Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 5.1 TRS and the CILASS framework for IBL

Rebecca O'Loughlin

I will begin by reflecting on the disciplinary culture of TRS in relation to CILASS framework for IBL. It is my view that IBL is a particularly appropriate pedagogy for TRS particularly in the light of this framework, which encompasses the three themes of collaborative inquiry, information literacy and networked learning.

5.1.a Collaborative inquiry

CILASS regards collaborative inquiry as one of three key components of IBL. The CILASS website claims: ‘A broad range of intellectual and transferable skills-related benefits are associated with group-work and other participatory forms of learning.’ Of what relation is this to TRS? As my case studies have illustrated, one of the main ways in which knowledge is created, discussed and disseminated in TRS is through collaborative endeavour and small group work. From the onset of their studies, TRS students are introduced to working in groups. They engage in collaborative learning in the context of small group teaching and seminars throughout their studies, and, as my case studies have shown, there is also some existing good practice in terms of peer group learning. Assessment by group work and group presentation is also commonplace in TRS, whether that be in the context of IBL/hybrid-IBL modules such as those on which the case studies focused, or of modules which would not be typically labelled IBL.

5.1.b Information literacy

CILASS lists the development of students' information literacy skills as the second key theme of IBL. A useful definition of information literacy is 'knowing when and why you need information, where to find it, and how to evaluate, use and communicate it in an ethical manner'.

Students are arriving university with far higher levels of computer and web literacy than ever before, but this does not mean that they are information literate. This is of crucial importance in TRS, where students are increasingly encouraged to use the Internet for research, but are faced with a bewildering amount of frequently inaccurate information from religious and anti-religious organisations. Trying to research TRS on the Internet is a minefield, and this may make students reluctant to use Internet-based methods. Despite this, very little work has been done on information literacy from the standpoint of TRS, with most material coming out of information science and education. The proliferation of popular material which exists on the Internet and in the wider media related to religion and spirituality means that it will be of particular gain to TRS communities to assimilate the sorts of 'higher order' information literacy capabilities being considered by CILASS.
How can tutors help to develop students' skills and confidence in using the Internet to research TRS? First of all, CILASS' collaboration with library staff to develop students' abilities is something which could easily be copied within TRS departments by staff wanting to introduce inquiry into their teaching. It could be as simple as a departmental requirement that students attend information literacy sessions run by the library. Secondly, staff can create online resources for students to ensure that they have access to reliable sources. An example is the database of art and artefacts being created for students at Biblical Studies at the University of Sheffield.

Thirdly, staff can directly address the proliferation-but also the potential-of questionable material in classes devoted to the discussion of information literacy in the context of the discipline. Again working in liaison with librarians, staff can help students view such material as research fodder and can provide guidance on how to use it. It is also possible to turn dealing with questionable material into an inquiry exercise; imagine, for example, students working in groups to figure out how to distinguish between sources, perhaps comparing different websites' reports of the practice of self-flagellation in some religious orders.

Fourthly, staff can educate themselves and their students about the electronic tools which exist to help TRS students sift through the enormous amounts of data available to them online. As Meriel Patrick, lecturer in Theology and Philosophy at the University of Oxford and metadata editor at Intute: Arts and Humanities, has pointed out in a very useful article about information literacy in TRS and Philosophy, the problem with online TRS and Philosophy resources is that there is so much material, without the same quality controls that apply to printed materials. However, because students will continue to use the Internet as a study tool, regardless of whether their tutors want them to, Patrick argues that the proper response from tutors is to shepherd them in their use of it. In her article, she provides a useful list of ways tutors can help develop their students' information literacy skills. In particular, she recommends two subject gateways, the Virtual Religion Index and the Wabash Center Internet Guide to Religion, and the lists of resources in the Teaching and Learning Resources section of the American Academy of Religion's website.

Naturally, Patrick also recommends Intute: Arts and Humanities, which describes itself as a 'free online service providing access to the very best web resources for education and research'. Intute provides free access to a database of thousands of online educational resources which are selected and evaluated by subject specialists. The arts and humanities pages of the website include a TRS database. Intute also provides a service called Internet Detective, which is an interactive tutorial designed to encourage careful evaluation of online resources. Intute also produces a booklet on Internet Resources for Religion and Theology.

In addition to gateways, Patrick recommends digital libraries, many allowing free access to key theological texts. She also mentions the ATLA Religion Database, explaining that it indexes the contents of hundreds of journals and essays from anthologies. Online collections of journals may also be of interest, including JSTOR or Taylor and Francis Journals, which are freely accessible to members of subscribing institutions via an Athens username and password. Patrick also recommends online reference works, websites containing religious statistics, and reputable theological blogs.

Finally, tutors should bear in mind the importance of making sure that any technical barriers to students developing information literacy skills, such as lack of access to equipment, are removed.

5.1.c Networked learning

CILASS has identified the third key element of IBL as networked learning. Networked learning includes the production and use of multi-media materials and Web 2.0 materials, including information-sharing, web-based communities and hosted services, such as social networking sites, wikis and folksonomies.

The SC for PRS has built up bank of information on e-learning activity in our subject areas. Our website includes discipline-specific e-learning pages; the resources page and the bibliographyps illustrate the extent to which e-learning is being practised in TRS (and Philosophy) and signpost useful resources. We also employed an e-learning
project officer in 2007/8 to carry out surveys with students and staff in UK TRS communities to assess the nature and extent of e-learning in the discipline. The results of these surveys were published in a report in the special e-learning online edition of Discourse, the Subject Centre journal. This can be accessed at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/74.

Surveys of twenty-nine TRS staff suggest that e-learning is common practice in TRS. TRS academics reported high levels of usage of the following e-learning facilities: online course materials, VLEs, and online discussion forums. They reported moderately high usage of online multimedia such as podcasts, and a similar number said that they require their students to submit assessments online. Some use of blogs, wikis, e-portfolios, computer-mediated interactive forms of assessment (such as online quizzes) and computer-mediated interactive forms of teaching (such as the use of interactive software with avatar characters, like Second Life) was also reported.

Other interesting results from the TRS respondents include:

- 50% agree or strongly agree that they try to incorporate the use of ICT in learning and teaching wherever possible; 21% disagree.
- 58% agree or strongly agree that they try to encourage colleagues to use ICT in their learning and teaching; 10% disagree or strongly disagree with this claim.
- 89% agree or strongly agree that they try to encourage their students to engage with ICT; 4% disagree with this.
- 83% agree or strongly agree that ICT makes learning easier for students with physical disabilities.
- 68% agree or strongly agree that ICT makes learning easier for students with specific learning difficulties.
- Respondents also recognised a link between enhanced employability and ICT skills, with 90% of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that it is important for students’ job prospects that their course provides them with experience of using ICT. 3% of staff disagree with this claim.
- 97% agree or strongly agree that traditional methods of teaching such as lectures and seminars can benefit from the use of ICT. None of the respondents disagree with this claim (the remaining 3% of respondents describe their position in respect of this claim as neutral).
- 85% of respondents disagree or strongly disagree with the claim that the use of ICT is not appropriate to teach their subject area. None of the respondents agree or strongly agree with this claim.
- 55% of respondents agree or strongly agree that their students are enthusiastic about the use of ICT in learning and teaching; 3% strongly disagree with this claim (the remaining respondents remained neutral on this point).

Respondents were also given a space to mention anything else about e-learning which they wanted to share. One said that e-learning empowers students, motivates them, and develops their skills. Another four respondents said that e-learning empowers students who lack confidence. One respondent also referred to e-learning as a democratic alternative to classroom teaching, because 'students can engage with each other without what is sometimes a more combative classroom environment where quieter students can be intimidated'.

To supplement these results, and those derived from my case studies at the Universities of Sheffield and Manchester, I would like to reference two other examples of e-learning in TRS which came to the attention of the SC for PRS’ e-learning officer. One, an example of e-learning in Theology, is the work of Sara Parvis and Jessie Paterson, who are based in the School of Divinity at the University of Edinburgh. They use blogs with students of all levels, including taught postgraduates, as a preparation tool for face-to-face interaction in seminars. Students take turns to write a blog on that week’s set text(s), and others in the class add shorter comments. The point of blogging in this context is to encourage the free flow of discussion, and to empower students of different cultures, learning styles, and sometimes
languages, to participate in the seminar. At the later levels of undergraduate study, blogging takes the place of essay-writing, with students being required to post three formal commentaries instead of writing an essay. Shorter comments are still invited from other students, thus continuing the practice of more informal shared learning among the students. According to Parvis and Paterson, blogging has been found to enhance face-to-face teaching and discussion at all levels, and to encourage the students both to develop new skills and to develop the traditional skill of close textual analysis in an engaging form.97

The second example is of e-learning practice in Religious Studies. The 'Religions in Wolverhampton' module which is taught at the University of Wolverhampton uses e-learning to help students explore their local religious environment. The module draws on a variety of technologies to support learning, including a Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), interactive whiteboards in classroom activities, and a website. Students have responded to these approaches positively, reporting increased motivation, developed competencies, and a sense of empowerment as a result of them. Students have also made connections between e-learning, the consequent development of their ICT skills, and their enhanced employability.98

'Religions in Wolverhampton' also takes an open minded view of students' use of Wikipedia. Indeed, the role of Wikipedia in learning and teaching is subject to considerable debate in higher education. I encountered a variety of opinions on this issue in the course of my research; some tutors told me that they ban all reference to Wikipedia in assessments, but others are more tolerant of its use. It is my view that it is possible, and valuable, to use Wikipedia constructively in higher education. Although it is reasonable, I believe, for students to use Wikipedia as a starting point to further research, its main value as a learning and teaching resource lies in its potential to be a tool for the development of information literacy skills. This makes it a particularly useful resource for TRS, for reasons I have already mentioned.

A number of practical examples of how Wikipedia can be used in this way come to mind. Students can grade and edit Wikipedia entries on TRS topics, create articles, and link appropriate pages together, probably in supervised classes. Such activities are particularly appropriate for group work, and are thus ideally placed to be IBL exercises for use in TRS. Another useful exercise would be to ask students to write a short piece on a topic in TRS that they know something about, and then to critically assess the Wikipedia entry on the same topic and compare it with their own.100

Footnotes

- This includes undergraduates and taught postgraduates, and arguably, research postgraduates, who may be collaborating on a project, or simply gathering with peers in research seminars.
- When I was an undergraduate in TRS at the University of Leeds, the Department ran two undergraduate modules (and continues to run them) which further evidence this point. Christian Theology and The Religious Mapping of Leeds both include significant collaborative elements. Christian Theology includes an assessed group work project which also incorporates a peer assessment component. It also uses online communication tools to facilitate group work. Religious Mapping is a fieldwork module, and requires students to organise themselves into a group which meets regularly and which has overall charge of planning and managing a research project. It is assessed by team report and group presentation, and again, this includes a peer assessment component. Group work is also facilitated by online message boards in this module. See also 3.3.a.
- Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), Information Literacy: Definition. CILIP. [accessed 7 Sept 2008]: http://www.cilip.org.uk/policyadvocacy/learning/informationliteracy/definition/default.htm
One of my interviewees referred to this as TRS' 'bigger lunatic fringe', in comparison with other disciplines.

See 3.4.b.i.

Meriel Patrick, 'Best of the Web: Internet Resources for Philosophy and TRS', *Discourse* Vol. 6, no. 2 (Spring 2007), pp.11-17 at pp.11-12. Available online at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/PrsDiscourseArticles/7.


Patrick, ibid., p.13.

Patrick, ibid., p.14. See http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/detective/. As Patrick explains, Internet Detective is part of the Intute Virtual Training Suite, which is a collection of over sixty free, mostly subject-specific online tutorials intended to help students improve their Internet research skills. Each provides a tour of key online resources in that field, plus advice on finding and evaluating further websites. The Religious Studies tutorial also includes a section for teachers which suggests how the tutorials might be used in a classroom setting (see http://www.vts.intute.ac.uk/).


Patrick, ibid., p.15. See http://www.jstor.org/ and http://www.tandf.co.uk/journals/


See http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/elearning/e_resources.html.

See http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsdocuments/397.

(Referring to TRS respondents only): 24% of respondents reported the practice of compulsory e-submission of assessments in their departments, with a further 17% of respondents reporting active encouragement of this practice. 28% of respondents reported that e-submission of assessments is not an option for students in their department. 28% of respondents reported that provision of online resources is compulsory in their department, with another 38% reporting that, although not compulsory, provision of online resources is actively encouraged. A further 28% said that provision of online resources is supported, and 7% said such provision is available but not supported. 38% of respondents reported compulsory use of VLEs in their department; 24% reported that such use is actively encouraged; 21% reported that is supported; 3% that it is available but not supported; 10% that it is unavailable; and 3% of respondents did not know if VLEs were used by their departments. Regarding online discussion forums, 7% of respondents said that the use of such forums by students is compulsory in their department; 31% said that it is actively encouraged; 28% that it is supported; 24% that such forums are available to students, but that their use is not supported; 7% said that such forums are unavailable to students; and 3% did not know. None of the respondents reported the compulsory use of blogs, wikis, e-portfolios, online multimedia such as podcasts, computer-mediated interactive forms of

Deirdre Burke, Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at Wolverhampton, gave a presentation on this module at the SC for PRS' 'E-learning in Dialogue conference' (14-15 May 2008). A webcast of Dr Burke’s presentation is available online at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/elearning/webcast.html. Please see the SC for PRS website's e-learning project pages at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/projects/elearning/elearning_in_dialogue.html for more information about the event.

Of course, although Wiki articles are dynamic, and constantly changing, with quality of information being determined only by a growing consensus over time and by collaborative updating, it is also the case that certain pages are ‘watched' by editors for bad edits and inaccuracies.

Tutors may, however, judge Wikipedia's rivals to be more appropriate resources for such exercises. These include Citizendium, an online encyclopaedia which is edited by named experts, which includes subject sections, and which employs community managers; and Knol, which is a collection of articles on specific topics which are written by a named single author, whose permission is required to allow others to edit their article. Knol also provides multiple articles on the same subject. It may also be useful to mention at this point the Almond Springs website, http://www.christianleaders.org. This website came to my attention as a result of Michael Jinkins' review of it (Michael Jinkins, 'Theological Dot Education: A Review of the Almond Springs Web Site www.christianleaders.org', Teaching Theology and Religion 5.1 (Feb 2002), pp. 49-55). The point of the website is, according to its owners, 'to stimulate theological reflection on the uses of technology in theological education'. Jinkins says in his review that the website holds particular promise for theological education, 'especially for the teaching of pastoral and practical theology, church leadership, finance and admin, Christian education and homiletics' (p. 50).

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

Created on: October 27th 2009
Updated on: November 25th 2009