Inquiry-Based Learning in Theology and Religious Studies: an Investigation and Analysis: 5.4 Conclusions and notes of caution

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The conclusions of this report are that:

- IBL is an appropriate pedagogy for TRS;
- There are significant reasons why exploiting the affinity between IBL and TRS should be a priority for TRS departments, and;
- That there are a variety of means of so doing, as learning and teaching activities at the Universities of Manchester and Sheffield illustrate.

Before drawing this report to a close, it is important to identify some notes of caution which may affect the engagement of TRS with IBL. However, these are not discipline-specific; my research suggests that there are no obvious reasons why IBL should be more difficult to apply in TRS than in other disciplines. Indeed, as I have shown, it suggests quite the opposite.

5.4.a Content

A potential criticism of IBL is that it is insufficiently intellectually rigorous-‘learning lite’. Some of the staff I spoke to expressed concerns that IBL does not allow students to imbibe sufficient subject content. Conversations with CILASS and CEEBL staff confirmed that this is a common worry amongst academics. Whilst it can be legitimate, it can also be based on a misconception that IBL is a pedagogy which requires the tutor to stand back from the learning process completely. IBL does not support this. Bill Hutchings has argued that IBL is flexible enough to be a means by which clearly-defined and finite pieces of knowledge are acquired; it does not have to be relativist.\textsuperscript{116} Similarly, Kahn and O'Rourke have noted:

It is unrealistic to expect that students will never wander from the main thrust of an open-ended enquiry, and so facilitation will be important to bring them back on course...The balance appears to be a delicate one-too much tutor intervention and the EBL process is stifled, too little facilitation and the students may feel anxious or unsupported.\textsuperscript{117}

They suggest that facilitators can achieve this balance by:
...asking open-ended questions that provoke further discussion... supporting students, motivating them to engage with the task and valuing their ideas and contributions, encouraging students to reflect on their experiences, monitoring progress...challenging student thinking, encouraging them to extend their boundaries and to seek new ways to work with problems and situations [and] developing an atmosphere of trust in which students are willing to share and exchange ideas or work co-operatively.118

The atmosphere of trust to which Kahn and O'Rourke refer is particularly interesting in the TRS context, since it is to be hoped that creating such an atmosphere would be an existing priority for the TRS tutor, who has to manage not only a diverse classroom—especially in terms of the religious affiliations and cultural backgrounds of students—but also explicit discussions of this diversity, often with reference to individuals who are present.

Where there are well-founded concerns that students are not imbibing content, it may be that the question or problem they are exploring has been set up incorrectly by the tutor and needs to be reframed. The trigger for imbibing content is the setting up of the inquiry properly; that is, designing the question or problem correctly and pitching it appropriately. The question or problem can be designed by the tutor or the student, or by both together, depending on the capabilities of the student. Christopher Justice et al list the following as characteristics of a good IBL question: it must be interesting, analytical, problematic, complex (having more than one answer), important (topical or relevant to the real world), genuine (the student has to really want to find out the answer, not simply set up a question which will allow them to prove something they already believe), and researchable.119

In particular circumstances, IBL exercises require augmentation with more structured, including taught, activities such as lectures. Certainly, a number of the staff I spoke to felt that it is important to include traditional lectures in inquiry courses, to ensure that students do not miss out on important facts. Consequently, they teach using a hybrid of lectures and IBL exercises.

Finally, problems with content can be minimised by introducing IBL as early as possible in degree courses, when students are still forming their learning habits. Other small measures, such as ensuring that IBL is practised in small groups—no more than ten students is ideal—and that students keep learning journals, can also help.

5.4.b Group work

One of the concerns expressed by many of the students I spoke to was that the collaborative work integral to IBL can be difficult to manage. In particular, students had experienced situations where one person in a group does very little work, and the others have to work much harder than they feel is reasonable to make up for it. Less commonly, students complained about one student dominating group work. Students may also feel under confident or overshadowed in group tasks. These situations become more problematic when group work is assessed. CILASS' Interim Evaluation Report also reports issues of concern for students relating to the dynamics of group work, suggesting that this is a general problem. Many of the students surveyed by CILASS, particularly undergraduates (although postgraduates also expressed high levels of dissatisfaction), were ambivalent or unhappy about working in groups. This trend has been widely observed.

Some of the tutors with whom I spoke have developed strategies for minimising these problems, such as the confidential 'ratting out' option used by Diana Edelman at the University of Sheffield. More often than not, however, tutors told me that they respond to this problem by reminding students that they are likely to have to work in teams in their future employment, and should regard their experiences at university as a trial run, which they themselves are responsible for managing.

5.4.c Perceived lack of support for students
Although findings from CILASS' Interim Evaluation Report suggest that the majority of students respond positively to inquiry pedagogies, less engaged undergraduates report feeling abandoned by their tutors in IBL courses. They experience a lack of support or structure in inquiry courses, and struggle academically as a consequence.

It is important to remember that IBL is a new approach for many students, some of whom will feel disorientated by the expectation of independent student learning intrinsic to the pedagogy. The CILASS Interim Evaluation Report advises: 'successful IBL activities should be carefully designed to provide needed structure and contact, as well as links to what students perceive as authentic, real-life tasks and situations.' Tutors should not make unrealistic assumptions about their students’ capabilities, designing IBL exercises which stretch their intellectual capacities just enough, but not too much. They should also remember that IBL is not a pedagogy which absents tutors; on the contrary, it requires them to take very seriously their responsibilities of facilitation and support.

5.4.d Design and sustainability

My research suggests that academics perceive it to be a greater challenge to design IBL curricula than to teach through lectures. IBL is also considered to be a greater drain on resources, including staff, than more traditional methods of teaching. Echoing this, in CILASS' Interim Evaluation Report, staff reported concerns about the amount of time needed to design and deliver IBL courses.

There are a number of ways these concerns may be addressed. Again, hybrid IBL is likely to be easier to design than modules based entirely on IBL, and may also be easier to staff. The employment of postgraduate teaching assistants is another way to relieve the burden on staff. Anecdotally, I have also heard it argued in response to claims that IBL is difficult to staff that non-subject specialists should be recruited to facilitate sessions. The idea is that, because the point of IBL is for students to conduct their own research, tutors do not need subject knowledge because it is not their place to provide information. Indeed, those who make this point regard it as disadvantageous for subject specialists to facilitate IBL precisely because they may be tempted to 'teach'. However, I do not agree that this is a solution. On the contrary, I believe that IBL sessions need to be facilitated by subject specialists because IBL does not advocate the complete withdrawal of tutors from student learning activities. The purpose of this non-abandonment of students is that if a student's inquiries become too tangential, there is a subject specialist at hand to recognise the error and guide the student back on course. Furthermore, I am not persuaded that subject specialists would be inclined to 'teach'.

Practitioners new to inquiry approaches may take heart from the comments of Virginia Lee et al.:

> most instructors grow into inquiry-guided learning rather than instantaneously transforming their teaching like a light switched on. Some instructors may begin by articulating clear learning outcomes as a guide for instruction. Others may jump in, try out an interactive teaching strategy, like the way students respond, and then gradually refine it. Others may begin by assigning a project and then realise that they need to provide students more explicit instruction in how to do it. And so inquiry-guided learning proceeds by fits and starts.

5.4.e IBL, widening participation and diversity

Finally, one of the major appeals of IBL relates to the widening participation enabled by its democratic conceptualisation of education. IBL works with a less hierarchical and more inclusive student-teacher model than does traditional 'transmission' teaching. Furthermore, its endorsement of non-traditional learning and assessment methods gives students who do not do well in essays and exams a chance to succeed academically.

However, there is a danger that this potential for inclusiveness could be under-exploited, or even squandered, as a result of excessively heavy student workloads. The students I spoke to claimed that the IBL modules on which they
are enrolled have disproportionately heavy workloads. CILASS' Interim Evaluation Report also notes students' concerns related to workload. 133 These findings are supported by the claim made by Spronken-Smith et al: that students perceive higher workloads in IBL modules. 134 The irony is that the very students who could benefit most from the equalisation of opportunity brought about by the use of non-traditional learning and assessment methods, alongside more traditional ones, may be so disadvantaged by overwork in IBL courses that any such opportunity is redundant.

This is in fact a thorny political issue. Some staff with whom I spoke responded to these concerns by arguing that, although students endure heavier workloads with IBL modules, this furnishes them with a greater number of skills, which in turn leads to an enhanced C.V., thus offsetting the problem. I do not feel that this is a satisfactory way to respond to a student struggling with overwork. I have more sympathy with the argument from other staff with whom I spoke that IBL modules make better and more structured use of the hours allocated to them than do other modules. It may be the case that other modules simply do not build in a structure which would make proper use of the hours allocated to them. In either case, however, students endure an imbalance, and this is in need of redress.

Specifically in terms of assessment, it is important that IBL practitioners do not over-assess students, or design assessments which are discordant with the IBL activities in which they have participated throughout the course. A concern expressed by students cited in the literature I have reviewed, and echoed in my own research findings, is that methods used to assess IBL modules are disjunctive with the forms of learning nurtured by IBL. CILASS' Interim Evaluation Report found that students feel that IBL activities encourage valuable learning, but that exams and other assessments test knowledge which is not emphasised in IBL assignments and activities. The Report comments: 'IBL strategies may be more appropriate for high-level cognitive processes such as analysis, evaluation, and synthesis rather than the recall of facts'. 135 Kahn and O'Rourke write that:

...a range of assessment methods will usually be desirable, matching the complex open-ended nature of an enquiry...assessment should, ideally, be generated as a natural product of the enquiry rather than as a separate exercise...[for example] records of group meetings may serve both to sustain the group process and provide evidence for assessment. 136

Finally, I also remain concerned that IBL courses presume a certain level of ICT literacy and access to ICT facilities which may not in fact be the case for students from particular socio-economic backgrounds.

Footnotes

- Ibid.
- HEFCE/CILASS, HEFCE CILASS Interim Evaluation Report, appendix three.
- Ibid., appendix six.
- Spronken-Smith et al. report that students are at first uncomfortable with IBL partly because they are
unhappy working in groups (see Spronken-Smith et al., ‘How Effective is Inquiry-Based Learning in Linking Teaching and Research?’). See also Plowright, David and Watkins, Mary, ‘There Are No Problems To Be Solved, Only Inquiries To Be Made, In Social Work Education’, Innovations in Education and Teaching International 41.2 (May 2004), pp. 185-206.

- See 3.3.e.
- This is supported in Mary Whowell, A Student Guide to Enquiry-Based Learning (July 2006). CEEBL. [accessed 7 Sept 2008]: http://www.campus.manchester.ac.uk/ceebl/resources/general/studentguide_july06.pdf. Whowell argues that conflict management is part of the group work process.
- See 2.2.f.
- See, for example, Plowright and Watkins, ‘There Are No Problems To Be Solved’, p. 196. This paper reports students in social work who had been exposed to IBL feeling anxious about their own subject knowledge and desiring more contact time with tutors to provide them with a background to the subjects they were inquiring about.
- HEFCE/CILASS, HEFCE CILASS Interim Evaluation Report, appendix six.
- Ibid., appendix three.
- Lee, V. S., Greene, D. B., Odom, J., Schechter, E. and Slatta, R. W. ‘What is Inquiry-Guided Learning?’ in V. S. Lee (ed.), Teaching and Learning Through Inquiry: A Guidebook for Institutions and Instructors, (Virginia: Stylus, 2004), pp. 3-16 at p. 15. Also useful is Jenkins et al., Reshaping Teaching in Higher Education, which includes strategies for course design (pp. 63-71). Amongst its recommendations are developing students' understanding of research (by making them aware of their tutors' research and so on) and developing their ability to carry out research (by having them present work at simulated research conferences and so on-on this point, I would suggest that students be encouraged to present work, perhaps in groups, at real conferences, as was the case at the 'Finding Your Own Way' workshop at CILASS CETL in May 2008).
- See 2.2.d.
- See 3.4.a.iv.iv.
- HEFCE/CILASS, HEFCE CILASS Interim Evaluation Report, appendix three.
- Spronken-Smith et al., ibid.
- HEFCE/CILASS, HEFCE CILASS Interim Evaluation Report, appendix six.
- Kahn and O’Rourke, Guide to Curriculum Design: Enquiry-Based Learning, ibid..

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