

# ***Inquiry-based Learning Design Overview***

## **Third Year Philosophical Projects**



1. *The students and the curriculum*
2. *The teaching and learning aims*
3. *The inquiry/ inquiries*
4. *The assessment*
5. *The 'process support'*
6. *The information resources and strategies*
7. *The tutoring/facilitation approach*
8. *The learning technology*
9. *The learning spaces*
10. *What really worked*
11. *Things to build on and/or do differently next time around*
12. *Advice to others doing a similar project*
13. *Further comments*

### ***1. The students and the curriculum***

This project encompassed the development of two 20 credit Level 3 modules in the Philosophy Department (PHI355: Philosophical Project 1 [Autumn Semester]; PHI356: PHI356 Philosophical Project 2 [Spring Semester]). In 2007/8, 38 students took PHI355 and 41 students took PHI356 (total students: 79).

### ***2. The teaching and learning aims***

This project aimed to offer students the opportunity to map out the contours of the intellectual landscape of the philosophical topics that they were studying, something which was largely lacking from the curriculum previously. They did this in the context of carefully chosen areas, and within the confines of tasks that were structured in a way that was appropriate to the level of the students.

The project was aligned with departmental and university learning and teaching strategies, emphasising student-centered learning and the enhancement of transferrable skills, with a specific goal being to improve departmental performance in the area of personal development. The modules involved a significant amount of group work and invited the students to show greater initiative in directing their learning; this was intended to improve students' communication skills and their ability to tackle problems for themselves.

The Level 3 modules aimed to further develop skills that were being encouraged in a range of modules at Levels 1 and 2, namely:

- Independent and self-directed learning capabilities;
- Skills in collaborative working and time and project management;
- Presentation skills;
- Knowledge of and competence in the use of electronic resources to conduct their research.

The additional capabilities that the Level 3 project modules sought to inculcate in students were:

- to digest and interrelate pieces of literature, using only their shared intellectual resources;
- to develop the ability to identify for themselves the central issues;
- to be more questioning of the outlooks presented by the lecturers in their other philosophy modules.

### ***3. The inquiry/ inquiries***

For each module students were asked to undertake a project. They chose one project from a longer list; students choosing the same project were put into the same group and expected to work together to tackle the task. The project listings detailed a broad topic, but not the specific question to be addressed, and four to six pieces of reading (the length of an article or book chapter).

The inquiry task was to digest the reading, to identify the (or an) issue that the pieces discuss, to explain how the various contributions relate to the broader issue and to one another (e.g. whether they disagree, and if so how), and to develop responses to the question identified. Students were also encouraged to identify and integrate at least two other pieces of literature that bear on the question identified. This could be done by chasing up references in the specified literature, but the exploration of other sources of information was encouraged (e.g. web-based resources, including encyclopedias and bibliographies, literature databases). They were encouraged to record their progress and to share their thoughts, including through the use of discussion boards in the virtual learning environment.

This inquiry task closely modeled that involved in the process of academic research in Philosophy. Students had to:

- try to understand specific pieces of individual literature;
- identify an issue arising from the literature that all of the student group then addresses;
- relate the contribution made by each piece of literature to the issue;
- search for and identify at least some other relevant literature;
- and then adopt and argue for a position on the matter, describing the key questions that remain and what they judge to be the most likely path for progress.

All this exposes students to the fact that Philosophy is a subject in which very little is uncontroversial.

In performing the task, students are required

- to work together;
- to develop their understanding of the material in a group;
- and to submit their ideas to the scrutiny of their peers.

#### *4. The assessment*

Assessment is individual, by written essays.

#### *5. The 'process support'*

Students were given initial guidance about how to work in groups, how to tackle the inquiry and engage with specific sources of information. However, as the tasks were intended to develop skills in independent learning, it was deemed inappropriate to provide them with too much explicit process support at Level 3. Support was available from tutors, however, if students sought it out specifically.

#### *6. The information resources and strategies*

The ethos underlying these projects was that students should work in self-directed ways, as far as possible. The students were therefore encouraged to identify and locate relevant resources and subject information independently having been given initial reading. They then had to identify and integrate at least two other relevant pieces of literature that bear on the question they had identified. This was done by chasing up references in the specified literature and through the exploration of other sources of information (e.g. web-based resources, literature databases).

#### *7. The tutoring/facilitation approach*

Tutoring was done by the module lecturer(s). Having identified their project, students were arranged into groups with a common interest and met as a group with a tutor as well as individually.

#### *8. The learning technology*

Significant use was made of learning technologies, including: discussion boards in the virtual learning environment to facilitate group discussion; and online electronic resources (e.g. web-based literature databases).

#### *9. The learning spaces*

Contact hours took place in small group teaching rooms.

*10. What really worked*

Student feedback on the modules has been very positive. Students judged that the modules did give them responsibility for their own learning. They found this challenging but not unreasonably difficult. They also agreed that the module helped them learn more independently. In addition, grades achieved in this module have been very good.

*11. Things to build on and/or do differently next time around*

*12. Advice to others doing a similar project*

*13. Further comments*

These project modules allow students to study areas they would not otherwise have had the chance to cover, and also to work independently and to a greater depth than they have to on standard modules. These courses have generally attracted keen students who are well-motivated. The courses have helped these students develop skills of independent research and reasoning that are integral to the discipline of Philosophy.