

THE USE OF PROBLEM BASED LEARNING IN THE TEACHING OF EPIGRAPHY

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At the start of my fieldwork with inscriptions in 1986, I was advised to “look at the monuments from all possible angles”. Despite this useful piece of advice, I had to return to the stones all too many times. I learned that at the beginning of fieldwork it is worthwhile to stop and reflect on all the possible aspects necessary for documenting a monument, and on how the procedure differs in the case of special monuments, particular text types, and various historical periods. In Finland we have no ancient monuments to visit with students, but the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia, with its Greek and Latin inscriptions, is quite near.

This paper proposes more effective ways to initiate students into dealing with ancient inscriptions, into getting to know how to handle research literature, and into solving epigraphical problems. The course that I am referring to is basically aimed at fourth to fifth year university students of Greek, i.e., those at an advanced stage. This is when special methodologies are offered to philologists in my department — and duly, my course has concentrated on the textual aspects of epigraphy.

Problem Based Learning (henceforth abbreviated PBL) is a special way of learning and teaching, introduced to various subjects in higher education a few decades ago. The idea is to put students to work together, after some preliminary tuition and guidance has been given to them, in order to solve a problem in their special field. Towards the end of a given seminar, the students are challenged with a real or a simulated problem, and the tutor or teacher, who has to possess some knowledge of the aims of PBL, is there to make sure that if the students take the wrong path, they

will not go too far down it. Fortunately, nowadays there are several books about this particular method, and also courses in university pedagogics usually include this teaching method¹, at least in Finland and Sweden.

From my experiences in 1998 I can affirm that PBL can be successfully applied to the teaching of epigraphy. This is because epigraphists repeatedly encounter and have to solve problems of various specific kinds: e.g., a broken monument has to be reconstructed and joined, or there seem to be no indications as to the date of a document, or it is not clear what type of monument is in question, or the history of a given site looks unclear, etc.

I planned and carried out a “Methodological Seminar on Greek Epigraphy” in 1998 at the University of Helsinki. The course lasted 14 weeks and met once a week for two hours at a time. I would now suggest that twice a week for seven weeks would be both more comfortable and more effective.

As to the number of students, I wished to have around half a dozen of them, because in PBL the best results are achieved with not more than seven or eight students.

I launched the seminar by defining its aims, the principles of working, and the final assessment, and I gave a short list of secondary literature², but also literature on PBL.

1. Cf. BOUD, D.; FELETTI, G.I. (eds.), *The Challenge of Problem Based Learning*, London 1991 (2nd ed. 1997).

2. The introductory books KLAFFENBACH, G., *Griechische Epigraphik*, Göttingen 1966 (2nd ed.); WOODHEAD, A.G., *The Study of Greek Inscriptions*, Cambridge 1981 (2nd ed.); and COOK, B.F., *Greek Inscriptions. Reading the Past*, London 1987.

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The seminar itself consisted of a program in three stages:

- 1) lectures on technicalities and methodology
- 2) individual exercises from squeezes and photos
- 3) the solving of a more complex problem by the group.

Some self-reflective comments on stages 1 and 2 may not be inappropriate:

1) Lecturing on the methodology: 2nd to 4th week, mostly following the basic topics in the students' favorite textbook, Woodhead, to be read by the students beforehand for generating some discussion. This was successful as far as students really read in advance. But perhaps a preliminary examination on such an introductory book, together with an anthology of various types of inscriptions could be an alternative to be considered. It would produce a more knowledgeable group of students to work with.

2) In mid-course — i.e., from the 5th to the 9th week — a squeeze of an inscription and a photograph of another was assigned to each participant for an oral and written interpretation and identification, with the help of basic reference literature. Afterwards one of the students told me that more than two assignments would have been necessary. The success of this part of the seminar will certainly depend on how much the students have prepared themselves by reading different types of inscriptions from anthologies during these first weeks, and not just covering Attica, whence the assigned texts came. Some guidance as to which anthologies to use seems appropriate³.

Finally, more detailed information and new ideas about the main task at the end of the course: the main task at the final stage was to find out how to restore the text of an unpublished fragmentary inscription that affected the reading of a previously published fragment associable with it; this was the victory title of a Late Roman

emperor on an epistyle from Corinth. This was the most important part of the seminar, carried out jointly by the students. I would recommend that the three to four sessions needed for this should be held daily, if possible: to have this spread out over three sessions once a week was unsatisfactory for all of us. In any case, a short paper, six pages in length, was composed by the group for assessment.

In our particular case, I gave the students a squeeze with four fragmentary letters in monumental writing and information about its provenience; the students started to work on it by trying to find similar monumental inscriptions from a similar period in publications on Corinth and, having worked their way through handbooks on imperial titulature, they finally got the "Eureka!" of revising the restored reading in the previously published parts of the text.

As for similar training tasks, most teachers of epigraphy will be able to find real ones from previous work on inscriptions, rather their own than others'. If not, a fictional problem may be composed.

For a sample of problems, the students could choose from the following main tasks:

- a) which Attic text types (excluding epitaphs) employ metrical form? What kind of evolution can be detected, and on what grounds?
- b) the same problem, but from a limited period, e.g., the Roman period
- c) the *formulae* of prose epitaphs, their evolution in different parts of Greece from the Archaic down to the Roman period
- d) the same problem, but restricted to Peloponnese, Megaris, and the Aegean Islands⁴
- e) students' own suggestions (to be discussed and reformulated).

In October 2002, I launched a similar, amended seminar at my department, with two weekly sessions over seven weeks. This time the students had access to an anthology of around 50 inscriptions in Greek with Finnish translations⁵ and a selection of photos⁶. The personal

Further literature: ROBERT, L., *Die Epigraphik der klassischen Welt*, Bonn 1970; PFOHL, G., *Das Studium der griechischen Epigraphik. Eine Einführung (Die Altertumswissenschaft)*, Darmstadt 1977; GUARDUCCI, M., *L'epigrafia greca dalle origini al tardo impero*, Roma 1987; BÉRARD, F.; FEISSEL, D.; PETTMENGIN, P.; ROUSSET, D.; SEVE, M., *Guide de l'épigraphiste*, Paris 2000 (3rd ed.).

3. PFOHL, G., *Griechische Inschriften als Zeugnisse des privaten und öffentlichen Lebens*, München 1980 (2nd ed.), and POUILLLOUX, J., *Choix d'inscriptions grecques*, Paris 1960, are handy in comparison with DITTENBERGER, G., *Sylloge inscriptionum graecarum*, Lipsiae 1915-1924 (3rd ed.).

4. Note that the students will get to know that searching through *corpora* is needed; indices alone are not sufficient.

5. Texts mostly picked from GUARDUCCI, M., *Epigrafia greca I-IV*, Roma 1967-1978.

6. KIRCHNER, J.; KLAFFENBACH, G., *Imagines inscriptionum Atticarum: ein Bilderatlas epigraphischer Denkmäler Attikas*, Berlin 1948 (2nd ed.).

assignments consisted of three short texts from Corinthia, worked out from squeezes and photocopies of photos. Towards the end of the seminar, the students preferred the task of identifying, editing and commenting on a photo collage of a challenging epigram from Arabia⁷. They worked

hard with good to excellent results. The photocopies of photos of Corinthian inscriptions were not always of the best quality, so this is another amendment for an upcoming seminar. At the time of writing this, I am about to take seven students on a two week trip to Athenian museums.

7. Cf. *Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 37, 1538.