Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 4.2 Engaging with Early Christian Communities: An IBL Approach

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Kate Cooper, Senior Lecturer in the History of Christianity at R and T, has been funded by CILASS to work on this project which is aimed at the development and evaluation of two different models for integrating IBL into The Rise of Christianity level one module, and which has as its overall objective support for independent student research in the history of Christianity.

When I met Kate, she explained that she has taught The Rise of Christianity for a number of years. She has been experimenting with getting the students to do their own research after classes but has had difficulty implementing this. I asked Kate whether she thought that this was because level one students are too inexperienced as researchers to take this on. She responded by saying that semester one of level one is the right time for students to take on a new model of learning; she does not think that staff should wait until students have reached level three before introducing IBL. She reported that some students respond positively to the challenge-these are the ones who go on to do PhDs because they regard the lecture as a place to get inspiration and are happy to do their own research after class.

After IBL components have been integrated into The Rise of Christianity, the module will continue to have lectures and to be assessed in traditional ways-that is, by essay. Kate sees her mission as being to revive traditional academic methods and formats, not to replace them. She emphasised that she teaches and researches in very traditional, 'ivory tower' areas-antiquity, the rise of Christianity and so on-and has a lot of respect for traditional learning and research skills. Although she feels that this ostensibly makes her an unlikely candidate to teach an IBL course, she argues that the two can go together. Elaborating, she says that it is empowering for students to demystify antiquity; she describes it as a 'house of cards' and enthuses that students can have a say in creating knowledge of it. They do so, in her modules, via IBL. She wants to encourage students to see that antiquity and classical Christianity should not be sidelined as old-fashioned subjects, but rather seen as topical and exciting ones. She does not anticipate any hostilities from 'old school' academics working in these areas to the practice of innovative pedagogies, and cannot imagine such people have a problem with the idea of students being researchers and creating their own knowledge.
Kate and one of her postgraduate students, Maria Haralambakis, presented a poster on this project at the ‘Finding Your Own Way’ workshop at CILASS CETL in May 2008. More information about this event, including the abstract of this session, can be found at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/350

The meeting took place on 01.02.08.

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