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Finding friends and freaking out: the potential of enquiry-based learning to enhance the first-year experience

Karen O'Rourke

Introduction

Enquiry-based learning (EBL) encompasses approaches to learning that are driven by a process of enquiry, for example problem-based learning, fieldwork and research projects. EBL represents a shift away from passive methods of learning to more facilitative teaching methods where students are supported and guided through processes of enquiry to construct their own knowledge. It has been argued (Kahn and O'Rourke, 2005) that EBL can be used to address some key contemporary issues in the learning process that might impact particularly on the first-year experience, including students' sense of anonymity and social isolation within a mass higher education system.

But consider this third-year Literary Studies student's response to an encounter with EBL:

"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."
(Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2005)

The above reflection reveals the anxiety felt by some students when faced with their new identity as a university student. According to research carried out by Yorke and Longden (2008), younger students suffer to a greater extent in respect to transition, seem to have more difficulty in making friends with fellow students, are more likely to suffer homesickness and often struggle with developing a sense of belonging in the city or town in which they are studying.

Yorke and Longden's pointers for success in relation to the first-year student include:

- a mode of teaching in which students are **quickly engaged** in academic work and are **given formative feedback** from an early stage
- a teaching approach that focuses on **student development** within the subject area
- finding ways in which students can be supported in developing a **network of peers** that can sustain them when difficulties arise.

Engagement and feedback

Given that EBL is an approach that can look and feel very different from more traditional methods, it is important that student expectations are considered. For many first-year students, their experience of learning has so far been in passive mode, a matter of receiving information from a teacher and then regurgitating that information in response to tests and exams.

During his workshop at the Edinburgh SPARQS conference (Johnston, 2006), Bill Johnston suggested that to achieve teaching for learning, universities should replace the model of the lecturer as primarily a transmitter of disciplinary knowledge and examiner of student comprehension with a model that seeks to move the student – personified as actively and confidently taking responsibility for developing robust understanding – to the centre of the educational stage. Lewis Elton (2000) also argues that “the centre of the teaching and learning process must become the student” and quotes Heidegger: “the teacher is ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he has still far more to learn than they ... he has to learn to let them learn”, acknowledging that this will require a radical change of attitude for some academics.

Typically, in EBL the students work collaboratively in small groups. Encouraging students to co-operate in this way can enable their learning to take on a social dimension. Students start to engage with learning as natural, enjoyable and not detached from regular activity. They have described this type of learning experience as “healthy”, “pain free”, “casual”, “buzzing”, and the learning it fosters as “organic”, “almost by accident, like, intravenous”. They have revealed that their learning, and the relationships formed through group-work, “take on a life outside the class” (Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2005). A survey on the first-year experience of Australian students (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005) defines engagement as “the time, energy and resources students devote to activities designed to enhance their learning at university. These activities range from a simple measure of time spent on campus or studying, to in- and out-of-class learning experiences that

connect students to their peers in educationally purposeful and meaningful ways." UK EBL students report that this takes place:

"Even though it was a Friday you wanted to be there, it was fun learning. You knew you would learn something that would be useful, whereas in other courses you would not bother going to a lecture on a text that you weren't going to write an essay about or answer an exam question on. With this you knew that every session would contribute to what you were learning."

"... the contact hours are increased because we're always working with our group and that's contact hours. It's really good because we're so motivated to work and we're not isolated." (Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2005)

Students engaging in EBL during their first year at university are given supported opportunities to rehearse and practise giving feedback and feedforward, so that by their third year they are confident:

"The nature of EBL 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." (Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2005)

They are also competent, demonstrating a more formalised and structured approach:

"I got regular and comprehensive feedback from [tutor] and peers. The feedback was very specific, broken down and not just general." (Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2005)

Student development in the subject

Engaging students in research-like processes can help them to develop more sophisticated ways of 'knowing'. The EBL environment benefits from teachers modelling and discussing research and knowledge creation within their own disciplines. Kay Sambell suggests that most first-year students have little or no idea of what their university tutors do 'behind the scenes' in terms of research activity (Sambell, 2008) and so have no conception of their teachers as being learners, explorers, investigators themselves. EBL, i.e. learning in 'research mode', involves students in the excitement of discovery and breaks down barriers between student and teacher: "It felt like there were real levels of mutual respect between the students and the tutor."

"You feel like you're supposed to be here. We're all talking with tutors." (Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2005)

EBL allows the student to have-a-go at research, to develop the skills and language, and helps to demystify what it means to be a researcher, as this first-year student revealed:

"I originally thought research was a big thing to do ... scientists and stuff. I know it's not now. I know I can do it. It's about bring critical, looking at what other people have done, then finding a methodology and asking questions." (Sambell, 2008)

We might compare the above comment to a very similar one quoted in Leeds Met's *The Little Book of Skills for Learning*:

"I soon learned that it did not require a great brain to do original research. One must be highly motivated, exercise good judgement, have intelligence, imagination, determination and a little luck. One of the most important qualities in doing research, I found, was to ask the right questions at the right time." (Julian Axelrod, Nobel prize-winning scientist) (Scopes, 2007)

Developing supportive networks and friendships

The first-years surveyed over a ten-year period in Australia (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations, 2005) revealed that 'emotional health' was rated the most important element if they (particularly females) were to continue with their studies at university.

Yorke and Longden (2008) also discovered that 'making friends' was a crucial element of a positive first-year experience. Achieving a sense of belonging is often something that is more difficult for those who engage as 'commuter students' and do not live cheek-by-jowl with other first-years. Others who indicated isolation were part-time and distance learners, students with dependants, with jobs or those who came from backgrounds where there was limited or no experience of higher education. The Australian survey revealed that students who spend less time on campus are also those least likely to ask questions in class and contribute to class discussions.

Consider this comment from a third-year student encountering EBL for the first time towards the end of her undergraduate programme:

"I would have liked to have seen the EBL methods introduced right at the start of my university career. As a student who lives at home, who belongs to such a large department, on such a non-practical course, it has been quite lonely. Finding friends has been a challenge. The opportunity to work in small groups from Year 1 would have been ideal for me."
(Hutchings and O'Rourke, 2005)

Students surveyed by Yorke and Longden cited frequently their concerns about the level of contact with academic staff, lack of support from fellow students and emotional problems involving others (Yorke and Longden, 2008). Their report suggests that institutions can assist students in friendship formation through the approaches they adopt to teaching; for example, by engaging students early on in activities that involve collaboration and team work.

Conclusion

The first year of higher education is not experienced by students alone. The 'partners in learning' ethos of EBL means that tutors engage themselves in learning deeply about their students and often liaise more closely with the colleagues due to inherit their students in subsequent years. The extract below comes from an email sent to by a second-year tutor to the first-year Computer Science course director in September 2007 a week after teaching a group of students who had just come through a new EBL pilot module

"I've noticed ... the students seem to be more switched on and able to work independently, there is less fuss ... [I] noticed the self direction and the accuracy of information the students had returned after foraging. I believe this to be in no small part down to the first-year project. So on the basis of this week's experience, hats off to the [pilot project] team for effecting what looks like a real change of culture amongst our students, much for the better."

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