Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 4.1 Students Facilitating and Validating Peer Learning

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Katja Stuerzenhofecker is working on a collaborative pedagogical research project with CEEBL to develop a progression model for IBL in undergraduate education. This project is called Students Facilitating and Validating Peer Learning and is aimed at the development of students’ skills in facilitating and engaging in peer-learning activities, without involvement from tutors. The peer learning activities which the students are required to facilitate, and to validate the outcomes of, include group work and classroom discussions.

Katja has based the project around a level two, inquiry-based module she teaches called Religion, Culture and Gender. She tells me that the module endorses a student-led approach to learning which requires students to become actively involved in knowledge-creation. Previous experience has shown her that the students need support and preparation to be able to take this on, so two seminars are held at the start of the module to introduce them to the basics of facilitation and to give them the opportunity to negotiate their own ground rules for group work and group discussions. Students are also given the opportunity to discuss and decide on a peer validation mechanism of learning. These activities are rooted in a constructivist epistemology and standpoint theories. The module is assessed by a portfolio of work, which includes a learning journal. The students also present their work at admissions events.

Katja feels that the module has been successful because the students have approached the diversity intrinsic to the TRS classroom in positive, sensitive ways.

In order to find out more about the experiences of Katja’s students, I attended a focus group evaluation for the Religion, Culture and Gender module, facilitated by Louise Goldring of CEEBL. Only one student—a female, level two student-attended; she will be referred to as Student A. Fortunately, because she was very engaged, the interview yielded some interesting data, although the extent to which it could be considered representative is debatable.

4.1.a Group working

Student A told us that Religion, Culture and Gender involved extensive amounts of group work, both during and after classes. Students were required to work in groups during lectures, and to give group presentations. When asked whether the CEEBL-run introductory workshops prepared the students for facilitating their own group work, Student A said she had enjoyed them but that some of her peers had considered them little ‘high-schooly’ and a waste of time. She felt that they would have been useful for people who did not know others in the class.
4.1.b Student-led discussions

Student A enjoyed the discussions and got a great deal out of them, saying that she learns and understands things better if she teaches them herself. She feels that oral presentation is one of her strengths, and reported that the feedback Katja had given her for her presentation was the best she had received since starting her degree. She commented: 'I remembered more from Religion, Culture and Gender than any other course I've done at university' because 'that's my way of learning; I really suit it'.

She felt it was a good idea to make students present to other people in the class, but recalled that some of her peers were very nervous about doing so. If someone really did not want to present, Katja was happy for them to take on an alternative role during presentations, perhaps writing on the board or handing out leaflets. Student A also pointed out that marks given for the presentations make up a very small proportion of the overall mark (two per cent), and that the marks are not given for the actual presentation in any case, but for the students' reflection on the process of presenting. Student A said: even if a student's presentation itself was a disaster, as long as they wrote a good reflective piece on it, even including comments like 'I was too scared to talk', 'they would still get full marks'. She reflected on this system during the interview, making the point that it does not put those who do not want to speak at a disadvantage.

The facilitator asked Student A whether she felt that the review session at the end of the introductory workshops, or indeed the workshops as a whole, should have included exercises designed to help students who felt uncomfortable leading the discussions. Student A found it difficult to answer the question because she is comfortable speaking in public, but she did say that everyone has different strengths when it comes to learning, and there was 'something for everyone' in this module. She mentioned essays at this point, perhaps meaning that the variety of assessment methods used in this module gives students of different abilities equal opportunities to achieve high marks.

Students generally seemed nervous about speaking up during the discussions, even when they were being led by someone else. Student A reported that the same individuals spoke up in class after class. Some members of the class did not speak at all, and Student A thought that something should have been done to help them. She reflected that people's confidence to speak up during the discussions depended on how competent the people leading the discussions were. In discussions led by someone enthusiastic, more people were willing to participate, but when discussion leaders gave dull or awkward presentations, their peers found it difficult to interact.

The facilitator asked Student A whether her peers' reluctance to speak up was a problem unique to student-led discussions, or whether it a problem in all classroom discussions, including those led by the tutor. Student A replied that all discussions were affected. When asked if there might have been a particular reason people did not speak out, Student A pointed out that the module includes controversial content. Speaking up in Religion, Culture and Gender classes may have resulted in the disclosure of a very personal, and perhaps contentious, view, and for this reason, it was easy to be intimidated into silence. Short of the tutor pointing to people and telling them to speak—which she did not do—Student A did not know how this problem could have been avoided. She did say that people talked more when they were split up into smaller groups. She said: 'This is an issue of confidence; it's a personality issue that will crop up year after year with this course. There will always be shy people.' Student A thus identified one reason why collaborative inquiry, as an expression of IBL, should be set up carefully, regardless of discipline—students' lack of confidence—but she also identified a subject-specific reason; that is, the controversial content factor involved in TRS education.

The facilitator asked Student A how she and her peers had felt about having to write points which emerged from the discussions on the blackboard or overhead projector, and what they thought about using PowerPoint. Student A reported that all of the students had seemed happy to use PowerPoint, and had produced some excellent presentations. To her mind, they felt less comfortable writing discussion points on the blackboard or the overhead projector because they found it difficult to identify and summarise the most important points. Katja had to pick on someone every time. Student A nonetheless found it helpful to have ideas written on to the blackboard, because this
helped to sustain the discussions, and also helped the students to retain information. Student A made the point again that this is her preferred way of learning, making a distinction between herself and 'old school academic' people, for whom reading a book would have been preferable. She said that such people were obviously uncomfortable in the discussions. Indeed, she noticed that a lot of people dropped out of the module after Katja explained in the introductory lecture that students would be required to use blackboards, PowerPoint, and that the module would be inquiry-based. Student A remarked that these people did not want to 'do that kind of learning'. To her mind, TRS is 'such an old-fashioned subject and such an academic course; some people expect, and just want, to read books'. These people want to do their own work, and do not want to interact with other students. This being the case, she commented: 'I wouldn't have expected theology to have done this sort of learning but I'm glad they did because I like it'.

4.1.c Networked learning

This module included a webCT component. An online calendar was provided for students to check deadlines, and assignments had to be submitted through webCT. Katja also recorded lectures and made them available online, but Student A did not listen to them because she would not have known how: 'I'm just not an Internet sort of person'. She said that training to use the various systems involved was adequate, but she felt that the module focused too much on networked learning. She said 'I personally do not like computers', and explained how daunting it had been to submit a 75,000-word learning journal online.

4.1.d Workload

Student A said emphatically that the module had involved far too much work. Although she learned more from this course than any other, and enjoyed it more than any other, she felt that having to produce a 75,000-word learning journal was not a reasonable expectation for an undergraduate module. By doing only what was requested, without doing any extra work, she produced a journal of this length.53

Learning journals had to be updated on a weekly basis, and Student A found that doing this took up all of the time she had allocated for home work, for all of her modules, each week. This had had a detrimental effect on her work for other modules, and prevented her revising for exams. She reported that all of the students had agreed that the workload for this module was too heavy.

Footnotes

- One of the students from the module—the same student who attended the focus group evaluation for the Religion, Culture and Gender module which is detailed in this section—also presented with Katja on her experiences of the module at the 'Finding Your Own Way' workshop at CILASS CETL in May 2008. More information about this event, including the abstract and slides from this presentation, is available at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/350
- Katja shared this information with me during the group meeting at CEEBL on 18.01.08.
- The focus group took place on 01.01.08.
- Students are not required to submit assignments of 75,000 words for this module, but this was the word count Student A’s assignment reached.
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