

## Enhancing mindsets through Research-Teaching linkages

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## Part 1: Course summary

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### Body & Belief

Honours option in Theology, over two semesters, mixture of level 3 and 4 students. 30 credits.  
50% coursework, 50% final unseen exam  
One 2-hour class per week

Religious Studies is multi-disciplinary;  
this course is essentially History in discipline  
Has run for years;  
Taken over by Vicky and Sarah 2007-8;  
In 2008-9, major redesign by Vicky.

Content: Conceptions of the body in Jewish and Christian tradition, and issues relating this with theology

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### Guiding inspirations of the redesign

Research-Teaching linkages.

Require students to find and deal with "raw" sources:  
both theoreticians and historical sources  
Treat students as fellow researchers as far as possible.  
I.e. show them what that world of scholarship is like;  
Train them up to function in it.

Enable Vicky to advance her own research in the area.

Design it not around content coverage, but around a specific quality of learner engagement with the material.

## Part 2: The Teacher perspective

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### The nature of the evidence

This is small numbers of people, and the exam marks are still to come. The evidence is thus subjective:

Opinions, not (yet) demonstrated attainments  
Mostly open ended, not comparable, data ("qualitative")  
I didn't follow a laborious "qualitative" method to give this an air of respectability  
I didn't ask carefully precise questions, but to some extent vague questions to see what issues would emerge.

Furthermore, the interviews seemed to shift the views of the interviewees: they found them enjoyable, thought provoking. (It offered them a rare opportunity for reflection i.e. PDP.)

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## The nature of the evidence (2)

On the other hand:

- 100% sample of the students and staff involved
- The cohort was clearly NOT selected high fliers, untypical of students in this department.
- As you will see, it is very hard to remain sceptical in the face of the testimonies. (*No, no, surely it was mind altering drugs and hypnosis ...*)

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## Teacher experience

I interviewed both Sarah Nicholson and Vicky Gunn.

- Indicator 1: They enjoyed teaching this course (this is a neglected metric of course quality).  
Enjoyed seeing and listening to the learner-learner discussions  
Looked forward to marking their work because its content is interesting; and because could actually see the mental development happening from piece to piece.
2. Enjoyed the team teaching: the different classroom dynamic.
  3. Advanced their knowledge of the area and literature.

## Part 3:

### The Learner perspectives

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## The previous and initial learner view

Most of these students did not select B&B as a course for any great positive reason: the title looked OK, the alternatives seemed less attractive, etc.

Furthermore, many of them had been explicitly warned off by students who had taken it the previous year.

Thus:

- a) The students are not an unusual bunch better than normal students.
- b) The first measure of the success of the course redesign is that the student word-of-mouth has radically improved ...

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## Learner evaluation: quick measures

B&B is the course you most liked or enjoyed in Honours? **7 of 8**

B&B is your most valuable course in Honours **8 of 8**

Considering postgraduate study:

- 2 No
- 4 Yes, and was already
- 2 Yes and B&B is the main reason

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## Learner evaluation: quick measures (2)

Votes for best feature of the course [some top equal votes] (plus in parentheses: rated "very important" or "best"):

- 4 (8) Interesting subject matter
- 2 (8) Great discussion and group feeling between students
- 1 (8) The staff teaching it are great
- 2 (7) Approaches and skills I learned on this course, I'm applying to other courses
- 1 (7) The methods of teaching / learning kept my attention
- 0 (3) I saw my work was useful to others (not artificial)

### Student summary statements (1)

[Pleasure, interest]

I interviewed all 9 students, and later agreed with each of them a personal statement indicating the varying attitudes.

"Best course of any in my 5 years as an undergraduate, because it felt interesting. Most important attributes were Vicky's enthusiasm for the course, for the student discussion, for the students' work (what they were doing). Also important was the participation of all the students, and the individual written feedback I got". – Nicola

"For me, the pleasure of doing this course is about the mind-expanding ideas. Feeling drawn to doing the reading, enjoying doing the assessments, and finding myself frequently discussing the ideas with people outside the course. An intellectual treat, above all." --Fiona 13

### Student summary statements (2)

[Multiple views, free discussion, ownership]

"For me, the big reward on this course was being able to develop and talk about views that I'd constructed myself. It is the personal stake in, or ownership of, views that is the heart of what was so enjoyable." --David

"For me, discussing ideas and what you can defend is at the heart of how I learn. I didn't need this course to teach me that knowledge is not about established dogma but being open to any idea, and choosing what can be supported by reasons. However this course gave a particularly good place for practising this, for allowing any view to be discussed openly, and encouraging dialogue about ideas." --Chris 14

### Student summary statements (3)

"Half way through the first semester, there was a crisis with students feeling overworked, unable to see how to tackle the theoretical reading, and seriously uncertain about the direction of the course and what was expected of them. Sarah tackled this promptly, devoting a whole class to discussing the issues, explaining the way the course was meant to operate, adopting a student suggestion about dividing the labour of weekly reading among students, and giving a briefing to orient us on how to tackle each theorist. Since then things went well.

For myself, while I haven't always had as much coverage of the particular topics I'd personally have valued the most, the course has shown me that I really can develop quite extreme views rather than being limited to conventional ones, and have them valued for the quality of how they are treated and developed." --Tony, Class Rep. 15

### Student summary statements (4)

"For much of the course, until my last presentation, I felt I was working hard but not getting good marks. Yet as a joint honours student with Philosophy, I was already used to not reproducing a fixed truth but arguing which position was best. Even so, I can say that this course added depth to my 'Perry position' by getting me to relate the issues to life and not only to abstract academic debates." --Stacey 16

### Student summary statements (5) [evidence]

"The course developed my sense of personal mastery: doing the reading myself from original sources, being able (eventually) to understand those things and use them myself. (Being personally original, sharing the reading, enjoying a good group atmosphere were less important for me.)" – Laura

"What I personally appreciated learning from the course, was the help in argument building, which I learned from the excellent, extensive essay feedbacks." –Mira

"While the course content was very interesting, it could never equal that of my beloved Islamic courses. But for real value in developing methods of approaching topics and basing my work on primary sources rather than derivative commentaries, this course was of unequalled importance." – VickyT

### Vicky Telford in her own words

- 1) **Content:** most varied I have come across, something for all interests. Students given scope and support (in and outside the department) to research and report on any topic related to course.
  - HOWEVER not overly complicated; we were given good further reading/material to use for our own research.
  - most personally challenging topics lead to good discussion. The relevance/current nature of topics made study effortless and enjoyable.
- 2) **Value,** though, for developing my methods of approaching topics by basing my work on primary sources rather than derivative commentaries. In this, the B&B course was of unequalled importance.
  - This development affected all aspects of my study and courses. I felt more able and prepared for my final year dissertation etc.
  - Understanding of topics also feels greater/more substantial as learning methods were improved in the first place.
- 3) **Aids** such as outside speakers, web chat, and group work made the course active and responsive. 18

**Part 4:**

**Theoretical perspectives on the success**

**OR**

**Lessons for Teachers from Vicky's course design and practice.**

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**Perry, and R-T linkages**

Anyone who has read William Perry will recognise many of the student statements as exhibiting a "high" Perry state as to their conception of knowledge as composed of, not black and white truths resting on the lecturer's say-so, but multiple tenable views, differentiated by the strength of evidential support.

Perry articulated the chief educational aim behind Arts disciplines; and, some would argue, behind Higher Education and "graduateness".

Perry offered no interventions to promote this development.

Perhaps we should interpret the B&B course re-design as applying Research-Teaching linkages ideas to create such an intervention: and apparently a massively effective one.

**Self-directed learning**

A big point emerging from most interviewees was the importance of the degree of choice of topic i.e., of "self-directed" learning, where the learner decides what they will learn.

This is a big step towards supporting future lifelong learning, where the learner certainly will decide on their own curriculum.

And of course, there's nothing like choosing what one is intrinsically interested in to increase learner motivation.

(Cf. Stirling research on intrinsic interest)

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**Designing around process not product**

One conscious design aim had been (VickyG says) to design the course NOT as most of us do by fixing the content then planning everything around that, BUT by specifying the nature or quality of the learners' engagement with material, and basing the design on that.

Not surprisingly, this course achieved that quality or type of intellectual process in the learners, and the rest of us are much less successful at this.

(In education, it has emerged from the work of Twigg and REAP, you get (only) what you design for.)

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**The 2-dim view of disciplines' A&F**

Most discipline knowledge has two independent components:

1. Content / breadth / coverage / declarative knowledge
2. The core procedure e.g. "the history essay" "physics problem solving".

Most exams demand both together.

But tutoring and feedback seem necessary mostly for the procedural aspect.

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**B&B as the tutorial component?**

The staff:student ratio of 2:9 would seem wildly extravagant to a big department (like psychology).

But as a tutorial group, this is normal: easily justified if it were implicitly carrying the entire tutorial burden of the department. There is no separate tutorial strand in that department.

The fact that students say that B&B has affected their approach to study on the other honours courses (but not vice versa) supports this interpretation.

## Managing student anxiety

Many brave new course designs elicit student panic at unfamiliar demands. The new, keen, but inexperienced academic then takes these loud student complaints as evidence of a failed design.

The wise (wizened?) and skillful lecturer foresees the anxiety and has strategies in place to address it.

In this course, there wasn't altogether the foresight, but there was, ready to hand, Sarah's competent implicit skills which effected a total repair.

Successful repair was in fact followed by closer bonding than would otherwise have occurred, because large scale and rapid responsiveness to student needs and proposals was demonstrated. (*A risk taker might do this deliberately.*)

## More tactics / features

Mindsets: tell the students at the start of the course that this will involve a lot of effort; that it is OK to feel overwhelmed at times; but that typical students will end up with good marks.

Team teaching: much appreciated by these students; important to the atmosphere of discussions (model researcher-researcher dialogue among other things); yet many courses have multiple staff but fail to achieve this. (N.B. Jim Boyle @ Strathclyde, who reduced dropout from 20% to 3%, uses team teaching on that course.)

Repeated use by a student of the same topic for subsequent assignments allows application of the feedback on the first one. (Some policies forbid this, thus preventing feedback ever being useful or leading to learner development.)

## More tactics / features (2)

Student generated content:

Aronson's Jigsaw Classroom is the ancestor of a line of important learning designs where students produce materials for each other.

The B&B design has an element of this because students produce presentations that other students find interesting (strong support in the interviews for this).

A stronger aspect of the Jigsaw approach (only 3 of the students felt they'd experienced this in B&B) is that if a student sees other learners using and benefiting from their work, then this validates their work as useful, not the usual artificial academic task of no actual value to others.

## Last word

A successful course relies on all of:

- A great learning design
- Good "delivery" skills e.g. being able to facilitate discussion (not bore for Glasgow yourself).
- Major tactical abilities to respond to what happens, not follow a fixed design: accommodating major student choices of topics, responding to student concerns at once, at length, with positive actions not merely listening.

*It's been depressing for me hearing such unrelieved praise: my own courses seems shabbier and shabbier. Perhaps there's something in implementing these educational principles after all ....*

## A place to stop

What do you want to ask anyone about anything?:

- Vicky, Sarah and the teachers' perspective
- The B&B students here and the learners' perspectives
- Steve and educational interpretations?