Physics: teaching fusion

Nigel Lowe visited the Physics Department to find out that teaching involves a bit of everything, from the staunchly traditional ‘chalk and talk’ to the latest pioneering adventures with the VLE.

Paddy Barr, Deputy Head of Department and Chair of the Departmental Teaching Committee, tells me that his colleagues would ‘defend to the death’ the practice of using blackboards as the main means of transferring information. Naturally, other media are exploited but only where they provide genuine enhancement, such as presenting complicated diagrams, graphical data and photographs via Powerpoint. Professor Peter Main uses the mathematical software Maple in his lectures. The strength of this package is that it can be used to illustrate mathematical results visually through animations. This is something Peter uses extensively in his Year 2 vector calculus course and other courses dealing with the physics of waves. Peter points out, “The thing about waves is that they move – so why not use animations to show this?”

Peter Main is widely held to be one of the Department’s inspirational lecturers, known to get spontaneous applause in his courses. (“It has happened,” he concedes modestly when we later meet!) The Institute of Physics recently invited him to be a plenary lecturer at a workshop on inspirational lecturing. Peter used examples from his Year 1 ‘Physics of Music’ option to illustrate the five key elements of his teaching. I offer these here not as a sure-fire route to inspirational lecturer status but because others might find them thought-provoking when contemplating their own teaching:

- **Start with the familiar** – build on the students’ current knowledge.
- **Arouse curiosity** – generate interest so that students want to learn.
- **Generate surprise** – the unexpected generates interest and heightens attention.
- **Foster adventure** – encourage exploration and discovery, search out the unknown.
- **Have fun** – entertain the students and allow them to participate.

With thanks to Fabiano Corsetti of the University of York Physics Society, for the use of these images

(continued on page 2)
Peter talks about a confrontation with an undergraduate who told him, “You treat all students like idiots.” Before Peter could defend himself, he added, “You assume we know nothing and you explain everything in a way that I can understand.” So that’s a good thing! As to generating surprise, Peter tells me how he teases out the wave equation from Maxwell’s celebrated equations whilst demonstrating vector calculus. This epiphany is “something they seem to like” he comments with a smile. Rounds of applause for the ‘Physics of Music’ with its context and demonstrations (which Peter makes full use of) is one thing but rounds of applause for vector calculus! It probably tells us all we need to know about Peter.

York has been successful in riding out the recent national downturn in applications for Physics. Paddy Barr attributes this to York’s general popularity, though the Department makes considerable effort through open days and by making sure that all potential applicants can speak one-on-one to a member of staff there. The Department also has a commendable history of delivering public lectures nationally and, through the 6th-Form magazine Physics Review, keeps a second foot in the door with many schools. Peter Main is involved in both and was a founder member, with Jim Matthew, of a lecture team given the Institute of Physics ‘Public Awareness of Physics Award’ for a nationally toured talk on chaos, which now also includes Sarah Thompson. Ingenious demonstrations devised and constructed by Mat Hill – the senior technician – and his section make a strong contribution to the effectiveness of such outreach activities, as they do to the Department’s undergraduate teaching.

Another perspective on teaching comes from David Jenkins, a lecturer for just three years. He echoes Paddy Barr and Peter Main when pointing out how Physics looks after its students through small group teaching and the supervisory system. It also supports its undergraduates at various levels in those parts of the course that are traditionally challenging. Support in mathematics comes from compulsory maths classes (particularly for those whose mathematics is exposed by the diagnostic test taken on arrival), problem-solving workshops led by staff and, latterly, the Physics Undergraduate Consultancy Service! This last component is an informal peer-led drop-in session where senior undergraduate volunteers help newer undergraduates with whatever course problems that they are having. David also mentions how the practical course has benefited from substantial investment with modern, commercial facilities supplanting old, idiosyncratic hardware that required constant gentle persuasion from the technical staff. The programme of experiments has been revisited making a more coherent path through physics and culminating in a final-year project that is tied to real research. This last element, David feels, has received a real boost with the recent influx of new research staff into Physics. A significant proportion of staff have been at the University five years or less, and in that time some areas – such as nuclear physics – have become real research powerhouses. David feels that this research vibrancy has added fresh impetus to what was already a Department that prided itself on its teaching.

Timely mention should be made of a recent project, involving David Jenkins, which supports teaching of astrophysics. David gives credit for this to a graduate student, Paul Kent, who has championed the idea with the support of David and his colleague Charles Barton. This is ‘ROY’ – the Robotic Observatory at York – one of the University’s embryonic VLE pilot projects. The project sprang from a bequest from Paul Kent’s family with support from the Institute of Physics, the Alumnus Fund, and the TIDC. The £15,000 will provide a good-quality, small reflector telescope atop the Physics tower controlled remotely by undergraduates via the VLE. It will allow observations to be made to appropriate celestial schedules without requiring late night rain-stop-play undergraduate huddles in the University’s larger telescope building. The VLE will act as a repository for the images accumulated and will host discussion boards relating to their acquisition and analysis. There is also outreach potential in the project with local schools being offered access to the system once it has become established. David hopes that this tentative first toe in the VLE waters will establish the medium with Year 1 students and that increasing use will be made of it thereafter. A second VLE project is also underway, aimed at handling the assessment of the weekly problem solving that the student undertake with options to permit central discussion of the commonly arising issues.

For further information, please contact:
Paddy Barr – ext 2275; email hcb1
Peter Main – ext 2265; email pm1
David Jenkins – ext 2248; email dj4
For details of the ROY project, see www.york.ac.uk/admin/aso/TIDC/Reports0405.htm#158
Editorial: looking forward

The annual round of National Teaching Fellowships is getting underway, so look out for information being distributed across the university for these and for new Vice-Chancellor’s Teaching Awards. In this issue, see a critique of the NTFS scheme in the column taking the place of Head-to-Head, which starts with some opinionated ‘Grumpy Old Academics’ (thanks to John Brown of Social Policy and Social Work for this idea). Meanwhile, against the backdrop of the National Student Survey, there is an article by Karen Clegg on Assessment and Feedback. The Student Focus Group also took feedback as its subject and offered views echoing Karen’s in stressing the value of feedback in improving their understanding of and learning from the assessment process. Visits to Admissions and Schools Liaison, the Library’s e-learning resources, and the Physics Department are featured. Finally, don’t forget to look at the details of the Annual Learning and Teaching Conference on 17 May which appear on the back page, and sign up for registration.

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

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, to buy out staff time, to cover travel expenses or attend a conference.

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

E-learning projects
Grants of up to £3,000 are available to support the development of e-learning for both campus-based and distance learning programmes. The emphasis should be on activities such as online discussions or simulations, which engage the learner, rather than on static information resources.

Further information, including an application form, is available at www.york.ac.uk/univ/org/learntech/funding/epllearningfunds.htm

Enterprise projects
The White Rose Centre for Excellence in Teaching and Learning in Enterprise (CETLE) is offering grants of up to £10,000 to support the introduction of enterprise or entrepreneurship into existing modules or the creation of new modules in this area. Proposals from Social Science and Arts and Humanities departments are particularly welcomed, as are joint proposals from more than one department or between departments of the same discipline within the White Rose Consortium.

Further information, including an application form, is available at www.york.ac.uk/enterprise/portal/4_cetle_funding.html

The next deadline for applications is 10 May 2006

Limited funding is available to enable colleagues to attend learning and teaching conferences or workshops which are of use to their department or learning support service. To apply, please send a brief description of the event and how attendance will be of benefit, along with details of the amount requested, to Janet Barton (email jcb503; ext 2155) for consideration via Chair’s action.

News

Teaching Fellowships
This year sees the re-launch of the National Teaching Fellowship Scheme. No longer linked to a project, the awards are designed to raise the profile of learning and teaching and recognise individuals who have made an outstanding impact on the learning experience. Keen to use this opportunity to reflect on the strength of teaching at York and to build on our success in last year’s awards, the University will be nominating three candidates for the NTFS. Furthermore, the University will also be taking this opportunity to reward excellence in learning and teaching through its own internal scheme of recognition. The Forum Teaching Fellowships have been revised as the Vice-Chancellor’s Teaching Awards. The University will be awarding around ten of these, each of £1000. As with the NTFS there is no project requirement. We strongly urge you to give serious thought to your own strengths and expertise, and that of your colleagues. If you have not been involved in a nomination this year, it is not too soon to be considering a future application.

Learning and Teaching Conference
This year’s Learning and Teaching Conference is on the afternoon of 17 May. The event starts with a buffet lunch and poster presentation session, featuring many new projects and developments from around the University. The conference then focuses on its two themes, Employability and Teaching for Sustainability, both of which have plenary sessions and workshop discussions. The afternoon culminates in the annual York Excellence in Teaching Lecture, this year to be given by Professor Kel Fidler, Vice-Chancellor of Northumbria University. As York’s former Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Learning and Teaching and Deputy Vice-Chancellor, we take great pleasure in welcoming Prof Fidler back on this occasion. The evening closes with a drinks reception. For further information, see www.york.ac.uk/eltl/conference. You may also register using the slip on the back page of this issue of Forum.

New Forum member
Welcome to Dr Alpaslan Özerdem, our new Social Sciences Academic Associate. Alp teaches in the areas of post-conflict recovery and politics of humanitarianism, and he is Convener of the MA in Post-War Recovery Studies at the Post-War Reconstruction and Development Unit (PRDU). With field research experience in Afghanistan, Bosnia-Herzegovina, El Salvador, Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Sri Lanka and Turkey, Alp’s research interests centre around post-conflict reconstruction, reintegration of former combatants and disaster management. He was the principal researcher for a United States Institute of Peace (USIP) funded project on the reintegration of former combatants in Kosovo in 2000–01, and funded by The British Academy for his 2003–04 research project looking at the civil society–state relationships in Turkey. He has also taken an active role in the initiation and management of several consultancy and commissioned research projects at the PRDU.
Introducing *Yorkshare*

We asked Richard Walker (Project Leader for the VLE) to explain to Forum.

Despite its name, there is surprisingly little that is virtual about the VLE. It exists right now, it is being used successfully by staff and students, and it is overseen by a real implementation group who are located not in cyber space, but the top floor of the Raymond Burton Library. There is even a sign. But to begin and the beginning…

Following approval in November 2004, the University moved forward with its development of the VLE as part of its Learning and Teaching strategy. *Blackboard Academic Suite* was selected as the VLE's platform and installed in January 2005. *Blackboard* is a flexible learning system that supports a rich set of assessment, discussion and student tools. It also includes a content management system (CMS) - sort of a virtual filing cabinet used for storing all the teaching and learning resources deployed across the system. Learning and teaching materials stored within it will be fully accessible to all users, thus facilitating interdisciplinary discovery and learning. Another of Blackboard's strengths is its 'room for growth' – its capacity to incorporate new software and programs as required by different departmental learning and teaching needs. This will ensure that the VLE not only fits now, but that it will continue to do so in the future.

But in case the 'virtual filing cabinet' image has stuck in your mind, the VLE is much more than just a repository for lecture notes and slides. It provides staff with a single e-learning environment, linking communications, content delivery, course management and assessment, all with a focus on pedagogic needs. The flexibility of the environment for learning and teaching activities enables collaboration and the sharing of content amongst students, staff and their departments. This is the reason why we have adopted *Yorkshare* as the name for our VLE.

**Are we virtually there yet?**

So when can we expect to be using the VLE? The answer is, some of us already are. The VLE is already fully integrated with the Student Records system, for example, and there is a gateway established to the Library's electronic resources. Preliminary testing of the system was conducted over last summer, with prototype courses involving YCAP, the Computing Service and Departments of Economics and Related Studies, and Health Sciences.

The next part of the 'rollout', as it's called, involves a pilot phase, which is being conducted in two key stages over this academic year (2005–06) and the next (2006–07). The pilot phase, as its name suggests, is about testing the system while ensuring that training and enrolment processes are also running smoothly, before the VLE is made available to everyone. It also provides an opportunity to establish good pedagogic practice, by enabling academic staff and the implementation team to work together on developing innovative online components of modules, which complement class-based practice.

The first round of 21 pilot projects were presented to the Vice-Chancellor at the official launch of the VLE on 4 October 2005. These projects (running from January to July 2006) explore a range of student-centred pedagogic approaches, including problem-based learning, case-based learning, formative self-assessment activities and personalised learning pathways. A broad range of departments and disciplines are involved: Archaeology, Biology, Chemistry, Educational Studies, Economics and Related Studies, Health Sciences, History, Physics, Politics, Psychology, YCAP and the Graduate Training Unit.

The application process is currently open for the next round of pilot projects to run from October 2006 until July 2007. Anyone unsuccessful in securing a place in this second pilot phase will be invited to participate in the staged rollout of the VLE, beginning in October 2007. It is hoped that at this point a maximum of 7500 student accounts will be activated within the VLE, enabling the University to run both full courses and a range of restricted modules containing e-learning components during the academic year 2007-08.

Full availability of the system to all students across the university is targeted for the beginning of the academic year 2008-09.

So there we have it. The VLE offers us real learning, right now. It is hardly virtual at all…

**Further information**

Details on the VLE Implementation Group: http://www.york.ac.uk/univ/org/vle/vpig.htm

Information about approved pilot projects from the first round: http://www.york.ac.uk/univ/org/vle/pilotsuccess1.htm

Details on the VLE Advisory Group: http://www.york.ac.uk/univ/org/vle/advisory.htm

UCISA VLE Survey (longitudinal study of VLE deployment across the UK HE sector from 2001–05): http://www.ucisa.ac.uk/groups/elig/vle/index_html

Or contact Richard Walker (ext 4685; email rw23@york.ac.uk) or the rest of the E-Learning Development team
Do e-Librarians dream of electronic books?

Jane Rostron visited the Library to grapple with virtual resources . . .

The Google generation presents librarians with something of a challenge. Students want the answer now. They don’t do structured searches; they do lengthy natural language queries instead. They’re impatient and inflexible – who wants to drill down through a database to find an article? Why use a number of interfaces to find something? Worse, they may not even know what an electronic journal or online database is, or the difference between the two.

A little dystopian, perhaps, but you can understand the concerns. Do the expectations of those used to Google mean that students will lose the ability to research resources thoroughly? Some argue that Googlers need to learn the research skills necessary to deal with other online resources. Others suggest that interface designers need to learn the lessons of usability from the successful search engines.

The reality is that both things are probably a good idea – for undergraduates, a Google-type ‘quick and dirty’ search may often be sufficient, but a researcher needs more depth and detail in searching. Sue Cumberpatch (E-Information Services Support Coordinator) and Martin Wilkinson (Sciences and E-learning Development Librarian) introduced Forum to some of the advances in electronic library services. These advances won’t entirely satisfy the Google generation but they have significantly improved the outlook for those used to the rather clumsy search options previously available.

MetaLib and SFX

MetaLib, as its name suggests, is a one-stop-shop search interface for electronic library resources. You can cross-search databases and find electronic journals, save your searches for quicker access next time, and even get email alerts to tell you when the search you’ve saved has thrown up some new material. You can also check the Library catalogue while you’re at it to see if we have a print copy. For anyone used to clicking around through innumerable bibliographic sources and then out again, followed by a click through the A–Z of electronic journals listings to find the article you want – only to find we don’t stock it – this will seem like a Google-style boon. And you can finally say goodbye to that teeth-gritting moment when your students say things like “why can’t there be a single interface to all this stuff?” or “why do you list stuff in the bibliographic source without a link to the full text?” Good questions which are now thankfully answered by MetaLib and SFX software.

Electronic reading lists

The Library is piloting the use of ‘Resource List’ software in the University’s VLE. This means you can create an online electronic reading list which links directly through to the online resources on that list (journals, web-pages, e-books) and also to the Library catalogue (so users can see whether a print version is in stock). A link to online booksellers like Amazon gives price comparisons for students wishing to purchase their own copy. This list can be reused and updated whenever it’s needed for future runs of the course (how long do the library and course administrators currently spend in compiling and updating?). The readings on these lists can also be ‘embedded’ into course content itself, which means students can see a link to the reading in-situ, as well as get hold of everything in one view. Links to readings can also be done from web pages outside the VLE – so if you wanted to create a reading list on your module/course page on your departmental intranet, contact your Subject Librarian.

E-Books

If you’re in the social sciences, eBrary is definitely worth a look. Claiming 35,000 full text titles (that’s books, not journals), eBrary allows you to not only view and print pages, but also to highlight and write notes, almost like a ‘real’ book. If this can help resolve the problem of the lack of enough hard copies in the library, or the lack of access to a library at all (especially for part-time and distance learners), then it has to be worth a try. eBrary is just one of several e-book collections subscribed to by the Library.

ATHENS and other animals

Another future Google-ish development will be the use of one username and password to access everything – the University network, your Library Record, databases and e-journals, and MetaLib. At present, MetaLib is available using your University login but the others use ATHENS. However, thanks to software developments, over the next few years all resources will use the University login.

So – there’s much to explore and something to satisfy skilled researchers and Googlers alike. There is still some way to go in creating fully integrated online libraries, something the Library staff recognise, but developments are moving apace. Forum will update you on this as it happens but it’s important that staff and students use these tools and provide feedback, so that the Library can understand what works and what doesn’t.

Further information

MetaLib: http://metalib.york.ac.uk and for its excellent user guide: http://www.york.ac.uk/library/datanet/data base.htm

E-journals and e-books: http://www.york.ac.uk/services/library/ ejournal/

eBrary: http://site.ebrary.com/lib/york

Library surveys about e-resources and other services are in the pipeline, but please contact Sue at any time with any comments or suggestions: ext 3891; email sc17
Innovative approaches to assessment

Can you honestly claim that your assessments:

- enhance the student learning experience?
- provide useful and timely feedback?
- help students to understand and recognise quality?
- lead to improved performance?

Good formative assessment, that is, assessment which serves to help learners improve their learning, should meet these criteria. Yet too often we focus on the grades and quality assurance aspects of assessment and lose sight of the pedagogic role that assessment can and should play in improving learning. This short article aims to challenge ideas about assessment and highlight some of the areas in which we can improve assessment practice.

Context: why change?

Historically assessment has been used to justify grades and enable selection and recruitment. We have, perhaps, valued assessment as a tool to support accountability over assessment for learning. Research into student learning has revealed that albeit implicitly, we pass on these values to students who soon learn that strategic approaches such as question-spotting and cue-seeking pay dividends. If we really want our students to learn then we need to develop assessment that challenges them and provides formative feedback that can help students grow.

In the ‘golden age’ when all our students had similar educational backgrounds and we could make assumptions about the knowledge and skills they came to university with, assessment was less contentious. Invigilated examinations and course work served a purpose and supplied both the student and teacher with information about the progress being made. This golden age (if ever it existed), is over. We live and teach in complex times. Our student body is increasingly diverse, cases of academic misconduct are growing and our fee-paying students expect high-quality, timely, constructive feedback on their work.

The results of the National Student Survey 2005 caused a great flurry of media interest. On the whole, the results indicated general satisfaction with teaching. However there were indications that improvements could be made in assessment and feedback. The QAA reiterates this call for good feedback and highlights the use of general assessment criteria and discipline specific criteria to help demonstrate the consistency of institutional academic standards of provision. It also highlights the use of effective systems and procedures to support assessment practices. Here the University of York shines, starring twice in the ‘features of good practice’ section and applauded both for its comprehensive and regularly updated guide to policies and procedures provided for Chairs of Boards of Studies and for the Guide to Assessment Policies and Procedures. How then can we ensure that our practice is as good as our procedures?

Good feedback practice

Drawing on research and the literature on student feedback, David Nicol has identified seven principles of good feedback practice:

- helps clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, expected standards)
- facilitates the development of reflection and self-assessment in learning
- delivers high-quality information to students about their learning
- encourages teacher and peer dialogue around learning
- encourages positive motivational beliefs and self-esteem
- provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance
- provides information to teachers that can be used to help shape the teaching.

These principles provide a useful checklist for those designing assessment and help to ensure that assessment is both equitable and robust.

Assessment and plagiarism

Without assessment there would be no need to plagiarise. A sobering thought. Research into student learning has provided empirical evidence that assessments that reward memorisation and deny the opportunity for reflection promote surface approaches to learning. Similarly it teaches us that assessments that are related to real life, are relevant to the subject and provide appropriate assessment are likely to produce more sophisticated learning. Why then do we continue with inappropriate practices and blame technology and students for the shortcomings of assessment, which are entirely (or at least mostly) our creation? We cannot legislate for the determined student’s intent on doing well at the expense of others but we can address poorly designed assessment such that the majority of students are inspired enough not to compromise their academic integrity.

Innovative, authentic assessment that provides opportunities for students to evaluate their performance against negotiated criteria and offer timely, quality feedback goes a long way to combating the temptations of so-called internet ‘cheat-sites’ and e-bay.
Good assessments centre on the process of learning and examine the extent to which an individual has increased skills and understanding. This process can be evidenced through, for example, an oral examination, viva, debate, portfolio, skeleton draft, reflective log, team-work project or any other method that requires the student to account for the process of learning, the links and connections that prompted him or her to connect one piece of information in relation to his/her own experience. Accounting how you learned and the rationale for choosing to site one particular source over another is very difficult if you are not the author or orator of the particular piece of work. Speech is transparent and any falsification is immediately clear to an audience. It is very difficult even for the most practised orator, to pass off the work of someone else as his/her own when faced with inquisitive peers ready to ask challenging questions. Jude Carol suggests that in designing assessment, tutors should ensure that tasks include reference to current affairs (not dated such that old essays can be recycled) and require students to access primary sources. The more the task involves the student conducting research or referring to recent references the less opportunity there is for plagiarism. “The more analytical, specific and creative the task, the less likely the solution already exists and therefore, for the student, the task becomes ‘create the solution’ not ‘find the solution’.” There are endless possibilities for the learner to demonstrate thinking and engagement with the task, all of which make learning and teaching more interesting and plagiarism more difficult. Good practice in terms of deterring plagiarism is, per se, good assessment practice.

Tips for designing out plagiarism and improving assessment:

- reduce the final assessment
- require evidence of the process of learning
- set tasks that require analysis and evaluation rather than description
- vary the format – ask for reports, case studies, problem questions, empirical research
- ask for plans, drafts and outlines
- change the content and up-date examples
- use oral presentations, defence and peer review
- provide citation training.

Assessment design

Biggs’s concept of ‘constructive alignment’ has been much cited in work on assessment. Essentially the idea is that there should be a correlation between the explicit learning outcomes of a programme, the teaching and assessment. The student should know at the start of a course or module what is expected of them, how they will be taught and what the assessment is. It is easy and perhaps tempting to approach assessment design by looking at the assessment and then calculating what needs to be covered but this negates the purpose of the educational experience; we need to ascertain what we want students to achieve and then look at what students will do and how to develop their understanding. The assessment should simply record and support the learning process.

Assessment criteria play a crucial part in helping students understand what is required of them. Without them students have no benchmark against which to judge their progress and have no point of reference upon which to evaluate tutor feedback. In order to be useful to the student, feedback should also relate to the criteria such that the student who gets 74% understands how they might achieve the elusive 26% that separates them from perfection. However, this assumes that we mark to the full range. If, deep down, you know you’ve never given more than 80% for a piece of work then shouldn’t we let students know this? As Nicol argues, ‘good assessment provides opportunities to close the gap between current and desired performance’.

Research into self and peer assessment indicates that students who are encouraged to engage with assessment criteria reveal greater understanding of what constitutes quality and are more likely to improve their performance. Far from spoon-feeding, engaging students with criteria and involving them in qualitative peer assessment (giving feedback not grades) has pay-offs both in terms of motivation and achievement.

Innovative assessment

Perhaps in developing a set of guiding principles for innovative assessment we should think about what we really want for our students and what makes the York experience special. Assessment modes successfully being used across the University already include oral assessment; self and peer assessment; reflective logs; portfolio and work-based assessment (e.g. theory and practice working in tandem); practice-based assessment such as clinics and client based work (health science and medical education are particularly experienced in these areas); simulated learning and poster presentations. Through media such as Forum and the VLE perhaps we can enable a cross-fertilisation of ideas and begin to share and debate good practice around assessment.

Dr Karen Clegg writes in a personal capacity as a researcher of assessment and welcomes comments and feedback (1) on this article: kkc500; ext 4847. She is Director of Graduate Training and currently acting director, Professional and Organisational Development.

Further reading


N Entwistle and P Ramsden, Understanding Student Learning, London: Croom Helm (1983)


HEFCE have funded two main centres for excellence (CETL) on assessment: Assessment for Learning http://northumbria.ac.uk/cetl_afl/ Assessment Standards Knowledge Exchange (ASKe) http://www.business.brookes.ac.uk/askex.htm
How can you evaluate teaching?

Those whose concern is quality in teaching assume not only that such a thing exists but also that its properties can be measured. Because we seek to measure quality we assume that it is measurable or, rather, we choose to define as quality only that which can be measured. That is the utilitarian dilemma: poetry can be allowed to be better than pushpin only if we are able to weigh each and reach a measured conclusion. Those who favour poetry have to show that it is objectively better or it will not attract higher funding. Soon we come to believe that what attracts higher funding ipso facto must be better.

The difficulty is that life will not lie down and be measured. I can recall from my own student days a lecturer who broke every rule in the book: he spoke indistinctly and far too fast as he breathlessly spat out his words; he wrote on the blackboard (remember that technology?) with his right hand, the chalk snapping and flying dangerously while his line of writing sloped to vertical as he hit the limits of the board; simultaneously he rubbed his words out again with his left hand before you could see through his back to read them. He was quite brilliant – inspiring – a man who fired students with enthusiasm and whose ideas sprouted new shoots from the ground wherever he carelessly scattered them.

That does not mean that lesser mortals do not need to be taught a few rules or that critical evaluation should not be attempted in the name of improvement; but any system of evaluation which cannot recognise quality without the aid of a tick box is doomed to fail – not by its own mortal standards but by those immeasurable standards which exist only in some Platonic heaven that does not hand out funding to universities. And so, by definition, such quality is not quality at all: the system must be reared up to rein in, inhibit and defeat the unrestrained forces of genius. We seek the best and we create mediocrity in the process.

So we train how to be good teachers; and our trainers evaluate how good we are at learning the lessons that they have given us, for that is what education is about. I recall one lecturer whose aims and objectives were clear and whose material was well organised: sixteen items on the syllabus; sixteen lectures with sixteen hand-outs; and, naturally, with assessment to measure the fulfilment of aims and the attainment of objectives, sixteen questions on the examination paper. Everything was done according to the best educational theory, for this was a Professor of Education. Good results ensured that this indeed must have been a quality teacher.

And yet, over forty years on, I remember both – and others like them; and I remember who really were the good teachers. So let us have our criteria and our tick boxes if we must, but let us also listen to our students both now and as they reflect over the years. What do they see as quality and who really were the good teachers?

Professor Ted Royle attempted to teach history to students at York between 1972 and 2004. He was also involved throughout that time in various university schemes to improve the standard of lecturing but he is still searching for what makes a good teacher.

Getting academics to teach better – or at least try

Most of us know that we are pretty good teachers. Sometimes that belief is stretched a little, but then it is usually clear, after a little reflection and a couple of drinks, that any lack of student performance or satisfaction can be put down either to the students’ own shortcomings or to the material that one is now expected to teach. On occasion, however, one cannot escape the conclusion that spending significantly more time and effort in preparing new material or thinking about how best to put it across would yield real benefits.

The question that now arises is really tricky – is this a sensible way to spend time and intellectual energy? The Guardian, in ‘See how the experts do it’ (17 January 2006), reported that “the lecturers’ Oscars” are being re-launched by the Higher Education Academy and supported by the Guardian. “There is enough money at stake to make academics sit up and pay attention: £2.5 m.” That might...
How I use my research in my teaching

Matthew Townend, English and Centre for Medieval Studies

I am a medievalist, and my areas of research are Old Norse (the language and literature of the Vikings) and Old English (the language and literature of the Anglo-Saxons); I am particularly interested in the connections between the two. I teach both subjects at undergraduate and MA level; just at present my research is focused more on Old Norse than Old English.

There are three main types of Old Norse literature: the Icelandic (prose) sagas, Eddic (mythological) poetry, and skaldic (court) poetry – with skaldic poetry by far the most neglected genre. However, this situation is in the process of changing, and it is here that connections between my teaching and research activities can very easily be found. A major international project, involving over forty scholars in various countries, is currently under way to re-edit the entire corpus of skaldic poetry, as the standard edition is a hundred years old and has a number of failings (plus the added challenge of being in Danish). As one of the ‘contributing editors’ to the project, I am currently engaged in editing the poems in honour of King Cnut, early eleventh-century king of England, Denmark and Norway, and an obvious bridge between Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse literary culture.

What has been so stimulating for me has been the ways in which my attempts to introduce skaldic verse into my teaching of Old Norse literature has met with a very positive response from students, at both undergraduate and MA level. My undergraduate module on ‘Old Norse Literature’ makes modest but significant use of skaldic verse, as it attempts to survey all the main genres of Old Norse writing, but this year I have introduced a dedicated MA module on ‘Viking Poetry’. Excitingly, the traditional neglect of skaldic verse in Old Norse studies means that students (and scholars!) are not labouring under the weight of previous scholarship or received interpretations; there is, quite simply, an awful lot to be done, and many new insights and perspectives to be gained. Every year at least one or two MA students choose to write their dissertations on some aspect of skaldic verse, and this is an extremely satisfying experience both for them and for me: there is a genuine sense in which such students are making an important contribution to a developing field.

This term the Centre for Medieval Studies’ flagship lecture, the York Medieval Seminar, was given by one of the general editors of the skaldic editing project. While in York Professor Margaret Clunies Ross also taught a special seminar to MA students, taking the opportunity to try out some of her own draft editions and (one hopes) gain some valuable feedback. So even the most eminent have much to learn through the teaching of work in progress!

In conclusion, then, what I am saying is that in this particular field at least – skaldic verse – the difference between research and teaching is not very easy to draw: in endeavouring to teach this difficult and overlooked genre of poetry, I am myself learning all the time, and am drawing on my own developing (research-based) understanding; while in studying the poetry, the students are themselves contributing to the broader understanding and revitalisation of the field. As a tenth-century Norse poet says, *fregna ok segja / skal fróða hvērr* – ‘Every wise man should both ask questions and answer them’!

Matthew Townend can be contacted on ext 3922; email mot1
A large group of diverse and committed students turned up to discuss the question of feedback.

Obviously in such a diverse group there was a broad spectrum of experience, however there were certain things in common. All those present thought feedback on their work was essential if they were to progress and get better. One of them, indeed, ascribed his improvement in a subject to this. In addition, there was a consensus that feedback in the first year was well delivered and very useful. Less encouragingly, about a quarter of the group reported that at present they didn’t get enough feedback to help them improve from one piece of work to the next.

At the bottom line, the whole group wanted more feedback of a formative nature, even – perhaps surprisingly – on summative pieces of work. They were aware of the disparity of standards and expectations between departments, and wanted to see some kind of University-wide minimum standard of good practice set in place.

There were also more specific suggestions on what would be helpful. A few reported that statistical information on the year group would enable them to judge their personal performance more accurately, and identify the areas where they needed to improve. One student felt that in her department being able to see a tutor one-to-one to discuss feedback would be a great improvement, and that if structured around specifics feedback would be more uniformly helpful. “I agree that tutors have a lot to do . . . but I don’t think providing good-quality feedback is too much to expect.”

A doctoral student echoed the desirability of discussing feedback with tutors. “Usually the session where a student gets work returned is also the session where they’re being taught, and so the emphasis is placed on moving ahead.” He suggested returning work in advance would be an easy way to facilitate tutorial follow-up. He also felt it would be helpful if there were two different contexts for feedback – where a piece of work stands relative both to short-term and long-term expectations. This, he hastened to add, need not be written and time-consuming. But it should help the student know whether he or she “was on target and what lay ahead”.

Overall, what became apparent as the meeting progressed was that this group had a definite sense of ownership over their education – a feeling of their centrality to York’s life and that there were both responsibilities and rights conferred through membership in this community. “After all,” said one, “the University is there to teach and educate.”
A University as a Community of Teachers, Learners, Researchers and Support Staff

A university, as a community of teachers, learners, researchers and support staff, needs to have something like an immigration service to help define it, to help determine and implement policy on who should and who should not be admitted into the community. And, quite obviously, that’s one of the main roles of Admissions and Schools Liaison (A&SL) for one of the University’s most important groups, undergraduates. Working with departments and the central University, A&SL typically deal with 20,000 applications per year for undergraduate study.

Since admissions decisions can often be decided on clear principles not requiring specific knowledge of an academic discipline, A&SL have piloted a more centralised admissions process with eight departments. As a member of one of the departments participating in the pilot (Philosophy), I can attest to the great benefits of this centralised process. Both the volume of applications is increasing, and their variety – especially those coming from EU and overseas students with different and unfamiliar qualifications. Some involve delicate issues requiring particular knowledge of UK legislation and University policy, as well as an awareness of the equal opportunities and widening participation agenda. All this added together means that undergraduate admissions can be a large job for an academic member of staff trying to keep up his or her teaching while maintaining a research profile.

In light of this, A&SL have developed a pilot project where they take on the bulk of admissions work, dealing with the vast majority of UCAS forms previously destined for the eight departments in question while working with the admissions tutors to refine admissions criteria and adjudicate difficult cases, when necessary. In exchange for this great service, these departments participate in University visit days and widening participation events where academic expertise is needed, for example, by giving ‘taster’ talks to prospective students on an academic subject at events like ‘Green Apples’. Now in the last phase of the pilot, it will be interesting to see how this programme is developed from here.

Not only does a community – such as a nation or a university – typically have something like an immigration service; a community also typically has ambassadors, whose role it is to promote the community. As ambassadors for the University of York, A&SL are responsible for the recruitment of UK and EU undergraduate students, and they do this through print and electronic media, such as the undergraduate prospectus and the admissions websites; visit and open days on campus (when prospective students can talk with representatives from various departments and see what it might be like to study at York); and representing the University at HE exhibitions.

But A&SL are ambassadors, not only for the University of York, but also for higher education itself. This leads to the ‘SL’ of ‘A&SL’: schools liaison. A&SL go to local schools to offer advice on issues concerning higher education irrespective of whether students at that school are applying to the University. This role is particularly important now given the government’s commitment to widening participation – a commitment which involves a target of 50% of the population having experienced higher or further education in the near future.

Since 1998, A&SL have put a great deal of resources into widening participation: developing new courses, new ways of delivering information and new ways of promoting higher education to those who previously might not have considered it. Though there hasn’t been an increase in enrolment in higher education commensurate with the resources devoted to widening participation, other benefits have come about: we know from the feedback of teachers involved that widening participation visits help young people see better the point of education, they have a better relationship with their teachers, and adults affected by outreach are more interested in lifelong learning. Widening participation is therefore still an important priority for A&SL, and should be for the whole country.

So, by helping to define its undergraduate population, and by being ambassadors for the University and for higher education, A&SL is at the heart of the University. A&SL help make us what we are.

For further information on the work of A&SL, please contact Connie Cullen, Director – ext 2674; email cjc1
Annual Learning and Teaching Conference
Wednesday 17 May 2006
12.00 – 6.00pm, Physics/Electronics Exhibition Area

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

12.45 Welcome
Juliet Koprowska, Chair, Forum for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching

12.50 Theme 1: Employability

Plenary: Robert Partridge, National Teaching Fellow, Careers Service

Workshop 1: York graduates: first destination?
Speakers to include Janice Simpson, Careers Service

Workshop 2: Employability: the challenge to the curriculum
Speakers to include John Issitt, National Teaching Fellow, Educational Studies

Workshop 3: Work-based learning
START (Students and Refugees Together) project, University of Plymouth

2.45 Theme 2: Sustainability, the university and teaching

Plenary: Brian Chalkley, Director HEA Subject Centre for Geography, Earth & Environmental Sciences

Tea

Workshop 1: Sustainability and the University
Gary Tideswell, Director of Health and Safety

Workshop 2: Education for sustainable development

Workshop 3: Sustainability in the curriculum
James Clark, Director Clean Technology Centre
Caterina de Lucia, Environment Department

5.00 The University of York Excellence in Teaching Lecture
Kel Fidler, Vice Chancellor, Northumbria University

6.00 Drinks reception
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 21 April 2006.

Name:________________________________________________________ Department:________________________________________
Tel:_______________________ Email:________________________________ Are you a YCAPer? ___________________________

Please specify any dietary requirements for lunch:_____________________________________________________________________

Theme 1 preferred workshop: _______ Theme 2 preferred workshop: _______ Attending lecture? _______________________
Attending drinks reception? _________

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