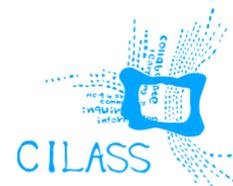


# ***Inquiry-based Learning Development Cases***

Inquiry-led Independent and Collaborative Research Modules



1. *Where I/we started from and wanted to achieve*
  2. *What happened*
  3. *What worked*
  4. *What I/we learned and how it will be taken forward*
  5. *Any other comments*
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## **1. Where I/we started from and what we wanted to achieve**

The project sought to build upon and enhance the Department of History's existing excellence in teaching and learning. Three main issues were identified:

1. The Department of History has a reputation for high-quality teaching, especially related to its efforts to embed information literacy and independent research within the curriculum. The department was at the forefront of integrating ICT into its courses, e.g. through the use of the institution's virtual learning environment. The department saw engagement with CILASS as an opportunity to draw more deeply on the web for electronic resources suitable for undergraduate research and to integrate ICT more fully.
2. With this in mind, it was decided to focus efforts upon core Level 2 and Level 3 modules: Course Assignments and Dissertations respectively. These modules are central to the degree and essential to the development of students' transferable skills in independent research and critical interpretation of sources. It was felt, however, that there was room to improve the materials available, the space for student creativity and the sense of collaborative community. This was to be achieved by providing more support, more electronic resources and more collaborative feedback.
3. Dual degree candidates, undertaking one-semester Short Dissertations, were felt to have been disadvantaged in the past by not having had the opportunity to take the Course Assignment at Level 2. Special workshops were to be introduced in order to redress the balance and, together with the development to the Course Assignments and Dissertations, transform the experience of independent and collaborative inquiry-led research for **all** history undergraduates at Levels 2 and 3 (= over 200 students per year).

## **2. What happened**

In accordance with the above objectives, the History project has created a framework of seminars, information literacy workshops and other collaborative links as well as web-based resources to support students in their independent research modules, the second-year Course Assignment and the third-year Dissertation. At both levels Web-CT sites were also set up to provide extra support, including further reading, guidance and links to electronic resources.

- **Course Assignments (Level 2).**

- This module has been part of the undergraduate curriculum for many years. The module already developed students' transferable skills in independent research and critical interpretation of historical sources (primary and secondary) as they worked through a small independent research project. CILASS input gave the project leader the opportunity to augment the skills development activities, particularly in the areas of independent and collaborative learning and the use of ICT. With this in mind, CILASS funding was used to purchase data projectors to allow for demonstration of information resources and specially designed workstations to foster collaborative working.
- Staff-led seminars and postgraduate-led Information Literacy workshops (which took place in a technology rich environment) were added to the curriculum to develop information literacy skills and to facilitate collaborative learning resulting in a more focussed approach to student inquiry. The students selected the chronological/topical

groups closest to their research interests. The workshops were then led by postgraduate tutors close to their own areas of research expertise.

- The IT workshops were voluntary for single-honours students and were taught in chronologically-specific groups (reflecting the postgraduate teachers' areas of historical specialisation as appropriate). The postgraduate teachers were given an outline of tasks, but each teacher moulded the workshop to their own strengths and the period being researched.
- Staff taught students in small groups for 5 sessions, in which they discussed the process of designing, researching and writing a small research project. In earlier years, students had selected a supervisor from the available tutors — most often linked to one of their current modules — and this supervision was conducted on a more informal basis. With the 5 seminars the supervision process has been formalised, giving students a chance to generate ideas for topics, learn key skills, engage in peer assessment, and receive feedback from peers and tutor after giving presentations.
- Together, the seminars and workshops were intended to build students' confidence in formulating research topics, develop competencies in the construction of appropriate search strategies in an electronic research environment, bolster skills in evaluating the authority of internet search results and provide opportunities for students to engage in collaborative peer feedback.
- **Dissertation (Level 3).**
  - This module further developed students' independent learning and research skills, building on the Level 2 Course Assignments module. In a voluntary system, students formed small mutual support groups and met at least twice to exchange and discuss title and synopses, and then draft extracts of dissertations, using pre-designed forms made available online. Students developed their assessment and evaluation skills by the peer review process of reading and commenting on dissertation drafts shared with peers. The activity was intended to enhance their skills in critical reflection and to enable them to perceive themselves as full participants in the process of research and their own learning rather than as passive receivers of information.
  - Extra guidance in planning and conducting research projects as well as in carrying out the peer review process was provided through pre-designed documents and exercises on the Web-CT virtual learning environment. Students were also encouraged to provide examples of good practice and critical self-reflections, with the goal of extending the community of inquiry to future student cohorts.
  - Students from dual degrees who have to complete 'short' dissertations also received the benefit of area-specific information literacy workshops.

### 3. What worked

The CILASS workshops have increased student awareness of the place of the course assignment in the level 2 programme, reminding them at regular intervals during the year about the milestones in the process, and making them think carefully about the 'research and writing process' itself. The workshops helped students get to grips with the information environment for History and gave them a space in which to practise the evaluation of internet-based resources, including primary and secondary sources.

Students worked towards a series of deadlines during this series of seminars, at each phase being offered peer or tutor feedback. This replaced an older system of one-on-one supervision of which not every student took full advantage. The new system did, however, have one drawback from the point of view of student choice: they now had to develop a topic that fitted in with a themed seminar group, whereas in the past their choice of topic was more wide open. Additionally, there was no necessary connection between the voluntary postgraduate-led workshops and the staff-led seminar series. These issues will be addressed in the next phase of departmental engagement with CILASS (see below). Anecdotal evidence suggests that some History staff were unaware of the dissertation project, and that students did not take up the opportunity to form peer support groups if

staff did not get them started. However, where staff did encourage (booking spaces for students to meet, for example), students reported the groups were very successful.

Students are finding themselves with better skills training and better support networks for inquiry-based collaborative learning and for formulating and carrying out research projects. They have also experienced enhanced access to electronic resources. The Department is able to put forward the curricular reforms associated with the CILASS projects as examples of innovative teaching and learning practice, in such a way as to demonstrate that it has already begun meeting some of the new university Learning Teaching and Assessment Strategy guidelines, above all in terms of information literacy, on-line module delivery and resources, student-centred learning and inquiry-based learning. These projects have also kick-started the process of integrating information literacy skills into the curriculum in cooperation with the Library and its programme to customise skills-building tutorials.

### Feedback on Course Assignments

“Some of the students really liked the group work, and others would prefer to have one-on-one time with their tutors. I tried to get the tutors to tell the students that it’s not mutually exclusive—they can still talk individually with their tutors. But to also make clear that it’s not just the advice you get, but the information that can come through interacting with peers. Peer feedback can help students to do better themselves. But not all are convinced.”

(Project leader reflective interview)

“[The workshop] gave a very good starting point for my research, and I have begun to find useful resources already.” (Student feedback)

“The atmosphere was better than you would have with a large group, and it is much easier to ask questions etc.” (Student feedback)

“It is always useful to work with others – sharing ideas and getting help if they are more competent.” (Student feedback)

“I enjoyed the fact it was an opportunity for independent study and could be different to other essays.” (Student feedback)

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

The second stage of CILASS engagement with the History Department started in the autumn semester of 2007. This programme seeks to deepen and extend the strands developed in phase 1, rolling out innovations from level 2 to levels 3 and 4:

1. A spine of online exercises will be established through levels 2 and 3;
2. Collaborative work will be embedded by using IT and CILASS spaces to facilitate the meeting of student peer groups; collaborative work in the classroom will also be developed;
3. IBL will be employed more widely throughout the curriculum, making teaching more student-centred and learning more collaborative and open-ended.

More specifically, further innovations will be made to the two core elements of phase 1:

1. **Level 2 Course Assignments:** the PG led IT workshops will be made more sustainable. Individual worksheets will be adapted into period-specific lesson plans/worksheets (e.g. on finding and selecting electronic resources) to create a sustainable teaching resource. These IT exercises may be linked more explicitly to staff-taught seminars – currently taught in very different ways – and provide a basis for discussion and reflection.
2. **Level 3 Dissertations:** the emphasis on student-oriented collaboration and support will be retained, but will be advertised more widely to raise awareness and make this opportunity more available. The existing, highly successful Level 2 Course Assignment IT workshops will be developed further to create teaching models (more focused on specific primary sources and the process of writing a dissertation) for Level 3 dissertationists.

### 5. Any other comments