Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning
Essays and Studies

Evaluating Learning Change: How Third-year English Literature Students Adapt to Problem-Based Learning

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Abstract

We have argued elsewhere that Enquiry-Based Learning methods are conceptually appropriate for Literary Studies courses when adapted to meet the local needs of the discipline (see Hutchings, B. and O'Rourke, K., 2002, 2004). We defined our procedures in these essays as Problem-Based Learning in order to highlight the conceptual basis of the learning method and because we removed all the conventional frameworks of courses, including reading-lists and syllabus (except as defined by the course title). Thus the problems themselves were the sole drivers of the learning. However, Enquiry-Based Learning is a more flexible and appropriate term, and can readily include forms of Problem-Based Learning.

We gathered qualitative student response data from the implementation of Enquiry-Based Learning methods in third-year English Literature courses. Five main issues emerged: general anxiety about the introduction of innovatory methods; group dynamics; the absence of a familiar framework; continual pressure; and the rigidity of conventional Problem-Based Learning methods. Each of these is illustrated with quotations from student feedback, and each is accompanied by a description of the ways in which the issue has been addressed, also with illustrative student feedback.

Context

The project we engaged in was to implement Enquiry-Based Learning methods in the delivery of selected Literary Studies courses in the former Department of English and American Studies (now part of the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures) at the University of Manchester. The stimulus and opportunity for this implementation were provided by the award to Bill Hutchings of one of the first tranche of National Teaching Fellowships in July 2000. This externally-funded award, given to an individual rather than a department or an institution, allowed for an autonomous, individually-driven project to take place within an otherwise traditional teaching environment.

Our project therefore necessitated a particular kind of educational change. We were adapting enquiry-led methods for a discipline that is completely different from those within which Problem-Based Learning methods were generated and within which they have largely developed. With Literary Studies, we are dealing with an Arts subject that is non-practical and non-vocational in any accepted sense of the term. Established principles and practices had to be subjected to a process of rigorous scrutiny to assess and evaluate their suitability for our discipline. Moreover, the students involved had spent their first two years in a traditional learning environment, with teaching being delivered by a mixture of large-scale lecture and small-group tutor-led tutorial/seminar, so that their exposure to different ways of delivering courses necessitated a radical change in their approach and their working methods.

Data

The courses chosen for implementation were two final-year options (one on Samuel Johnson, one on Eighteenth-Century Poetry), both taught solely by Bill and involving small groups of fifteen to twenty students. This allowed for an intensive process of observation and feedback with manageable control groups. Karen, as Research Assistant on the project, managed the data collection. During the session 2000-01, the two courses continued to be taught by conventional tutor-led two-hour seminars, with the equivalent courses in 2001-02 and 2002-03 being taught through Enquiry-Based Learning. Thus the project produced comparative data as well as qualitative data from two years of implementation of Enquiry-Based Learning.

Data was gathered in a variety of ways:

- End of course evaluation forms
- Focus groups
- Peer feedback
- Reflection by students on group work
- Observation of Enquiry-Based Learning and tutor-led sessions

Issues raised in data

Detailed analysis of the data revealed five main areas of concern for students. These problems will each be described and illustrated from the data sources, with commentary. The mechanisms by which we have sought to resolve these problems will then be described, and again illustrated from the data, with commentary.

Problem 1

Students' anxiety about innovatory methods, particularly in the third year of a degree programme and when encountered in the context of other courses being delivered in traditional ways; tensions within the resulting hybrid syllabus; potential problems if Enquiry-Based Learning had been introduced in year one.

> "*A lot of people were nervous because it was something new and we didn't know quite what was going to happen and a few people dropped out before it started because it was the last semester so they didn't want to take any risks.*"

Commentary

This reflects a common anxiety about any change, particularly at this late stage of students' careers.

> "*The written report counts for 40% - you can take it as an essay or a report. I'm not going anywhere near a report because that would be scary because you don't know what is meant by report and you're not going to take a risk in your final year to write a report properly.*"

Commentary

Students have become used to one specific form of written assessment, the written essay, with its particular conventions and expected register of language. But an English degree ought, arguably, to develop students' awareness of, and ability to produce, different kinds of writing. Again, we see a - very understandable - tendency to play safe.

> *"I think if I had come in the first year and been dropped into this situation, I would have freaked out. I quite liked being anonymous in the first year."*

Commentary

The above responses provide arguments in favour of implementing Enquiry-Based Learning at an earlier stage and in toto. However, the effects of implementing Enquiry-Based Learning in first year, with younger students fresh from a range of school and college experiences, need to be considered.

Responses

Practice problem; feedback; peer feedback

> *"The pre-session explained how it would be delivered, we were able to try a test problem, which gave us an idea."*
>
> *"The course is highly supported. Safety nets are in place for us - we can try it beforehand, we do a practice problem at the start."*
>
> *"The way we were introduced to PBL wasn't in any way intimidating. We had a practice problem to allow us to make our mistakes."*

Commentary

Induction methods are an important part of the process of implementation. The advantages of introducing a new learning method at a later stage are that we can arrange demonstration sessions, using students who have experienced the learning method; that we can ensure full consultation with the tutor before the course begins; and that at least some students will have direct experience of working with the tutor on other courses, so that - we hope - they can approach the new course with confidence. The course began with

a non-assessed problem, so that students can learn by experience - which is, after all, the essence of Enquiry-Based Learning - without an assessment outcome depending on it.

> *"Regular and comprehensive feedback from Bill and peers. Feedback was very specific, broken down and not just general."*

> *"Peer feedback lends itself to PBL. The nature of PBL is that we are all working together so we get to know each other really well so you wouldn't be too shy in saying 'listen, mate, that bit was really good but you could improve on that bit'. You wouldn't feel any qualms with that because we all know each other, it's not as if we're dealing with strangers and we wouldn't have known each other if it wasn't for the style of the course and the group work."*

Commentary

Prompt and full feedback on performance is an essential for any teaching method. It is important that the feedback be specific, reflecting all aspects of process and product, and be linked to expected outcomes. The group dynamic inherent in Enquiry-Based Learning work should engender a feeling of trust and confidence among students as well as with the facilitator. As students come to recognize their peers' strengths and abilities, so they come to value other points of view. Ensuring that a course makes room for peer feedback demonstrates that students' responses are valued, and is itself a means of empowering students, giving them confidence in their own opinions and encouraging a collaborative learning ethos. And the more responses students receive, the more information they are gathering.

> *"We did a reflection on how we had come together to do our last presentation and we were absolutely astounded at how much we had learnt, about the problem and about group skills."*

Commentary

Feedback should also be inward-looking, asking the group to reflect on their own experience and the end-product. That students may thereby come to recognize how much they have done and learnt is part of the process of convincing students of the efficacy of Enquiry-Based Learning.

Problem 2

Group dynamics and potential for conflict

> *"I have friends who have been forced to do group work and have been assigned groups and they go and no-one else turns up or some people do all the work and others don't contribute."*

Commentary

Good group work does not simply happen. It has to be fostered and encouraged. The phrasing of this comment is instructive. Being "forced to do group work" is itself counter to the principles of group work, which is about cooperation rather than compulsion. See Yeung, An-Yeung, Chiu, Mok and Lai, 2003: "It has been suggested [cf. Norman and Schmidt, 1992] that setting up PBL groups provides students with the opportunity to develop skills but in itself does not develop their problem-solving skills, group skills and self-directed learning skills".

> *"I can imagine that if you got into a group where the ability was very different, where people had very different ideas, where people weren't good at meeting up regularly and let you down, I think that would be really detrimental to the course."*

Commentary

These concerns reflect common problems with group work.

Responses

Removal of feelings of compulsion and artificiality by the creation of a relaxed social atmosphere; establishment of effective dynamic early, in practice problem, so that students begin to develop strategies, identify successful methods and understand their role within a successful group; realisation that students can learn from each other and so want to meet in order to learn.

"You can come and go as you please. It means that because there is such a casual feeling towards it, it kind of lends itself to people just chatting about this, that and the other. And that dynamic is really important."

"The nature of the course means that the tutor has to be accessible because the students become actively involved in the problems and the groups take on a life outside the class."

"Having access to [the tutor's] own books is great. It means more than the books though - it really demonstrates that there is respect and trust both ways."

"You feel like you're <u>supposed</u> to be here. We're all talking with tutors."

Commentary

The best way of establishing a positive group dynamic is for the tutor/facilitator to demonstrate his/her commitment to being part of the group. There are many ways of doing this, the appropriateness of methods depending on the kind of teaching and learning. Our approach to Enquiry-Based Learning has placed importance on the availability of resources, including materials - computer, but, principally, books and other printed resources. The aim is to demonstrate that the space within which students are working is conducive to creative and diverse activities. One of the resources has therefore been Bill himself, as the 'owner' of the space who is making it freely available and as himself a participant in the processes. Such commitment and openness seek to 'naturalize' the learning, to make it part of a living continuity rather than an artificially set period apart from 'normal' life.

"Different groups had different ways of working and you were able to learn from seeing how other groups were operating."

"All of us hold a key to loads of information. We are all sources of information as much as the bookshelves and the tutor. It taught me how to work with others."

"One of my fears was either that some people would do nothing and that you would have to do loads or that some people would completely take over and you would be left behind. But the first problem established dynamics and I learnt when to be quiet and when to ask questions of the quieter people and make sure they contributed. I think we all recognised different characters."

"You have responsibility to the whole group, not just yourself. Everyone has to pull together."

> *"It brings people out of their shell. Quieter people who don't pipe up have to be disadvantaged, if you don't feel comfortable speaking in a group you're going to be disadvantaged, if you can't ask a question for fear of sounding thick. Whereas in this you get to know each other, warts and all, and that increases everyone's confidence."*

Commentary

Once the open dynamic is established, students can learn from working together on the first problem. They are also learning about one another, and about themselves and their attitude to others. It has been noted that students who lack communication skills or who are apprehensive about speaking are disadvantaged in Enquiry-Based Learning work (Blue, Stratton, Donnelly, Nash and Schwartz, 1998), but positive group work in a supportive and non-threatening environment ought to enable such students to contribute more effectively to discussion than in conventional seminars. It may, of course, be the case that students in our subject, which is about language, experience fewer such problems than students in some other areas.

> *"You feel like you're actually at University, there's a collegiate feeling within the course."*

Commentary

Well, this is the point, isn't it? If teaching doesn't create this feeling, then there's something wrong. That the student felt the need to point this out indicates that there may be fundamental problems with some conventional methods.

Problem 3

Absence of a familiar course framework

> *"In the first couple of weeks I was worried, I was thinking 'this isn't for me, I'm not going to learn anything'. I thought the course would be quite woolly, I couldn't see how it was going to work."*

> *"I was surprised there weren't any set texts. It's much more left up to us."*

Commentary

This form of Enquiry-Based Learning removes the familiar frameworks of conventional course structures: reading lists, tutorial topics, set books. This can be intimidating, since these frameworks provide the comfort of the expected and a sense of clear direction from tutor to student. Removing them can make it seem as if there is no direction, that the tutor has given up, has abdicated his or her responsibilities.

Responses

Encouragement of self-reliance and the excitement of individual discovery

> *"You learn to rely on your own resources more. For the exam my way of working was completely different from ever before…I went away and found the readings and did stuff off my own bat and was taking it in because I was interested in it and wasn't just reading it for the exam."*

Commentary

Once the confidence in group work has been established, the freedom of action carries over into individual students' attitudes to their work. It gives them back the ownership of their learning, and so of the literature itself. Literary Studies is not about directing students to a point of view, but about allowing students the room to discover their own point of view from the various possibilities. Make the learning experience like that and you develop the same attitude to learning that engaged students' interest in reading literature in the first place. Hence you approach closer to an alignment of the teaching with the subject being taught.

> *"The open nature of PBL - and the support you get from peers - encourages the student to explore <u>new</u>, untouched areas. For example, both groups this year touched on relatively 'obscure' poets, which would not happen in a traditional tutor-led session course, where one is encouraged to 'follow' the path/spoon feeding of the tutor."*

Commentary

The freedom also allows for creative expansion of the curriculum.

Problem 4

Continual pressure

> *"Because of the nature of the course, generally you can read all your books and then leave it until week nine and then really start battling with the revision, but with this you can't. It can be hard to change into a pattern of continuous working."*

> *"In terms of time spent it has far exceeded my other courses and I, at first, resented the degree to which it occupied me."*

Commentary

Time pressures can prove problematic. The open-ended nature of PBL work makes it harder to 'contain' the workload. This is a further difficulty when the course is being taken alongside other traditionally-taught courses. There is, perhaps, another way of looking at this: do conventional courses actually make adequate and appropriate demands on students?

Responses

Realisation that continuity is a more effective learning experience than troughs and peaks; development of deep learning; learning becomes a natural process

> *"The content from this course really has stuck in the long term. A lot of the courses you can do very little all year and then cram for two weeks. In this course, because it was course work and problem-based you had to plan and so you learnt so much and it was work <u>you wanted to do</u> because you <u>chose to do</u> it."*

> *"For other exams you just look at the course notes and think 'as long as I can remember all these points I'll be OK'. You don't recall the information beyond the exam."*

> *"It requires you to organise, you can't just cram for the exams. You have to organise and learn on a constant basis, which is healthier."*

Commentary

Perhaps because students have become used to different work patterns, they are surprised to find that operating in a more rationally structured way and learning by discovering actually result in more effective and deeper knowledge. Giving students power and

responsibility to plan their own methods of proceeding results in a feeling of ownership, so that a heavier workload doesn't feel so.

> *"You go out of a PBL with your head buzzing, rather than feeling you've just passively sat there. You can't be passive, you have to be active and committed on this course."*

> *"We are almost learning by accident. It's like intravenous. You don't realise it. You're talking to your friends and so it's not like being in the lecture theatre."*

Commentary

The key effect, as with responses to problem 3, is to make the learning natural. Just as literature is part of life, not something artificially separated from it, so the learning should be.

Problem 5

Rigidity of conventional Problem-Based Learning methods

> *"We tried to allocate roles - chair, scribe, etc - but I thought that was too rigid and could be detrimental."*

Commentary

Most Problem-Based Learning courses prescribe roles and structures. The interesting point here is that students were able to be critical of these, to interrogate the processes.

Responses

Allow students to forge their own working methods; trust them to create a structure that suits them

> *"We didn't define roles, it was very organic."*

Commentary

There is a contradiction between the principles of Problem-Based Learning - that it should empower students, allow them to take responsibility for their own learning and encourage

independence - and the imposition of a fixed structure. Students need to be freed to discover their own kinds of working methods, especially in Literary Studies, an essentially open, discursive subject that challenges students and allows for the discovery of individual intellectual pathways. If you impose a rigid pattern of study, you are actually working against the very symbiosis between Enquiry-Based or Problem-Based Learning and the subject that took us to the project in the first place. Use the liberation of the learning method to release students' creativity; don't reject one form of rigidity (traditional tutor-led methods) to replace it with another. If they find recommended structures work for them, fine; if not, fine. Methods should emerge from within the working, not be imposed from outside - that word 'organic'. Thinking about the delivery in terms of Enquiry-Based Learning rather than Problem-Based Learning may enable us to re-address some of the basic principles of the method and adopt processes that are genuinely aligned with those principles and with the nature of the discipline.

Conclusion

Problem-Based Learning is a broad category, a "coat of many colours", as it has been called (Lloyd-Jones, Margetson & Bligh, 1998). Its principles remain solid and clear (see, for example, Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2004), but models are myriad and open to intensive debate about their value and viability. Our study is of a number of small groups of final-year students who have experienced conventional teaching methods in their first two years and who are taking conventionally-taught courses alongside their new course, so that the model is towards the far end of the hybridity spectrum. Problems encountered by students making the transition to Problem-Based Learning are acknowledged in all varieties (see, for example, Bernstein, Tipping, Bercowitz, Skinner; Milfin, Campbell and Price, 1995; Hoad-Reddick and Theaker, 2003). We have elsewhere argued that the principles of Problem-Based Learning are appropriate for the discipline of Literary Studies (Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2002); equally important is it to assert that each discipline has to interpret Problem-Based Learning according to its own lights and adopt models that suit it. This process of free thinking may, let us repeat, be helped by adopting the more open term, Enquiry-Based Learning, a term which has the additional advantage of placing emphasis upon the students' activity (enquiring) rather then the materials (problems). However, the difficulties encountered and the responses made to them can and do range across subject boundaries, and the present paper is offered to this end.

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