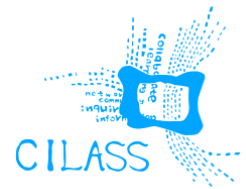


# ***Inquiry-based Learning Design Overview***

## Paths From Antiquity to Modernity



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

Level 1 first semester 20 credit module, HST112: Paths from Antiquity to Modernity, compulsory for all Level 1 students in the History Department. The IBL activities were taken by approximately 44 students in 2007-2008 and the entire first year cohort in 2008-2009.

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

The module as a whole aims:

- to introduce students to the broad structures of Western history from the end of the Roman Empire to the present day
- to equip students with an understanding of the periodisation of western history and of the major transitions in the process of modernisation.
- to increase students' critical awareness of the essential conceptual tools that modern historians readily use to analyse the past
- to provide the essential training in the skills and methods needed for University level historical study.

The IBL tasks were introduced primarily to underpin the final two of these aims, by engaging students and developing the skills necessary to learn from lectures and seminars, and to aid students in independent learning, developing new skills and gaining knowledge of new research resources. A general objective of the IBL sessions is to assist students in their navigation of available sources of information at the University of Sheffield, as preparation for the more intensive and independent projects they undertake at Level 2 and 3.

This Level 1 project was also designed to contribute more generally to the development of an 'IBL spine' in the History Department's curriculum from Levels 1 to 4, ensuring continuity and progression in the student experience.

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

The project integrated IBL exercises into seminar classes on the Paths module. This was done successfully for seminars in pilot groups during Autumn 2007 and was rolled out across the whole module in Autumn 2008.

The Paths seminar programme is constructed around tasks and topics identified by lecturers on the module. The IBL tasks were designed to aid students in seminars in which students in previous years had experienced difficulties, particularly in linking together the lectures with the seminar tasks.

2007-2008: Seminar task 1: 'Nineteenth-Century Empires': This was based on the Dictionary of National Biography, a resource that Level 1 students are usually unfamiliar with. This is available from the University Library in book and digital format. This was chosen by the two associate tutors who designed the activity due to the lack of knowledge amongst students about why the two historical figures who were the focus of the seminar were important.

2007-2008: Seminar task 2: 'Modern Revolutions': This class was based on an academic website identified by one of the course lecturers. This seminar task was highlighted on the basis of past experience by one of the associate tutors as particularly problematic. Students had claimed that it was very difficult for them to understand the relevance to the broader seminar of the extracts (excerpts by leaders of the Russian Revolution) they had been given to comment on.

2008-2009 (semester 1): The IBL pilots developed in the previous year were implemented across all seminar groups. Tutors were asked to carry out three exercises at some point in the semester (preferably early on given the nature and purpose of the exercises). These exercises were:

1. DNB (*Dictionary of National Biography*) search
2. JSTOR search
3. E-resources search

Templates were provided for the three seminars and handed out to tutors at the tutors' introductory meeting prior to the start of the module. Tutors were told to use the templates if they felt that they were suitable, or alternatively (and preferably) to develop their own tasks to fit their seminar choices. Tutors were steered towards more open-ended, IBL-style, tasks.

#### 4. The assessment

The inquiry-based learning tasks were not assessed, though they were meant to feed into research for assessed work.

#### 5. The 'process support'

The activities that were developed as part of this project were themselves intended primarily as process support activities that developed students' inquiry capabilities for use in assessed assignments.

#### 6. The information resources and strategies

Students were provided with handouts that laid out what they were expected to do for the IBL task. These handouts included details of the relevant websites and step-by-step guides to completing the activities.

#### 7. The tutoring/facilitation approach

The IBL activities were linked to a programme of seminars that runs alongside a lecture series. The seminars are led by postgraduate tutors. Students completed relatively simple pre-seminar IBL exercises on finding biographical information and secondary material using specific electronic resources and were then able to feed this into the seminars themselves.

#### 8. The learning technology

The students engaged with the following electronic resources:

- the *Dictionary of National Biography*, a digital resource (although it is also available in book format) that Level 1 students are usually unfamiliar with.
- JSTOR journal archive
- The University Library catalogue, STAR, making specific use of its e-resources search function.

#### 9. The learning spaces

Teaching took place in standard seminar/ small-group teaching rooms.

#### 10. What really worked

These exercises were an important part of the departmental programme because they integrated IBL into a core module at level 1 for the first time.

The pilot IBL exercises (2007-2008) were very successful. Student feedback suggests this is a valuable extension of IBL to Level 1 students.

- “I believe the seminar exercises worked very well, raising student awareness of research resources available to them, and increasing their confidence/skills in using them. I believe that these exercises demonstrate the need to raise student awareness of resources early in their first semester, and of the usefulness of IBL in achieving this.” (academic staff feedback)
- “Useful for me to realise that there are helpful e-resources to back up core reading” (student feedback)
- “It helped me to learn how to use a new resource” (student feedback)
- “Overall I found this method of learning enabled me to consider my preparation for seminars and helped me further immerse myself in the subject” (student feedback)
- “Useful to find different ways of research” (student feedback)

Based on feedback from both tutors and students it seems likely that the students got more from their seminars because of the preparation and background provided by the inquiry exercises.

Students were clear that they had improved their skills through these exercises:

- Of 33 students questioned, 76 % were positive that they had found new e-learning resources;
- Of 33 students questioned, 78 % were positive that they had found new library resources at Sheffield;
- Of 33 students questioned, 76 % were positive that they had improved their understanding of how to access appropriate e-resources;
- Of the 25 students whose task had involved an e-resource, 72 % were positive that they now understood that Sheffield had a list of recommended appropriate websites;
- Of 33 students questioned, 91% said they were confident in using STAR (the course resource list) although only 42% said they had improved that skill through these exercises.

In 2008-2009 all of the tutors carried out the Paths IBL exercises, some following the templates inherited from last year, others experimenting with their own ideas. Students were generally positive about the impact of the exercises, emphasizing the following features:

- Collaboration, discussion and sharing:
  - “It gave us a basis of where to start the search and the group discussions meant we could pool what we found which meant we had more extensive resources than if we had been working alone.”
  - “Discussing research skills was helpful in that it encouraged the sharing of ideas about ways in which others undertake research.”
  - “Created a wider range of discussion in seminars because different people had different sources. The journal article search did not open new areas, having already heavily utilised it for essays.”
  - “Gave us more depth and knowledge, leading to healthy discussion.”
- Developing a different outlook on learning:
  - “promoted a questioning attitude towards questions/ opinions”
  - “developed an enquiring mind.”
  - “Added variety to the course giving me a different way of learning.”
- Improved information literacy and research skills:
  - “finding resources can be difficult, as there is a lack of good resources/ they are in high demand. Being able to evaluate information for its usefulness helped me to target the resources I needed.”
  - “no real experience in searching for published articles, especially on JSTOR, so I have increased my understanding.”
  - “Very helpful in widening my range of reading. Helpful in finding different views on arguments”
  - “Because it offered a different method of gathering data that will be beneficial in the future.”
  - “It made it easier to evaluate one source in light of another. I found it easier to link sources. It helped me in finding essay research sources.”
  - “I knew relatively little about using the web-based resources until now and they have proved to be very beneficial to my studies.”

- “Allowed you to develop research skills.”
- “It now allows me to use different resources with an increased understanding and confidence. I am able to use a variety of sources in essay and exam preparation – not just books.”

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

It was initially envisaged that a series of pre-lecture exercises would be created to run alongside the seminar IBL exercises. In retrospect, this was perhaps too ambitious because there were difficulties in asking established staff, who give the lectures, to devote significant amounts of time to assisting in the design of such exercises.

It is important that these activities remain sustainable and that subsequent course tutors do not have to ‘reinvent the wheel’, so attention was devoted to making sure that the exercises are easy to access and use. In 2008-2009, therefore, the exercises were made available to all seminar tutors and staff, via the virtual learning environment, so that tutors can more easily access and share the materials. However, the exercises probably will not be made compulsory for tutors on Paths. They will be built into the module documentation, but it is important that tutors should have some choice about how they teach the sessions.

Student evaluations and anecdotal evidence suggest that the exercises did not succeed in increasing student engagement. Student feedback mentioned a number of areas for improvement, for example:

- The level of the tasks may have been pitched too low for some students:
  - “I already knew how to use such resources and personally the tasks did not contribute much to my current practices.”
- Some tutors may not have tied the tasks sufficiently to the seminars:
  - “I found that the exercises were often un-discussed in seminars.”
- The timing of the tasks may not have been ideal in some cases:
  - “The exercises would have been more useful if put into an intro period i.e. weeks 1-3 rather than spread out across the semester resulting in exercises focussing on skills you do/ should already know and have used for essays.”

#### 12. Advice to others doing a similar project

The module is particularly tricky because it relies on a large pool of up to 15-20 associate tutors. This represents a logistical challenge. It also meant that complete buy-in was more difficult to achieve due to the number of people teaching on the module. Having said that, the number of staff involved in the module also creates powerful opportunities for increasing awareness of IBL and attaining higher levels of engagement among staff.

#### 13. Further comments

The development of the IBL exercises was influenced by a similar project being carried out by Dr Cathy Shrank’s in the School of English (see: “Embedding Information Literacy in core modules”, at: [www.shef.ac.uk/cilass/projects/iblenGLISH.html](http://www.shef.ac.uk/cilass/projects/iblenGLISH.html), for more details).