Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 4.3 The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology

Rebecca O'Loughlin

The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology (DPT) is a practice-based research degree which utilises IBL methods. It admitted its first cohort of seven candidates in the academic year 2006-7. Since then, numbers have grown rapidly. The DPT is offered by Anglia Ruskin University with the Cambridge Theological Federation, and the Universities of Manchester, Wales, Lampeter, and Birmingham. The DPT approaches participants' own professional contexts as a central research resource. These contexts usually include religious ministry, health care, education, social and community work, charity/NGO work, or psychotherapy, but they may also include industry or business. In this section, I will outline the way the DPT works.

4.3.a Methods

The emphasis of a professional doctorate lies in reflective practice. Professional doctorates have been described as being designed for the 'researching professional' rather than the 'professional researcher' (the latter being used to describe traditional PhD students).

The DPT emphasises learning through doing, and uses real-life examples to stimulate the students' inquiries, including case studies, problem-based workshops and fieldwork visits. Fictitious action-research scenarios are also part of the curricula, pointing to the usefulness of action research as a means for incorporating IBL into TRS. According to its architects, students do not need to be religious to undertake the DPT but they should be interested in the role of religion, theology and ethics in forging 'action-directing worldviews'. In keeping with the collaborative inquiry element of IBL, the DPT also includes peer group working.

According to the DPT pages of the R and T website, students on the DPT are required to keep a learning journal, which is a record of their reading and research. The point is to cultivate the students' writing skills and to integrate their theoretical work with reflection on their own practical context. The latter helps students to see that their work commitments and research interests need not exist in tension. Elaine Graham, who directs the DPT at Manchester, has written that the learning journal is a particularly powerful learning method for students who have been away from higher education for some time because it provides a space for experimentation and for 'finding a voice'. One may infer from this that this form of IBL is well-suited to the needs and abilities of mature students.

Indeed, the DPT emerged in response to the 'diversification and expansion [of higher education], especially in the
range of postgraduate, post-experience, and in-service professional development courses, with a steady rise in part-time and distance attendance', which itself arose as a result of changing relationships between universities and employers, including greater recognition of work-based learning and transferable skills appropriate to the labour market, and also a result of the government's promotion of lifelong learning. One of the consequences of the massification of higher education has been that universities have had to adapt their recruitment strategies, their pedagogical approaches, and the range and type of awards they offer. The DPT, then, and, I believe, the IBL methods on which it is based, endorse and facilitate widening participation in higher education. Furthermore, it has been argued that the DPT, and professional doctorates in general, cater for a wider range of people than do traditional PhDs, which are directed at people who want an academic career. Professional doctorates, by contrast, it is said, offer 'advanced training for a wider range of career paths whilst retaining an explicit research focus directed towards enhancing such professions' knowledge base and understanding'.

Graham points out that the DPT is based not on applied research but on a process of 'practice-theory-practice, or a spiral or circle of experience-analysis-practice'; that is, the focus is not on how professional context or individual practice can be informed by research, but on how practice informs research and serves as a primary 'knowledge base' for doctoral study. The DPT, and professional doctorates in general, are not about research training and career development for aspiring academics, as are traditional doctorates, but are rather focused on 'research-based career development'.

In Graham's view, practical theology can be considered a form of action research. She writes that the dynamic of action-research begins with current practice, moves on to engaging in new learning through a process of inquiry, observation or reflection on practice and dialogue with existing conceptual paradigms, leading to a re-evaluation of extant understandings. Given that it works from practice-theory-practice, Graham argues that the DPT may have a wider impact than a traditional PhD because its aim is to effect changes in the candidate's professional organisation, to influence understandings of best practice within that professional context, and to enhance the candidate's personal and professional development. That is, the point of the DPT, and of practical theology in general, is to change things, not just to produce research. When I met with Elaine at CEEBL, she made the point that this makes practical theology an 'easy fit' with IBL. She has observed that there are similarities between the core aims of IBL and current understandings of practical theology as an experience-based form of learning.

4.3.b Assessment

According to their architects, professional doctorates such as the DPT allow for greater flexibility in terms of modes of assessment and forms of research output. The assessment for the DPT is via a portfolio of work which candidates develop during the course of the degree. This includes shorter pieces of work including a literature review, a publishable article, a research proposal and a self-evaluation based on the learning journal (altogether totalling 30,000 words), and an extended research dissertation of 40,000-45,000 words.

On a related point which evokes concerns that IBL is 'learning lite', Elaine has posed the question: 'will the professional doctorate be regarded as a 'soft option' in relation to the traditional PhD?'

Footnotes

- See The University of Manchester: Religions and Theology, What is the Doctor of Practical Theology? [accessed 7 Sept 2008], http://www.arts.manchester.ac.uk/subjectareas/religionstheology/postgraduatestudy/practicaltheology/whatisthedpt/
- Graham, Elaine, 'The Professional Doctorate in Practical Theology: Practice-based Research in a
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