

Centre for Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning

Facilitating Enquiry-Based Learning: Some Digressions

A keynote lecture given by Dr Bill Hutchings at the 2nd Southern Universities EBL Network Event, University of Surrey, 11 January 2006

“Every day for at least ten years together did my father resolve to have it mended – ‘tis not mended yet; - no family but ours would have borne with it an hour – and what is most astonishing, there was not a subject in the world upon which my father was so eloquent, as upon that of door-hinges. – And yet at the same time, he was certainly one of the greatest bubbles [fools] to them, I think, that history can produce; his rhetorick and conduct were at perpetual handy-cuffs. – Never did the parlour door open – but his philosophy or his principles fell a victim to it; - three drops of oil with a feather, and a smart stroke of the hammer, had saved his honour for ever....

By all that is good and virtuous, if there are three drops of oil to be got, and a hammer to be found within ten miles of Shandy Hall – the parlour door hinge shall be mended this reign.”

(Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*; from book 3, chapter 21)

Facilitating and facilitators

Let us first outline the role of the tutor as conventionally conceived:

- establishing curriculum
- providing material (reading-lists, resources, bibliographies)
- defining parameters of discussion and learning
- correcting and steering learning

The model is, that is to say, tutor-centred: it is the seminar model of the central hub (the seminar leader) and spokes (the seminar participants).

Now let us try to define the role of the tutor in Enquiry-Based Learning:

- establishing the target learning
- providing the triggers to learning (problems, scenarios, tasks...)

Then it is over to the students. The student learning process (shorter or longer depending on the degree of difficulty of the problem and the time allotted for the process) goes something like this:

- collective examination of problem
- initial proposals for method of enquiry
- deciding on areas requiring information retrieval/research
- conducting research (individual and/or small group)
- collating information
- re-examination of problem in the light of new information and ideas
- repetition of the process if necessary
- deciding how to present outcomes

The model, that is to say, is student-centred: it is the model of the collaborative group.

During this student-centred process, what role does the tutor – now a facilitator – adopt?

The etymological root of the word 'facilitate' is the Latin word 'facilis'. The Latin 'facilis' came to mean 'easy', and this is the sense that furnishes the English word 'facile', signifying something that can be accomplished with little effort. The most celebrated appearance of the word in this sense in Latin literature occurs in the sixth book of Virgil's *Aeneid*, line 126, when the Sibyl tells Aeneas that "facilis descensus averno" ('easy is the descent to the underworld'; in the sonorous translation of John Dryden, "The gates of hell are open night and day; / Smooth the descent, and easy is the way"). But 'facilis' itself derives from the verb 'facere', meaning 'to do'; so that the original nuance is not so much the simplicity of the task described, but the fact that the task is capable of being done. To facilitate, then, is to assist the process of carrying out a task: not to carry it out oneself, but to enable others so to do. It is the opposite of 'defining', which derives from the Latin for setting limits (from 'finis', meaning 'end'). It is not closing down, limiting, but opening out, freeing. Whereas the conventional tutor's job may be described as leading students, sympathetically but surely, along the pre-established pathways of the subject, the facilitator's task is to enable the students to discover and journey along their own pathways. The conventional tutor has defined goals; the facilitator enables students to discover their own goals. In a straightforward Enquiry-Based Learning task, it may well be that the goals the students discover are the same as those the tutor would have set: the path leads to the same end. The difference is simply – but crucially – that the students learn for themselves. But, in more complex and problematic tasks, there may be many pathways leading to many different ends.

To facilitate, then, is to create conditions propitious to carrying out of a task. Those conditions can only be created if the process of facilitation is conceptually like that of the learning. If it is not, there is a conflict of ideas, resulting in a likely block to progress. The key criterion here is that we need to align the facilitation role with the principles and practice of the learning process.

What do students need to discover their pathways through learning?

Consider the processes that comprise Enquiry-Based Learning, that is, learning through experience. These may be described as:

- the examination of the issues underlying a problem
- relating those issues to appropriate contexts
- working out of what works and what does not
- defining areas for further research
- an active process of putting together a response that can be defended by students as intellectually coherent and consistent with issues defined in the problem.

The process, then, is precisely that which we academics take for granted as the method for our own research, when we put on our other, non-teaching, hat. So what do we academics need as the conditions under which we can readily conduct our research? How about these:

- freedom to explore, experiment, fail, and succeed
- space and time
- access to resources
- the opportunity to discuss difficulties with like-minded and sympathetic colleagues
- the opportunity to present and discuss outcomes in a collegial context.

These are the conditions that a good supervisor will provide for a doctoral student.

So what should a facilitator do to help students? How about:

- providing freedom to explore, experiment, fail, and succeed
- space and time
- access to resources

- the opportunity to discuss difficulties with like-minded and sympathetic colleagues
- the opportunity to present and discuss outcomes in a collegial context.

That is, the facilitator acts as a good supervisor does. We should be encouraging our undergraduates to learn in a manner that mirrors the learning process of research. The facilitator must recognise that it is the students who are driving the learning. Facilitators must both have, and demonstrate that they have, trust in the students. This means allowing space and time, not interfering, not nervously hovering, not intimidating. It is about releasing, freeing and having confidence in the enquiring minds of our students, treating them in short as colleagues in the learning process. This is *providing freedom to explore and space and time*.

It is crucial to assert, however, that such an attitude on the part of the facilitator is not the same as ignoring, showing indifference and leaving students alone. The provision of freedom and of the space and time to act represents only part of our responsibilities as facilitator. Consider our other categories of research needs. *Access to resources* may be provided by the wider community of department, school or institution (workshops, laboratory, library, IT). But it may be that the facilitator can actually support this, depending on the context within which the learning is taking place. When I was able to take Enquiry-Based Learning sessions in my own office, I was able to provide access to books, dictionaries, computer, even phone. Is this going too far? No, it is treating students as colleagues, trusting them. In more controlled, shorter Enquiry-Based Learning tasks it may be that certain selected resources may be usefully on hand in the expectation of their utility.

Consider our remaining categories of research need: *opportunity to discuss difficulties with like-minded colleagues, opportunity to present and discuss outcomes in a collegial context*. Who is it that can provide these? The facilitator - **but only if the facilitator is an active part of the learning process her- or himself**. This is active not in the sense of providing instructions, answers; but in the sense of being willing to become part of the learning process as the students are shaping it. If a doctoral student runs up against a difficulty, what should a good supervisor do? Listen, help the student to think through the difficulty, respond to any direct requests for support, but responding in a way that makes it clear that there may be more than one way to approach the difficulty (if there were not, there would

be nothing to research). Thus the supervisor and facilitator are ready to empathise with the intellectual approach of the students and, if necessary, to adjust their thinking to that of the students. The supervisor and facilitator take part in the learning, by being like-minded and collegial - and then knowing when to back off.

It follows that the facilitator can take part only if he/she is part of the same discipline as the students; or, at the very least, close enough to the subject of study to be able to become a part of the learning. This contradicts the purist Problem-Based Learning theory that a facilitator is there to ensure simply that the *stages of the process* are gone through - the seven steps, or the eight steps, or the thirty-nine steps....But to assert this is to separate process from content and to elevate the former over the latter, so producing a mechanistic model that, I believe, is counter to the principles of true learning. There is evidence that active facilitation is more effective than passive in attaining learning goals.¹ This is not simply to re-instate the dominant tutor model, and there are questions about how active is active. I agree with Jaleel Miyan that "students appreciate active facilitation but not if it pre-empts their learning", but would myself define active in less prescriptive terms than Jaleel's "active facilitation involves questioning and highlighting areas for research". I see active as being able to become part of the learning of students.

This also provides students with a role model: if I am energised by the excitement of their learning, then they are more likely to catch the excitement and respond accordingly. I thus become one of the resources that I am providing, another colleague - one perhaps further along the learning pathway, and for that reason able to act as an expert resource when required.

The facilitator's role is to become a part of the events as they unfold and develop. This is what John Keats defined as the key to creative involvement:

"...if a Sparrow come before my Window I take part in its
existence [sic] and pick about the Gravel."

(letter to Benjamin Bailey, November 22, 1817)

¹ See Jaleel A. Miyan, "Active facilitation as a tool to ensure depth in PBL", *Proceedings of Implementing Problem-Based Learning in Higher Education Conference, University of Manchester, 16/17 January 2001*, 58-59

“...it struck me, what quality went to form a man of Achievement especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed [sic] so enormously – I mean negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties...”

(letter to George and Thomas Keats, December 21/27 1817)

Shakespeare, for Keats, demonstrates supremely an ability not just to write his characters, but to *become* them. As Shakespeare puts it in his own sonnet number 111:

“And almost then my nature is subdued
To what it works in, like the dyer’s hand.”

A digression on novels

Conventional novels operate by means of a plot structure that is linear in direction. Events occur in temporal succession through a process of cause and effect. For example, in Jane Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice* Elizabeth Bennet overhears Mr. Darcy making patronising remarks at a dance party, concludes that he is a proud, arrogant man, finds confirmation of his snobbish attitude in his apparent interference in the budding relationship between her sister and his friend Bingley, and responds accordingly and firmly to his unexpected declaration of love. As the novel proceeds, however, she learns more about Darcy and events that she has interpreted in particular ways, and learns to re-adjust her thinking. Learning is linear, progressive and ends, of course, happily. Just like seminars.

But back in 1759, more than fifty years before *Pride & Prejudice*, Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy* had presented a very different kind of novel. The narrator, Tristram, tries to tell his story in a straight line, but other things keep on intruding, such as a squeaking door hinge. Tristram’s father, Walter Shandy, is literature’s great theorist. He has a theory for everything. For example, he has a theory of education, according to which he naturally wishes his beloved son (who should, incidentally, have been named Trismegistus, the most propitious of names according to his theory of names; but that is another story) to be brought up. So Walter sets about writing an education manual for the teaching of Tristram, his *Tristrapaedia*. Unfortunately, it takes him so long to write it that Tristram grows up beyond the age when it is relevant. For, alas, Walter’s theories never quite mesh with

reality. (There must be a lesson there somewhere.) So he never quite manages to bridge the gap between intention and realization: hence the perpetually squeaking door hinge.

Then there is the problem that, if everything is a chain of cause and effect, then wherever you begin, there is something antecedent that needs explaining. So even Tristram's resolute decision to begin his life story in chapter one where it began, that is at the moment of his conception, requires him to attempt to explain why his mother asked his father, "Pray, my dear, have you not forgot to wind the clock" ("Good God, cried my father...did ever woman since the creation of the world interrupt a man with such a silly question?" - and a, well, rather *untimely* question too...).

The result is that Tristram's story is repeatedly having to go backwards in search of antecedent causes and is repeatedly being interrupted by tangential ideas and events. These are Tristram's digressions:

"Digressions, incontestably, are the sunshine; - they are the life, the soul of reading! - take them out of this book, for instance, - you might as well take the book along with them; - one cold eternal winter would reign in every page of it; restore them to the writer; - he steps forth like a bridegroom, - bids All-hail; brings in variety, and forbids the appetite to fail."

(Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, from book 1, chapter 22)

Tristram's radical model of narrative proposes an inversion of the standard theory. The soul of writing lies, for him, not in the linearity of progression, but in the *apparent* digressions that actually become the real subject, the warm living heart, of the book.

Facilitation: an example

“Condemned to Hope’s delusive mine,
As on we toil from day to day,
By sudden blasts or slow decline,
Our social comforts drop away.

Well tried through many a varying year,
See Level to the grave descend;
Officious, innocent, sincere,
Of every friendless name the friend.

Yet still he fills Affection’s eye,
Obscurely wise, and coarsely kind;
Nor, lettered Arrogance, deny
Thy praise to merit unrefined.

When fainting Nature called for aid,
And hovering Death prepared the blow,
His vigorous remedy displayed
The power of art without the show.

In Misery’s darkest caverns known,
His ready help was ever nigh,
Where hopeless Anguish poured his groan,
And lonely Want retired to die.

No summons mocked by chill delay,
No petty gains disdained by pride;
The modest wants of every day
The toil of every day supplied.

His virtues walked their narrow round,
Nor made a pause, nor left a void;
And sure the Eternal Master found
The single talent well employed.

The busy day, the peaceful night,
Unfelt, uncounted, glided by;
His frame was firm, his powers were bright,
Though now his eightieth year was nigh.

Then with no throbbing fiery pain,
No cold gradations of decay,
Death broke at once the vital chain,
And freed his soul the nearest way."

(Samuel Johnson, "On the Death of Dr. Robert Levet")

I used this poem as the given example in a small-scale Enquiry-Based Learning exercise for second-level students beginning a course on eighteenth-century literature. I set a simple question, "What is the purpose of elegiac poetry?"

Well, I thought it was simple, and I thought it was a small-scale exercise. I thought so because, of course, the answers are all there in the poem. The lecture I had given earlier that week had made very clearly the point that most writers in the eighteenth century were practising Christians. Johnson plainly refers to the parable of the talents from Matthew, chapter 25, verses 14-30 ("the single talent"); he writes explicitly of the freeing of the dead man's soul at the moment of death. The language is religious and specifically Christian. The ideas are doctrinally clear. The body is a prison from which the soul is released, an old Greek idea adopted by particularly Pauline elements of Christian theology. The parable of the talents is about how, during our time in this world, the Christian should use whatever abilities God has given productively and not waste them. Life imposes on us the duty to moral action, which is the means by which we justify our lives to God. Elegies, like epitaphs in churchyards, define the individuality of the dead, justify their lives, and propose their acknowledgement by and reward from their maker. This is a very Protestant idea, to be doctrinally still more precise: that is why gravestones in English churches begin in the Reformation period. So elegies are statements of theological purpose.

What happened in the seminar? Well, on several occasions what happened was that the group ignored all these evident signs of a solution and instead started to ask questions about Levet himself. Who was he? Why did Johnson write a poem about him? Aren't most poetic elegies written about public figures? Did Johnson write any other elegies? This was addressed to me, as one who should know. Well, yes, he wrote, for example, an elegy on the painter William Hogarth. Well, there we are, Hogarth, still one of the three or four most famous English artists.

Yes, but hold on, my evil facilitation angel breathed into my ear. This is all irrelevant, a digression from the true path to knowledge. The point about the Christian theological model is that it is universal. The poem could have been about anybody. Indeed, it is about anybody because it is about a nobody: Levet is a type of humble Christian endeavour, a model for us all. That is what parables provide for us: hence Johnson's reference to a parable. It is time, I thought, for active facilitation. Time is getting on and we need a learning outcome. Perhaps I should shove a bible open at Matthew chapter 25 onto the table, nonchalantly saying, "I think there's a research resource we're overlooking here".

But my good facilitation angel breathed into the other ear. No, let us run with this. The students were intrigued. They were setting the agenda. How could we find out who Levet was? Well, Johnson was famously the object of biographies written by his contemporaries, notably James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, but several others as well. My shelves contained indexed editions of Boswell and Hester Thrale's *Anecdotes of the Late Samuel Johnson*, and the library's *Eighteenth-Century Collections Online* would enable us to look at other biographies, so let us see if they mention Levet. Yes, they did. And what did they say about him? That he was "awkward and uncouth" (Boswell); "he was of a strange grotesque appearance, stiff and formal in his manner, and seldom said a word while any company was present" (Boswell). Why then did Johnson insist on writing such an extensive elegy on him, naming him and exhorting the reader to bear witness ("See Levet to the grave descend")? I can still remember the first time this kind of process occurred and the moment at which I forgot I was the tutor and got excited by the chase. For I began to see that there was a way of reading that I had missed, and one that led with equal validity to the heart of the poem. Of course, the fact that Levet was not just unknown to most people, but actually despised by those of Johnson's contemporaries who did know him, is at the moral heart of the poem. Look at those oxymorons: "obscurely wise", "coarsely kind". Their point is that people can be an amalgam of contradictory qualities, and if we see only one half of them we are missing the full picture. Wisdom and goodness can be found in apparent obscurity. The parable of the talents is being creatively re-visited. A talent was originally a coin, a sum of money, and its meaning of 'natural ability' derives from its symbolic usage in the Matthew gospel verses. In the parable, the servant who is given just one talent hides it in the ground, and so does nothing productive with it. In Johnson's re-working, Robert Levet is granted but a *single* talent, but he uses it for the good of humanity. He does not bury it in the earth, but instead descends to "Misery's darkest

caverns" to tend the sick and the dying. The most humble of people (so humble that he scarcely says a word in company) can lead the life of the good Christian. Levet is more than a type of obscure ordinariness indicating the universality of theological truths: he is proof of the greatness of the ordinary individual. It *is* important that the elegy is about Levet, and Johnson is challenging us (as well as Boswell) to reassess our assumptions. As Johnson writes in a letter to his friend Dr. Lawrence, quoted in another contemporary biography, Sir John Hawkins's *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, "So has ended the long life of a very useful and very blameless man." The digression was a pathway to truth, and I was being helped along it by my students - no, by my colleagues.

A digression on digressions

Enquiry opens up imaginative routes to truthful ideas; and all the more so because those routes are authentic, created by the people engaged in the quest, not imposed by external authority. Literary Studies, after all, is about creativity, about how language may be used to explore and express what we are as human beings. This is why Enquiry-Based Learning is so profoundly aligned with my subject. I just had to free my soul to allow my facilitation to be equivalently aligned with my subject. The ultimate challenge of facilitation is to match the creative nature of the intellectual process involved in the learning. This may mean resisting our own compulsions, re-visiting our own assumptions, allowing space and time for what appears to be a digression, but actually proves to be the life, the soul of the learning. If the digression proves in the event to be a dead-end, then that is part of the learning process: the freedom to fail. Tristram Shandy never refers to the door hinge again after his assertion of intent, and so perhaps it remains squeaking away in Shandy Hall to this day.

But often digressions may actually express more profound truths, be closer to reality, than attempts to impose linear order, because they actually represent how we do experience life and how we do come to knowledge about ourselves and the world. Squeaking door hinges exemplify and represent our human tendency to procrastination, to deferral. Why is that significant, apart from exposing our inadequacies? Well, why is the most famous play in English, *Hamlet*, predicated upon procrastination, Hamlet's refusal (inability?) to obey the Ghost's command to revenge his father's murder by killing the villainous brother, the Cain to his Abel? Because we do not know if we can trust ghosts? They could be devils in disguise - a familiar medieval theological notion. They could be figments of our imagination

or dreams, particularly if we have a pretty intense relationship with our mother - come in, Dr. Freud. Because one evil deed is not cancelled out by another? There is a nice moral issue – an eye for an eye. Now there is an Enquiry-Based Learning problem. I hereby resolve that my next course on Shakespearean tragedy will set students the door hinge chapter from *Tristram Shandy* and see what they make of it. If I get round to it, that is.