



FORUM

ENHANCING LEARNING AND TEACHING



**Supervising
independent work**

**2014 Learning and Teaching Conference:
registration now open**

FORUM

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Editorial



The main focus of this issue is “*supervising independent work*”.

In the lead article, Mitch Waterman, Pro-Dean for Student Education at the Faculty of Medicine and Health at the University of Leeds and keynote speaker at this year’s York Learning and Teaching conference (see registration poster), sheds some light on the features of a major curriculum enhancement project at the University of Leeds such that every undergraduate programme will incorporate a piece of independent work in the 3rd year.

In the following article, Jenny Gibbons, teaching fellow at the York Law School, introduces the very interesting case of the York Law School Clinic, which provides undergraduate students with an opportunity to apply legal theory to practice in real terms. In this context, the role of the supervisor is particularly tricky as it involves allowing students the space to work independently whilst also ensuring they have suitable support, and also ensuring that the service provided to the public meets the standards of any solicitors practice.

A very original **group research model**, where students at both undergraduate and post-graduate level are actively involved in a research team together with academics, is proposed by Mark Ormrod, Academic Coordinator for Arts & Humanities. As Mark points out, this experiment was a very good way of dissolving the apparent dichotomy between “teaching” and “research”.

Rex Godby, Professor of Theoretical Physics and member of the Condensed Matter Physics research group in the Department of Physics, shares with us the framework for independent study used in his department. This aims to progressively improve students’ research and presentation skills until, the final year of studies concludes with a two-day Conference where all the students give talks and prepare posters presentations.

In terms of seeing things from the students’ perspective, in his article, Paul Roberts, Director of the Centre for English Language and Teaching, explores the challenges of helping international students over their language barriers, including those associated with supervision. This is followed by a Focus Group article in which Masters students reflect on their dual feelings of excitement and anxiety when faced with higher level independent work. Finally, the issue concludes with the experience of a former MSc student, Maria Merzlyakova, who just after graduating from the MSc in Finance (Economics Department), landed a high flyer job as analyst for Citibank / FRM Consultant for Banca Intesa. I was Maria’s supervisor and I am extremely proud to learn that the dissertation supervision she received helped her to be confident and successful in her job interviews.

Paola Zerilli
Editor

Replay (lecture recording) service: your requirements for academic year 2014-15

The Replay Service group are increasing the number of rooms where lectures can be recorded. Choosing which rooms are equipped for recording is dependent on the level of demand for that room. So, if you want to record your lectures, ensure you and your colleagues contact your departmental administrator to outline your lecture recording requirements NOW for the 2014-15 academic year.

If you have any questions about the Replay service, please contact the E-Learning Development Team: vle-support@york.ac.uk An overview of the service and the current rooms that are supported is available at <https://www.york.ac.uk/staff/teaching/key-areas/digitalrecordingoflectures/timetabledlectures>

NEWS

Undergraduate researchers have their say in Westminster

Two York Education undergraduates addressed social justice and language learning issues with politicians and policy makers recently. Madeline Crosswaite and Martina Pentrella travelled to Westminster to participate in Posters in Parliament, an event organised by the British Conference

of Undergraduate Research (BCUR). The third year students exhibited their posters, chosen after a departmental competition, in the Jubilee room of Westminster Hall. They also presented their work to senior academics and fellow students from 23 UK universities.

Madeline's research on family meal frequency and academic aspirations was completed as part of a student internship with Dr Gillian Hampden-Thompson. Martina's research on speaking skills for learners of English is part of her final year empirical dissertation.

Dr Sarah Olive (Education) sits on the steering committee of BCUR and attended the event. She said 'Martina and Madeline were the first York students to participate in Posters in Parliament. I hope they have paved the way for our continued presence at the event.'



(photograph produced by University of Central Lancashire)

Both work in vitally important areas of educational research, addressing issues of social justice and language learning. This was a rare opportunity for our students to speak directly to politicians and policy-makers and they delivered, communicating their work confidently, enthusiastically and professionally'.

BCUR celebrates the embedding of research in undergraduate degrees. It aims to further promote the benefits of such activity for students and stakeholders.

The event was sponsored by the British Conference of Undergraduate Research in partnership with HEFCE, the HEAcademy and the University of Central Lancashire. The prizes were sponsored by the HEAcademy. www.bcur.org

Visiting Vikings

<https://sites.google.com/a/york.ac.uk/visiting-vikings>

Steve Ashby, from the department of Archaeology, has received a grant from the university's Rapid Response Fund for a project entitled 'Travelling the Viking World'. The project will bring a number of Northern European researchers at the vanguard of Viking-Age archaeology to meet and talk to students. The speakers will not only provide lectures on new research but will also be interviewed by students thus providing the students with an opportunity for training and experience in journalistic research and media. The interviews and lectures will be broadcast via Google Hangouts on Air, and curated online at a dedicated Google site for use in future teaching. The project also aims to embed this approach in the Department of Archaeology and the Centre for Medieval Studies' Viking Studies Research Group, such that future events might be broadcast and archived in a similar way.

The talks, both in person and online, are open to staff, undergraduate and postgraduate students at the University of York, both in the department and beyond. Further details, and links to the resources once available, can be found at the link given above or by following links from Steve Ashby's staff page or Google Plus feed.

Call for expressions of interest: applying for Senior/Principal Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy

Work has begun on the University's new Learning and Teaching Strategy and, at its core, there will be a commitment to maintain and develop the quality of teaching and student learning for which York already has an established reputation. To contribute to this commitment, the University is developing a Framework for Development in Learning and Teaching. One of the purposes of

the framework will be to provide clear pathways for staff to evidence the quality of their teaching and learning support practice for recognition by the HEA.

To support this process, we are looking to create a pool of successful teachers who will advise colleagues who wish to engage with, and receive recognition through, the Framework. These individuals will need to have achieved Senior or Principal Fellowship¹ of the HEA

so we are offering to support and pay for a number of appropriately experienced staff to secure these upper levels of HEA recognition.

If you would be interested in receiving this support or if you require more information, then please contact Duncan Jackson (duncan.jackson@york.ac.uk) by 14th May 2014.

¹ UKPSF: www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/ukpsf/UKPSF_2011.pdf pages 6 and 7

Final year projects – balancing

For about three years, Leeds University has been conducting a major curriculum enhancement project with a view to agreeing on changes to their undergraduate programmes. One of these changes is the requirement that all undergraduate programmes incorporate a major piece of independent work in the 3rd year. This, in whatever form it takes, will be known as the Final Year Project (FYP).

To strengthen and support the requirement for FYPs, the university has also devoted time to discussing the place of independent study in degree programmes, what research-based learning means for the university and what the core criteria for these projects should be. Mitch Waterman, Pro-Dean for Student Education at the Faculty of Medicine and Health at the University of Leeds, is Chair of the working party that has been grappling with these issues and he kindly agreed to talk to us about his views on the role of independent work in undergraduate programmes.

First, how would you characterise the value of independent projects at undergraduate level?

For a long time we have been asserting that education in a research-intensive environment is beneficial to students, but I don't think we have done much to demonstrate it and we need to. We need to ensure that our students are not just passive recipients of knowledge – they should be actively seeking to generate new knowledge and the obvious vehicle for that kind of activity is research. Now, that brings with it some implications. One is that you have to train students to actively engage like that. Another is you need to give them the opportunities to show that they can do that. The driver therefore is that you have to give students the opportunity to demonstrate that they have actually acquired the research skills – research design, critical evaluation, and writing skills – which count as research for the discipline in question.

What about the argument that there is so much knowledge and information for students to grasp in undergraduate programmes that research and project work has to be left to Masters level. Would you agree with that?

An interview with Mitch Waterman, University of Leeds

(Keynote speaker at our Learning & Teaching Conference – Wednesday 18th June 2014)



independence and supervision



I would not agree with that for several reasons. The first reason is that evidence suggests that students learn more through project type work than they do through anything else. This seems to be a reflection of lots of things, such as their increased ownership, motivation and a sense that they have intellectual investment in a project in a way they rarely have in a taught modules. This can make all the difference to students really understanding the value of research.

Another reason is that, even programmes such as Medicine, Dentistry and Engineering, which are often congested with material in the timetable, include research work. Basically, I have yet to hear a convincing argument along the lines of, “we have so much to include that we cannot include a project”.

To achieve this active pursuit of new knowledge through research, what kind of training or development do you think is necessary for students. They can't suddenly face a final year project for which they are unprepared?

I think it is certainly crucial that all students be adequately prepared for final year project work. To support that development, either explicit or implicit training throughout the prior years of the degree needs to happen, and it is more easily done with explicitly labelled, research-based modules in earlier years. But that is not the only vehicle; what happens really depends on the nature of the project which students are invited to take, or are required to take. As long as that project is recognisable as research in the discipline, then you would hope that the academics in question would introduce the sort of research skills training which they themselves would see as critical for that final year project.

Of course, there can also be issues with explicitly-labelled research methods modules. Students often have negative impressions of the traditional research methods module and it is certainly true that those negative reactions are seen in staff too with sometimes the newest staff being invited to assume responsibility for the research skills training. I think this is because ‘Research Methods’ modules have often been severed from content. I think there are lots of ways in which Research Skills modules can be made

more engaging and therefore successful, and the main one is directly aligning skills to current content that is being delivered.

To try to tie all this together and to ensure students have the opportunity to rehearse the kind of skills which they might use in the final project, at Leeds we have required all programmes to map their curriculum, in terms of a particular journey for research-based learning using Healey’s Matrix (see Fig. 1 on the next page). We have required, as part of programme review, all programmes to identify which modules do what in terms of Healey’s matrix to demonstrate that, as student’s progress through their degree, they have greater and greater exposure to research-based activity leading up to

...evidence suggests that students learn more through project type work than they do through anything else

the project. We have also made efforts to have discussions with students to explain what this all means in terms of their learning and this helps to address some of the negative feelings there can be towards research skills training.

Related to this then, is the role of the supervisor. Has your working group decided upon any guidelines related to appropriate supervision?

Again, norms between departments vary. For instance, in my own school, we decided many years ago that our supervision model would involve a larger number of supervision meetings (10+) and that we’d review thesis plans, but not provide feedback on thesis drafts. Our External Examiners at the time queried the degree to which we were assessing our own editorial input when we were reading drafts, and that led to current approach. Other schools have a very different approach; some read drafts, some schools require drafts, some schools require proposals as part of the assessment. So the modules vary enormously both in terms of the structure of the project and the supervisory approach.

But what we have agreed upon at Leeds is that, in order to be considered an independent Final Year Project, the students must have some explicit →

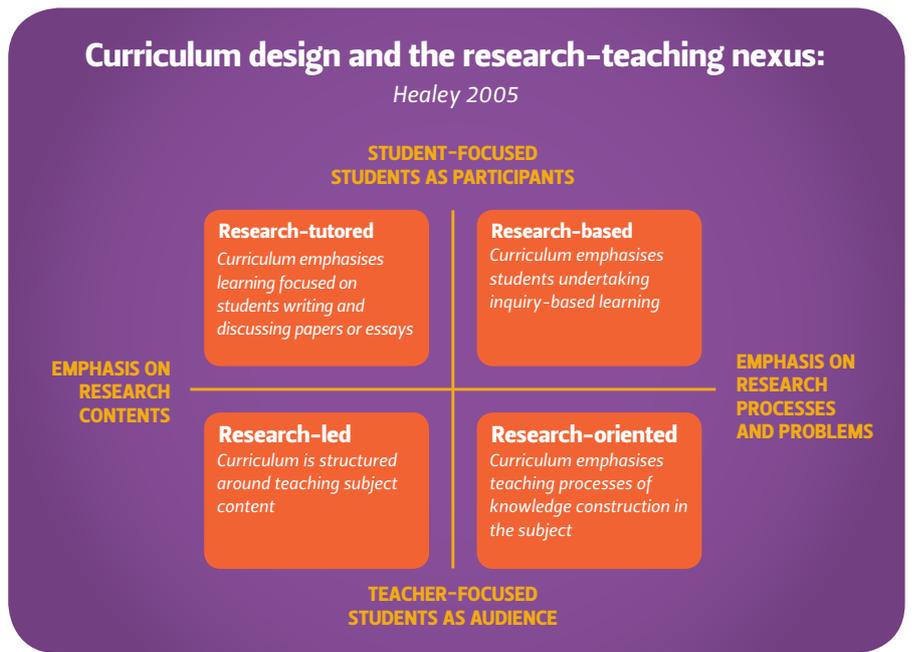
intellectual input into determining either what the project is about or how the project is done. There must be some element that allows them to claim ownership. Now that element might be the student ticking a project title then negotiating the terms of that project with the supervisor; that might be a student signalling an area of interest and then being allocated a group of academics that do work in that area. But there always has to be some sense of direct, explicit, intellectual input. We have also been explicit in wanting to know where the student's input is so we guard against any risk that they are just acting as research assistants. What we have articulated, I think, is the recognition that often this is the time the students truly join the discipline. The student, in owning something within the discipline, becomes the philosopher or the mathematician or the psychologist because actually they have got something that is theirs. Now that is not to say that the supervisor can't then act as a sounding board and advisor, but those conversations still need to drive a lot of the decision-making back to the student.



And whilst I'm out they can help you with your research on 'Violent Behaviour in Infants'.

So this is the time when the student becomes independent and has to make their own decisions. But, what if the student is enthusiastic and engaged but is not making the right decisions? What if they are way off target and heading for trouble?

The supervisor clearly has some responsibility to say, "Well, that is a brilliant idea but that is a PhD". Or, "That is a brilliant idea but you need to pick something from within that topic to



The supervisor also has a responsibility to ensure students take enough time over decisions at key points – often, points that come very early in the thinking about a project or dissertation

pursue that will work in the time and resource constraints you have." Again, this may need to be written explicitly into the supervisory approach. But also, building the necessary skills into the programme makes this scenario less likely. For instance, if students have had prior experience, perhaps through problem-based learning, of working out for themselves what is possible and practical within constraints, then they get some rehearsal. The rehearsal allows them to become familiar with skills like focusing down, turning a vague idea into something which looks like a research question and then turning a research question into something operational.

The supervisor also has a responsibility to ensure students take enough time over decisions at key points – often, points that come very early in the thinking about a project or dissertation. For instance, for quantitative-based projects, the student needs to be thinking about their analysis method when they are thinking about the research question itself. A lot of time needs to be spent on that: the question, the design and the connection between the two. Basically, half the job of the supervisor is getting the student to understand that all that thinking is vital and valuable.

So, for you, the Final Year Project represents what exactly?

For the staff and the departments, it is

the destination of a mapped curriculum. If you have a clear sense of the student journey – that it is more research-based at the end than it was at the beginning – then it has got to be reasonable to teach students about research, the findings that we see as the core content of our discipline; to teach students about doing research – the methods; to teach student how to be critical of the research; and then to supervise students doing research. What could be more logical?

For the students, the final year project is the cap stone – the point at which they become part of the discipline – the part of the degree they own and typically of which they are most proud.

Mitch Waterman has a BSc from the University of Lancaster, and a PhD from Keele University.



His background is in cognitive neuropsychology and the psychology of emotion, though in recent years his psychological research interests have focused mainly on forensic populations, pioneering objective assessments of deviant interest, and involvement in the development of new treatment programmes to reduce reoffending.

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Thinking outside the module box

Wednesday 18 June 2014

The Exhibition Centre, Physics/Electronics Building,
Heslington west campus

Registration now open

Register at: www.york.ac.uk/staff/teaching/sharing/sharing-practice/conference

Keynote speakers:

Professor Koen Lamberts, Vice-Chancellor, University of York

Dr Mitch Waterman, University of Leeds

The Conference is free and open to all staff and students.

If you have a query about any aspect of the event, please contact: Janet Barton (janet.barton@york.ac.uk)

Supervising independent work at the York Law School Clinic



Since January 2011, York Law School (YLS) has been offering a free legal advice service to the local community. It has provided legal advice to over 200 clients and has recovered or saved well in excess of £200,000 on their behalf. As a YLS clinic supervisor, and a recently appointed member of the *Forum* committee, I am keen to disseminate some of the educational benefits of following a clinic model to a wider audience. This article is therefore written to assist other departments who are considering how they could utilise the research skills (and other abilities) of their students for the benefit of the wider community, and who might want to evaluate how the model could be adapted to enhance the supervision of independent work.

I met the Director of the YLS clinic, Richard Grimes, for a coffee recently and he is keen to stress that the primary purpose of the clinic is a vehicle to study law through the application of theory to practice. As he said, "Obviously, the concerns and issues raised by the clients at the interview stage provide the medium through which the students can develop a wealth of skills and experience, but the clinic process also helps to develop students' confidence in their own abilities, and encourages them to take responsibility for the work that they produce." The development of consequent softer life skills, including empathy, time management and professionalism are of importance to all students, not just those at YLS.

Background to clinical legal education at YLS

Clinical legal education is not new. In some countries, most notably the USA, it forms an integral part of professional legal training. For a long time in the UK it was perceived as being purely vocational and therefore not sufficiently intellectually or academically robust to warrant inclusion in law degree programmes. Fortunately, this antipathy towards clinical legal education is beginning to abate, with over three quarters of UK university law schools now providing a free legal advice service.

YLS took in its first cohort of students in September 2009 and from the outset adopted a curriculum founded on problem based learning (PBL). Offering an optional

clinic module was an obvious extension to this teaching model, and Richard was recruited specifically to realise this intention. The 20 credit clinic module is now offered to both second and third year students in the undergraduate degree programme and, from this September, an adapted version will also be offered as part of a recently accredited, Masters degree programme. Richard regards the clinic module as being “PBL with knobs on”, because the process requires students to not only identify and research a specific legal problem (as happens with PBL), but also to solve it, and provide definitive advice to a client in an appropriate format.

The clinic module thus complements the teaching philosophy at YLS, as well as stretching the students who participate to develop skills, both academic and practical, which are harder to teach in a classroom environment.

Provided above right is a summary of the Clinic process:

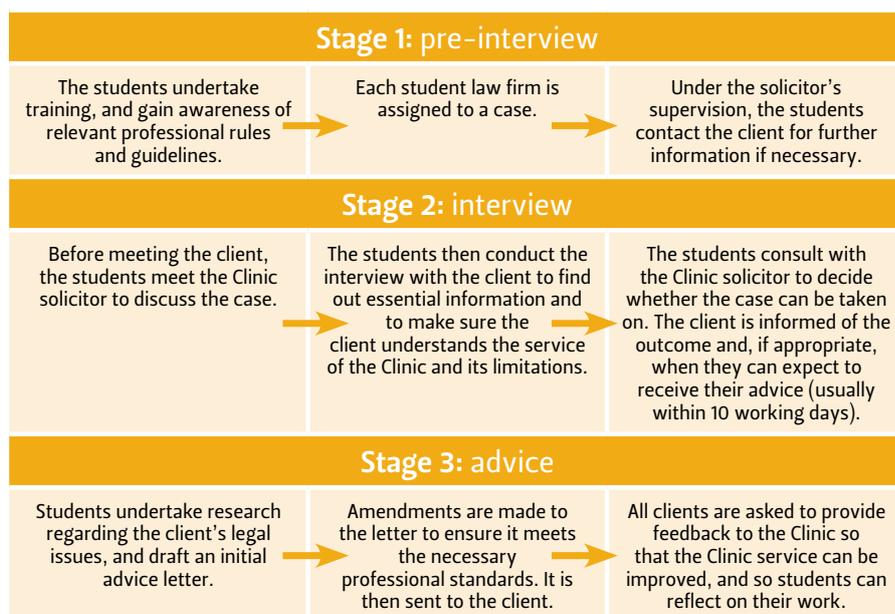
Independent study at the YLS clinic

Most of the day to day tasks within the clinic are managed and performed by student study groups called Student Law Firms (SLFs), but the clinic module itself is assessed by an individually prepared 3000 word reflective learning portfolio and an oral presentation of the content of the portfolio. An evaluation of the reflective comments within the portfolios provides a useful way to assess to what extent the students value the independent study undertaken.

Many students make reference to the variety of legal cases taken on by the clinic. Sometimes the issues correlate with subject areas covered in the core modules of the undergraduate programme, but more often this is not the case. SLFs have to undertake research into new areas of study, for example immigration law, employment law and family law, where the law changes often and there is a need to base research on primary rather than secondary sources of information. One student observed, “My level of understanding needed to be higher than in a normal PBL session – I couldn’t coast.” Another stated, “The clinic module welcomes students to reality – which is not always a pleasant place to be...”.

‘Real’ work and employability skills at the YLS clinic

An observation that recurs frequently within the learning portfolios is the difference between legal theory and



commercial reality. The students express surprise at how often the advice is, in effect, to do nothing due to the prohibitive cost involved in pursuing formal legal action. This is an ongoing area of discussion within the YLS clinic and has promoted many students to get more involved with campaigning against legal aid cuts.

Another common observation made in the learning portfolios, as explained by one student, relates to professional skills: “The steepest learning curve I’ve ever experienced was my attempt to write a letter in the appropriate tone to meet with Richard’s approval or, as he rightly explained, to be pitched appropriately for the client to understand.” This is in accordance with my own experience as a clinic supervisor. Without a doubt, I have made more comments on student draft letters about grammar and punctuation, the formalities of tailoring advice to the client and writing in plain English, than any comments about the substantive law. For this reason alone, I am a strong advocate of the clinic model being used as a way to help students to acclimatise to the working world.

Supervision at the YLS clinic

A negative of the clinic module is the unpredictable workload of the staff members who volunteer to act as clinic supervisors. Factors contributing to this uncertainty include the number of clients who contact the clinic, the complexity of the legal issues presented during the client interview, the research abilities of the students involved and the requirement for client letters to be of a sufficiently high standard to be ‘signed off’ by Richard in his role as a qualified solicitor. Despite this

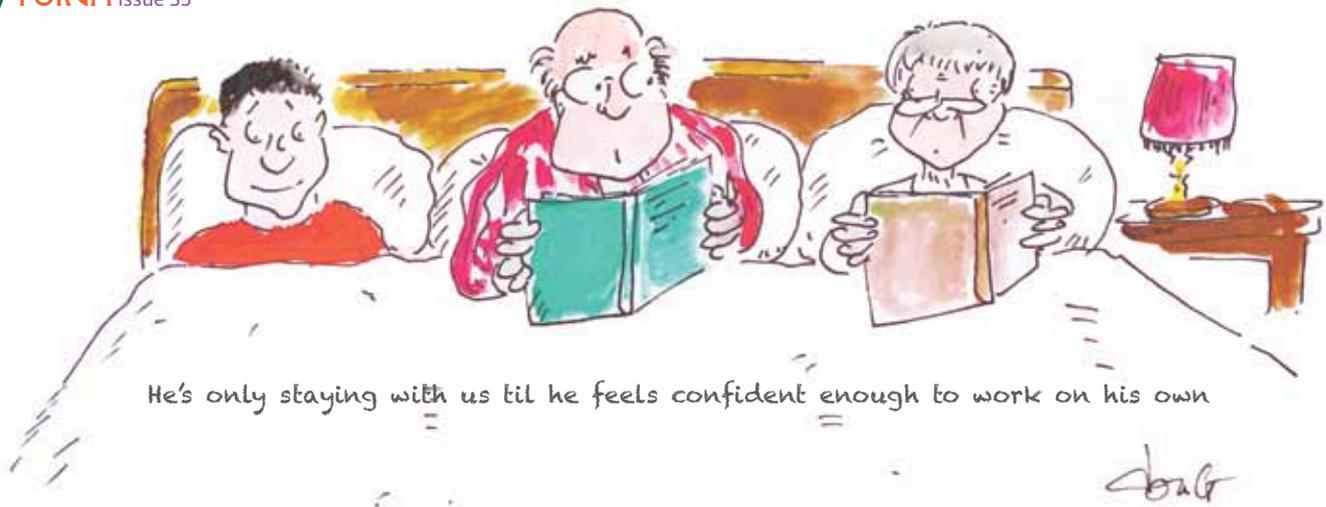
uncertainty, there is a strong supervisory framework at YLS. Each SLF receives specific supervision from a clinic supervisor in relation to the legal issues presented by the client. In addition, the whole cohort of students have weekly workshop sessions with Richard to discuss issues including procedural matters and case management, professional values and ethics, and professional skills such as interviewing and letter writing.

The YLS clinic module is by no means perfect (as any supervisor will tell you after they have spent yet another evening making pedantic corrections to hastily drafted letters of advice), but this is because the demands are both to provide effective supervision to students to support their independent work and to ensure that the service level is of sufficient quality to meet the standards of any solicitors practice. As summarised by Richard; “It’s not worth doing unless it’s done well, but when it’s done well everyone’s a winner!”

Jenny Gibbons

joined the University of York as a Teaching Fellow in February 2013, having previously taught at BPP University College. Before teaching she was a solicitor, an experience which assists her in her role as a supervisor at the York Law School clinic. Jenny is keen to talk to anyone who is interested in learning more about the YLS clinic and can be contacted on jenny.gibbons@york.ac.uk





Independent learning: the group research project model

When I first joined the University of York, I was struck by the creative and innovative schemes of learning and assessment that colleagues were encouraged to develop and apply to their teaching.

In my own discipline – History – there has always been a strong tradition of students individually engaging in extensive reading of primary and secondary sources in order to produce their own project work or dissertations. It is still comparatively rare, however, for students to work in groups or to engage in research projects together. As I had used the group research model before with lifelong learners, a couple of years ago I decided to integrate some of that experience into a new research project and have students at undergraduate, masters and PhD levels actively involved in my research team.

The result is the AHRC-funded research project, 'England's Immigrants, 1330-1550', which explores the identities and experiences of the thousands of people who moved to England from other parts of Europe in the later Middle Ages. The project's two PhD students have made a major contribution to data collecting, and in the process have acquired material for their own theses as well as learning how to use medieval documents and construct databases. Five brave History undergraduates, now in their third year, have also spent the last twelve months drawing on the database and other project resources to write their degree dissertations. And, two students taking a module from the MA in Public History are currently working with the research team to develop our material as a resource for schools and local history

societies, as well as helping to devise methodologies for quantifying and evaluating the impact of this work.

Wider feedback

What have we acquired from this collective experience? Learning from others is an obvious theme, but it's not just about the acquisition of facts. One undergraduate comments that access to the 'network of support' has 'enabled my research to come on much faster than if I were tackling the topic on my own'; another acknowledges the benefit he has had from hearing 'how other people have interpreted and thought about the same material'.

The opportunity to get feedback from a wider group of people – along with the possibility that not everyone may agree – has clearly given students a lot of confidence in their own ability and a sense of the progress of their own work. Finally, there has been a sharpening of understanding about the responsibilities and contributions of the various members of the group, and a growing awareness among the student members of the research environment in which we work. As one of the PhD students said, 'it's been really interesting seeing up-close how other people approach their work, and how they work, as well as learning what they work on and the pressures they work under.'

The opportunity to get feedback from a wider group of people has clearly given students a lot of confidence in their own ability

The AHRC and ESRC recently fell in line with the other research councils in removing PhD students from research grants, but we have many other opportunities to develop group projects at this level: for example, through White Rose Studentship Networks and the various collaborative doctoral schemes offered by research councils. I am struck, though, by how much my project has been enhanced by the inclusion

of undergraduate and masters students, and would encourage other researchers to develop similar models of group work to provide structure and support for dissertation projects and other forms of guided learning. It's one very good way of breaking down the

false dichotomy between 'teaching' and 'research' and reminding ourselves that the whole university community works together in the business of learning!

Mark Ormrod

is Academic Coordinator for Arts & Humanities; he works in the Department of History and the Centre for Medieval Studies. You can visit his project at www.englishimmigrants.com.



If a project you are supervising involves primary or secondary data collection & analysis, early advice on appropriate statistical techniques can save students anxious moments later

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Becoming a researcher: the design and purpose of the MPhys programme in Physics



Garibaldi...man or biscuit?
Well, it's certainly an original
research project

In May each year, the department publishes a list of proposed MPhys projects from which our 3rd-year students indicate a prioritised choice of six, often after discussing them with prospective project supervisors. Each student is then allocated a project. Projects are generally individual research projects based within one of our three research groups: Condensed Matter Physics; Nuclear Physics; and Plasma Physics and Fusion with almost all members of academic staff supervising MPhys projects. All students meet with their project supervisor before the end of the Summer Term of their 3rd year to discuss the background, aims and methodology of the proposed research.

The first component of the project work is for the student to prepare an essay, reviewing the research literature, providing a context for the work and outlining the questions to be answered. This is combined with a project plan which indicates the methods to be used and the timing of the phases of the research. As well as establishing the basis for the research, the essay provides an opportunity for formative input into the

The 4-year Master of Physics (MPhys) degree is the usual undergraduate degree for students who intend to follow careers as professional physicists, and is taken by around half of our 150 physics entrants each year. In this article, I briefly describe how we provide and supervise the individual research experience for our fourth-year MPhys undergraduates.

full dissertation that students will submit the following year.

From the beginning of the Autumn Term, the research itself begins. Students work 50% of full-time on their projects, as the project plus the associated professional-skills activities (described below) constitute 60 credits, half of the fourth year. Students doing experimental work often use laboratory facilities located in one of our research groups, and students doing theoretical projects (about 30% of the total) usually have access to desk space in an office shared with theoretical PhD students and postdocs. This level of contact with other researchers is very beneficial as students are part of one of the department's research groups and therefore see how their research fits into the group's larger research programme. The research phase lasts until Week 3 of the Summer Term, when students submit their project dissertations.

One-to-one guidance

A key part of the research is, of course, the one-to-one guidance provided by the project supervisor. Typically, project students meet with their supervisors weekly for up to one hour when they review progress using the student's project notebook as a basis for discussion, and formulate a plan of action for the coming week. At the end of the project, the notebook is submitted for assessment. The dissertation itself is assessed by two academics, not including the project supervisor, and a 30-minute viva also contributes to this assessment.

In parallel with conducting the

research, students are trained to communicate their findings. All Physics students receive training in preparing talks and presenting scientific posters in earlier years, and, in fourth year, they deliver a 12-minute talk to an audience of their peers and a member of academic staff on their research project. The main purpose of this interim talk is to provide experience that feeds into preparation for the two-day Fourth-year Conference, at which all the students present talks and posters. It forms a fitting culmination to a student's academic activities during their MPhys degree.

MPhys projects, while inevitably fairly small in scale, are generally at the cutting edge of research, and not infrequently contribute to publications. For example, a recent paper from my group¹ contained significant contributions from the MPhys project work of two fourth-year undergraduates, one of whom (Matt Hodgson) is the first author and has continued his research during a PhD in my group.

¹ "Exact time-dependent density-functional potentials for strongly correlated tunneling electrons", M.J.P. Hodgson, J.D. Ramsden, J.B.J. Chapman, P. Lillystone, and R.W. Godby, *Physical Review B (Rapid Communications)* **88** 241102(R) (2013)

Rex Godby is
Professor of
Theoretical
Physics, and a
member of the
Condensed
Matter Physics



research group in the Department
of Physics. He has supervised
fourth-year research projects since
1996/7, our first MPhys cohort.

Supervising international students

"I can't understand my supervisor – he speaks too fast"

"The first meeting was fine, all about coffee and getting to know each other but, after that, the friendliness evaporated"

"In my country these relationships are more formal, so here I don't always know how to behave"

Here in the Centre for English Language Teaching (CELT) we run a module in Academic Speaking. The comments above were made by students attending this module and show how, though students come to us for help with their English language, they often then present us with problems which extend beyond knowledge of language and skills.

Naturally, completing a CELT course can be very advantageous. In our Academic Speaking courses, we are able to attune students to different accents and help raise their awareness of transcultural issues in communication. We can provide students with gambits, ways of interrupting politely and of holding the floor when potential interruptions arise. Most noticeably, students attending academic speaking courses increase their levels of confidence over their term of study.

But we can only do so much. When it comes to real meetings with supervisors, international students often report that they feel responsible for miscommunication and misunderstandings and feel the onus is on them to do something. Attending speaking courses is a sign that many are willing to work at this. But each supervisor can also help students to adapt more quickly and easily: the following are suggestions based on successful practice in HE contexts to our style of academic supervision – and therefore get the most out of the supervision relationship.

Meta-communication

Talk to students about how you normally communicate with supervisees or ask

students to talk about the communicative behaviour they have been used to in the past eg:

"I normally offer students something to drink at the beginning of our meetings. Have previous teachers of yours done this?"

"Please call me... How do you call your teachers at home? Are you comfortable with calling me...? I would be uncomfortable if you called me..."

Language grading

When students remark that their supervisors speak too fast it is often because of colloquial vocabulary or lack of familiarity with a particular accent. It goes without saying that slower speech speed can help, but it is also a good idea to try to avoid idiomatic expressions and to speak in short-ish chunks, with some pauses, so your student is able to take you up on potentially misunderstood items.

Use of metaphors or images to clarify the relationship

This is not for everyone, but supervisors who have tried it report that the exercise has been very enlightening and worthwhile. Show your student a list of images and ask her/him to say which one or ones represent the way s/he thinks of you. A serviceable list, which has given interesting results so far, is as follows (of course, you may want to modify or make additions):

I see my supervisor as...

- an encyclopaedia
- a specialist reference book

- a beacon / lighthouse / guiding light
- a specialist instrument or tool
- an actor
- an engineer of the soul (this one came from a real student!)
- a busy bee
- a magician
- a salesman/woman
- a precious resource
- a gardener
- a parent

You might then have a useful discussion on how you see yourself in relation to your student.

Preparation

In asking students to prepare for supervisions, ask them to prepare specific questions and help them by showing them which kind of questions you are expecting. Talking about students' questions takes us neatly back to meta-communication, which cannot be overemphasised.

Meanwhile, we in Celt will continue to provide help to international students, both in groups and individually – students can come to us for series of group sessions or for one-to-one consultations. More than half of our activity is now embedded into Departments, with international students seeing English language and communication work as part of their regular training in graduate skills. We would welcome further collaborative links and may well be able to help you develop the supervision of independent work with your international students.

Paul Roberts

joined the Centre for English Language Teaching as Director



in August 2009. He has taught English and trained teachers of English in six different countries and written, or co-written, several ELT books. Paul is interested in the internationalisation of Higher Education, with a particular interest in curriculum transformation. He can be contacted on paul.roberts@york.ac.uk.

Excited & Anxious: Masters students' views on independent work and supervision

In order to hear postgraduate students' views on independent work and supervision, FORUM arranged a student focus group in February. Several international students attended and shared their views about the thrills and anxieties of taking on projects and dissertations.

The students had all undertaken dissertations during their undergraduate degrees in their home countries. However, when discussing Masters level dissertations or projects, the students were clear that this would be more challenging due to the requirement to define their own research question, the higher standard of research and critical thought required at a research-intensive university like York, and the anxiety caused by taking on such an important piece of work in another language. Despite this anxiety, students felt that this was a time when they could find things out for themselves. *"It gives you the sense of independence and also being self-driven. Because when you hear the word 'research' it means you are searching for something and you are the searcher – it is exciting because it is taking you to the next level in your subject"*. As a result, the students were enthusiastic about researching something they were interested in

but were also realistic about the complex decision-making and planning completing a dissertation would involve.

Independent students

In discussing, what they felt their role as Masters students should be, comments centred around the balance between wanting to operate independently but, at the same time, needing guidance to manage a process they have never undertaken before. The group felt that, whether students were self-motivated or not, their learning curve during the Masters degree was considerable and therefore the more clarity of information and practice there could be within departments, the more confidently students could move forward.

Expectations of supervisors

As far as expectations of supervisors were concerned, the group talked for a while about the need for consistency within departments. In terms of raising



anxiety levels, it seemed that one of the biggest culprits was inconsistency, such as – *"We see that there can be one supervisor who helps their students with everything and then there is another supervisor who only gives feedback after marking – neither is right"*. So, what did the students think the relationship should be between student and supervisor? The students agreed that they appreciated supervisors who were approachable and friendly but also *"I prefer to think that my supervisor is there as a guide because I am the sort of person who is very proactive and who likes to arrange all my things and thoughts myself. So when I see my supervisor, I can describe what I have done so far and then he will propose some questions and maybe those questions will be very helpful"*.

In relation to balancing the desire for constant access to their supervisor and the equal understanding that they needed to control this instinct in order to become independent, the students were very honest. As one student put it: *"Because we are human beings, we are self-centred. We don't think about the demands on the supervisors. We don't hear about their undergraduates, their six other Masters supervisees and their three PhD students – and their other work and family. We are many and all of us need support but if we knew this we might think a bit more about working independently"*.



He says it helps to dispel the 'ivory tower' image



What helps

The students then went on to discuss aspects of practice which might lower their anxiety levels and therefore help them engage with research in a more independent manner.

For some students, one helpful factor was the pre-session work undertaken by CELT, particularly in clarifying what is meant by 'being critical'. This also related to their view that more induction regarding the purpose of dissertations or research project work would be beneficial and would help them understand their role. Students also felt that being prompted by supervisors to start thinking about their dissertation early was helpful. This was not only because students could then manage their time better, but it also ensured they could develop a clear relationship with their supervisor. Finally, departments providing information about other forms of support available to students and about realistic time frames for tasks would give the students a sense of security.

Conclusion

The Masters students in the focus group understood that their dissertation would be demanding, but also exciting and worthwhile. As one student stated – "You are joining a big conversation and it is exciting to stand up and express your ideas and be heard".

From independent study to high flyer

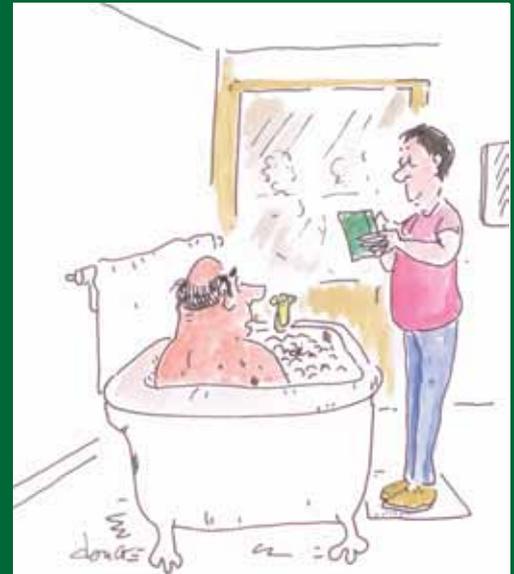
– a student's view of the value of MSc supervision

The University has always referred to its supervisory system as one of the key aspects influencing students' academic performance and their engagement in the academic culture. I personally strongly believe that in the case of MSc programs, supervisors' work also plays an important role in providing graduate students with transferable skills which are vital in their future career.

In the graduate market to which I have been applying, Investment Banking and Financial Risk Management Consulting, graduate scheme interviews are competency-based. One of the competencies which is a key factor for interviewers' decision-making, according to research, is commercial awareness – a difficult competency to develop in the isolated world of academia. Key to developing such awareness for any graduate student is finding a professor who is working on your sphere of scientific and career interest. I feel lucky that my dissertation supervisor not only guided me through the difficult world of financial assets' prices behaviour, but also shared with me some hot issues of the financial risk management business. Thus, the questions and tricks we had discussed while working on my dissertation, helped a lot on proficiency-based interviews and recruitment tests I undertook further down the line.

Employer's wish list

It is worth mentioning that the MSc dissertation is not only about what you write but also about how you do that. Thus, the supervision that I received on my dissertation helped me improve my time management skills while also providing me with the ability to express my ideas in a more effective way. As these qualities are used every day in a graduate's working life, they are definitely on every employer's wish list.



I'm going to have to ask you to leave – I have two more supervisees waiting outside

The supervision that I received on my dissertation helped me improve my time management skills while also providing me with the ability to express my ideas in a more effective way.

Maria Merzlyakova

(Department of Economics and Related Studies)

MSc in Finance

– graduated

in January 2014. Awarded Head of

Department's Prize. Researched

PDE approach in building Sample

moments of the Realized Volatility

using Monte Carlo simulations.

Currently working as an analyst for

Citibank / FRM Consultants for Banca

Intesa. Dr Paola Zerilli was Maria's

dissertation supervisor.



Learning and Teaching Calendar of Events: Summer Term 2014

WEEK 1	
Tuesday 22 April, 9.00am-12 noon, N/030	Teaching small groups
Wednesday 23 April, 9.00am-12 noon, BS/008	Teaching international students
Thursday 24 April, 1.00-4.00pm, H/G17	Structuring and designing sessions
WEEK 2	
Monday 28 April, 9.00am-12 noon, H/G09	Planning assessment methods for student work
Monday 28 April, 9.15am-12.30pm, H/G21	Marking consistency
Wednesday 30 April, 2.15-4.15pm, H/G21	Developing an inclusive curriculum
Wednesday 30 April, 1.00-4.00pm, H/G09	Evaluation and quality enhancement
WEEK 3	
Wednesday 7 May, 2.15-4.15pm, H/G09	Teaching international students
WEEK 4	
Tuesday 13 May, 1.00-4.00pm, H/G09	Academic careers: interviews
Wednesday 14 May, 2.15-4.15pm, ATB/037	VLE/E-Learning
Wednesday 14 May, 1.00-4.00pm, H/G09	Plagiarism and academic misconduct
Thursday 15 May, 2.00-3.00pm, N/030	Academic careers: CVs and applications
WEEK 5	
Monday 19 May, 12.30-2.00pm, LFA/015	EdTech – Getting started with Prezi presentation software
WEEK 6	
Tuesday 27 May, 10.30am-12 noon, H/G21	Staff Turnitin Workshop
Thursday 29 May, 9.00am-12 noon, H/G09	Effective lecturing
Friday 30 May, 1.00-4.00pm, H/G09	Learning styles and student motivation
WEEK 7	
Monday 2 June, 12.30-2.00pm, H/G21	Assessment and feedback: assessing skills through oral presentations
Wednesday 4 June, 9.00am-12 noon, H/G21	Linking teaching and research
Wednesday 4 June, 1.00-4.00pm, H/G09	Planning assessment methods for student work
WEEK 9	
Wednesday 18 June, 10.45am-5.00pm, The Exhibition Centre, Heslington west campus	Annual Learning and Teaching Conference
WEEK 11	
Monday 30 June, 12.30-2.00pm, H/G21	Taught Masters SIG
Thursday 3 July, 12.30-2.00pm, H/G21	Successful teaching encounters: seminars

Key to the calendar

 Events organised by the Learning and Teaching Forum. Open to all staff and PGWTs. For further information, see www.york.ac.uk/staff/teaching/sharing/sharing-practice/workshops; to register, contact janet.barton@york.ac.uk. If you are unable to attend an event but would like a copy of the materials, please let Janet know.

 Freestanding workshops offered by learning support colleagues. Please contact janet.barton@york.ac.uk for further details or to book your place.

 Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice (PGCAP) sessions. Priority is given to staff enrolled on the programme, but other staff are invited to express an interest in attending any session and places will be confirmed a week or two before the event. For further information, see www.york.ac.uk/admin/hr/academic-practice/pgcap

 Preparing Future Academics sessions aimed at PGWTs. Priority is given to those enrolled on the programme, but others are invited to express an interest in attending any session and the places will be confirmed a week or two before the event. Please note that these workshops are subject to change. Check www.york.ac.uk/admin/hr/researcher-development for the latest information, or contact the Researcher Development Team: rdt@york.ac.uk

 Taught Masters Special Interest Group: for further information, see www.york.ac.uk/staff/teaching/sharing/sharing-practice/special-interest; to register contact alison.mckay@york.ac.uk