Integrating EBL for Large Group Learning

Talking About... Learning & Teaching Series

University of Birmingham

Enquiry is at the heart of the University of Birmingham's Learning and Teaching Strategy. We are committed to enabling all our students to profit from a culture of learning, aligned with our research ethos, which is based upon critical enquiry, debate and self-motivation.

Academics who want to foster inquiry in their classes put less emphasis on lectures, while incorporating more critical discourse, research, and group work. Discussion and reflection are critical features of the enquiry process.

Large group teaching can mean different things to different people and disciplines. For some it is 50, 90, 130, 200 or even 400 per programme cohort. Whatever it means to you, there still remains that challenge for embedding enquiry for student learning.

Enhancing Learning

Enquiry-based learning (EBL) is an approach in which learning is driven by a process of enquiry shared with the student. It can encompass

- problem-based learning
- evidence-based learning
- small scale investigations
- field work
- projects
- research

EBL is often embedded as the main learning and teaching method. However it is equally valid to incorporate it thematically across a module or programme or even on an ad hoc basis (one week is fully dedicated to EBL).

Group Facilitation

Floating facilitators

Tutor(s) spends 5-10mins with each group combined with periodic large group discussions.

Postgraduate Teaching Assistants

Module tutor works with a team of PGTAs to support each group.

Assign Student Roles

Assign key roles (such as Chair and Summariser) or individual roles for each student (including Theme Poser, Recorder, Accuracy Coach, Time Keeper, Enquiry Checker etc). These are explored further in the *"Student Roles in EBL Groups"* Fact Sheet.

Work Outside Timetabled Sessions

Make use of the 200 hrs of student effort required per 20 credit module. Whether that means purely utilising non-contact time with assigned activities or a more blended approach (virtual learning environment such as WebCT/Moodle, Wikis, Blogs etc).

Timetabling

Thinking creatively about timetabling is essential when dealing with large groups.

If you have the staffing (tutors and/or PGTAs) you may have the luxury of hold one or more facilitated sessions per week. This is often the case in the Medical and Health Sciences fields. Although this may (depending on staffing levels) put an extra burden on staff having to repeat sessions.

EBL cycles can run successfully weekly, fortnightly and three weekly depending on circumstances and your curriculum design. The space in-between EBL sessions can be used for tutor-directed independent learning by the small groups.

Some EBL sessions / modules are run virtually for both campus and distance learners. The initial induction sessions (what is EBL and learning online) take place face-to-face. From then on all activities are organized through a virtual learning environment or wiki. This method requires meticulous planning and ongoing online moderation. The advantage of this method is that you as a tutor have increased flexibility and opportunity to arrange and manage your own timetable.

Learning Spaces

Ideally spaces should be flexible and allow the small groups (6-8 students) to an area to work, discuss, explore and search. Rooms that are flat and have rearrangable chairs and/or tables are good as well as the increasingly common table / plasma screen and wireless keyboard facility. It is possible (with extremely large numbers, ie 250-400) to undertake group work in spaces that not ideal such as tiered lecture theatres. For an interesting example see the Human Geography module case study.

Don't forget there are plenty of learning spaces that students can utilize in their non-contact EBL time. From the library, to the lawn, to the pub – anywhere can be a learning space.

Give Me an Example

The Skills Development 1st year module is delivered to a mixed cohort of aprox 90 campus-based students. Due to space and staffing considerations the 11 week module was run in a blended manner. Weeks 0 and 1 were dedicated to induction and were delivered twice face-to-face to accommodate numbers. All the EBL activities (each 3 weeks long) were delivered online via WebCT. Students were expected to post evidence and discussion to the WebCT discussion boards every week. As students were based on campus they were also required to meet F2F three times per EBL task. During the module students had access to "online lectures" and two F2F workshops.

For more details see the link below or contact the author.

Where Can I Go for More Information?

Chemistry Module
University: University of Birmingham **Student Numbers:** 90+ **Year Level:** 1st
http://www.landtdevelopment.bham.ac.uk/journal/documents/Rowley_BETA_Vol1_No2_Pg3_v.1.pdf

Skills Development Module (School of Education: Sports and Golf Management Students)
University: University of Birmingham **Student Numbers:** 90 **Year Level:** 1st
http://www.ldu.bham.ac.uk/documents/School_of_Ed_LIP_Project_leaders_meeting_April_08.pdf

Human Geography
University: University College Dublin **Student numbers:** c. 400 **Year Level:** 1st
http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/projects/epl/caseStudies/Case%203.%20Geography.pdf

Electronic and Electrical Engineering Module
University: Loughborough **Student Numbers:** 80 **Year Level:** 2nd
URL: http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/projects/epl/documents/Case1.doc

Enquiry & Problem Based Learning in Large Classes: Strategies for Organising Group Work
University College, Dublin
http://www.ucd.ie/teaching/projects/epl/AISHE2007.html

Problem based learning in large groups: the experience of undergraduate students and their lecturer
University of Nottingham
http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/resources/problembased/problemb276/

Teaching Methods: Large Group Teaching
University of Nottingham
http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/pesl/resources/largegroup/

Your College E-Learning Team