

**Sheila Webber**

University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

**Discovering and building the knowledge base of Information Management through different roles and spaces (0270)**

**Programme number: L3.3**

**Research Domain: Student Experiences**

This paper outlines approaches taken to increase student engagement in an undergraduate programme (BSc Information Management) and highlights the way in which adopting an Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) and using virtual spaces has enabled us to extend the roles which students adopt. Our response to a perceived lack of engagement with the discipline included: strengthening the IBL approach; improving links with practice; expanding the ways in which learners interact with digital spaces; explicitly engaging students with technology in multiple ways; enabling learners to experience multiple roles relevant to research and practice. The paper elaborates with an example of the use of multiple roles and spaces (real and virtual) to develop understanding of information behaviour. Reflections on the experience are drawn from evidence gathered from students and tutors. Levy's (2008) Framework for IBL is used to map student progression and reflect further on the roles and spaces employed.

Title

Discovering and building the knowledge base of Information Management through different roles and spaces

Paper

This paper outlines approaches taken to increase student engagement in an undergraduate programme and highlights the way in which adopting an Inquiry Based Learning (IBL) approach and using virtual spaces has enabled us to extend the roles which students adopt.

The context is a BSc Information Management (IM) programme which has an intake of 20-25 students each year, in a Department with a strong research profile. We had identified (through National Student Survey results and the Department's own investigations) that even level three students were not fully engaged with, and enthusiastic about, the discipline and did not necessarily perceive the links between Departmental research and teaching. Since this appeared a deep-rooted problem, we decided to start by rethinking our level one programme.

There are challenges to engaged learning of IM. IM is an unfamiliar discipline, not taught at A-level or in Highers; it is a contested discipline (Middleton, 2004) with uncertain boundaries; and we normally recruit a number of students through clearing (i.e. making a late decision to join the course). As well as wanting to foster Mode II knowledge of this applied discipline, we also need to "prove" to the students that there is a Mode I body of knowledge: that IM is a "real" subject for study and practice.

Whittaker (2008; 8) has identified that developing a "more challenging learning experience to encourage greater engagement and the development of independent learning and high-level critical skills" fosters transition into higher education. Our response included the following.

- Strengthening the IBL (CILASS, 2006) approach, by introducing a new Semester 2 core module *Inquiry in Information Management*, from 2006/7 (Cox, 2008b). Students develop their own research questions and carry out mini research projects in groups, culminating in a poster session attended by Departmental staff and students;
- Improving further the links with practice, with input from IM consultants, in particular two consultants who talk about their work and provide students with advice about student group research projects;
- Expanding the ways in which learners interact with digital spaces e.g. through use of the virtual world, Second Life in the core module *Information Literacy* (this is discussed in more detail below);
- Explicitly engaging students with technology in multiple ways: learning to use tools and information for academic practice, exploring the use of IM tools and information in organisations, carrying out their own research into their use, learning to create websites or systems and also using technology in their personal lives. For example, we know through annual surveys (Cox 2008c) that most of our first years use Facebook for social networking. Some of them choose to explore use of Facebook as an IM tool, in mini research projects (e.g. in 2008/9 investigating opinions on academic use of Facebook; in 2007/8 surveying use of Facebook by sports clubs).
- Through these strategies enabling learners to experience multiple roles relevant to research and practice.

An example of students experiencing multiple roles and spaces is the approach to developing understanding of information behaviour models and theories, an element in the core *Information Literacy* module. Firstly, students take the more traditional role of recipients of disciplinary knowledge, with a face-to-face lecture from an expert researcher and associated readings. Secondly, they take on the role of research subjects and reflective practitioners, as the lecture is followed by a session in which they complete self-diagnosis instruments derived from two of the research studies that they have learnt about. As well as helping them to see the link between survey and findings, they also are encouraged to reflect on the implications of their individual results for their own information behaviour (and students may include these reflections in an assignment presented in an e-portfolio).

Finally, the learners progress to take on the role of research assistants, gathering interview data on information behaviour and analysing the data for an assignment. In 2008/9 the research investigated information behaviour relating to Second Life activities, and was subject to normal research Ethics Approval, so that results from the jointly-investigated project can be published. The interviews were undertaken by students virtually in Second Life, enabling access to a wider range of interviewees, and pursuit of a genuinely novel research question.

We are evaluating and reflecting on our learning and teaching practice in a number of ways, through student focus groups, through examination of data collected through assessment and exercises, and through documented discussion and reflection (see Cox 2008a, Cox 2008b).

Examination of the student Information Behaviour assignments and interview transcripts in 2008/9 showed that students performed their research assistant roles adequately to excellently, with the majority achieving at least a good level of competence.

The students also identified a wide range of issues relating to interviewing in the SL environment, and some explicitly drew comparisons with “real life” interviewing experience. Pang and Marton (2005:

162) assert that "Learning is associated with a change in discernment, which entails a change in the aspect(s) of the phenomenon in the focal awareness of the learner" which requires that learners discern variations of the phenomenon simultaneously. In this case students experienced the phenomenon of interviewing in two environments, Second Life and Real Life. The possibilities of using Second Life as an instrument for promoting understanding with a variation theory approach will be explored further in 2009/10.

In the *Inquiry in Information Management* module, two elements strongly highlighted by students are the input of IM consultants and the ability to specify their own research questions. From the students' perspective, the IM consultants provide a crucial bridge in showing how "classroom" learning can be applied in a career, and in validating study by taking the students' projects seriously.

We have used Levy's (2008) conceptual Framework for IBL to map learning, teaching and assessment in the BSc Information Management first year. The progression is from (in Semester one) a staff-led exploration of the existing knowledge base and pursuit of new research questions formulated by staff, to (in Semester two) pursuit of new student-formulated research questions. We aim to use this framework further to map and elaborate the roles of all agents in the learning and teaching process, and to identify the value of enacting these roles in different spaces, virtual and physical.

## References

CILASS (Centre for Inquiry Based Learning in thArts and Social Sciences) (2007) *Inquiry Based Learning*. Sheffield: CILASS. <http://www.shef.ac.uk/cilass/ibl.html>

Cox et al. (2008a) *Inquiry in Information Management*. Sheffield: CILASS. <http://www.shef.ac.uk/cilass/cases/informationmanagement.html>

Cox, A. et al (2008b). "Inquiry-based learning in the first-year information management curriculum". *Italics*, 7 (1) June. [Online]. <http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/italics/vol7iss1/pdf/Paper1.pdf>

Cox, A. et al (2008c) "Teaching our grandchildren to suck eggs? Introducing the study of communication technologies to the 'Digital generation'" *Italics*, 7 (1). <http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/italics/vol7iss1/pdf/Paper5.pdf>

Levy, P. (2008) "'I feel like a grown up person': first year undergraduates' experiences of inquiry and research." Paper presented at a CILASS Research seminar. Sheffield: Centre for Inquiry Based Learning in the Arts and Social Sciences. <http://www.shefac.uk/cilass/>

Middleton, M. (2004) "The way that information professionals describe their own discipline: a comparison of thesaurus descriptors." *New Library World*, 105 (11/12), 429-435

Pang, M.F. and Marton, F. (2005) "Learning Theory as Teaching Resource: Enhancing Students' Understanding of Economic Concepts." *Instructional Science*, 33 (2), 159-191

Whittaker, R. (2008) *Quality Enhancement Themes: The First Year Experience: Transition to and during the first year*. Glasgow: QAA Scotland