Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 2. Introduction to Inquiry Based Learning and its potential benefits

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2.1 What is Inquiry Based Learning?

Inquiry Based Learning, or 'IBL', refers to a range of pedagogical approaches which have student-led research at their heart. The term 'IBL' also accommodates the more widely known 'problem-based learning' (PBL). Both IBL, and PBL within it, fall under the wider umbrella of 'active learning'. This diagram illustrates the relationship between the different elements:

In its simplest expression, IBL is 'learning by doing'. Students learn by identifying and engaging with the questions and problems of their discipline, becoming participants in the research process. They direct their own lines of inquiry-which often means designing their own open-ended questions-and identify appropriate methods and resources with which to address them. The tutor acts as a 'walking resource', guiding the students' inquiries without undermining the students' autonomy, which is crucial in inquiry approaches. Teaching and learning are thus integrated such that staff and students become 'partners in the learning process'.

Entire modules or programmes can be designed along inquiry lines, or discrete IBL activities can be incorporated into more traditional curricula. IBL complements a variety of existing teaching methods, including small group teaching, interactive lectures, problem-based teaching, case studies, and small and large-scale research projects. The centrality of the question-as opposed to a topic, as per traditional methods of teaching-is the common thread in all IBL activities. In light of the absence of emphasis on a set response to such a question, IBL has been described as 'a pedagogy which best enables students to experience the processes of knowledge creation'. In contrast to transmission teaching-where the tutor imparts knowledge to a reactive class-IBL espouses independent, self-directed
CILASS has identified three main components to IBL:

- Collaborative inquiry
- Development of information literacy
- Networked learning

More details of this framework can be found at: [http://www.shef.ac.uk/ cilass/ibl.html](http://www.shef.ac.uk/ cilass/ibl.html). Its relationship and relevance to pedagogy in TRS is discussed later in this report, in the analysis section.

### 2.2 Advantages of using IBL

The SC for PRS considers that IBL is a useful pedagogy within our disciplines and warrants further investigation for the following reasons:

#### 2.2.a IBL fosters deep learning

Research has shown that active learning methods such as IBL encourage deep learning in students, and that this enhances students’ enthusiasm for learning. This stands in contrast to the surface learning fostered by traditional transmission approaches.

#### 2.2.b IBL produces authentic learning

With IBL, the inquiries which students explore have emerged from their own interests and experiences, and are motivated by a desire to really know something, or to solve a real problem, which may be of relevance beyond the classroom, either in the public sphere or in students’ future careers, or both. Consequently, students feel that they ‘own’ their inquiries, are more engaged with study, and are more likely to retain the knowledge which results from it.

#### 2.2.c Students acquire a range of skills through IBL methods

IBL furnishes students with a range of transferable skills - personal, professional and intellectual. These include:

- research and information literacy skills
- critical thinking skills
- reflexivity
- creativity
- problem-solving
- leadership skills
- project management skills
- team working and interpersonal skills, including conflict-handling skills and time management skills

These skills are essential in both academic and professional contexts and, indeed, in the wider world. The point which I particularly want to emphasise is that IBL satisfies both a pragmatic and an intellectual purpose. Students are more employable by virtue of acquiring these skills, but they have simultaneously developed academically because these skills are also genuinely intellectual. To put it crudely, IBL ticks institutional boxes but does not allow the employability agenda to take over, because the values at its heart are intellectual. IBL is, then, a powerful way of merging
2.2.d IBL can have a positive impact on widening participation and diversity agendas

IBL has the potential to promote inclusive teaching and learning. It works with a student-teacher model which is based more on mutuality and equality than that in which transmission teaching is grounded. The student and the tutor are reconceptualised in IBL as co-researchers, rather than the tutor being regarded as the information-giver and the student as the receptacle. Furthermore, IBL employs non-traditional learning and assessment methods. To a degree, students decide how to do their research, and they have a say in how, and by whom, they are assessed. IBL thus complements the widening participation agendas of higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK.

2.2.e IBL promotes a safe atmosphere for students and staff

Peter Kahn and Karen O'Rourke have pointed out that the small group work which is intrinsic to IBL fosters relationships between staff and students, which is important in mass higher education, where students can feel anonymous and isolated. IBL provides students with a safe environment in which to experiment with creativity; if the IBL exercise is properly set up, then getting it wrong should not feel too bad in front of friends and peers. IBL also creates an environment in which tutors can be reasonably comfortable to admit that they do not know the answer to a particular question.

2.2.f Student satisfaction with IBL methods is high

According to CILASS' Interim Evaluation Report, students generally report positive experiences of IBL. Two-thirds of students surveyed by CILASS prior to the publication of the report found IBL enjoyable and motivating, and similar proportions attributed to IBL the positive outcomes of developing a good understanding of the questions and problems of their disciplines and reinforcing their interest in their disciplines. Three quarters of both undergraduates and postgraduates surveyed felt that the skills they had acquired through IBL would be useful beyond academic study.15

2.2.g IBL strengthens the research-teaching nexus

Commenting on the role which IBL plays in the strengthening of the research-teaching nexus in higher education in the UK, Philippa Levy and Bob Petrulis comment: 'When inquiry is seen as the common link between what students do as learners, and what scholars do as teachers and researchers, the distinction between learning and teaching begins to blur and possibilities for more integrated approaches to higher learning emerge'.16 Students are thus empowered to play active roles in the research communities of their disciplines.

Footnotes

- Kahn, Peter and O'Rourke, Karen, 'Understanding Enquiry-Based Learning', in Barrett, Terry, Mac Labhrainn, Iain and Fallon, Helen (eds.), Handbook of Enquiry and Problem-Based Learning: Irish Case Studies and International Perspectives (Dublin: Centre for Excellence in Learning and Teaching, NUI
1. Introduction to the research project

2. Introduction to Inquiry Based Learning and its potential benefits

3. Case Study institution A: University of Sheffield

3.1 Generic student focus group

3.2 Interview with CILASS student ambassador

3.3 Staff interviews

3.4 Formal IBL provision

3.4.a Fieldwork recording project

3.4.a.i Fieldwork Recording: the videos

3.4.a.ii Fieldwork recording: staff and student interviews

3.4.a.iii Fieldwork recording: student focus group 1
3.4.a.iv Fieldwork recording: student focus group 2

3.4.b Other IBL projects

3.4.c Tandem learning at the University of Sheffield

4. Case Study institution B: University of Manchester

4.1 Students Facilitating and Validating Peer Learning

4.2 Engaging with Early Christian Communities: An IBL Approach

4.3 The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology

5. Analysis

5.1 TRS and the CILASS framework for IBL

5.2 The disciplinary culture of TRS

5.3 Pragmatic considerations: employability, IBL and TRS

5.4 Conclusions and notes of caution

Bibliography

Appendices