Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 5.2 The disciplinary culture of TRS

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Having argued that the 'fit' of TRS with the CILASS framework for IBL is a good one, I will now consider in more detail the disciplinary culture of TRS as it influences its relationship with IBL, and with active learning in general. The point is to identify the methodologies and epistemologies intrinsic to TRS to determine whether the disciplinary culture of TRS makes it a 'natural' for inquiry approaches.

TRS, like all arts and humanities disciplines, has the search for new knowledge as its core intellectual and epistemological endeavour. The vast majority of TRS departments are situated in research universities. Research is at the core of TRS, and ideally, both tutors and students are valued as parts of the researching community. Learning methods which have research at their heart are, then, likely to work well within the discipline.

Indeed, all of the TRS academics I spoke to during the course of my research endorsed student-led learning and used some non-traditional forms of teaching and assessment, such as presentations and group projects. The majority reported good feedback from students. The academics also told me that IBL helps to strengthen the relationship between teaching and research. This is supported in the literature. Jane Robertson and Carol Bond have found that in 'hard' disciplines, many academics think that students need to acquire a sufficient basic knowledge before they can contribute to discussions, but in 'soft' disciplines academics expect students to participate in their disciplinary community from the beginning. Engaging students with research via IBL is, then, one important way to help bridge the gap between teaching and research. Mick Healey writes:

One type of active learning that focuses on student direct engagement with research is IBL. Both research and teaching can be seen as different forms of inquiry. Several voices are now calling for developing research-teaching linkages in communities of inquiry in which staff and students are 'co-learners' in the process of academic inquiry.

The students I spoke to understood the disciplinary culture of TRS, reporting feeling valued as part of a research community and empowered as learners as a result of inquiry methods. They also said that IBL enables them to engage better with learning and to retain more knowledge, primarily because their inquiries have developed in response to a desire to really know something or to solve a real problem, and are likely to be of genuine relevance to other people, and to their own future careers.

To clarify, it is my view, based on the results of my research, particularly the case studies and my literature review,
that IBL is an appropriate pedagogy for TRS because:

- It is consistent with the ethos and methodology of TRS;
- It is consistent with the epistemology of TRS.

5.2.a The ethos and methodology of TRS

According to the David A. Kolb's taxonomy, adapted by Tony Becher and Paul Trowler, TRS is a 'soft' discipline. C. Colbeck explains: 'In high paradigm consensus or "hard" disciplines, knowledge is perceived as cumulative and concerned with universals, quantification, and discovery.' Shân Wareing develops this: "'Hard" disciplines are characterised by widespread agreement about curriculum content, research collaboration, competition for recognition and funding, clearly defined intellectual boundaries, and the gatekeeping of those boundaries by a powerful elite.' To paraphrase Wareing, low paradigm consensus or 'soft' disciplines consider knowledge as recursive; scholars use new lenses to explore intellectual territory already mapped out by others. Knowledge is also concerned with particulars, qualities and understanding. She says: ""Soft" disciplines are characterised by idiosyncratic curricula, weak boundaries, independent research efforts and tolerance for unusual ideas or methods.' The relevant point here is that because it is a 'soft' discipline, TRS has a greater affinity with IBL than do 'hard' disciplines because teaching and learning practices within TRS are likely to be interpretive and constructive. Further to this, a culture of dialogue, inquiry, argument, critical reflection and arguably, action direction, characterises TRS, and is similarly resonant in inquiry approaches.

In addition, the lack of an agreed methodology by which academics and students do TRS helps to make the discipline receptive to new methods of learning, teaching and researching, including IBL. Mike Fearn and Leslie Francis have made the point that the absence of core subject matter in TRS may be causally related to the absence of a universally agreed methodology. As they say, linguists, historians, sociologists, archaeologists, philosophers, and psychologists may all teach in TRS departments. The QAA Benchmark Statement affirms this: 'Much of the excitement of the discipline lies in its contested nature. What should or should not be regarded as belonging to the subject, what methods should be used, the different results that come from adopting different presuppositions - these are some of the issues.'

Although there is no one method for doing TRS, it is nonetheless possible to narrow learning, teaching and research in TRS down to a few key methods, which happen to correspond with many methods used in IBL. These include documentary analysis, qualitative research (primarily used in Religious Studies), interpretative methods, phenomenology, action research, and observation research. In addition, TRS teaching is heavily seminar-based, thus suggesting that an affinity with collaborative working-a central feature of IBL-characterises the discipline. TRS also has a tradition of requiring undergraduates to complete dissertations, which are good examples of IBL.

5.2.b The epistemology of TRS

It occurred to me when I began my research that competing epistemologies within TRS may affect the reception of IBL in the discipline. I wondered whether I would encounter traditional systematic, philosophical theologians who regard knowledge as a priori, based on absolute truth-God in many cases-who would have an epistemological suspicion of the free-flowing nature of IBL, which, in some of its expressions, is constructivist, and regards knowledge as that which is created, not that which is already in existence and awaiting discovery. One of the academics I spoke to referred to the existence of two theological camps, one of which consists of theologians who engage with culture, and the other of theologians who regard themselves as standing outside of culture. He predicted that the latter group would regard practical theology, for example, which starts with the idea that knowledge is born of human situations and which is consonant with IBL in a number of ways, as 'flaky.'
However, I did not encounter any such opposition to IBL; all of the academics I spoke to, whether in formal interviews or not, understood TRS to be a subject in which conclusions are reached through a process of debate, and were of the opinion that this makes it an appropriate discipline for IBL. I imagine that if I had argued for IBL as necessarily constructivist—which I do not believe it to be—opinion would have differed.

In terms of epistemology, then, the following points should be borne in mind:

- IBL is appropriate for disciplines, such as TRS, in which truth is contested and in which argument is the route to knowledge. The status of appeals to authority—that they are not acceptable—means that learning in these disciplines is necessarily inquiry-based.

- Expanding on this point, TRS is not prescriptive. 'Right answers' cannot be derived in TRS in the same way as they can, for instance, in Maths. On the contrary, in TRS, answers are arrived at through a process of discussion. IBL, which in some senses, but not all, takes away the concept of the single right answer yet insists that individuals defend their answers, seems ideally suited to such a discipline. This consonance between TRS and IBL is also important in light of concerns amongst TRS academics that their students are arriving at university expecting to be spoon-fed information. IBL, especially if it is practised with students from level one, is one way to address these concerns.

5.2.c IBL and established pedagogies in TRS

Necessarily, pedagogies already exist in TRS which complement the ethos, methodology and epistemology of the discipline as described here. These established pedagogies have evolved partly in response to what we might call the special 'issues' unique to TRS, such as insider/outsider issues, potential challenges to faith engendered by the academic study of TRS, self-disclosure and emotion-arousing in the classroom and during unsupervised study, and encounter with people from different religious and cultural backgrounds to one's own. Crucially, these issues may also give rise to three particular foci in IBL which are supported by existing TRS pedagogies: experiential inquiry (reflecting on, and subjecting to scrutiny, one's own values, beliefs and practices), practical or active learning, and a focus on the process of learning.

As the popularity of the DPT suggests, active learning via practical theology may be one route into IBL for TRS tutors and students, since this form of 'doing' TRS is already established in the discipline, and encapsulates many of the values at the heart of IBL. Experiential learning via working with faith-based and voluntary organisations is also common practice in undergraduate TRS. Reflection on the process of learning is also built into many TRS modules through the use of learning journals and self-evaluation questionnaires. The 'real life', reflective learning which is a key feature of IBL is, then, already being practised to a considerable degree in TRS.

Footnotes


- Healey, ibid., p. 75.

- Kolb, David A., 'Learning Styles and Disciplinary Differences' in Chickering, A. (ed.), The Modern American College

- Wareing, ibid., p. 11.
- Wareing, ibid., p. 11.
- Wareing, ibid., p. 11.

TRS can be taught as an applied subject, hence the development of the discipline of practical theology. Although not all TRS is applied, where it is, its praxis methodology echoes the methodology of IBL.


It is a mistake to assume that IBL cannot be used to reach factual certainties.

- The SC for PRS organised a conference on this topic, 'Spoonfeeding or Critical Thinking: A Level / Higher to First Year Progression in Religious Studies and Theology', on 3-4 July 2008. It provided a space for academics, teachers and representatives from qualifications and curriculum authorities to debate this problem. Abstracts and slides from the presentations are available on the SC for PRS' website at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/view.html/prsevents/313, and write-ups of the presentations were published in a special issue of the Subject Centre's journal, *Discourse* (vol. 8. no.1 (Autumn 2008)), which is also available online at http://prs.heacademy.ac.uk/publications/discourse/8_1.html.

- See 4.3.
- For an example of PBL in TRS, see Worsley, Howard, 'Problem-Based Learning (PBL) and the Future of Theological Education: A Reflection Based on Recent PBL Practice in Medical Training Compared to Emerging Trends in Residential Ministerial Training for Ordination', *Journal of Adult Theological Education* 2.1 (2005), pp. 71-81. Worsley outlines two problem-based scenarios for use in ministerial theological education. In one, candidates assume the role of a vicar who has to solve the problem of low levels of attendance at their church, and in the other, they assume the role of an inner city vicar who notices that a homeless project is attracting Christian volunteers who are meeting to pray, and that a local youth group is meeting for alternative worship (p. 76).

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