

Student-Led Workshops for Innovative Learning Week

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Summary

This paper sets out the case for developing Student-Led Workshops (SLWs), to run during Innovative Learning Week 2011-12 onwards, as one of a number of activities that Schools might want to incorporate into this week of the timetable. Similar initiatives elsewhere are described, together with the motivation as to why we might want to introduce this at Edinburgh. Finally, I present a tentative timetable for the various activities that need to be undertaken as part of an annual planning / delivery cycle for these sessions.

Background

The concept of SLWs is not new; several major North American universities operate similar programmes¹, in which students in the later years of a degree are permitted to initiate and coordinate small group collaborative learning experiences: Berkeley, Stanford and UBC all have active programmes. The UBC scheme has been in operation for over a decade and is described extensively online², with an annual delivery of 20 seminars, over 35 coordinators, and over 200 student participants.

Under these schemes, students in the latter years of a degree are able to propose a topic of study that is in an area that might not be currently offered by the department, or may cross disciplinary boundaries, or is simply a topic that they wish to study in greater depth. Having identified a suitable faculty 'sponsor' to vouch for the topic's academic suitability, they are able to submit a proposal to run a short course on that topic. If successful in their application to the faculty adjudication board, the course is offered as an elective (counting for typically 3 credits) to a small number of students (~ 8-15) who can earn course credit for participation and assessment.

Content delivery does not have to be the sole responsibility of the student proposer. Their role is to coordinate and plan the course, in collaboration with the academic sponsor. The courses frequently involve contributions from a range of other staff (who may be experts on the

¹ Often called Student Led Seminars

² See <http://learningcommons.ubc.ca/get-conscious/study-global-issues/student-directed-seminars/>

subject) and student participants (as the style of the sessions are highly discursive and interactive). Student coordinators are usually given training from University teaching and learning centres, in order to help prepare them for designing and facilitating sessions.

Motivation for SLWs in SCE

I propose that we should establish a modified programme of SLWs within the College, and deploy them during Innovative Learning Week from 2011-12 onwards. I see several benefits to establishing such a programme as this.

The most obvious and most important is that these sessions have the potential to be enormously beneficial to the organisers and participants who take part in them, and represent a unique way for students to take responsibility for their own learning in a small part of their undergraduate study. They would help to establish / reinforce a community of learning by working in close cooperation with staff and their peers to explore a topic they are interested in and motivated to further their learning.

Such a scheme would enhance interaction and communication in several areas. Students who propose interdisciplinary topics may bring together staff from different schools; students organising the sessions would have close interaction with staff which may develop into future interests in project or research work; students taking part in the sessions, possibly from multiple years of the same or different programmes, will have a greater opportunity to interact with each other.

Such a programme should not be seen as 'undergraduates delivering teaching'. The lead student is a coordinator / facilitator for a topic not covered in existing courses. S/he is responsible for organising the learning resources to be used in the class, working with the academic sponsor and setting the parameters of what is covered and aims to be achieved in the sessions. Training will need to be provided (through workshops run with IAD) in preparing student coordinators for designing and facilitating SLWs. Likewise, SLWs are not intended as a large burden on academic staff: their role in this process is advisory / supportive and they are not necessarily compelled to go to the sessions, but are free to contribute.

In contrast to schemes that run elsewhere, these sessions are not proposed to be formal courses, nor should they comprise any summative assessment. There is a convenient space in the academic year that fits very well with the aims and aspirations of such a programme within Innovative Learning Week. It could be envisaged that SLWs are one of a series of activities that schools offer for their students during ILW.

Deploying such a scheme is extremely well aligned to the aims of both the College Learning and Teaching Strategy and elements of the UoE enhancement strategy. It is inherently applicable to all Colleges in the University, but I propose that we develop a pilot within SCE in the first instance. The theme of development of graduate attributes is still very much at the forefront of strategic planning and thinking around the University, and a scheme that has the potential to positively impact student engagement and autonomy articulates well with this. One of the most exciting aspects of such a scheme is the possibility to bring about meaningful additional inter-

school discussion and possibly collaboration, outside the confines of established UG programmes. Both EUSA and the IAD have been contacted for their views about this proposed initiative: both are very enthusiastic about the opportunity to work with colleagues in SCE on this.

Possible logistics

Whilst it is not necessary at this juncture to be too prescriptive on the way these sessions should be developed and run, it is helpful to have a framework in place to guide thinking. I would suggest that these sessions should *normally* take place over two half-day sessions during ILW, with a gap between sessions for refocusing / adjusting the second session in the light of the first. In developing suitable pro-formas for applications / evaluations, there is a clear role for input from IAD, as there is in terms of providing support and training to successful student facilitators well ahead of the delivery of their workshops.

A suggested annual timetable is as follows, illustrated for the 2011-12 academic year.

- End of 2010/11 academic year: launch of scheme to year 3 and 4 (Masters programme) students
- Start of 2011/12 academic year: formal call for course bids from DoTs/TOs within each School. Needs clear pro-forma for students to complete, plus guidelines that they need to approach a member of staff for discussions prior to this.
- Selection process, mid-S1, done by School TO or small subgroup. Intended to ensure academic rigour but relatively light touch.
- In the case of cross-disciplinary applications from a pair / team of students from different Schools, one student and School should be identified as 'lead'.
- Announcement of successful applicants late S1 together with invites to training sessions from IAD on course design and facilitation skills.
- Coordination meeting early S2 for student facilitators to cover logistics such as room bookings, planning, progress check etc.
- Delivery is Week 6 of S2. Coordination needed with the emerging timetable of activities to be delivered in ILW so as not to restrict student choice unnecessarily.
- Post session, students asked to complete a short feedback questionnaire to inform School (College?) planning for subsequent years.

At a later date, we should also consider guidelines for students on the outputs expected from these workshops. Although it is not the intention that the workshops be formally assessed, it would be good to have some light but tangible output - e.g. a collection of learning resources that were used and / or produced, possibly through a wiki. These could then be utilized in several ways: a) by students as evidence of their involvement / achievement b) to inform future years' activities and c) to promote / expand the programme.

CL&TC asked to discuss and approve this proposal. If approved, the paper will be presented to the March meeting of SL&TC, by which time it would be helpful to be able to identify schools genuinely intending to deliver these sessions in 2011-12.