Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 3.1 Generic student focus group

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3.1 Generic student focus group

Julie Gallimore ran this focus group on 20.02.08. Four students attended. Their demographic was as follows:

- Female, level 3, single honours biblical studies student, 21 years old.
- Male, level 2, single honours biblical studies student, 20 years old.
- Male, level 2, joint honours biblical studies and philosophy student, 19 years old.
- Male, level 1, single honours biblical studies student, 24 years old. This student had returned to study after working for five years.

The questions were designed to encourage the students to talk about how they are learning. In particular, they focused on the students’ experiences of directing their own inquiries and research, the skills they perceive themselves to be acquiring as a result of engaging with particular learning styles, their thoughts on how different learning styles relate to information retention and recall, their views on assessment methods in the department, and the levels of support for learning offered by the department.

The students in this group were able to reflect on their engagement with a variety of learning styles, including IBL and PBL, and to articulate the different skills they were acquiring as Biblical Studies students. They were also able to relate the skills they had acquired to their employability. They had all thought about their future careers, and three had already made a clear career choice. All of the students demonstrated a clear enthusiasm for inquiry and all clearly enjoyed their studies.

The students were less emphatic and enthusiastic in their responses to the facilitator’s questions about their learning experiences than were the students who had taken The Bible and Field Archaeology. However, it is acknowledged that an archaeological dig in Israel is a particularly memorable learning experience which these students had not had the opportunity to experience and reflect upon.

3.1.a Learning experiences
When asked about their learning experiences, the group reported participation in a range of learning activities, including lectures, seminars, presentations and research. They reported feeling empowered by their tutors to learn. However, one student commented: 'The learning methods are simple but they [the tutors] are trying to use IT more and get lectures to be more interactive. I'm not sure about this as I need time to absorb new things.' When asked about their experiences of directing their own inquiries/research, the students talked about researching for essays and presentations. L3 was also engaged in research for her dissertation. The students felt that their degrees were giving them the tools to direct their own research. L3 was more confident than the other students to discuss research skills in detail and to talk about challenging the views of tutors. Comments included:

'There's a balance between directive study and openness to do your own thing.'

'Only a curious person does this course'

'My tutor is involved in IBL and we have discussed it and its sounds really interesting, and interactive learning is part of what we do.'

'Inquiry is all about asking questions and going down different roads-we do that all the time.'

There was, then, a sense among the students-and many of the academic staff I spoke to also-that IBL is not particularly new to TRS, because it has inquiry, critical thinking and argument at its heart, and is grounded in an epistemology which regards truth as contested, and which posits argument as the route to knowledge. However, although these comments substantiate the view that IBL and TRS are a 'natural fit', it is also the case that the students were working with a weak definition of IBL, one which may not do justice to its true nature at all.

3.1.b Deep learning

When asked about how different learning styles relate to information retention and recall, the consensus among the students was that if a topic is interesting and has been the subject of debate in the classroom, knowledge of that topic is more likely to be retained. The point here is that student participation in scholarly debates, albeit in a seminar setting, was perceived to be crucial to knowledge retention. One of the students remarked: ‘Learning for an exam is easily forgotten.’ Another said: ‘Things are retained more when you care about them’, which recalls the claim that IBL is ‘authentic’.

3.1.c Independent research and information literacy

All of the students believed themselves to be self-directing in terms of their learning, but they mentioned feeling overwhelmed by the choice of research sources available, and said that they welcomed guidance on reading lists. One student remarked: ‘It's faster and easier when people tell me what to read.’ Another student said that because they had only seven hours of contact time with tutors per week, it was inevitable that the research they do after class is self-directed. This student would like their course to include more lectures. The students also referred specifically to information literacy skills. One said that they had learned ‘how to read effectively and fast' as a result of their degree, and another agreed that, in Biblical Studies ‘you have to be able to analyse different perspectives fast'. Two of the students reported using online search tools and journals to speed up their research. This led to a discussion of electronic sources which included reference to information literacy and the value of different sources. One of the students said 'It feels like we are given a lot of freedom to research sources but there's lots of guidance [from tutors] about good sources and checking out what the agenda of an author might be. Sometimes they [the tutors] tell you sources to avoid.'

The group also showed a good understanding of the research activities of their lecturers.
3.1.d Assessment methods

When asked about assessment methods in the department, two of the students said that they were satisfied with the mixture of coursework and exams. The two remaining students described exams as 'stressful' and 'frustrating'. All of the students felt that the creative learning methods endorsed by the department should be complemented by creative forms of assessment. The group discussed ways of making assessment more creative, including introducing oral methods of examination. L3 explained that her dissertation involves having to present her work and defend it, and she understands that this form of assessment can be difficult for some people. Another student, however, asked: 'Why don't we have oral exams? We are taught in this style so an exam would test this. I'd find it easier, as I'm more articulate speaking than writing'. The comment that 'We are taught in this style' is important, because it betokens the importance of consistency between teaching and assessment methods, which IBL practitioners need to be particularly aware of. It is unfair to use teaching methods which are disjunctive with the types of assessments the students have to undertake; by way of example, IBL modules which entail interactive classroom sessions may not be most appropriately assessed by a written exam at the end of the course.

3.1.e Support for learning

When asked about levels of support for learning offered by the department, responses varied considerably. L1 said he had received 'not very much' support from members of staff but conceded that it was his responsibility to seek this more proactively in future. L3 appeared to have more productive relationships with staff, which was not surprising given that she had been in the department for the longest time. She said that the support offered 'depends on the student. I've chosen to have in depth conversations with lecturers and have developed intellectual and social relationships with them. Not everyone does this'. Another student said of the tutors: 'They are very supportive of you making your own efforts and exploring new things. It feels like there is a lot of freedom.' Similarly, another student referred to 'an interactive engagement [between students and staff] where you are being encouraged to think quickly and articulate an argument'.

L1 reported strong support from peers and from faith and friendship groups, and said that informal debates within these groups outside of class time had helped him to reflect on his learning: 'We challenge each other and learn together as students.' This student also said that his 'Christian discussion group' had been particularly useful in this regard, which suggests that there are ways of managing tensions between faith and inquiry for TRS students, which arise particularly within the context of the study of sacred texts. This adds an interesting, discipline-specific dimension to the question of the appropriateness of IBL for TRS. A variety of issues are raised in this respect, including whether or not topics in TRS are emotive such that they are less suitable for group discussion than topics in other academic subjects, because misinformation and intolerance is more likely to surface and cause offence in the TRS context, and also, whether learning styles such as 'tandem learning' can work in TRS, dependent as it is on students achieving sufficient objectivity about their own faiths to impart useful knowledge about them to others.

3.1.f Group work dynamics

The students mentioned problems with working in groups, particularly some students dominating and others not doing their share of the work.

The students also engaged in a discussion of the specific nature of group work in TRS. One of the students spoke about the importance of mutual patience and sensitivity in seminars. This generated much conversation, with students saying that some of their peers lack these qualities, and find it difficult to receive feedback on their work and to cope with challenges to their opinions. Interestingly, one student claimed that to be a good learner in Biblical Studies 'you need to leave your emotions at the door'. This contrasts with the opinion of the student quoted above that 'Things are retained more when you care about them'. It betokens the view that the academic study of the TRS is unique because it has the potential to affect students' personal, religious and moral convictions in a way that the study of
other subjects does not. Whilst this means that inquiry approaches should be initiated with more caution in TRS than in other disciplines, it should also be regarded as an advantage of TRS that it brings students into close contact with what they regard as sensitive, even controversial, ideas, topics and materials. If a student cares about a topic because it has personal meaning for them, then they are more likely to engage with it. Using IBL to teach modules which deal with sensitivities and controversies in TRS may in fact encourage students to think about the importance of tolerance, respect and constructive criticism in debates.

3.1.g Skills acquired as a consequence of learning

When asked about the consequences of engaging in particular learning styles, the group were able to articulate a number of different skills they perceive themselves to be acquiring. These included planning and time management skills, and creative thinking skills. The students reported feeling encouraged by departmental staff to be creative, and being rewarded for looking at old problems in new ways: ‘There's a lot of scope to be creative in what you study and how you present your work. In other subjects you are taught one way but in Biblical Studies there are no right answers; you have to formulate opinions.’

The students also said that they valued the development of their ability to argue and debate issues, and they repeatedly identified ‘questioning’ as a key skill and learning tool in Biblical Studies. One of the students said that they felt encouraged by their tutors to ask questions of sources, of received wisdom, of the tutor's own opinions. Apart from formal classes, informal conversations with tutors were regarded by one student as the best learning opportunity available: ‘these conversations are better than reading. They [the tutors] ask challenging questions that encourage learning’. This was echoed by the comment from another student that ‘In the first year they ask questions that seem to shock you into learning more’.

The facilitator also used the opportunity, when the students were discussing skills, to raise the issue of employability. All of the students had considered their future careers and all wanted to use the knowledge, as well as the skills, they had acquired as Biblical Studies students, in their working lives. One hoped to use the research and writing skills they had developed in a career in religious journalism. Another spoke about wanting to work in a church and support the community. Another wanted to become a teacher, and one was hoping to go on to postgraduate study.

Footnotes

- The group discussion lasted ninety minutes. Students were briefed about the project prior to the group and all signed a consent form (see Appendixes A and B).
- For the sake of brevity, the four students will be referred to in the text in the following way: L3 (the Level 3 student); L2 SH (the Level 2 Single Honours student); L2 JH (the Level 2 Joint Honours student); and L1 (the Level 1 student).
- See 3.4.a.
- My emphasis.
- A debate exists, for example, about whether researching for an essay question is IBL.
- See 2.2.b.
- See 3.4.c
- See See 3.1.b.