

Engaging with the purposes of undergraduate history: challenges and processes

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This presentation draws on the findings of the history strand of the nationally-funded Enhancing Teaching-Learning Environments (ETL) project which is concerned with enhancing the quality of undergraduate learning in a range of subject areas and course settings. Responding to the commonly expressed criticisms that much educational research is not sufficiently directed to practitioners' concerns, a collaborative partnership approach underpins the project, which also has a much greater concern with the disciplinary dimension of university teaching than has characterised most previous research into higher education. A central concern has been to identify specific disciplinary purposes in teaching in order to gain a sense of the forms of learning and teaching that will 'go with the grain' of these disciplines. However, there clearly cannot be a single approach to bringing students into the mind-set of a particular discipline. Thus as well as considering student backgrounds and study orientations, together with the conceptions and craft knowledge of teaching staff, attention has also focused on the constraints imposed and the opportunities afforded by particular institutional contexts. Against the background of a review of the teaching and learning literature in history, and detailed consultations with academic teachers in contrasting departments, the main phase of the project has involved working with history lecturers in three different universities. In each institution we have been concerned to explore by means of a series of interviews and questionnaires the learning and teaching environments of two history modules (one early and one late in the programme of study), from the perspective of both staff and students. Our investigations resulted in a substantial report for each module which was shared with the individual course teams and became the basis for the implementation of sets of well-principled, closely-tailored changes in a succeeding year. A further round of data-gathering again tracked student approaches and reactions, along with those of the staff concerned, in order to assess the effects of the module changes upon the quality of students' learning.

Focus of the Presentation The ETL project research has made new material and insights available to contribute to the discussion of important disciplinary dimensions of learning and teaching within higher education. In particular we will be:

- o providing an account of perceptions of the purposes of undergraduate history among the academics and the students with whom we have been working
- o tracing out the challenges such purposes present to teachers and learners alike at different stages of disciplinary study
- o identifying productive ways of scaffolding students' efforts and enabling them to grapple with various aspects of the challenges
- o analysing the impact of various environmental factors upon the extent to which students engage with key elements of historical thinking and acting.

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