Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 3.4.c Tandem learning at the University of Sheffield

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Also worth mentioning in relation to IBL at the University of Sheffield is a project which the SC for PRS has commissioned on inter-faith tandem learning at the University. The project, which is being coordinated by Will Lamb, the Anglican Chaplain at the University, is developing and trialling learning materials for inter-faith tandem learning. In tandem learning, students work in pairs to share their knowledge of a particular topic with each other. Tandem learning is a form of IBL which has been used principally in language teaching, allowing two native speakers of different languages to work together to learn each other's language, whilst gaining a sense of the cultural context of that language. The inter-faith tandem learning project works on the principle that this form of learning can be transferred to TRS to facilitate inter-religious and intercultural exchange. In practice, this means that two students, of different faith or cultural backgrounds, meet to share information about their faith or culture in an informal and supportive setting.

Like all forms of IBL, inter-faith tandem learning is based on the principles of learner autonomy and reciprocity. Students are responsible for their own learning, and for developing their own research and time management skills. They receive mutual support from the other learner, but also receive support from the learning materials being developed by Will Lamb and colleagues, which are designed to fill gaps in the students' knowledge of their own religious and cultural backgrounds.

Tandem learning is particularly appropriate for TRS because it confronts the sensitive and controversial nature of the topics discussed in the TRS classroom by encouraging students to engage in structured conversations on a range of religious, ethical and spiritual issues, to reflect on religious diversity, and to treat others with empathy and sensitivity.

I met Lesley Walker, who coordinates undergraduate modern languages teaching at the University of Sheffield, and who pioneered tandem learning in the languages at Sheffield, to find out more about tandem learning. Lesley is an enthusiastic advocate for tandem learning but said that it is very labour intensive for the students. When I asked for her views on whether tandem learning could work in TRS, she had a number of concerns.

First of all, she pointed out that language students are experts in their own language, but that students from particular religious backgrounds are not necessarily experts in those religions. Potential problems arising from this could, however, be moderated by the use of accompanying learning materials—an online resource, a textbook—as reference points, which is something the inter-faith tandem learning project coordinators have recognised. Another solution
would be to situate tandem learning conversations in TRS in a module which includes lectures to provide content and clarify questions raised during tandem conversations. These measures could also be used to address another point which Lesley raised: that students affiliated to a particular religious tradition are more likely than language students to have an agenda, in the sense that they may want to promote their faith and would therefore be more likely to present a biased picture of it to their tandem partner. Lesley also expressed concerns that culturally-rich words are used in religious dialogue, which may make it difficult for students to understand each other; again, some form of resource or a taught element would help to offset the negative consequences of this.

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Footnotes

- The team involved in this project presented a poster at the 'Finding Your Own Way' workshop at CILASS CETL in May 2008. More information about this event, including the abstract for this poster session, can be viewed at [http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/350](http://www.prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/350)
- The meeting took place on 11.03.08.

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Bibliography

Appendices

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