

Report on the Meeting of Historians associated with CETLs, held at the University of Sheffield, 20 January 2006

At the instigation of Paul Hyland of the Subject Centre for History, Classics and Archaeology, and with the support of the Centre for Inquiry-Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences (CILASS) at the University of Sheffield, a meeting of historians associated with some of the various Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs), was held in the Tapestry Room of Firth Court in the University of Sheffield on Friday, 20 January 2006.

There were two main portions of the programme. In the morning and early afternoon session, representatives from the CETLs described the aims and scope of their respective projects, and opportunities for sharing and cooperation among them were explored. In the after-lunch session, discussion turned to the search for overarching issues, problems and synergies among the various projects.

The morning session, chaired by Professor Mark Greengrass, began with presentations from Nicola Reilly, the Managing Director of Sheffield's CILASS, and Pam Bing, Learning Development and Research Associate (Information Literacy). This was followed by brief presentations of the project run by the Sheffield Department of History within CILASS, by Professor Greengrass (instrumental in bringing the CETL to Sheffield and in ensuring History's involvement within it), and by the Project Leader, Dr Brian Vick. CILASS in general emphasises the pursuit of inquiry-based or problem-led learning within both independent and collaborative frameworks for student research, with the development and deployment of information literacy skills in an IT-rich environment as a central component of that endeavour. In accordance with these 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.

Professor Roger Lloyd-Jones, Dr Merv Lewis and Dr Nicola Verdon represented the Centre for Autonomous Learning at Sheffield Hallam University. Level Two modules in Business and Economic History and in Research for Historians were the venues for introducing autonomous learning into the history curriculum at Sheffield Hallam. In this regard, it was emphasised that autonomous learning did not mean isolated or even independent but rather cooperative. Assessment, dissemination and diffusion were also highlighted as particularly important for the success of the project, in getting both students and staff on board and on the same page in their aims and objectives.

Next, Howard Wickes outlined the strategic vision of the CETL for Assessment for Learning at the University of Northumbria, which looks to reshape assessment practices in such a way as to promote learning goals more effectively. Once again, dissemination both to staff and students was identified as a key to success, along with the targeting of new modules for involvement with the programme.

Alan Booth of the Subject Centre spoke in his capacity as representative of the Centre for Integrative Learning at the University of Nottingham. This project looks to promote the process of learning in all aspects of life, even beyond the university years, combining for example Personal Development Planning with the skills developed in History in order to produce e-Portfolios. History's involvement with the project begins with the Level One module Skills in Learning, and, through collaborative assessment and critical reflection, encourages students and staff to

reflect on the construction of a history curriculum in a more pedagogically informed way.

Finally, Geoff Timmins spoke on behalf of the Centre for Employability in the Humanities at the University of Central Lancashire. History, along with the other departments in the project, puts considerable emphasis on Personal Development Planning, as well as modelling work experience within the structure of the curriculum, through projects, modules and specially-created 'realistic working environments' (with community history, oral history, teaching, heritage and museums all featuring prominently).

In the after-lunch session, chaired by Dr Vick, the other participants joined in actively. These included Sonja Cameron of the Subject Centre in Glasgow, Richard Williams for Classics in the Subject Centre (Durham), Karina Croucher for Archaeology in the Subject Centre (Liverpool) and Elaine Fulton of the University of Birmingham. Possibilities for sharing information and resources among the various universities' projects were discussed, and it was suggested that it might be possible to establish some sort of an e-network for history CETLs, perhaps through the Subject Centre. Several speakers also identified the problem of incentivising the participation of younger members of staff in these pedagogically innovative projects when promotion prospects are predicated much more upon research outputs. As a way of dealing with this problem, and of sharing information about pedagogy, it was agreed that it would be worthwhile to explore funding opportunities for the possible founding of an international society for learning and teaching in History, and/or for the creation of an e-journal for historical pedagogy, in which the results of such research and practice could be published in a form that would contribute to RAE returns.

In addition, Professor Hyland stressed the need for clarity and careful reflection upon the criteria for evaluating the various CETLs and projects, particularly as this affected the ability to provide results that would at once be measurable and useful across institutions. Along these lines it was noted that enough attention may not as yet have been given to the delineation of taxonomies of skills to be learned or to the building of a broad consensus about the seemingly quite disparate theories of learning underpinning the various projects. In the end, however, the participants in the discussion decided that most of the pedagogical theories behind these projects were of a broadly 'postmodern' variety, that is, emphasising both learning and the creation of historical knowledge through research as open-ended processes rather than as a set content, in which neither truth nor utility were fully fixed. To this extent, finding a suitable set of evaluation criteria — typically grounded in a more 'modernist' social scientific conception of measurability — would indeed require further careful reflection. Such a discussion might appear on the agenda of a future meeting of CETL-connected historians, which all participants agreed would be a desirable event.

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