

Enquiry-based learning: an approach to enhanced independent learning in the Humanities

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As is often the case with many good pedagogical practices, Enquiry-Based Learning has been around for some while – without anyone giving it a particular name. So before launching into a definition of what EBL stands for (which I will give later) it is perhaps of more relevance to begin by offering a brief history of how I came to be involved in EBL. And by so doing, I am sure that many others will find that they, too, are already engaging in this practice.

At the University of Manchester within the discipline of French Studies, I run a final year optional module entitled “Occupied France” and this module provides the context for my involvement with EBL. In the module, we cover both the historical, socio-political aspect of the period and also study the works of four contemporary authors in order to try and understand some of the varying responses to the situation by the French: for example, we read works by some very strong advocates of resistance such as Vercors and Sartre but we also look at the writing of a committed fascist, Drieu la Rochelle. What very soon becomes clear to the students is that the ordinary French public did not always have a clear-cut choice between, say, collaboration with the Germans or resistance. In other words, there were many factors affecting individual responses which ranged from one extreme to the other with most people acting somewhere in the middle. But at the beginning of the course, most students arrive with a set of conventional prejudices or fixed ideas about the “right” or “wrong” way to behave under the Occupation and I wanted to try and encourage them to understand the moral dilemma facing the French in a less judgemental way.

So, thinking along those lines, and partly also as a sort of ice-breaker, a few years ago, I thought it would be interesting to include at the end of the first introductory session to the module, the following role-play exercise: the students move into groups of approx 5 (my total class is usually approx 40) and assume the character of one of the following villagers from “St-Luc sur Villiers in 1942”:

Alain – farm labourer, father of 5 children at home, lost 1 son in the war;

Bernard – town hall clerk, father of 3, wife seamstress with German clients;

Claude – owner of café/bar with German customers, children grown up;

Denise – schoolteacher, living with parents, fiancé in the maquis;

Emilie – housewife, mother of 4, husband in POW camp in Germany.

Once characters have been allocated within each group, the students are then told that they represent the local village council, faced with coming to a council decision on a particular issue – I then put up on the overhead projector the following question: “Two Jewish children have been found in the village station coal-shed, left behind from a transportation train to Germany. What is the village council’s decision on their fate?”

Clearly, to come to a proper decision, the students have to firstly have some notion of what would be influencing the attitude of each of the village characters – and in order to know that, they must engage in some form of investigation or enquiry about the context and experiences likely to be affecting those characters. Without any of us realising it at the time, what the students were doing was “learning something, based upon the process and outcome of enquiring about it” and not from a tutor standing up and giving

them an answer. In other words, this kind of exercise is an example of something like EBL.

So, what then is EBL? Most people in Higher Education today will have heard the term PBL, Problem-Based Learning. This is an approach to learning pioneered in the sciences and notably medicine, whereby a group of students is given a concrete problem to solve or a patient case scenario to deal with, and asked to come up with a solution. Examples include: building a structure to certain requirements; designing a factory component to improve an aspect of production; providing the diagnosis and treatment for a patient with a particular set of symptoms.

PBL, and EBL, are thus modes of knowledge acquisition which place as much emphasis on the process of learning as on the actual final outcome, result or product. It is important to appreciate this fundamental difference between conventional tutor-led teaching and student-led learning. Different levels of EBL may range from a tutor having more input into the objective to be pursued or, more radically, students can be encouraged to identify their own learning objectives and merely to justify whatever path they have taken in their enquiry. When it comes to that ever-present bogey, Assessment, this difference needs to be taken into account – it may be, for example that there are no “right” answers to a question but rather a number of appropriate paths which could be followed. I’ll come back to this issue of assessment and other concerns later.

But first let us highlight some of the many positive aspects of problem or enquiry-based learning as an approach: very importantly, it lends itself ideally to groupwork, which is something we all recognize as being a vital skill which nevertheless needs practising, and as with all groupwork, students learn the value of mutual respect through sharing responsibilities. EBL requires or allows individuals to pursue independent paths of enquiry and thus rewards the whole group through the variety of information discovered. And, vitally, EBL encourages an attitude of curiosity about the world and fosters the habit of reflection, which is only now beginning to be recognised as an essential aspect of self-discovery and personal and professional growth.

However, it is true that there are some concerns about the “experts”, teachers and lecturers, “letting go” of our control over students’ knowledge acquisition. What if they simply don’t cover all the facts? We all want to feel that when we visit our GP with a pain in the left leg that he or she will know what is causing it and how to treat it. Clearly, there are cases where it is appropriate and indeed essential for a course to be designed to include sessions that cover any potential gaps in knowledge, but such sessions need not preclude elements of the course which allow each student to follow their own lines of enquiry, engaging in research and making sense of the data collected for themselves. These are skills needed for successful careers in all fields of society as well providing essential basic research skills for further academic work at post-graduate level.

A more awkward issue is the one of assessment. Good pedagogical practice requires us to try and ensure that the form of assessment reflects the mode of learning. This should lead to the opening up of assessment to include a wide variety of formats to allow for a choice of the most appropriate type. At the University of Manchester, we are lucky to enjoy an academic environment which does indeed encourage such diversity but I am aware that, sadly, some “powers that be” still try to insist on traditional modes of assessment, by which is meant largely, written exams, supposedly for purposes of parity of credits and recognition by professional bodies.

However, such criteria can be met by alternative modes of assessment, ranging from quite radically new forms such as group posters or enacted dialogues to more readily

accepted compromises such as “open book” or “pre-seen” exam questions or questions which allow for more than one acceptable answer whereby the method and process followed are included in the marking criteria as much as the display of factual knowledge.

This leads into a further concern for tutors embarking on the EBL approach with their students and that is: How much extra work is this going to mean? It would be unrealistic to say that no extra work is required but it is my own experience and that of others more experienced than me that once an EBL unit has been set up and is running, then there is very little work required by the tutor. The tutor needs to be available as a facilitator or guide, so there is not necessarily a reduction in one's timetable (although some colleagues certainly do reduce their contact hours with students during EBL or PBL periods) but the actual workload is minimal. Where there is a certain burden of work is during the design of the project or unit as this must include making sure that guides to resources and resources themselves are in place.

It may be of interest to others if I share my experience of the first EBL project I was involved with and the way this has led to the current established EBL element in the same module which is a final-year option from a list of cultural studies within our discipline. The module is taught in French and all materials are in French but there is no formal assessment of the French itself. After describing what happens in this course, I shall then talk briefly about a new project with more direct relevance for the teaching of language.

The first five weeks of semester one are devoted to an introduction to the background of the Occupation in France, i.e. we cover the pre-war period, the military defeat and the establishment of the Vichy government. Within these history lectures, I also show the students some archive film showing contemporary newsreels and interviews with French people, mostly from the documentary film *Le Chagrin et la Pitié* made in 1969 by Marcel Ophuls. Parallel to these lectures, we also have weekly literature seminars looking at the first text on the course, which is a call to resistance by the left-wing writer Vercors, *Le silence de la mer*, published in 1942. These first few weeks provide the students with a starting context for the work which they will undertake in their group projects. As the EBL sessions roll out, I continue to give one hour a week to the students, a combination of some background history, notably everyday life under the German occupying forces and Pétain's government, plus a summary of the second literary text which is ultimately a promotion of fascism – *Gilles*, written in 1939 by Drieu la Rochelle.

In week 8 of the semester, the students are given the title of the task towards which they will now work in groups independently of myself. That first year, the EBL task was entitled: “Explain the attraction of fascist ideology to young Frenchmen in the winter of 1940/41.” The project would lead to group presentations lasting 15 minutes and given in either French or English but that first year the presentations would not count towards any formal assessment – this was partly because my superiors were not convinced that EBL could be assessed properly and partly because I was too nervous to insist! But, the research for the presentations was to be summarized by each group as a report covering max 2 sides of A4 paper which would be distributed to everyone in the class and the data from this would feed into an essay to be written in the January exam for this module and the students would have the title of the question given to them one month in advance so as to be able to investigate the issue individually as they wished, and it was to be answered in French.

In the first week of the group meetings within our usual seminar hour, I asked the students to consider the following questions before attempting to set about answering the actual task question given above:

- 1) What information will we need to be able to answer the question?
- 2) What do we already know between us?
- 3) What are the gaps in our knowledge?
- 4) So, what do we need to go and enquire about?
- 5) How will we present the findings of our enquiry?

These questions were designed to help the students identify their own learning objectives and to then set about establishing a plan of action. It is, I believe, a fundamental part of the Enquiry-Based Learning process that students be given the freedom and responsibility to decide what they think needs to be researched.

There are many ways in which a tutor can provide input during or at the end of a project to ensure that no vital fact is omitted, but it may not always be necessary or appropriate to provide such additional sessions. In the case of my module, I want to allow students to pursue their own learning objectives and I believe that final-year students have the maturity to do this responsibly and competently, albeit needing regular reassurance and very occasionally a sort of nudged guidance. Clearly, with less experienced students, more guidance may be needed and there may well be a case for designing a more tightly controlled project where the learning objectives have already been laid out by the tutor but where the students nevertheless undertake the research needed to answer the question or problem posed independently.

At the end of my first year piloting an EBL approach within my module, I invited the students to give me feedback about their experience of the project and below is a summary of their comments:

Firstly, to the question “What was the most positive aspect of the project for you?” came the following responses:

- the chance to engage in individual research
- the opportunity to discuss ideas with others
- working in a group
- the chance to practise doing a presentation
- different groups covering different aspects led to greater overall knowledge
- the format of the summary report was good.

Secondly, of course there were some hiccups that first year, as shown by the responses to “Ideas for improvement”:

- all groups should undertake different topics
- other EBL elements be included in the course
- the time spent on the project was too long
- the composition of the groups was not ideal
- the initial purpose and structure of the project needs to be clearer
- presentations should be formally assessed.

Clearly, there were several points that needed to be addressed but overall, interestingly, the feeling was that EBL was a worthwhile approach and that the students would actually prefer to have their EBL work included in the module assessment.

The following year, I modified the instructions and the task has indeed become an integral part of the module, with the presentations counting now for 10% of the assessment and the January exam essay based on the same research counting for 30% (the remaining 60% of the module mark is currently carried by a traditional exam in the summer). I have also tried to vary the type of end-result to the EBL process and this year's task (2005-06) took a very new form, summarized below in English.

“18 year-old Jacques from a village near Vichy has a dilemma:

Pierre goes to the Chantiers de jeunesse meetings every week and keeps asking me to go along with him – they do really interesting things and are going camping next month. But Papa would go mad if he thought I joined them, he says they're a bunch of brainless idiots who think they're really macho but who would betray the country if they were old enough! The trouble is, I'm so bored! What else is there to do?”

Will Jacques follow his friend Pierre or his father?”

There follows a brief description of six people whose opinions are likely to influence any decision Jacques makes. Each person in the EBL group is to choose a character from the list such that the group includes at least two who are *pour* and two who are *contre* the *Chantiers de jeunesse*.

The task = In a 10-minute debate in French, explore the arguments each character might make to convince the 18 year-old boy of the best way to spend his time.

I am delighted to report that both the students themselves and the visiting colleagues who acted as co-assessors of the debates thoroughly enjoyed the work and the quality of the final debates was excellent.

As I have gained in confidence about the merits of EBL as an approach to learning, I have come to believe that it can be usefully followed in many other areas of knowledge acquisition, although I remain convinced that no single approach should take over all others – there are contexts for which other modes are just as or more appropriate and I believe that a sensitive blending or combination of learning methods is optimal. However, within the context of EBL, I have wished to extend its application to other areas of our discipline, notably language itself, and I would like to finish this presentation by sharing with you the outline for a brand-new project I have written with two Teaching Fellow colleagues from French Studies at Manchester.

The project is called EBL for EBL: Enquiry-Based Learning for an End to Boredom with Languages!

The rationale behind this project is that all the staff within French Studies repeat every year at the exam board meetings that, in all years, many students' command of French language falls below the standard desired. Quite apart from the issue of maintaining standards of excellence in the students we send out into the wider society with a degree in French from our university, it is clear that students' own learning experience in other courses on their degree programme, such as the cultural modules, is impoverished. In an ideal world, there would be sufficient funding and resources to provide hundreds of lessons devoted to French language (or maybe that wouldn't seem ideal to everyone!) but in the actual world, as we all know, there are constraints on the number of language classes we are able to provide.

This means that there is a need to encourage independent learning of language skills, especially accurate grammatical competence and practice in spoken French. The problem is that students don't engage fully with independent learning. It would seem that their perception of language-learning is that a) it is not necessary (and yet we as tutors have a different perception – see the rationale above) and that b) it is boring.

The aim of our project is thus to *make* them enjoy learning grammar and speaking French!

At the time of writing, the year-long EBL for EBL project is just about to begin. Our Project Plan includes the following aims and objectives:

- to promote the ethos of independent learning via EBL whereby students will “take ownership” of their own language-learning
- to cover grammar and oral skills in the First Year core programme
- pilot scheme to run 2006-2007 with full implementation in September 2007
- it will involve group-work on specific topics leading to presentations of research findings
- plus interactive exercises devised by groups for peer practice
- spoken practice to be encouraged and monitored through specific tasks.

Further details of the project include the following:

- plan to include design of a Web-CT support site
- timetable to include tutor-led consolidation periods
- training of staff team as “facilitators”
- design of new assessment modes in accordance with EBL approach e.g. choice of questions, non-standard answers
- two initial pilot groups for grammar whose competences will be compared with conventionally taught groups via a year-wide test
- implementation of oral element of project ready for inclusion in semester 2 and leading to year-wide assessment
- development of peer-assisted learning (PAL)
- evaluation of project through questionnaires and staff-student discussions.

My colleagues Catherine Franc and Annie Morton, together with myself, are feeling excited about designing and initiating this project but at the same time fully aware of the challenge to engage the enthusiasm and commitment of our team of 12 language tutors before we can promote the EBL approach among our student body. So, if anyone has any suggestions to offer us, these would be gratefully received....

I would like to end by acknowledging the brilliant support I have received in the past for my pilot project and for the equally tremendous support I know the new project will receive from the Director and Associate Director of the Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning at the University of Manchester – Dr Bill Hutchings and Ms Karen O'Rourke. I cannot thank them enough for their encouragement and advice and I refer all those who are interested in knowing more about EBL to the CEEBL website, www.manchester.ac.uk/ceeb/

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