



**Subject Centre for
History, Classics
and Archaeology**

Discussion Paper

Minding our Prompts and Cues: some thoughts on how to recognize, and respond to, tertiary history students' indicators of deep learning.

December 2007

by Rosemary Gill

Introduction

'The more I read, the less I know.' So said Eleanor¹, one of the students whose interviews provide the bulk of this paper's material for reflection and analysis.

The more I read about deep learning, the more I find myself in agreement with her. We teachers understand what deep learning is, we can experience it ourselves and describe it, we can recognize it in students' work, and we can optimistically plan to facilitate it in our classes, even as we bear in mind the caveats of phenomenology. But how can we know when it is happening for students? Do we have to wait for their written assessment, or for the comparatively unhurried, conversational atmosphere of a seminar?

The subtitle of this talk is not false modesty on my part. I am offering simply 'some thoughts' on recognition of student indicators of deep learning, and how one might respond to these. The discipline in which the discussion takes place is History, taught at accredited tertiary level, in an ecumenical theological college.

Just in case there is any confusion over what I mean by 'deep learning', despite my opening assumption that we all know what it is, I will concede that the expression shades off into a variety of subtle nuances. What these have in common, however, is their insistence that this type of learning involves connection. It links hitherto fragmented experience and knowledge within the individual. It may also connect these with the experience and knowledge of other people, here specifically students who share a learning venue, and those who teach them. Connection makes meaning, and with this comes understanding. And this is not any old understanding, this is

the understanding that carries with it a new dimension of self-consciousness. As John Biggs wrote in a *locus classicus*, 'Understanding is itself the realization that what is separate in ignorance is connected in knowing.' He continued, 'Cognitive growth lies not just in knowing more, but in the restructuring that occurs when new knowledge becomes connected with what is already known' (Biggs, 1999).

Methodology

Which is all very well, but how can one develop a methodology for the discernment of this that is both valid and portable, in the sense that it can be carried into virtually any tertiary teaching/learning situation? What I offer here is my own adaptation of the categories employed in Entwistle and Ramsden's analysis of interviews on experiences of learning, conducted with fifty-seven students at Lancaster University (Entwistle and Ramsden, 1983). There follows my summary of the first part of their Figure 8.1 Categories of Description for Deep and Surface Levels of Approach. The sentence that follows each subheading is taken directly from the text. The questions that follow are extrapolated by me, from each category, to apply to the documentation from my student subjects, and, occasionally, to my recollection of classroom and other conversations with them.

It is the questions that are properly the tools for discernment and analysis; and, I suggest, they are adaptable to virtually any discipline and any teaching/learning context. Indeed, at the risk of sounding as though I am reneging on part of my self-set task, responses can become almost self-evident once it is clear to what (strength or deficiency) one is responding!

The student interviews were part of a research project I undertook in 2003. (The full

¹ All student names are altered to honour confidentiality.

text of the original questionnaire is at Appendix A). I knew that the material was open to further analysis, and decided to see if it could help me make some progress in recognising and responding to the prompts and cues that come from students as they experience deep learning. I consider that using material from just five students was a reasonable decision, in the light of Laurillard's observation that the 'repertoire of approaches' to learning which arise from the individual student's prior experiences may be regarded as 'characteristic of the population as a whole ... with all of them potentially available to all students as aspects of their interaction with the teaching...' (Laurillard, 1993).

When deciding whom to approach, I had recalled Ashworth and Lucas' comment on the unwisdom of an interviewer relying on the 'intuitive likelihood' that a group of student subjects will provide automatically a range of 'lifeworld' experiences (Ashworth & Lucas, 2000). My final choice was three undergraduates (two women, one man) and two postgraduates (two women). I understood that the group could not be considered to provide a representative sample of any of these categories; and chose as I did simply to know that I worked with a group somewhat representative of the make-up of that particular class: all five were members of a mainstream Christian tradition; are studying at tertiary level; are Australians of predominantly Anglo-Celtic background with English as their first language; and were enrolled in the Western Medieval Church course taught by me.

The Interviews

Descriptive Categories

1.0 Personal Experience: integrating the task with oneself.

1.1 Question: when I read the individual student's response to the questionnaire, do I find evidence that s/he is engaging with an area of knowledge and teasing out a set of internal relationships within it? Are connections being made between learning and personal experience?

An aspect of particular interest in the responses of all five subjects is the nexus between internalised and externalised relationships. In each case, the nexus does exist; but it is variously between:

-- (internalised) 'self/faith' **and** (externalised) 'church'; or
 -- (internalised) 'church + self/faith' **and** (externalised) 'the world/the church in the world'.

A generalised way of describing this might be to say that, for some students their lens of learning is **Church History**, and for others it is **Church History**.

There follow some examples drawn from the postgraduate interviewees, Bridget and Eleanor.

Bridget and Eleanor

For Bridget and Eleanor, the lens of learning is **Church History** i.e. they have already developed a set of internal relationships within the historical discipline generally, and continue to reflect on and refine these further.

Bridget's description of what **Church History** means runs thus: 'I think ... it is western Church History ... I think it's western History, but with a particular emphasis on the Church.' It shows that 'things don't happen in isolation ... it shows a series of historical subsets.'

'History is the story of mankind's existence ... the social and political and religious can't be separated', although 'you can home in on a particular aspect, like the Church'.

Personal identity also has a bearing on historical connection-making for Bridget. She mentioned bringing her own life questions to bear on her academic studies. When asked how she knew when she had made a connection, she said, 'One question is answered, and more appear.' She links this to personal growth: connection-making 'doesn't make you comfortable and complacent ... it helps you in being a person.'

Eleanor's description of what **Church History** means is this: it is a 'case of starting with the Church, and looking outwards ... it asks questions about the place of theology as the basis for ideas' that extended beyond what might now be understood as 'Church'.

Eleanor said she thought historical connection-making was a way of 'trying to make retrospective sense of the world', and that one 'had to begin with one's own experience'. Herself a teacher, she mentioned her realization that some students take the attitude that 'everything has always been like

this' (a remark reminiscent of the description of the Nonexpert learner in Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993).

Suggested Responses: Both students are engaged in deep learning, according to the interrogative criteria of category 1.0. Bridget might be encouraged actually to take apart areas of integration in a particular historical context e.g. the 'social, religious and political', reconsider relations amongst them, then see if the 'fit' amongst them has altered her understanding of the context. I would encourage Eleanor to consider how she might shift her own students' Nonexpert preconceptions via her own experience of learning.

In the interviews with Lucy and Julian, two of the undergraduates, the learning lens emerged strongly as **Church** History.

Lucy

When Lucy and I talked about her ways of 'making connections', she told me that she finds discussion difficult in class, because there are 'so many different opinions' to deal with. Lucy made the comment that theological study can be 'dangerous' without support from 'outside' friends who provide a theological norm with which she feels comfortable.

Lucy's description of **Church** History suggested a desire to break down the discipline into discrete, and thereby controllable, portions: she called it 'understanding a record of events ... understanding different processes the Church has gone through.' It may be that Lucy is engaged in a struggle between intellectual acceptance of ideas that help constitute her academic learning, and an intuitive rejection of these same ideas as potentially disruptive – even destructive – of her present sense of faith/sense of self.

Suggested Response: When talking to Lucy, I used basic reflective responses such as, 'There are so many', and 'Dangerous', principally to let her know that I was indeed listening to her, and taking her concerns seriously without offering advice or judgement. With such a student – and I must add here that I respect Lucy for the honesty she showed in her conversation with me – earning trust is important, before any real conversation about underlying concerns can take place. Given one's teaching context, this may or may not be possible.

Julian

Julian's description of the discipline was, 'looking at the world with the filter of the Church, and seeing too how the Church has shifted. Sometimes Church History means world history, and then it's not easy to divide one from the other.' His concern about establishing a demarcation between Church History and world history may point to the beginning of a progressive differentiation: 'the refinement of concept meanings [here 'church' and, indeed, 'world' and 'history'] in cognitive structures giving more precision and specificity to these concepts' (Novak, 1998). In other words, Julian has to establish a working conceptual plurality before he can name and discuss relationships within it.

There is little doubt that Julian wants to relate his life situation to the discipline he names as **Church** History. As he said, 'Faith pushes me to desire understanding of the Church', and this is the Church in which he believes he is called to serve as an ordained minister. He is however still learning the academic skills that may help him to express this relationship; and sometimes they preoccupy him as ends in themselves. For example, his 'motivation' for getting to work on an essay was 'knowing about due dates' by which essays had to be completed and handed in.

Suggested Response: I would encourage Julian to talk further about 'world and church', since it seems that it may be conversation between these that, at present, provides the meta-narrative of his development as a learner. I would like, in particular, to see if he would be willing to talk about possible connections between personal experience and the historical learning task.

Hilda

Hilda, the third undergraduate, described the discipline as 'Christian History' because, she said, its scope is wider than that of the institutional Church. Hilda told me that learning in this discipline 'can be quite confronting: I have had to realize that a lot of it is not about Christ and salvation, but about power and money.' She feels the need to 'keep a personal journal to record thoughts I have, and to get things into the perspective of faith.'

Hilda, who is considerably older than Julian and Lucy, was in her first year of tertiary study when she took part in the interview. She told

me that her employment 'had not been the sort that encouraged a lot of deep discussion amongst the people I worked with'. Even so, she had engaged with an area in which it was possible for her to reflect and discuss extensively, namely her religious faith, and had practised connection-making there. This connection-making skill was now being extended into the formal academic sphere, and, as I would observe when marking Hilda's written work, was conducive to her development of deep learning.

Suggested Response: With this student, I am always aware of a highly individual learning context. Something clarified in private might then be ready for public discussion i.e. in the lecture room, or at least in a class discussion group. In the right setting I would feel confident in discussing with her the osmosis I see going on between her spheres of informal and formal learning. She would tell me if I were wrong, and, better yet, I believe she would then explain exactly what she thought was happening.

2.0 Relationships: integrating the parts into a whole.

2.1 Question: do I find evidence that the student is aware of relationships between one area of knowledge and others, some of which might not sit within the same discipline as that under discussion?

Eleanor said that 'learning' Church History 'isn't my terminology – I would say "explore", "unpack", even "make connections", but not "learn"'. She tries to 'match up and make sense of ideas' in the historical context, and identified her area of historical study as being the 'history of ideas'.

Bridget's comment on the matter ran thus: 'to me, this means an informed overview of what's happened', an account of 'biases in historical versions of events'. It means taking into account one's own biases. 'There has to be a continual reassessing of my own perspectives ... exposing my own filters.' 'There is a continual correcting of impressions.' What is happening at a subconscious level is 'brought to light'.

Elsewhere in conversation Bridget referred to Eva Cox's idea of 'social capital', and wondered if one could not see elements of this present in medieval concepts of community. This is a good example of awareness of relationship between so-called

'discrete' areas of knowledge, and its linkage to deep learning.

Suggested Responses: In Eleanor's case, I would ask her to see if she can offer some specific examples of what she is saying – maybe encouraging reference to some very contemporary issue/s in the popular media. I would like Bridget to give some examples historical and biases being reassessed. In other words, each student speaks in terms of the deep learning criteria of 2.0; and now I would like to see these applied to historical material and issues.

Of the three undergraduates, Julian and Lucy's responses retained the learning lens of Church, and restricted any connection-making to that focus. Beyond this, however, there was another thought-provoking similarity. When writing up the interviews, I noticed that both Julian and Lucy had given markedly similar responses to the question, 'What do you mean when you say that you "learn Church History"?'

- Lucy: 'I understand a bit about where the Church came from' and how it came to be as it is now. She added that maybe it means to 'learn some facts? [paused and thought] ... maybe not facts ... to know more about who people were, how things got put together in the way they are now.'
- Julian: getting 'some understanding of where the Church came from, and why we are as we are now. It's not only names, places and dates, although these are important.'

So far as I am aware, Lucy and Julian had not conferred before their interviews. Indeed, there would have been little reason for them to do so. The similarity of their responses here made me reflect on how quickly students can pick up what they believe they are 'meant' to say about a discipline, and consequently (though without malice!) lay false learning trails that confuse their teachers. This was highlighted for me by the discrepancy between Lucy and Julian's responses to later questions, particularly that which asked what helped them to learn in the Medieval Church course.

Julian alone amongst the undergraduates said that he 'learned best' by writing assignments. 'Short papers and essays make things clear for me. They force me to look deeper and make connections, and express my thoughts

logically.' He said that in the actual process of writing, he found he 'expressed further things not understood before.'

Suggested Response: As with Eleanor, I would like to hear Julian give some specific examples of 'looking deeper and making connections'. Even more than that, I would want him to talk more about 'learning best' by writing assignments: what happens for him during this process? Can he catch and name the steps in this aspect of the learning process?

Lucy's response, in contrast, revealed a low level of conceptual specificity at this stage of her studies. She actually said that she finds longer essays 'overwhelming' because 'the concepts are too big'. To use Novak's useful terminology (1998), the general and the superordinate have yet to become distinct for Lucy, as her cognitive framework for learning in History is still quite rudimentary.

Suggested Response: If 'concepts are too big', then talking in terms of learning theory may not be helpful to Lucy. I would instead ask her to talk about these problems in terms of a specific task and topic. That might help us both to understand what she does in preparation for essay writing; and how the task – and the learning it is intended to promote – could be reconceptualized. With a student like Lucy, I am ever aware of Diana Laurillard's succinct summation: 'Their conception of learning is an important manifestation of a student's epistemology, being, quite literally, the way they believe they can come to know.' (Laurillard, 1993)

Hilda's lifeworld again proved influential in her making connections between Church Historical studies and her other areas of knowledge. She spoke of how her perspective on feminism had shifted considerably as the result of an essay she wrote, in which connections between her academic reading, and her own experience and prior learning (which included work as a telephone counsellor) had become patently obvious to her.

Suggested Response: My response to Hilda would be similar to that at 1.0. I would also encourage her to mention in her written work (a) any relationships she discerns between her areas of knowledge, and (b) if she finds this discernment alters her understanding of the historical issue under discussion.

3.0 Meaning: integrating the whole with purpose.

3.1 Question: do I find evidence that the student seeks what could be called 'an ultimate meaning' in this area of knowledge? Is s/he prepared to ask of the knowledge, 'What does this change (for me)? What's at stake (for me) if I take this on?'

Bridget's observations on learning indicated awareness of ultimate meanings, and a desire to address these. The language she used linked interiority with community/society, and the personal with the academic. She mentioned the 'rate of change in society', and remarked that, in the midst of this, historical connection-making can 'sometimes lead to rediscovery of earlier knowledge' that can be reworked in a different historical context. Connections are complicated, because 'every event in history has its own history.' Finally, there is her already quoted comment that connection-making 'doesn't make you comfortable and complacent ... it helps you in being a person.'

In approaching the topic of integration, I asked Eleanor how she knew when an historical connection was made for her, or when she had made such a connection. She said something happens that 'awakens the realization that you see more, where once you saw something only very partially ... you didn't see something you were expecting to. It might mean moving into a different discipline, different sources' and so on. Far from avoiding ideas, Eleanor spoke enthusiastically of their 'provocation' and said with relish, 'the more I read, the less I know!'

Suggested Response: I would like Bridget to talk more about how her personal interaction with historical issues led to her final statement. What is the 'intention' of Historical studies? With Eleanor, I would like to hear her understanding of how a multitude of 'provocative' ideas can be subsumed to the structure, or intention, of the historical task.

Of the undergraduates, Julian made the most specific comments, linking meaning-making to his sense of vocation i.e. to his future work for the Church, in the world. When he spoke of making connections, he said, 'this leads to greater understanding of what I'm doing', and talked of it having an impact on his faith, and his understanding of God; and so on his future ministry. It is Julian's lifeworld that enables him to 'think about ... the intention of the

whole task' (Entwistle & Ramsden, 1983) of Church Historical learning.

Suggested Response: I would like Julian to be able to give some specific examples of the type of meaning-making he describes, and to encourage him to map *how* these connect with the big issues of God, faith and vocation.

Lucy's comments on integration and meaning all but laid bare the struggle between her inclination to knowledge-building, and her concern to keep her religious faith intact. As she talks about and mulls over information and ideas with friends, so 'a foundation begins to be built ... then I move onto the next stage of building something on it.' I asked if the building always turned out to fit the foundation? Lucy said not always and added that, at present, 'the foundation feels very uncertain ... I wonder if this [whatever belief/idea is under discussion] is actually true and what does that mean for me.'

Suggested Response: One response could be, 'In some of the historical contexts we've looked at in class, people have had to decide that sort of thing. What are some of their stories that have stood out for you?' That is to say, can Lucy begin to relate to, maybe even integrate, how have other people of faith coped – or not – with her experience? What meaning did they make from their task?

Hilda, once again, sits somewhat apart from the other undergraduates. When I asked her how she recognized the presence of a meaningful historical connection, she said, 'When I can see the historical, and present, consequences of something happening.' If this is contextualised with her earlier comments at 2.0, the outline of an integrative 'knowledge-building schema' begins to emerge (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1993).

Suggested Response: Hilda is making meaning of her own history, and is beginning to apply this process to academic learning. Events have consequences; and if through 'extensive engagement, feedback and practice' she can learn to make meaning in one area, she can similarly learn to do so in 'broader or multiple domains' (Shavelson & Huang, 2003). I would like to encourage her to continue to extrapolate from one area of knowing to another.

Summing Up

Revisiting the material from the 2003 student interviews, and applying Entwistle and Ramsden's descriptive categories to it, produced some interesting results.

For example, I had thought of Bridget and Eleanor's prompts and cues as deep learners as being very similar. Consideration of the descriptive categories however made me see that whereas Bridget provides specific examples of how she does connection- and meaning-making in historical studies, Eleanor does not. I can only say that now I assume Eleanor, an Audit student², *may* have the same facility as Bridget in providing these.

Lucy's responses highlight an over-generalisation in the 'judgement instructions' of Entwistle & Ramsden (1983): to a significant degree, Lucy does see her academic knowledge as 'external, a threat, a source of distress or anxiety' and 'not part' of herself. Yet the sheer importance of what she is defending – faith/self – pushes her to unwilling engagement with the course content, because she discerns its relevance to her faith, as well as its potential to disrupt that faith. That in itself is a useful insight for me, since many of my students have a faith commitment via one of the Christian traditions, and at least some of these may experience Lucy's struggle between intellectual and intuitive reception of knowledge. Their prompts and cues may not indicate deep learning, but they may not point simply to the surface variety either.

Some of Julian's lack of development at 2.0 and 3.0 may relate back to his struggle with conceptuality at 1.0. His prompts and cues, in general terms, point to the development of deep learning, or, at the least, a desire to achieve this; but the specifics of the process are yet to emerge for him. Hilda, by contrast, is well on the way with the integration of personal experience, relationships and meaning.

² Audit students enrol in a subject, have to meet the same attendance and participation requirements as others in the class, but do not do any of the written work for assessment. Their result sheet for that semester will show the subject code and name, and the abbreviation AD where their grade (Pass, Credit etc.) in that subject would normally appear. An audit result does not in itself contribute to the completion of a degree.

List of References

Ashworth, Peter and Ursula Lucas (2000). Achieving empathy and engagement: A practical approach to the design, conduct and reporting of phenomenographic research, *Studies in Higher Education*, 25(3), 295-308.

Bereiter, Carl and Marlene Scardamalia (1993). *Surpassing Ourselves: An Inquiry into the Nature and Implications of Expertise*. Chicago: Open Court.

Biggs, John (1999). *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, Buckingham: SRHE and Open University Press.

Entwistle, Noel and Ramsden, Paul (1983). *Understanding Student Learning*. London: Croom Helm.

Laurillard, Diana (1993). *Rethinking University Teaching: a framework for the effective use of educational technology*. London: Routledge.

Novak, Joseph, D. (1998). *Learning, Creating and Using Knowledge*, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Shavelson, Richard J. and Let Huang (2003) "Responding Responsibly to the Frenzy to Assess Learning in Higher Education", *Change*, 35(1), 10-19.

Appendix A - Questionnaire

Title of project: 'Making Meaning of the Past: connecting prior experience and learning in the discipline of Church History.'

QUESTIONNAIRE

The Brisbane College of Theology/Griffith University School of Theology encourages its students to 'make connections' between their prior life experience and the formal academic learning undertaken in its programmes. I am interested to find out

- a) what students think this philosophy means, and
- b) what effect, if any, it has on their studies in Church History.

The following questions are designed to open up these related areas for your consideration. Please continue your answers on another page if necessary.

- 1. What do you mean when you say that you 'learn Church History'?**
- 2. In the Western Medieval Church course, what really helps you to learn (e.g. group work, reading, note-taking, writing short papers and essays, coffee-room chat etc.)? Why?**
- 3. Why do you think you are encouraged to make connections between your life experience and Church History?**
- 4. In the Western Medieval Church course, what helps you to make these connections? Why?**

Rosemary Howard Gill
Visiting Fellow
School of Arts
Griffith University
Nathan Australia
R.Gill@griffith.edu.au