Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 3.3 Staff interviews

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3.3.a Hugh Pyper

Hugh Pyper is head of the Department of Biblical Studies and CILASS’ ‘academic champion’ in Biblical Studies, which means that it is his responsibility to promote and develop IBL programmes and methods in the Department. I interviewed Hugh on 11.10.07.

Hugh teaches a variety of undergraduate modules, including the level one modules Decoding the Bible and Creation to Revelation, and the level two modules The Bible in the Postcolonial World and Hebrew Texts. He supervises and examines level three dissertations. He also teaches on a number of postgraduate programmes.

Hugh explained that IBL has always been a part of the culture of Biblical Studies, and that excellence in IBL in Biblical Studies preceded–indeed was one of the reasons for–the establishment of the Centre for Excellence in 2005. In fact, Biblical Studies was in fact heavily involved with the original bid.

I asked Hugh about how CILASS’s framework for IBL, which encompasses the three themes of collaborative inquiry, information literacy and networked learning, relates to his teaching in Biblical Studies. Regarding collaborative inquiry, Hugh told me that he encourages the students to think of each other as resources. His classes include group work, but this is not assessed, and students are not required to work in groups after class. He reported that students have responded well to group research tasks, but he did mention the problem of disparity of effort in group work, a concern which was also raised by the students in the focus groups. As a pre-emptive measure, Hugh sets ground rules for group work, and encourages students to ask for help if they encounter problems. Should they do so, he attempts to offer solutions, but he also reminds the students that negotiating in groups is a life skill they need to acquire.

Hugh also recounted examples of his own collaboration with students. He has asked students to work with him on research projects in the past, and also invites their feedback on papers he wants to present at conferences. He regards the relationship between learner and teacher as a cooperative one, and said that the only reason he feels able to stand at the front of a class is because he has shown himself to be a good learner over the years.

Regarding information literacy, Hugh spoke about the value of even the most outlandish Biblical Studies sources for helping to develop students’ information literacy. His view is that the most effective way for students develop discernment when it comes to evaluating sources is to engage directly with those sources and to inquire in earnest into the reasons why they might have been written. And it is not simply material deemed worthy by the body of
scholars which he wants the students to engage with: 'The wackiest Biblical website is grist to our mill'; that is, an unreliable source in Biblical Studies can be the inspiration for a fascinating research project.

Hugh would like to see the department develop its programme of networked learning, and would like to use technology more in his own teaching. He referred me to the International Group Learning project which the department received CILASS funding to run, but explained that this is in its early stages.

Hugh also made the point that IBL gives students assessment options beyond the traditional essay, which recalls the point about IBL's potential for inclusivity.

Suggesting widespread practice of IBL in TRS departments, Hugh also mentioned a module he recalls from his time at the University of Leeds which was IBL-based. This module, which is still taught at Leeds, is called Religious Mapping. It involves students mapping religion and religions in given areas, for example, the University of Leeds campus itself, or the surrounding areas.

Finally, speaking more broadly about the 'fit' or otherwise of TRS with IBL, Hugh suggested that Biblical Studies is a 'natural' for IBL because the ethos of the subject is inquiry.

### 3.3.b Barry Matlock

Barry Matlock teaches and researches New Testament at Sheffield. Confirming my suspicions that IBL is widespread practice in the department but usually goes unflagged, he told me when I interviewed him on 06.02.07 that the department does not tend to use the term 'IBL' but has always emphasised student-led learning. Barry's own level three teaching tends to emphasise student-centred, research-led learning. The level one teaching he is involved in is more contact-driven, and lecture-based, although students at this level do attend seminars. Barry also mentioned that Biblical Studies courses feature non-traditional teaching and assessment methods, including presentations and group projects, alongside essays and exams.

Barry suggested that the (compulsory) final year dissertation is the most obvious example of IBL in the Department. At present, students are required to present their dissertation findings to their year group; this accounts for five per cent of their mark. This lends a professional research element to the experience. Classes for dissertation students to come together to compare their experiences and discuss any problems are about to be introduced to the dissertation module, partly in response to some of the students reporting feelings of disorientation because they have never managed their own research projects before.

I asked Barry specifically about how, if at all, he feels that the three elements of IBL identified by CILASS—collaborative inquiry, information literacy and networked learning—apply to his teaching. He reported encouraging student collaboration in the modules he teaches, and promoting the development of information literacy skills through his teaching. In terms of collaborative inquiry, although his current teaching does not require students to take part in group projects, he has required students to do so in the past. His students have encountered various problems in relation to group work, including the disparity of effort which was mentioned by the students we interviewed, and by Hugh Pyper in his interview. Barry understands that this is frustrating for conscientious students, but he says that they appreciate that learning to work in a team is an essential skill in the workplace. In the past, when such problems have arisen, the students have managed the problem themselves. Barry prefers not to assess students by group activities, opting for essays and portfolios of shorter writing assignments instead. He has not collaborated on a project with his students but says he would consider doing so.

Regarding information literacy, Barry teaches a level one module on research methods. The point of this module is to introduce new students to the importance of a critical approach to sources. After all, as he points out, in TRS there is a proliferation of popular material, making it all the more important for students to have the appropriate tools to engage with it.
Barry has not yet used networked learning methods, but he is aware of the use of these methods by some of his colleagues at Sheffield.

On the subject of course design, Barry speculated that it would be more of a challenge to design an IBL course than it would be to design a course based on more traditional teaching methods.

Speaking more generally about the ‘fit’ or otherwise of TRS with IBL, Barry said that he did not feel that the discipline is more suited to IBL than any other within the humanities. He argued that the humanities as a whole lend themselves to student-centred pedagogies and group activities, since discussion of texts is a common theme.

**3.3.c James Crossley**

James Crossley teaches a variety of modules at Biblical Studies, including language modules (Greek and Hebrew), the level one Fact or Fiction and Biblical World modules, and the level two module, Gospels. I interviewed James on 06.12.07.

James reported that interactive teaching methods are standard in the department. In his own teaching, he makes sure that he gives his students content, but he also encourages them to discuss and question ideas in class. He is emphatic about the importance of classroom discussion with level one students. Somewhat surprisingly, he says that at levels two and three, his modules are less explicitly student-led.

James also reported the customary problems associated with group working, with some of his students concerned that they are working harder than others. When asked about the likelihood of collaborating with students on research projects, James told me that he prefers to direct his own projects. He also expressed concerns about the controversial nature of his work, and the impact that could have on anyone involved in it.

With regard to information literacy, James reported a dramatic rise in the use of web-based sources amongst his students in recent years, especially Wikipedia. He also referred to the level one module on research methods which was mentioned by Barry Matlock in his interview. James reported that the module includes a lecture on the use of sources. In addition, he said that students attend an information literacy session run by the library at the beginning of their degree.

Speaking generally about the ‘fit’ or otherwise of IBL and TRS, James suggested that TRS is more disposed to inquiry approaches than are other disciplines. The reason James gave for this view is that TRS is a subject which evokes impassioned opinions in people.

James also made an important point about the pragmatic rationale for IBL. He said that student numbers are declining, and by pointing out that IBL enhances student employability, he implied a relationship between this decline and the perception that some degrees do not prepare graduates for the workplace. Although James did not draw this conclusion himself, it would be fair to say that this perception certainly extends to TRS degrees.

**3.3.d Keith Whitelam**

Keith Whitelam teaches on the level one Fact or Fiction module and the level two module, The Bible and Historical Imagination. I interviewed Keith on 06.12.07.

I asked Keith about collaborative inquiry, information literacy and networked learning in the context of his teaching. Regarding collaborative inquiry, he reported that classes for The Bible and Historical Imagination involve group work, but it is not assessed. Keith chooses to use group work less with his Fact and Fiction students, and he suggests that collaborative inquiry is more appropriate for more advanced students. ‘One or two’ of Keith’s own research projects involve collaborating with postgraduates.
Regarding information literacy, Keith told me that the Fact or Fiction module is entirely based around the development of students' information literacy skills. Keith also proactively engages his students in networked learning. He uses webCT to create online reading lists and PowerPoint presentations for his modules. He has also created a chat room, where students can ask questions and receive feedback from him and other students. He created the chat room with weaker and/or less confident students in mind, because it allows them to solicit feedback anonymously. His students download the online reading lists and PowerPoint presentations, but none of them have used the chat room. Keith is considering setting an exercise which requires them to.

Keith told me that departmental staff use a range of teaching and assessment methods. He describes his own level one and level two teaching as PBL, and reports that using problem-based approaches has generated positive feedback from students. He regards PBL as the most appropriate pedagogical method, as long as it is supplemented with lectures to provide students with essential information, and to give coherence to modules. In his experience, students are more likely to retain knowledge when they can link it to a problem which they have identified and solved themselves; it is only really when the problem impinges on them, and when they are challenged by it, that they can really engage.

I asked Keith about pragmatic rationales for IBL, particularly related to the enhanced employability of students taking part in inquiry-based activities, and he said that he feels this is very important. He said that one of the advantages of the department's promotion of a variety of teaching and assessment methods is that it helps students to build up a bank of generic skills. He mentioned the self-assessment that all students are required to write at the end of each year. This self-assessment, a reflection on learning, accounts for ten per cent of the student's overall mark for that year, with the score for the self-assessment being given for process rather than content. Keith pointed out that, in addition to giving students an opportunity to increase their overall mark, the exercise also increases students' awareness of, and ability to articulate, the kinds of skills they have acquired.

3.3.e Diana Edelman

In addition to teaching The Bible and Field Archaeology,Diana teaches modules on the book of Samuel and on the Hebrew language. I interviewed her on 13.12.07.

Diana told me that there is a considerable amount of IBL occurring at Biblical Studies at Sheffield, including five IBL-based taught MAs. In terms of her own teaching, she reported that as a result of working with CILASS, she has introduced a portfolio of IBL exercises for the students on her Samuel module. The module also includes assessment by debate. Diana thinks that with more traditional, essay-based assessments 'good students could get away with doing almost no work and then get a first'. As a result of the changes she has made to the Samuel module, she says that students on the module are really reflecting on their work and learning more as a result. She told me that a group of students from this module meet in their own time to discuss the issues covered in the classes, simply because they are interested in them. She has also noticed that students on the Samuel module ask for more contact time with her.

Diana's Hebrew language teaching does not use inquiry methods. Her comment that 'When you teach a language, you teach a language, and that's that' contrasts with the views of tandem learning enthusiast Lesley Walker.Diana echoes Keith Whitelam's remarks about the power of active learning. She says that students are most passionate about, and most likely to retain, knowledge they have discovered themselves. She reports that students who have transferred from other universities are a little shell-shocked by the Department's approach to teaching at first, but, in her experience, if they embrace it, they find it liberating.

One problem such students encounter relates to collaborative inquiry, specifically to group work and group presentations. In common with her colleagues, Diana is keenly aware of the way different personalities affect group
When she first introduced assessed group presentations, there was an outcry from the students, who were worried that their marks would be dragged down by the poor performance of others in their group. Diana points out to her students that they are likely to have to work in groups in their professional lives, and she emphasises that group management is their responsibility. She reasons that they are thereby learning real world, transferable skills which will enhance their employability. However, the students' reactions, and a remark from one of her colleagues that the more capable students should not be punished-by being given low marks-for having the misfortune to be put in groups with less capable students, led Diana to devise a system whereby students can inform on each other confidentially. The students have taken advantage of this facility twice in five years; sometimes, they complain about the unfairness of group work but do not take the opportunity to inform on their peers when it is offered to them. Not doing so, Diana reflects, does indeed provide them with a learning experience.

In modules which include assessment of group work, Diana also asks the students what marks they think they should get, and she takes this into account when assessing them. She and the students negotiate how they will be assessed, deciding together what percentage her mark will count for and what percentage the student's mark will count for.

When asked about the involvement of students in her own research, Diana describes education as a collaborative process which includes undergraduates. She talks about another module she has taught, The Bible and Archaeology, which involves giving students pictures of artefacts uncovered during archaeological digs, and asking them to identify them and then to present their findings to the group. She reports that some of the ethnographic information they produce is amazing. She says: 'I am firmly convinced that you can learn from undergraduates. Some of the stuff that they can turn up is very creative. I look at teaching as an enterprise of sharing information, and my job as a teacher is to get students to discover things, but I also know that I learn from them'.

Regarding information literacy, Diana refers to a class on using the Internet which is part of the compulsory level one module, Decoding the Bible. During this class, students are taught how to evaluate and use online material.

Footnotes

- See 3.4.b.iv
- See 2.2.d
- See http://www.leeds.ac.uk/trs/irpl/crp.htm
- I have siphoned off data from Diana's interview which is specific to The Bible and Field Archaeology and presented it in the section of this report which is devoted to a discussion of this module (3.4.a).
- See 3.4.c
- First of all, Diana gives a mark for the group presentation. The students then complete internal group evaluations, which include an option to confidentially identify individuals in their group whom they feel have not worked as hard as they should. If the students decide to 'rat someone out', Diana gives that person a lower mark.

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