Music: pioneers with passion

In her final assignment for the Forum, Kate Giles visited the Department of Music to find out about its project system and its outreach work.

Imagine that you are a first year undergraduate in the Department of Music last October. The cohort is assembled for its first meeting to discuss the term’s work with Dr Jo Wainwright, co-ordinator of the ‘practical project’. Suddenly he arrives – in full Restoration costume, complete with wig – and informs you that over the next few weeks, you will design, rehearse, costume and choreograph a ‘Restoration Entertainment’ featuring music by John Blow, Henry Purcell and the court of King Charles II. Moreover, you will be performing before a paying audience in Week Five!

The practical project is one of the many innovative teaching methods pioneered within the Department. Staff take it in turns to run the project, and past events have included an 18th-century burlesque opera, a Japanese Kabuki play, and even a multimedia performance of railway music in the National Railway Museum. The project is a demanding but effective way of encouraging students to take responsibility for their learning and develop the research skills required to interpret the musical context, as well as the teamwork and time management skills necessary to organise and rehearse the group.

The project system

Although group projects are used by many departments as an alternative to individual-centred learning, the idea of ‘the project’ has underpinned every aspect of the Department’s teaching for the last 30 years. Each project is an elective unit, and a series of these makes up the core of the undergraduate programme. Projects may focus on general areas, such as composition, ethnomusicology or electroacoustic music, but can also be tightly focused, such as The English Madrigal, Baroque Editing Techniques or Music Post 1945. They generally last for 12 weeks, dividing into four weeks of intensive contact time, followed by four weeks of individual study assisted by tutorials, and a further four weeks in which a portfolio of work is produced for assessment.

The system enables students to engage with subjects critically and in depth, contrasting with departments elsewhere which are more concerned with providing a traditional curriculum of ‘set-piece’ courses.

(continued on page 2)
As Dr Tim Howell, Chair of the Departmental Teaching Committee, explained, this method of teaching also allows key knowledge and skills to be addressed, but always concurrently through the course, rather than as separate modules.

Importantly, projects arise directly from the research interests of staff, eschewing the research-teaching split commonly experienced by academics – and students. Indeed, several colleagues described their forthcoming courses as opportunities for developing research ideas. Moreover, concentrating an individual’s class teaching into four weeks of the term means (in theory at any rate) that they can actually devote some time to research during term.

**Mixed-year groups and progression**

A more controversial aspect of the system, perhaps, is that students are taught in mixed-year groups throughout. Although this might not be popular with the QAA, staff and students are adamant about its advantages. Tim Howell notes that “the combination of differing levels of experience and ability produces a very lively mix which is a significant and positive characteristic of the system overall”.

The issue of progression is addressed explicitly through assessment criteria, but in addition, the number and combination of projects with other activities varies between the years.

First years take a course designed to bridge the gap between A level and University level study, and participate in departmental ensembles. Second years are also assessed on practical performance, whilst third years continue with projects, and embark on a solo project or dissertation. As Professor Nicola LeFanu explains, the system requires supervisors to play an active role in advising students on their course choices, with an eye to possible career paths – and in ensuring that students do not take on too much.

**Teaching facilities**

The Department has particular requirements in terms of its teaching space, ranging from rooms which are easily converted to accommodate chamber groups or full orchestras, to the cutting-edge technology suite recently refurbished under the guidance of Dr Ambrose Field. With the help of a grant from Teaching Innovation and Development Committee, the Department has recently acquired an interactive whiteboard to teach composition. Head of Department Professor Roger Marsh explains that the equipment enables him to project up a composition for the group to view, and then to experiment with the effects of changed notation or timing, playing back the results.

**Music in the community**

The Department is involved in a wide range of ‘outreach’ activities, including the Students in Schools initiative, where performances of a children’s opera composed by Nicola LeFanu were facilitated by students, and the Hands and Voices choir, which combines singing and sign language. Bruce Cole’s MA in Community Music has pioneered some of the most challenging outreach work with the Wetherby Young Offenders’ Institution and with Everthorpe Prison near Brough. Students use music to teach offenders both life and professional skills by exploiting their interest in particular kinds of music, such as club, rap, or guitar-based rock. On one occasion, this involved an impromptu organ recital by a York organ scholar with clients of the Bridge project in Bradford Cathedral. Funding from the Department, from government and from prison authorities allows students to provide offenders with access to mixing ‘decks’, through which DJ-ing and other skills can be developed.

For some offenders, such projects enable them to access education from which they have previously felt excluded, often because of undiagnosed conditions such as autism or dyslexia. Inevitably, music can arouse strong emotions in these individuals, and Bruce encourages students to remember that “we are just piano players, not social workers”. Nevertheless, students are fully trained, and are offered counselling to support them throughout the course. Whilst not all departments will have the courage or means to embark on this form of outreach activity, there are possible synergies here with, for example, Health Sciences, or Sociology.

For more information on the topics covered in this article, please contact:

Jo Wainwright – ext 4748; email jpw6
(first year practical project)

Tim Howell – ext 2433; email tth1
(the project system)

For more on the project system at York, see Tim’s contributions to the FDTL-funded Professional Integration Project: http://pipdbs.rcm.ac.uk

Ambrose Field – ext 2430; email aef3
(learning and teaching technologies)

Bruce Cole – ext 4693; email bwc2
(music in the community)

Nicola LeFanu – ext 2444; email nfl1
Roger Marsh – ext 2432; email rmm6
Editorial: the relationship between teaching and research

The theme of this issue is the relationship between teaching and research, which is explored from a number of angles.

In a University consistently described as ‘research-led’, yet whose reputation is also built on excellence in teaching, the topic is usually dynamic and occasionally dynamite – especially with so many minds focused on the demands and impacts of the Research Assessment Exercise.

How do research and teaching connect and interconnect? Is the relationship symbiotic, parasitic, or synergistic? Is it necessary, sufficient or neither? These questions underlie and inform the articles in this issue of Forum. The same theme will be taken up at the Annual Learning and Teaching Conference on 25 May, where there will be the opportunity to exchange ideas across the York constituency and with speakers from other universities. See the back page for further details and a registration form.

Juliet Koprowska
Chair of the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching

News

Training better researchers

Training and development for postgraduates and researchers is now better-resourced than ever before. Funding from HEFCE and the research councils has enabled the University to enhance its provision in this area, so that it now boasts a three-strong team of Graduate Training Officers, headed by Dr Karen Clegg. “We aim to provide the best possible development opportunities for York’s researchers,” says Karen. This will be achieved through programmes provided centrally, and by supporting departments in their provision of more subject-specific training.

The Research Student Skills (RSS) programme offers courses on all aspects of research and generic skills, and from the summer term, a programme of Professional Development Courses (PDC) will include courses and exchange fora for post-doctoral and contract researchers. Plans for 2005/6 include the development of a comprehensive website providing access to resources for researchers. In the meantime, the programmes will be advertised through departments and on the Student Skills Development Unit webpages: see www.york.ac.uk/admin/ssdu/gradstudents/pgscourses.html.

If you have any suggestions or questions about training, please feel free to get in touch with Karen Clegg: ext 4847; email kvc500.

The Graduate Training team: Eleanor Loughlin, Helen Lawrence and Karen Clegg

Funding opportunities

Teaching Innovation and Development Committee warmly invites colleagues to submit bids under the following schemes:

Teaching enhancement projects

Grants of up to £5,000 are available to support innovative or developmental projects in learning and teaching. Funds might be used to purchase equipment and materials, buy out staff time, cover travel expenses or attend a conference, for example.

Further information, including an application form, is available at: www.york.ac.uk/admin/aso/TIDC/FundWel.htm.

Activities to disseminate good practice

Departments and groups involved in learning and teaching are invited to bid for up to £750 to fund activities to disseminate good practice in this area, for example through an ‘away day’ or workshop. Any proposal to share good practice in learning and teaching will be considered, and collaborative bids between departments are particularly welcome.

Further information, including an application form, is available at: www.york.ac.uk/admin/aso/TIDC/DissFunds.htm.

The next deadline for applications is 10 May 2005.

Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning

Colleagues will recall that last autumn, the University submitted two bids to HEFCE for Centres for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETLs): one in Work-based Learning, and the other a White Rose initiative, led by Sheffield, for a CETL in Enterprise. The White Rose bid was successful, and Forum offers its congratulations to all concerned and particularly to Tony Ward from the Department of Electronics, who championed the bid on York’s behalf.

The bid, worth £500,000 of recurrent funding and £2 million of capital expenditure, proposes a CETL which will “make the teaching and learning of Enterprise more engaging and purposeful, equipping more young people for successful careers in business, as social entrepreneurs, or as enterprising employees”. Tony Ward will lead developments at York, centring around a media-rich Enterprise Zone based on the Science Park, which will act as an institutional focal point for students, researchers and staff interested in Enterprise.

Plans include the development and dissemination of new teaching resources for Enterprise across all subject areas, especially the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences, a programme of pedagogical research, and rewards for excellence in Enterprise teaching.

For further information, please contact Tony on ext 3021; email aew@ohm.york.ac.uk.

The Graduate Training team: Eleanor Loughlin, Helen Lawrence and Karen Clegg

The next deadline for applications is 10 May 2005.
Educational Studies: reflection and innovation

Jane Rostron visited the Department of Educational Studies to find out about teaching innovations and collaborative learning.

Smaller class sizes, a focus on the individual, and giving teachers the scope to innovate beyond the curriculum sounds like the educational land that New Labour forgot, but it is evidently part of the ethos in the small but rapidly expanding Department of Educational Studies. One of the oldest departments in the University, it now has a student population of around 350, split equally between undergraduates, PGCE students, and postgraduates studying on a wide range of programmes, including new MAs in Citizenship and Global Education and in Language Learning and Education. In addition, the Department is soon to launch an MA in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages, aiming to embrace multimedia technology and e-learning in its delivery.

You would expect a Department that sees Education as a “transformative personal, social and political activity” to practise as it preaches, and so with this in mind, I set out to ask colleagues how they approach their subject, focusing in particular on two teaching innovations: the use of ‘learning logs’, and the development of collaborative learning for staff and students alike.

Learning logs

The Department’s teaching ethos emphasises the processes behind learning and teaching as well as the outcomes. Dr Nick McGuinn’s students keep individual ‘learning logs’ throughout his module Literature and Education – a project developed with the help of funding from Teaching Innovation and Development Committee (see page 3). In the original exercise, following a group seminar, students were asked to write something about what they felt they had learned and what had interested them. They were then asked to reflect on the work they had done since the seminar, and to hand the log over to Nick for comment. Some changes have been made to the process since Nick developed the logs with Dr Sylvia Hogarth in 2001, as Nick explains: “Sylvia noticed back then that I tended to write a brief, general summative comment, so now I encourage them to focus upon particular issues, providing more structure than before.”

Nick points out that the extensive literature on learning logs generally regards them as useful tools for facilitating active and reflective learning, and that they also serve as aide-mémoires for students when writing assignments. However, he acknowledges that from the tutor’s perspective, reviewing the logs is time-consuming: they are not formally assessed, but students are required to hand them in for weekly feedback. Yet there are benefits for the tutor too: “Learning logs allow me to see more or less immediately and in detail what the students found exciting and interesting about the module, and what was less successful. They also give me a fuller picture of students’ progress and an insight into the kind of work they do in between teaching sessions, which helps me to understand and thus support the students more fully.”

Collaborative learning

The approach to learning as a process is also evident in a module developed by Dr John Issitt as part of his Forum Teaching Fellowship. Students work together over the course of a term to produce an introductory textbook on Educational Studies, developing their academic skills and their ability to work as a team. Last term’s issue of Forum looked in detail at how the group exercise is assessed (see Issue no.7 – Autumn 2004, pages 6 and 7), but it is worth highlighting here the benefits and challenges that the project has produced for students and staff.

After an exhaustive group editing and redrafting exercise that culminates in sending the completed textbook to the printers, students then agree marking criteria, and are asked to spend 20 minutes in exam conditions assessing each other’s input: a process, John says, that "weighs heavily on their shoulders as they have to make some pretty hard decisions". John expected the process to be “empowering” but was interested to discover that it was not always so. “If, as a student, you get a bad mark, you can rail against the system, rationalise it and find a way of making it OK, but if it’s your peer group making the decision, there’s more potential for deep personal hurt.”

On the whole, students value the exercise, but as John points out: “You have to remember students of Education are likely to be well-disposed to this kind of thing, because the process of learning is precisely what they have chosen to study.”

The textbook exercise is just one example of collaborative working, and Professor Graham Vulliamy emphasises the Department’s commitment to collaboration and sharing good practice amongst staff as well as students. The Department runs regular ‘Teaching Workshops’, where staff explore such themes as ‘small group learning’, ‘staff
Equality and diversity: encouraging reflection

Wendelin Romer reports on the first stage of the University’s Equality and Diversity in the Curriculum project.

“Over the past year, I have been exploring the extent to which current curricula across campus are informed by an understanding of equality and diversity, looking at good practice, gaps in knowledge and practice, and staff training needs. The first stage of the project involved a series of focus groups, interviews and workshops with a range of staff, and also funded three specific pieces of work to enhance or develop practice (details below).

A major issue raised by staff was the importance of academic freedom: as one participant commented, “The day I am told what I have to teach is the day I stop.” The project’s approach is to encourage reflection on equality and diversity within the curriculum, rather than to impose token elements on existing practice, or take a punitive approach based on simplistic interpretations of legislation. For example, during discussions with a participant, it was clear that their teaching and curriculum already engaged fully with race and ethnicity issues. However, they had not to date considered disability as an issue within the area of study, and we had a useful exchange which provided food for thought on both sides.

It was clear from the project’s findings that guidance and support for staff are needed on how to address equality and diversity in the curriculum, and that there are issues of capacity and resources. A second 18-month phase, supported by continued HEFCE Teaching Quality Enhancement Funding, will focus on staff development, promoting awareness and knowledge of the issues. Further pilot projects will be initiated to build good practice models and a repository of case studies. The final part of the project will be a formal evaluation of its impact.

A formal report on the first stage of the project has been presented to Teaching Committee and Equal Opportunities Committee; summaries are available from Wendelin: ext 4177; email wr3.

Pilot projects

With input from colleagues, Masoumeh Velayati from the Department of Health Sciences has developed an equality and diversity web resource, available at www.york.ac.uk/healthsciences/equality/webresource.htm. The site contains links to examples of good practice and resource materials to support the curriculum, grouped by theme (e.g. gender, disability) and by the type of resource (e.g. modules, legislation). The resource is regularly updated, and is currently being evaluated – for more information, contact Susan Major: ext 1313, email sm39.

In conjunction with the Department of Electronics, the YCAP team is developing a user-friendly equality and diversity e-learning resource to provide YCAP participants with examples of good practice as well as to gain an understanding of related legislation. The materials will supplement YCAP workshops by offering interactive and more flexible opportunities for learning. Further information is available from Dr Sue Grace: ext 4843, email sg10.

Dr Philippa Hoskin from the Borthwick Institute is leading the creation of two sets of webpages, one highlighting known and possible archival sources for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual (LGBT) history within the Borthwick, and providing links to other useful internet resources; the second providing similar information in a series of pages concerning the history of race relations and discrimination. The LGBT webpages can be found at www.york.ac.uk/inst/bihr/guideleaflets/lgbwebsite/index.htm, and the race history pages at www.york.ac.uk/inst/bihr/guideleaflets/racewebsite/index.htm. For further information, please contact Philippa Hoskin: ext 1162, email ph19.
In depth: the inter-relationship between teaching and research

The Forum asked Dr Sylvia Hogarth from the Department of Educational Studies to investigate how colleagues link their research with their teaching. We report on her findings.

Amidst the media storm over top-up fees, many other potentially controversial aspects of the government's White Paper on higher education received little publicity. One such aspect is the White Paper's vision of a sector where some institutions concentrate on teaching only, whilst others focus just on research – a view recently challenged by the government's own Higher Education Research Forum, which asserted in a report that teaching and research are "essential and intertwined". The Times Higher reported before Christmas that the Minister for Higher Education, Kim Howells, "has already indicated a willingness to take the group's recommendations on board"

Meanwhile, at York, it is clear where most colleagues stand on the issue. Between April and September 2004, Dr Sylvia Hogarth from the Department of Educational Studies carried out a cross-campus survey of academic staff, commissioned by the Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching, focusing on the inter-relationship between teaching and research. Every one of the 23 departmental teaching representatives interviewed replied that within their departments, teaching is commonly informed by research, and that this approach is "very strongly" encouraged.

A matter of policy?
In most departments, this approach is more "a long-standing culture" than a formally-documented policy. However, there are two significant exceptions. The Department of Archaeology's research programme on the Wold landscapes east of York serves not only as a focus for students' own research projects, but as the basis for undergraduate geophysical and topographical survey exercises, thus collecting valuable data. Integration goes one step further in the Department of Music, where the undergraduate curriculum is explicitly structured into termly projects based on staff research interests (for further details, see pages 1 and 2). Other departments have articulated the links in various ways, for example, the Department of Environment does so through its programme specifications, and the Department of Educational Studies held a staff discussion workshop on the theme a few years ago.

As well as talking to departmental representatives, Sylvia Hogarth gathered a rich collection of examples of individual practice, speaking to 40 colleagues, from YCAP participants to Heads of Department. Some staff use their research findings as case studies: for example, within the Sociology module, Language and Social Institutions, students work with recordings of trials and medical consultations gathered in the course of Professor Paul Drew's research. Other colleagues, such as Professor Brian Fulton from the Department of Physics, involve students more actively at the cutting edge (see case study opposite); indeed, the Department of Mathematics offers a specific module, Recent Advances in Mathematics, to introduce third year undergraduates to current research areas in which the Department is actively involved.

Why make the link?
Colleagues were quick to explain why they link their research with their teaching. The most common reason was that the practice allows staff to communicate their enthusiasm for the subject from their own experience – as one commented: "it gives currency and zest to the teaching". Many staff agreed that "students react positively to practical examples of what an academic has done". Tony Tew from the Department of Electronics uses his research in the field of assistive technology for disabled people within a first year course in digital electronics. "I demonstrate the intuitive control of a wheelchair using movements of my head alone, and finish the lecture a little early to allow time for some of the braver students to have a go themselves." Tony reports that this has the added benefits of providing a change of pace in the lecture, and "a little relevant entertainment".

Many staff introduce their research into their teaching as a means of encouraging a critical approach – for example, within the Department of Chemistry, Dr Peter O'Brien uses his own research papers to teach scientific literacy skills through a 'comprehension' exercise. "Personal contact allows students to appreciate that researchers and their publications are open to critique and reinterpretation," commented one contributor. Colleagues were also conscious of the need to encourage students to become researchers themselves. Although the Forum report focused specifically on how staff bring their own research into their teaching
rather than student research projects, undoubtedly the former can stimulate the latter. As one colleague commented, using your research in your teaching "puts a more human face on research, and hopefully convinces students that postgraduate work is not beyond them".

Reciprocal benefits

Linking teaching and research can also aid the researcher in a variety of ways. Several colleagues involve students in the collection and analysis of data to the benefit of both parties. Dr Fiona Polack from the Department of Computer Science has introduced her research into transaction modelling (the processes initiated by a user when interacting with a database) into routine undergraduate practicals. Students use adapted approaches to transaction modelling developed by Fiona’s research team as part of the practical, which provides insight into the variability of the adaptation.

Teaching preparation can feed into research: Dr Matthew Townend from the Department of English, who is involved in an international project to re-edit the entire corpus of skaldic poetry, has introduced some into his teaching at undergraduate and postgraduate level. “In endeavouring to teach this difficult and overlooked genre of poetry, I am myself learning all the time,” he says. Apposite comments from students can also be helpful: Dr Ron Weir from the Department of Economics reports how “questions from students about the performance of Irish industry made me realise just how poorly developed business history was in Ireland, and resulted in an article”.

The full report can be found at: www.york.ac.uk/felt/gpresource/research &teaching.htm, and the following ‘further reading’ may also be of interest:


A Jenkins and R Zetter, Linking research and teaching in departments, LTSN Generic Centre, 2003


The Department of Physics has a nationally and internationally recognised Nuclear Astrophysics research programme, which has been established over the last four years. In keeping with the Department’s practice of offering final year modules based on current research activities, I give an 18-lecture module on this topic, which is taken by students on the Physics with Astrophysics degree, and is an option for other Physics students.

The module draws on knowledge the students will have gained in Nuclear Physics and Astronomy courses given in earlier years, and this enables the coverage to be extended to the limits of current knowledge. Indeed, one of the challenges for the students is to be able to accept that what they are learning in parts of the course is only our current best guess at how nature behaves, which may or may not turn out to be correct as our knowledge and measurements develop in the coming years. It is interesting that this lack of certainty is hard for some of the students to accept, after years of being taught established facts in earlier years of their degree programme.

At the beginning of the year, I offer the students two options: either the material is presented as ‘standard’ lectures, or I give them copies of the overheads before each lecture, and use the lecture time to explore their understanding by asking them questions or getting them to provide background explanations. I stress that the second option (on the face of it easier since they don’t have to take notes) is not the easy option, as I will be asking each individual student to contribute at least once in every lecture period. Gratifyingly, in all but one year, the students have agreed to the latter approach, and it has been very stimulating. The students enter into the spirit of the sessions and are willing to say what they understand when asked about specific aspects. One benefit I find is that misunderstandings can be identified ‘in real time’ and corrected during the lecture period.

From my point of view, the sessions are much more enjoyable than giving a standard lecture, although I have to be prepared to field questions to which I don’t know the answer. I have found the students perfectly happy to hear me say this, especially if I offer to come back with some answers at the next lecture. The only caveat is that on the one occasion in recent years where the students opted for the traditional approach, the exam marks were equally good!

Brian Fulton, Physics

Brian Fulton can be contacted on ext 2217; email brf2
Teaching space and facilities: room for improvement?

Nigel Lowe reports on a visit to the Directorate of Facilities Management (DFM) and the Timetabling Office.

Last term, Forum asked its designated departmental contacts for comments on their experiences of teaching facilities at York, in preparation for my visit to DFM and the Timetabling Office. With some trepidation, I marshalled the feedback, comprising, perhaps inevitably, more complaints than compliments, and went to meet Sue Johnston, Manager of Campus Services.

Of course, the best teaching will be compromised by inappropriate teaching space, and unfortunately this does happen. However, Sue pointed out that many of the departments who had made comments had never provided any direct feedback to DFM. “There are notices in each teaching room outlining how to report faults, and we will rectify problems quickly,” she says. “But we want to encourage users to become involved in the evolution of teaching facilities: this is much more useful to us than reactive complaints.” One example Sue gave was over the issue of ‘climate control’. By pursuing various complaints about air conditioning facilities, it became clear that many apparent problems could be easily resolved by providing clearer operating instructions – and DFM has duly responded.

Timetabling

I spoke to Rosemary Royds and Sarah Farr in the Timetabling Office about the challenges of their particular role. The vast majority of the University’s teaching is centrally timetabled through an electronic system, which offers some benefits, in particular the facility to accommodate disabled students. By entering a student’s number, the system can access the complete student timetable, so that a department can match the practicality of the teaching locations against the student’s particular needs, and changes can be introduced at the draft stage of timetabling.

This is a key part of the central timetabling process, involving lecturers and their departmental Timetabling Officers. Details of room layout and facilities are provided on the web, and there is a responsibility on both sides to check that room allocation is sensible. Problems not picked up here are certain to manifest themselves later, and constructive dialogue is welcomed. “People can email or telephone us, and it is always helpful if it is in a spirit of co-operation,” Rosemary says, acknowledging that “timetabling can be an explosive issue”.

Colleagues can also help to avoid other common complaints, such as when the published layout of a room is disrupted by a previous class. Other problems arise when rooms are booked but not used: during a ‘space utilisation check’ towards making a case for Campus East, Sue Johnston found a large lecture room empty, which had been booked ‘just in case’, whilst in a smaller room, a lecturer was having to teach half the cohort at a time. Sue commented wryly that if the University made a charge for room use, such practices would soon stop!

The Audio-Visual Service

Rather than just concentrating on complaints, I met up with Rob Whitton, Manager of the Audio-Visual Service, who, along with his team of five technicians, is evidently much appreciated, judging from staff responses to the Forum survey. Perhaps curiously, I asked why a set-up team was preferable to providing data projection equipment as standard in all teaching rooms. Rob explained that data projectors are expensive, delicate and prone to obsolescence, and consequently it is more cost-effective to hold a stock of data projectors and deliver them to teaching rooms as required.

New teaching spaces

I also asked Adrian Morris, Assistant Projects Surveyor in Estates Services, about recent improvements to teaching space through building work. Current highlights include the conversion of Langwith College Dining Room into a large, tiered lecture theatre. This has enabled further development of a generic specification for teaching rooms – a move sufficiently bold to have attracted attention from other universities.

During my visit, I soon realised that I have a very narrow view of the structures behind providing teaching rooms and facilities. Sue Johnston and I wondered whether something addressing this might become part of YCAP, so that University staff would increasingly understand the wider environment in which they have come to work. It might reduce the amount of explosive feedback if nothing else!

For further information on the topics covered in this article, please contact:
Sue Johnston, Campus Services – ext 2007; email sjj7
Sarah Farr, Timetabling Office – ext 4746; email sf16
Rob Whitton, Audio-Visual Service – ext 3031; email rw8
Adrian Morris, Estates Services – ext 2184; email alm6
Student Focus

Should your teachers also be researchers?

We asked a small group of students from across campus about their experiences of staff using research in their teaching.

All the students felt that it was important for their teachers to be engaged in research, as this adds excitement and energy to the teaching. “If you’re interested enough to teach a subject, how can you resist researching it too?” For one Social Sciences student, it was particularly important to know “that lecturers have not always been in an ivory tower reading books, but have researched things as they really are on the ground. It gives you more confidence in the member of staff – they have more credibility.”

The students’ experiences of staff using research in their teaching varied: whereas some engaged with current research findings as a core part of their studies, others had experienced more ‘off-the-cuff’ contact. Several said it was quite common for lecturers to explain the research process behind a concept: “It’s interesting to see how ideas go in and out of fashion – it gives you a sense of timescale and development.” The students from the Sciences particularly appreciated their lecturers using their research for practical demonstrations – “it’s easier to understand if you see it at work” – but acknowledged that this is not always possible, especially when specialised machinery is involved.

It was clear that the students had enjoyed their exposure to research activity, and felt it would help inspire their peers to pursue research themselves. “In our Department, there are weekly lectures where staff talk about their research. A lot of us go even though the topics aren’t assessed – it’s interesting, and you pick up a lot more about your subject.” In particular, they appreciated the freshness of material which is still under development rather than cut-and-dried. “It’s good to hear a lecturer say ‘this is where I’m at and these are my problems’, rather than read a book where the ideas have been thought to death.” Interestingly, the students felt that staff did not always acknowledge that the research was their own, and that it was important to do so.

However, the students also came up with a number of caveats about the use of research in teaching. Some felt that it was important to ensure that a class understands the basics first. “It’s demoralising if a lecturer goes ahead too fast.” The students also felt there was a danger that staff might focus too much on their research area and not present a broad enough picture. “You can have too much of one viewpoint – it affects how much you get out of the topic.” Perhaps unsurprisingly, the students had an eye to assessment: “We have to focus on the principles, not just on specific examples”; “What happens if your essay doesn’t coincide with their research interest?”

In general, the students warned staff about pushing their ideas too forcefully. “We’re vulnerable to ideas and opinions, and it can be difficult for us to challenge you where the research is obviously your own. It becomes personal.”

The group did recognise that it is difficult for staff to juggle the demands of teaching and research; but they were adamant about the benefits of doing so. However, whereas they were clear that lecturers should engage with research, they did not think this necessarily held the other way around. “Some academics have clearly chosen academia for the research element, so they should just concentrate on that. If you’re going to teach, it’s important that you’re good at it.”

Memorable teaching . . .

Greg Dyke, Chancellor of the University of York:

“As a graduate of York, I’ve watched with pride as year after year, the University has come near the top of all those university league tables. 30 years after graduation, I’ve somehow managed to convince myself that I’m partly responsible for the University’s success. After all, I was taught there, and just look how many times York has won the award for top teaching.

Of course, those teaching me faced a real challenge when I first turned up as a pop journalist, with my one grade E A level, and with little, if any, understanding of academia. They understood the scale of the task when I wrote my first ever essay. Asked to explain the origins of the Industrial Revolution, I did what all good pop journalists did – I read half a chapter of a book, decided it addressed the question, and churned out an answer.

My Economic History tutor, recognising he had a problem on his hands, painstakingly explained that academic work was a little more sophisticated than that, and suggested it would be a good idea if I looked at more than a single theory in the future. And so began a three-year process of teaching and learning. Of course, I never became an academic star – the journalist in me would never have allowed it even if I’d had the ability – but I am forever grateful to a whole series of University of York academics who did their best, and in the process, fundamentally changed my life. Who can ask for more than that?”
Head to head: how necessary is it for teachers in higher education to be research-active?

Professor John Holman from the National Science Learning Centre and Dr Christine Skinner from the Department of Social Policy and Social Work discuss the issues.

Dear Christine,

How necessary is it for teachers in higher education to be research-active? I’d say very useful, but not essential. Teaching and research are very different activities: the first emphasising skill in communication and understanding of what other people are thinking, the second emphasising focus, concentration and attention to detail. Above all, good teachers need to be able to inspire: sometimes good researchers can do this, and sometimes they cannot.

Against all this, I’m pretty sure that a good teacher who is research-active is likely to do a better job than an equally good teacher who is not. The ability to draw on current research brings the subject alive, and if the research field is the lecturer’s own, the authenticity will be immediately apparent to students.

With good wishes,
John Holman

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With good wishes,
Christine Skinner

Dear Christine,

My immediate response to this question is: of course it is vital! Active researchers are (presumably) well-connected and respected in their field, up-to-date on the latest evidence and debates, and can bring a realism and enthusiasm to teaching that brings the subject alive for students.

However, I wonder whether this belief is well-founded, or a comforting folk tale, or different across disciplines? I have no answer. But I am reminded of the comments one of my students made last term in relation to Social Science research evidence on family policy: “Academics have no idea what it is like for people in the ‘real world’ – they spend too much time theorising.” It seems to me that the teaching based on research did bring the subject alive for this student, who was critically engaged with the evidence, but nonetheless it was not ‘real’ for her. Perhaps there is an additional dimension for Social Science teaching not only to bring subjects alive, but for lecturers to be enmeshed in research that is based on real life, and recognisable to students on an everyday level as well as on a theoretical level. I suppose I am suggesting that the belief in the inherent quality of ‘aliveness’ attached to research-active teaching needs further exploration?

With best wishes,
Christine Skinner

Dear Christine,

Good teachers at any level can bring a subject alive and there are as many ways of doing this as there are teachers. Part of the trick comes from understanding what, for a student, constitutes ‘aliveness’, and this understanding may come as much from native wit and empathy as from theoretical understanding.

The educational psychologist David Ausubel said: “The most important single factor influencing learning is what the learner already knows. Ascertain this and teach accordingly.” Good teachers seek first to understand what students are familiar with, then to extend their understanding beyond this frontier. What we are discussing in this exchange is the question of where the teacher takes the student next. Research-active teachers can take their students right up to the limits of current knowledge, and this can be a thrilling trip, but unless the trip starts from what the student currently knows, it may not be a fruitful one.

Best wishes,
John

Dear John,

The question of whether teachers in higher education need to be research-active clearly relates to concerns about the quality of teaching and the quality of student experience. The idea of ‘aliveness’ captures an aspect of quality fairly well. But I agree that being an active researcher in and of itself does not produce a good quality teacher. Non-research-active ‘professional lecturers’ can be just as up-to-date and enthusiastic – especially given the open and instant access to information and evidence on the web. It seems therefore, that ‘aliveness’ is an ‘added value’ component that can exist within a repertoire of teaching tools available to all, regardless of research activity.

Indeed, there may be something to be said for concentrating efforts into improving teaching delivery and quality without the competing demands of research. Another added value component of teaching attached
Putting educational theory into practice: student portfolios

Dr Jean McKendree describes how portfolios are used within the Hull York Medical School to encourage students to reflect and improve upon their communication skills and professional conduct.

"Students must receive regular and consistent information about their development and progress. Clinical logbooks and personal portfolios, which allow students to identify strengths and weaknesses and to focus their learning appropriately, can provide such information." (from Tomorrow’s doctors: Recommendations on undergraduate medical education, General Medical Council, 2003)

Hull York Medical School is dedicated to educating doctors who possess not only the knowledge to practise medicine but also, more importantly, the attitudes and behaviour that make a good doctor. Indeed, the majority of complaints filed against doctors are not caused by lack of knowledge, but concern communication problems and professional conduct. However, these skills are not easily assessed by standard written tests, so we have been exploring other methods.

We gather feedback from tutors in clinical placements, problem-based learning sessions and student electives about our students’ behaviour. However, although such feedback is extremely valuable, we emphasise to our students that they are the best source of feedback about their own attitudes. Whilst studies have found that external feedback can promote content knowledge and problem-solving skills (McKendree, 1990), deeper conceptual learning is not learned as effectively by receiving feedback or explanations from experts (Chi et al, 2000). Rather, deep learning occurs when learners generate their own explanations to reflect on the differences between their own belief or understanding and that of others (McKendree, 2002). This holds for personal attributes as well as cognitive knowledge.

Portfolios have been introduced in many medical schools for formative and summative assessment. Their strength lies in producing a cumulative record which students can use for reflection – to analyse past activities and experiences in order to identify progress, barriers and achievements, and to learn from this exercise in order to plan future actions and encourage commitment to self-improvement (Hatton and Smith, 1995). However, a serious reflective approach must be underpinned by time and practice (Moon, 2003). Students can find reflection difficult and threatening, and feel vulnerable exposing their perceptions and beliefs to others.

We therefore stress to students that everyone can improve: no one is perfect when starting out – or indeed ever! Identifying gaps or needs is an indicator of professionalism, and is recognised as such by the General Medical Council. Through the portfolio exercises, we aim to instil values in our students which they will carry with them throughout their lives.

References


Jean McKendree can be contacted on ext 1751; email jean.mckendree@hyms.ac.uk

Dear Christine,

I wonder if it is significant that the most popular higher education institutions (as measured by their average A level intake scores) are those in which teaching staff are overwhelmingly research-active? Does this demonstrate that the best teaching comes when the teacher is research-active? Or is it because the prospect of a job which combines research and teaching is more attractive, and therefore likely to attract more capable staff? I suspect the latter. And I wonder what would happen if a university like ours were to offer to relieve staff of their research responsibilities so they can spend more time preparing for teaching? I suspect this would not be nearly as popular as relief from teaching responsibilities in order to concentrate on research.

All of which leads me to conclude that being research-active is not in itself an essential feature of a successful teacher in higher education, but that an institution that offers the opportunity to carry out research is likely to attract better teaching staff than one that does not. Or is this an unacceptably elitist view?

With good wishes,

John

You are invited to further the discussion. Please contact the Forum editorial team c/o Alice Wakely (ext 2018; email aw31), or contact the correspondents individually: John Holman – ext 8301; email jsh4 Christine Skinner – ext 1251; email ches100
Annual Learning and Teaching Conference

Wednesday 25 May 2005

12.30 – 5.30pm, Physics/Electronics Exhibition Area

12.30 Buffet lunch and poster display of teaching enhancement projects and learning support services at York

1.40 Workshop 1: The relationship between teaching and research
   Strand 1: Integrating research and teaching
   Alan Jenkins, Oxford Centre for Staff Learning and Development
   Strand 2: Managing research and teaching
   Trevor Sheldon, Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Teaching and Learning
   Sue Mendus, Academic Co-ordinator for the Social Sciences
   Strand 3: Teaching skills to research students
   Speakers to include John Sparrow, Department of Biology

3.00 Workshop 2: Equality and inclusion
   Plenary: The Equality and diversity in the curriculum project
   Wendelin Romer, Equal Opportunities Office
   Strand 1: Race and ethnicity
   Stuart Billingham, York St John College: race equality and inclusion
   Philip Warwick, Department of Management Studies: academic skills for students with English as a second language
   Strand 2: Disability
   Adrian Harrison, Department of Biology: a practical approach to teaching students with disabilities
   Lawrie Phipps, TechDis: a service to enhance provision for disabled students and staff through technology
   Strand 3: Class
   Connie Cullen, Director of Admissions and Schools Liaison: widening participation and the issue of affirmative action
   Paul Wakeling, Department of Sociology, University of Manchester: the effect of class on continuation to postgraduate study

4.30 The University of York Excellence in Teaching Lecture
   Tony Ryan, EPSRC Senior Media Fellow and ICI Professor of Physical Chemistry at the University of Sheffield

5.30 Drinks reception and informal discussion

www.york.ac.uk/felt/conference

If you are interested in attending the Annual Learning and Teaching Conference, please complete this form and return to Janet Barton, Academic Support Office by 27 April 2005.

Name: ____________________________________ Department: ____________________________________

Telephone: ________________ Email: ______________________________ Are you a YCAPer? ____________________

Please specify any dietary requirements for lunch: ___________________________________________________________

Workshop 1 preferred strand: ______ Workshop 2 preferred strand: ______ Attending lecture? ______________________

Attending drinks reception? ______

Thank you for registering your interest. Further details will be sent to you nearer to the event.