

Inquiry-based Learning Design Overview

Roots-Routes



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1. The students and the curriculum

Level: Level 2 English Literature, Language and Linguistics
Module: EGH 201: *Roots Routes: Eight Things to do with a Text*
Number: 19 students

2. The teaching and learning aims

- Students undertake collaborative IBL
- Students undertake more independent inquiry and rely less on staff direction
- Students experience increased pleasure in working with texts & data
- Students are more confident & competent in using IBL processes & transfer their understanding & skills
- Students can better distinguish between the multiplicity of research methods used in their discipline & better understand the purpose & workings of them
- Students are better able to break through discipline boundaries & use their own initiative to successfully transfer their IBL knowledge & skills to other areas

One of our explicit goals was to make students more active and apply their knowledge and inquiry to their subject. Many students, for example, know how to look up things on Google; most will not look up unfamiliar phrases in a novel. So on the one hand we just wanted students to draw on being information literate and then be able to apply it independently; on the other hand, we wanted students to discover modes of inquiry that would help them become researchers in the subject. This approach to learning and teaching was intended to prioritise process rather than product and, in particular, to heighten students' awareness of process.

3. The inquiry/ inquiries

Main inquiry task: for students to gain a better understanding of how knowledge is constructed in their discipline through a multi-dimensional inquiry into an individual text. The project leaders

wanted to build on existing expertise, but find a way where students could also engage in research methodology related to their subject area and benefit more from 'research-led teaching'.

This project built on foundations laid by an earlier collaborative project involving all staff in the School of English. After identifying eight major areas of research methodology, or 'modes of inquiry', across the School, eight 'Teaching Clusters' were established. In these clusters, members of staff discussed ways of teaching the modes of inquiry. It was from these clusters that the eight inquiry routes into the novel (and TV mini-series) *Roots*, by Alex Hayley, were derived.

Additional inquiry tasks: students were asked to participate actively and collaboratively in the following inquiry routes, with a seminar devoted to each route:

- **History:** is engaged with on two levels in this seminar: (a) the representation of history in the text and to learn more about the times and historical references; (b) to think of the text itself as engaging with history. The facts of history are not always 'uncontested,' especially since history uses narrative to tell this story.
- **Theory:** is essential in that it's all about reflection and process. The literary appreciation of African-American literature, for example, is at the forefront of theoretical influence in the study of literature, occurring around the time of the publication of *Roots*. For this week we asked the students to examine *Roots* from a series of theoretical perspectives and related them to their contemporary situation.
- **Close Reading:** in this session the students examined the language of the text in detail through the techniques of rewriting and researching vocabulary.
- **Writing:** this week the students were given the creative freedom to (a) write a short poem on any aspect, event, character they wished; (b) link a pro-slavery character into their own autobiography and reflect on the process
- **Technology:** students again engage creatively with the text; thinking about how the idea of a 'hypertext' relates to the way in which *Roots* is constructed and how they read the text.
- **Sources:** through rough **intertextuality**, authors establish themselves in a literary tradition and a literary lineage. This use of sources can steer interpretation and meaning as well as demonstrate the knowledge of the author. This session examined *Roots* through Haley's use of sources to investigate the fine line between literary intertextuality and plagiarism.
- **Science:** the central thing this week was to grasp what linguists mean when they describe their work as 'scientific'. This took some time to explore. In the lecture and seminar we explored some research questions that relate to Haley's novel, and, particularly, to the representations of African American speech that we find in *Roots*.
- **Performance:** students were asked to consider two issues connected to the potential performance of *Roots*; we were not so much concerned with the finished performance – the *product* of what students have done with the text, but were far more interested in what they learnt by working on the material – the *process* of engaging with the text. By trying different ideas out, and by evaluating the result critically, students can raise some interesting questions that can be pursued using techniques learned elsewhere in the course.

Additionally, the interconnections between these modes of inquiry were constantly reinforced; the modes do not stand alone but are frequently complementary.

4. The assessment

(1) Eight 200-word postings on the WebCT bulletin board (10% of the total mark); to be completed each week, due Monday midnight prior to Tuesday lecture.

(2) Two written pieces of not more than 1,000 words (40%)

(3) One piece of not more than 1,500 words (50%)

5. The 'process support'

Specific support for particular sessions was also offered inside the VLE. Each week's mode of inquiry was outlined and linked to a series of learning tasks, each of which was described in detail and rationalised in terms of the overall module objectives.

6. The information resources and strategies

Subject information was provided by a number of means:

- **VLE:** this acted as the main support tool, containing links to online library resource lists, for example.
- **Lectures:** the course was underpinned by a weekly 1 hour lecture;
- **Podcasts:** the 'Theory' week was supported by a podcast of the project leaders discussing relevant issues
- **Resource packs:** the library created an electronic resource pack for this module (including a digitised version part of the core text, *Roots*; this was linked directly to the VLE);
- **Blog:** the tutors maintained their own blog at the same time as commenting on the students' bulletin board where necessary – this was a space that was separate from the assessed student bulletin board. It allowed the project leaders to focus upon issues of particular interest or conduct 'troubleshooting' if needed;
- **Course texts:** students were also required to purchase the novel *Roots* and the DVD of the mini-series.

7. The tutoring/facilitation approach

The module was supported by an integrated combination of lectures, seminars and VLE.

With the support from LDMU, CILASS, AV and the WebCT team project leaders provided a unique learning environment of 'real' and 'virtual' spaces. The module was supported by a media-rich VLE, which provided introductory reading on each of the modes of inquiry along with activities that students were required to complete and discuss on the bulletin boards before the first group session of the week. Both the reading and the tasks were intended to highlight methods of inquiry rather than facts or information about the book. Students would then attend a one-hour session in the CILASS collaboratory in which they would discuss the responses to the task that had been posted on the bulletin boards with the two tutors. This would lead into a second task, instructions for which were also available in the VLE. This second task formed the basis of a collaborative process of investigation in a two-hour seminar later in the week. Students presented the results of the second task to the rest of their group and posted a summary of it on the bulletin boards. The tutors also made entries in a reflective blog, looking back over the activities of the week.

The module is structured so that students must engage with the material prior to the lecture and seminar rather than afterwards; not only must they come prepared if they are to get the most out of the session but they must comment on the bulletin board on the tasks that they have been set before attending the session. This means that they will have material prepared in advance, will

have had time to reflect on what they have read and will be able to raise any problems with the lecturer there and then (if it has not already been addressed by the 'posting' process).

8. The learning technology

The MOLE VLE was integral to the course, hosting the students' discussion board, the project leaders' blog and podcast, as well as all course information.

9. The learning spaces

Contact hours took place in the CILASS Collaboratory in Bartolomé House. The flexibility and technology-rich nature of the teaching space were felt to have enhanced collaborative inquiry. Project leaders made extensive use of the huddle boards throughout the module, encouraging students to write on them in groups, present their findings, and then capture what they had written using the copy-cams.

10. What really worked

- **Originality** – we were excited by the way in which students' responses to the initial tasks produced original and unexpected insights into the material. Students showed great resourcefulness in finding ways of investigating particular problems, approaching the text from a new perspective, and producing exciting material to present to their peers. Students clearly picked up on our excitement and mentioned it in the focus group: 'It was very much a case of making you think, rather than spoon-feeding you'. Another said: 'They'd start you off with something, then you'd go off and do it, and they always said ... we were throwing up things they hadn't even considered'.
- **Pleasure** – although it is hard to quantify, students did seem to experience increased pleasure in working with texts & data. Student focus group participants made comments such as 'there is no other module that I'm doing this year where I look forward to the seminar in the same way I looked forward to Roots' and 'it absolutely flew by because it was just so relaxed; we just had a lot of fun'.
- **Interconnections** – many of the ideas put forward in the teaching clusters became specifically designed research activities in the module. For example, one of our colleagues, a drama specialist, attended the 'Performance' group and spoke about the concept of the 'mantle of the expert', an approach to drama education which was originally developed by Dorothy Heathcote and which involves creating a fictional world within which learners assume some kind of expert role: 'you are a team from an advertising agency...', 'You are a group of film makers...', and so on. In the 'Performance' section of the module, we used this approach directly, asking students to take on the role of radio producers planning a reading of *Roots* for 'Book at Bedtime'. We provided them with recordings of three voices (one British, one West African, and one African American) reading an excerpt from the text and we asked them to decide which of the actors they wanted to employ. This led directly into a discussion about the notion of 'authenticity' in performance and, hence, into an examination of what performance-based approaches can teach us about primary material.
- **Integration of technology into the lesson** - one of the students said that this was useful because it allowed the group to interact while one person made notes for all of them. The fact that the laptops were connected to plasma screens also enabled collaboration: 'Because we could all see the same thing ... if you found something, you could show the others'.

- **Collaboration** – students talked about the practice of posting on bulletin boards as a collaborative mode of inquiry: ‘I think posting on the bulletin board and reading what other people had written ... sometimes it was a completely different point of view, so you’d kind of learn from each other’. Participants tended to feel that posting enhanced the experience of seminars: ‘Sometimes it’s really easy to blag your way through a text because to be honest it’s not that difficult saying something that the tutor will, like, say “hmmm, yes, interesting”, and when you turn up to a seminar pretty much that’s it. And with Roots what was really good was that you did have to know what you were talking about to the extent that you had to write your piece and put it up ... and people paid attention to it, rather than it just being ignored’.

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

We were somewhat disappointed with the assessed work that the students went on to produce later. It often seemed quite distant from the fresh and original work that they had undertaken during the course of the module. Throughout the module, students contributed to discussion on online bulletin boards and their writing in that context was fresh, witty, lively, and interesting. However, too much of the assessed work was written in a stodgy pseudo-academic style that did little to convey the quality of the research it was reporting.

Students had a great deal of difficulty identifying appropriate problems for investigation. In other words, the process of setting suitable research questions caused them difficulty and the open-endedness of our assessment tasks made this fact particularly evident

After the first year of teaching our module, we are now continuing our enhancement of Roots Routes and IBL-teaching, testing once again the limits of technology, while exploring new collaborative assessment and presentations in English, taking Roots outside the classroom (field trip to the Liverpool Slavery Museum), and working with students on academic writing skills in English. We have introduced new classroom sessions, including: the ‘pitch’, in which groups of students have to ‘pitch’ their idea for turning *Roots* into a different format (a theatre production, for example) to a panel of experts.

12. Advice to others doing a similar project

13. Further comments