Inquiry-based Learning Development Case

Collaborative learning through argumentation

1. Where I/we started from and wanted to achieve

This project was one of the three strands of the Psychology Department’s PEBBLE (Psychological Enquiry-Based Learning) programme. The programme as a whole was intended to initiate web-based, collaborative IBL within the department, providing and infrastructural and skills base within the department, and collaborative skills and information literacy on the part of students. In addition, there was an aim of developing students’ methodological skills in the discipline of Psychology as well as their transferable critical thinking skills. The Collaborative learning through argumentation strand focused on the argumentation skills of Level 3 students taking an option which challenged their assumptions about mind, awareness and human nature.

2. What happened

23 students took this level 3 Psychology module in 2007.

Students were introduced to new approaches to the study of the mind which required them to develop an awareness of the differences of opinion surrounding the topic, using collaboration and interaction with their peers to formulate hypotheses and arguments. Students worked collaboratively to discuss and debate difficult conceptual material online before problem classes in which they had to work together to develop a textual argument for cohort evaluation. Students used the virtual learning environment and laptops in seminars, and discussion lists before seminars to help them think about topics and prepare material for the seminars. Different groups of students prepared essay-style answers to different questions, with their discussions, essays and comments being visible to everyone on the module, thus facilitating peer interaction and evaluation. This was intended to improve their ability to evaluate their own work. The project leader monitored, and occasionally contributed to, the online components of the module.

3. What worked

The project made a big difference to the project leader’s teaching and was a spur to thinking creatively about better ways of delivering the material, engaging students and making them take responsibility for their work. As originally proposed, the project enabled seminar work to be spread over a week. Although in the past students could have spent a week preparing essays for seminars, they tended to do it at the last minute. Because the discussion lists provided support and communication from their peers, the students had much more of a sense of working collaboratively and having to put their thoughts in writing meant they got started earlier and probably worked more thoughtfully and in less of a last-minute panic.

The PEBBLE project facilitated the linking of teaching materials to relevant electronic readings much more effectively than could have been done without the virtual learning environment. It was also good to know that students could access relevant readings directly in seminars using the project’s laptops.

The project was great and the students loved it (and hadn’t loved similar exercises conducted without WebCT support in previous years). I’m sure the IBL approach gave students greater confidence in their ability to evaluate arguments in the literature and to evaluate their own accounts of those arguments. Rather than writing an essay in one go, they were able to plan and discuss several drafts with their peers before the seminars – and WebCT of course enabled them...
WebCT use correlated positively with student grade (grade x time on WebCT during seminar month, \( r = 0.50 \), grade x total no. of WebCT sessions, \( r = 0.38 \)).

**Student feedback**

- **Virtual learning environment.** Students felt that the virtual learning environment provided a good way to increase contact time beyond the lectures. There was a section in the virtual learning environment about evaluating readings. One student said that if they had not been told about this and the discussion board at the beginning of the module, maybe no one would have used them. But because of the way that readings were organized for each week, and the ability to make anonymous comments, they did use them. The virtual learning environment was used because it was integrated into the classes.

- **Discussion board.** The discussion board allows people who didn’t get a chance to contribute in class to post their ideas. It’s also good for shy people or those who get nervous, because they can share their thoughts in a way that feels safer to them (e.g. anonymously). Also, it’s good to be able to go back and see what people had said previously (e.g. for revision) or to post something after the class. The materials are well organized, and can easily be reviewed.

- **Group work and discussion.** There was a feeling that the virtual learning environment helped things to happen. He said that there’s been group work in the past, and people just let it go until the last few days, where there’s frantic emailing going around, trying to figure out what to do. This way, the work has built up throughout the class time. Students talked about the assignment in which they had to discuss their range of views and converge on an agreed position. Several said that the discussion part was rewarding and useful, but that they did not enjoy the part where they had to come to agreement. In general, however, the students enjoyed working and talking together.
  - There are some people who have to work on their own, and then there are some people who prefer to work in groups, and there’s not really that much group work at uni, so I think there should be more for the people that do enjoy working in groups.

- **Collaborative reading.** Although there wasn’t as much discussion as students they would have liked, they felt that the collaborative reading process increased the contact time during the module, which they liked.
  - There’s not a huge amount of contact time for each module in Psychology, and it kind of feels like it’s increased that.
  - I think the way I learn best is that I interact. It’s like I’m engaging more in this module. In the other ones it’s just impersonal things.

- **Feedback and expectations.** Students also welcomed the opportunity for feedback and correction of their thinking and their work. They mentioned that a feature of the discussion board that they liked was that it makes interaction with the tutor transparent to the whole class—that no one gets information that others aren’t privy to, so there is less chance that a particular student enjoys an unfair advantage. The tutor’s approach to the module had made the expectations much clearer:
  - I know why this module is good, because she’s telling you what she [the tutor] expects while, like, in the other ones I feel like, I’m not really sure.

- **Writing.** Several students agreed that this module had clarified for them how to write in psychology.

**4. What I/we learned and how it will be taken forward**

The project leader felt that being part of the PEBBLE project was a valuable opportunity to discuss teaching methods and the use of the virtual learning environment with other lecturers in the department. She also thought that this approach would have a positive impact upon her future teaching activities.

**5. Any other comments**