

Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 3.4.a.iii Fieldwork recording: student focus group 1

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Naturally, the students who had taken the Bible and Field Archaeology module themselves were the richest source of data. The first of two focus groups to inform my research was convened by Julie Gallimore, who was commissioned by the SC for PRS to run a focus group with the students in February 2008.³⁹ All six of the students attended.

The students were asked a variety of questions which were designed to elicit key information about their learning experiences as students on the module. They were asked about the process of making the videos and attending the dig, what they liked and what they found challenging about the experience, the levels of support offered by the department, and about their ability to retain and recall the knowledge they had acquired.

3.4.a.iii.i General reflections

The students described The Bible and Field Archaeology as 'so totally different' to any others they had taken. They spoke very positively about taking part in the dig in Israel, although they agreed that it had been an intense experience which left them physically drained. One student described it as 'hard but also rewarding'. All of the students were pleased they had chosen the module. After the group, the facilitator said how impressed she had been with the students' engagement with the content of the module. Her report comments:

The Fieldwork group gave powerful feedback on the value of their learning experience. The Fieldwork students are living proof that IBL is effective and empowering students to take on new challenges. The Fieldwork module presents a very intense, enjoyable and unique learning experience which all the students highly valued. They were all able to reflect on their personal development over the course of the module and felt it had inspired them to be better researchers on their return to Sheffield. From my perspective, the module gave them a real sense of their personal and professional capabilities.

3.4.a.iii.ii Reflection on the process of learning and the skills acquired

The students were able to articulate the holistic nature of their learning experience, commenting on their academic, personal, social, emotional and spiritual development during the module. They were also able to reflect on the variety

of learning styles they were engaged with, including IBL and PBL, and they showed a good understanding of the portfolio of skills they were developing as a consequence of exposure to these learning styles, mentioning in particular research, ICT and presentation skills. The students spoke about feeling empowered to learn by these learning styles, and said that they had enjoyed directing their own research. One described it as an 'interesting way of learning', and another said 'we all wanted to learn because it was fun'. One student also commented that they 'prefer learning through experience and applying things taught through the degree', which supports the notion of IBL being 'learning by doing'.

The students reported that the module had enhanced their personal and social, as well as their academic, development. In particular, they spoke about enjoying the opportunity to navigate a new country, to debate politically and emotionally charged issues, and to develop relationships with their peers. One of the students said that the module had taken them out of their 'comfort zone' by throwing them into the vast cultural mix of Israel. The group as a whole said that visiting Israel had challenged their preconceived ideas about the region, and had reminded them of the importance of tolerating other people's beliefs and articulating one's own beliefs sensitively. They also liked the way being on the dig put their studies in context, and allowed them to see, smell and touch artefacts and tools that they would have otherwise only been able to read about.

The students were able to reflect on the value of peer learning, and said that they had welcomed the opportunity to develop their team working skills, and to support each other's learning and personal development. They had enjoyed working in groups, and again spoke about the importance of respecting the opinions and ideas of others. According to the facilitator, it was clear from the discussion that strong friendships had been formed or cemented by the dig experience.

It was not clear from the discussions during this focus group that the students experienced the levels of overwork and frustration with technical equipment as staff and other students had reported. My interviews with staff and with the CILASS student ambassador included references to the difficulties the students had endured during the dig and the video-making process, but the students themselves did not focus on these issues to any significant extent at the focus group. They did mention difficulties with the cameras and the video editing software, and they all described the experience as exhausting. One student also said that the assessment was not appropriately structured to take account of the effort the students put into the module, with insufficient credit being given to the more labour intensive parts of the module, such as the video-making. However, the students tended to focus more on the positive aspects of their experience.⁴⁰

Comments included:

- One student described the module as 'different, hands on, combining books with current reality', betokening the authenticity of IBL.
- Another said 'we get to see the practical application of the skills we're learning'.
- Other comments included 'I grew during it' and 'I felt a real sense of achievement on completing the project'.

3.4.a.iii.iii Being part of a research community

The students acknowledged the high levels of support they had received from academic staff on the dig, and reported feeling surprised that they were treated as their equals. The students had felt part a research community, and said that this had enabled them to appreciate Biblical Studies in a wider context.

Comments included:

- 'Instead of feeling separated from academia, you are part of it.'

- 'Researchers asked our opinion and took this into account. You didn't feel silly saying anything.'
- '[We were] supported all the way through.'

3.4.a.iii.iv Employability

The students reported that the experience had enabled them see the relevance of their learning and skills beyond university, and felt that it was bound to enhance their employability.

3.4.a.iii.v Technology

The students said that producing the videos had been a challenge, but they described the experience as an 'amazing' one. Some of them would have liked more time and support to make the videos, with one student saying that her lack of technical knowledge made her feel like she was 'drowning' in work when it came to editing the videos. Other students said they were happy with the levels of support and the time allowed for making the videos.

When they were asked how the module could be improved, the students focused on technical issues. One said it would have been easier to make the videos using digital cameras. Another said they would have appreciated two more training sessions on how to use the camera, with a third student saying that they had accidentally erased an interview because they were unfamiliar with the technology.

3.4.a.iii.vi Widening participation and diversity

Although all of the students would recommend the module to other students, two did cite the cost involved as a potential barrier to student participation, raising questions about the inclusiveness of the module. One said 'the affordability is an issue for some students...it would be good if all could be involved...or it could be subsidised'.

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Footnotes

- The focus group took place on 28.02.08 at the University of Sheffield and lasted ninety minutes. All students were briefed about the research project prior to the group, and all signed a consent form (see Appendixes A and B).
- Of course, it may be that sufficient time had elapsed between the dig and the video-making process and the focus group to allow the students to have become nostalgic about their experiences and more inclined to overlook the frustrations.

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

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