

Inquiry-based Learning Design Overview

Discovering the Background



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1. The students and the curriculum

Three 10 credit compulsory Level 1 Philosophy modules were developed. The following table gives the module codes, titles and numbers of students taking the module in two successive iterations of the modules.

<i>Module code</i>	<i>Module title</i>	<i>Student numbers 2006/7</i>	<i>Student numbers 2007/8</i>
PHI114	History of Philosophy	59	77
PHI112	Areas of Philosophy	55	78
PHI113	Key Arguments	12	26

2. The teaching and learning aims

The three modules had the following common aims:

- To encourage students to think that certain issues within the discipline can be tackled by them without any direct input from staff. This was intended to impact in a positive way upon their later willingness to undertake philosophical investigations (e.g. opening up sidelines of inquiry in their other modules) by themselves.
- To develop students' capabilities in working collaboratively. Students were to work together in ways not currently provided by the tutorial system – collaborating to structure the task and manage their time as a group.
- To improve students skills in the use of electronic resources to further their studies.
- To develop students' abilities to present the results of their research as a group, including in electronic formats.

Context

Philosophy as a discipline lends itself to imaginative independent research. This is a particularly successful aspect of Level 3 modules in which students are encouraged to investigate issues and develop arguments for themselves. This project sought to close a gap that students sometimes encountered in the Level 1 Philosophy curriculum: that it did not explicitly cover the background to the issues and positions they were presented with in their studies and which form the basis for their work at higher levels. That 'background' is both historical (how a particular philosopher fits into the development of the subject) and a matter of intellectual geography (how a given area of the subject interlocks with others). At higher levels of the Philosophy curriculum the research-led nature of the teaching that students encounter makes them aware that much knowledge is inherently controversial and constructed. However, the fact that issues in Philosophy can be very difficult to master means that even a basic level of understanding is harder to come by than an equivalent purchase in many other disciplines. For this reason, much of the department's teaching involved lecturers mapping out the contours of the immediate intellectual landscape. Students were never required to do this for themselves. The purpose of the two projects was to offer students the

opportunity to do this for themselves at an earlier stage in their programme of study. This was targeted on carefully chosen areas, and within the confines of clearly structured and supported tasks.

The modules that were developed address issues that are ideal material for inquiry-based learning. The issues were relatively clear; there is a wide range of suitable sources of information on which students might draw; questions of this sort will, at greater levels of detail, recur throughout the degree programme; and they are not issues that require, or even leave room for, substantial intellectual input from a staff member, leaving room for substantial independent work on the part of the students.

Overall, therefore, the project aimed to make students more independent and effective in their learning, to make them better able and more willing to work collaboratively, to familiarise them with relevant technology and other learning resources, and to promote cohesion within the student group.

3. The inquiry/ inquiries

Students worked together in a series of group sessions to produce a single piece of collaborative work for assessment. Staff input was limited to one or two lectures at the start of the study period, explaining the task and the methods that should be used to tackle it, and outlining the resources available. Students were required to use various electronic resources (web-based encyclopedias, online bibliographies, literature databases) in the course of their inquiries. For the history module, the task was to produce an outline of the history of the discipline, or in some cases, of a more restricted section of that history. For the 'geography' module, the students were to identify one of the main sub-areas of Philosophy, some of the major questions that have dominated it in the past and continue to do so today, and some sense of how those questions interlock with issues in other parts of the discipline. Although the issues on which the students were working permit a relatively uncontroversial summary up to a certain point, in the course of undertaking their projects students soon encountered the controversy and intellectual debate that characterise the whole discipline of Philosophy.

4. The assessment

Assessment was via a single piece of collaborate work, the choice of which was decided by the group. For example, groups could choose to produce a webpage, a wiki or a blog. Peer assessment formed part of the assessment process.

5. The 'process support'

Students were supported by a mixture of face-to-face and technological approaches. Lectures and small-group tutorials offered students guidance on how the inquiry would proceed and how student groups might cope with any problems they were likely to encounter and the benefits of such working arrangements. Discussion boards in the virtual learning environment also proved useful in this respect. The Library's 'information skills' tutorial was used to support students in the development of their information literacy capabilities.

6. The information resources and strategies

Students worked in groups on the modules with staff input limited to one or two lectures at the start of the study period, explaining the task and the methods that should be used to tackle it, and outlining the resources available.

7. The tutoring/facilitation approach

Tutors for these modules were selected from amongst the postgraduate students in the department. Tutors were able to bring their experience of small group teaching to bear in getting students to work in groups. However, the Level 1 modules threw up new challenges because the emphasis was so much on the student groups being responsible for their own organisation and meetings. Staff input was therefore limited to one or two lectures at the start of the study period, explaining the task and the methods that should be used to tackle it, and outlining the resources available. After that point students were to organize their own research and groupworking processes, including the production of the final assessed piece of work.

8. The learning technology

The institutional virtual learning environment was an integral part of these modules, particularly the discussion boards; its widespread use acted as a catalyst for the use of the technology in other courses. In order to make the discussion board more manageable the student cohort was divided into two parts. Students' familiarity with the virtual learning environment opened up new opportunities for online discussion and communication. In addition, students were required to use various electronic resources (web-based encyclopedias, online bibliographies and literature databases; Library 'Information Skills' tutorials) in the course of their research in order to build their information literacy capabilities.

9. The learning spaces

Contact hours took place in a mixture of lecture theatres and small group teaching rooms.

10. What really worked

Anecdotal evidence from staff suggests that large numbers of Level 2 students who have experienced the modules as first years are keen to learn independently, are familiar with learning technologies and form a fairly cohesive group. Furthermore, the results from the Level 1 modules have been good – both in terms of the marks achieved and in the quality of the work produced.

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

Feedback (from second year students who took the three modules as first years) indicates that, while students often accept the importance of the aimed for outcomes to their learning, they are not sure that the ways in which the modules are structured helps them to develop the relevant skills. In particular students felt that not enough support was given by staff and tutors. In response to this feedback from the iteration greater tutor input and more support were introduced into the modules on the second occasion that they were taught. Next year the plan is to run the modules in the second semester of Level 1, giving the students time to adjust to university expectations before exposing them to an independent learning module.

12. Advice to others doing a similar project

Given the disjunction noted above between staff and student perceptions of the module (and between the latter and students' marks), it is important that neither evaluative perspective is privileged as the sole measure of a project's success.

13. Further comments