

# Student-Led Workshops for Innovative Learning Week

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July 2014

## 1 Introduction

The basis of Student-Led Workshops (SLWs) is that students initiate, coordinate and deliver small group collaborative learning experiences to their peers. The concept is not new; several major North American universities, including Berkeley, Stanford and UBC, have operated programmes of this type for a number of years. The UBC scheme, known as Student Directed Seminars, has been in operation for well over a decade. Its aims, together with example courses, are described extensively online.<sup>1</sup> The scheme delivers around 20 courses annually, utilising more than 35 coordinators, to over 200 student participants.

Common to all these schemes is the basic idea that students, usually although not necessarily in the later years of their degree, are invited to propose a topic of study that might not be currently offered by their department, or may cross disciplinary boundaries, or is simply a topic that they wish to pursue in greater depth. Having identified a suitable faculty sponsor to vouch for the topics academic rigour, they can then submit a proposal to run a small course on that topic. If their application is successful, the course is offered as an elective (counting for a small number of course credits) to a small group of students (typically ~10-15) who can earn course credit for participation and assessment.

In these schemes, content delivery is not the sole responsibility of the student proposer(s). 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 subject) and student participants (as the style of the sessions are invariably highly

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<sup>1</sup>See UBC Student Directed Seminars <http://studentdirectedseminars.ubc.ca/>

discursive and interactive). Student coordinators are given training from University teaching and learning centres, in order to help prepare them for designing and facilitating sessions.

## 2 Aims and Objectives

The aim of this project was to develop, evaluate and disseminate SLWs, to be delivered by students from Schools across the College of Science and Engineering during Innovative Learning Week in 2011-12 and 2012-13.

The scheme was not intended as ‘undergraduates delivering teaching’. The lead student, or team of students, was coordinator and facilitator for workshops on a topic that was not covered in existing courses. They were responsible for organising the learning resources to be used, working with the academic sponsor and setting the parameters of what is covered and can be achieved in the session.

In contrast to the North American schemes described above, SLWs were not formal courses, nor did they include any summative assessment. They were offered in Innovative Learning Week, as this was a convenient space in the academic year to accommodate such sessions, which fitted very well with the aims and aspirations of ILW.

## 3 Implementation

The scheme was set up and coordinated by an SLW coordinator, a member of staff who provided operational and general support for students and academic staff involved in the workshops. It was supported by a wiki which included details of the scheme, information on how to apply, a link to the application form (applications were made online via SurveyMonkey), the guide for academic sponsors and, in the second year of operation, information on previous projects, see:

<http://www.wiki.ed.ac.uk/display/InnovLearning/Student-Led+Workshops>

The call for applications was opened to students in the second part of Semester 1, with a deadline for applications at the start of Semester 2. Applications were accepted from individuals or from small teams of students (ideally no more than 3); although the scheme had been originally envisaged as being based on workshops run by individual students, it was decided to extend this to include student teams, partly as were keen to encourage cross-disciplinary proposals and partly because a team approach meant that the workload and responsibilities could be shared among the team. Applicants

were required to have the agreement of a member of staff to act as their academic sponsor. To facilitate this, a guide was produced which students could give to potential sponsors explaining the role and that it was advisory / supportive and not intended to be a large burden. For example, sponsors were not required to attend the workshops, although in practice many chose to do so.

Applicants were notified of the outcome early (end of week 1) in Semester 2. The workshops were then developed between weeks 2-5 and delivered in ILW. Training for student coordinators was provided in collaboration with the IAD. This focussed on designing and facilitating workshops, including ways to incorporate innovative approaches to learning.

The summary timeline is shown in Figure 1.

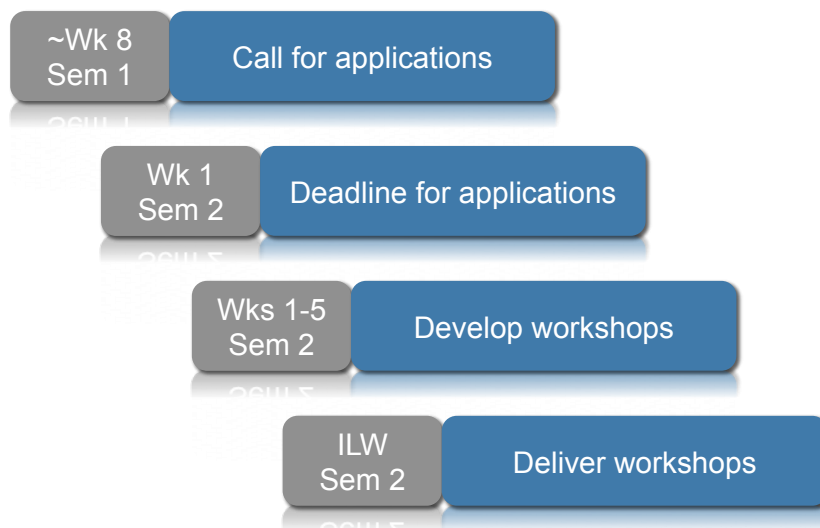


Figure 1: Timeline for Student-Led Workshops

The roles and responsibilities of the students and staff involved in the scheme are outlined below:

- **Student coordinators** (individual or small groups of ~2-3)
  - Propose workshops
  - Identify academic sponsor
  - Plan, coordinate and deliver workshops
- **Academic sponsors**

- Offer academic advice and mentoring
- Ensure academic quality
- **Student participants**
  - Engage with activities
  - Contribute to any outputs
- **SLW coordinator** (member of staff)
  - Plan, coordinate and implement scheme
  - Provide operational and general support

## 4 Workshops

Four workshops were run in 2011/12; these are summarised below.

- **Build your own time machine**
  - Have you ever wanted to know how travelling through time looks like? Wanted to build your own time machine to roll back to the past or jump ahead into the future?  
This interactive and interdisciplinary workshop will address some key concepts of the Nature of Time and Time Travel merging scientific and philosophical point of view.
  - *Student coordinator(s)*: 1 student, Yr 3, Physics & Astronomy (Academic Sponsor from PPLS)
- **Life after science**
  - Ever wondered if there is more to life than science? Or if there's a place for you in the business world? What on earth is an assessment centre anyway?  
Find your own answers to these questions as you work your way through the kind of group tasks you'd be set at an assessment centre. Run by final year students going through the application process now.
  - *Student coordinator(s)*: 2 students, Yr 5, Chemistry.
- **Ten billion**

- Ten billion people? Miles? Months? Killer African Bees? We are looking at ways to approach big problems analytically and scientifically. Come help us find solutions whilst enjoying free tea and doughnuts!
- *Student coordinator(s)*: 2 students, Yr 3, Physics & Astronomy.

- **Biotechnology - an interdisciplinary approach to the role of microbes in our lives**

- Session 1: Each team will produce a short video concerning various applications of Biotechnology.
- Session 2: Big Debate on biotechnology issues.
- *Student coordinator(s)*: 2 students, Yr 2, Biological Sciences.

The sessions were generally well-attended, for example there were 20 participants (12 from SCE and 8 from HSS) for ‘Build your own time machine’. One of the workshops (Build your own time machine) also featured in *The Critical Angle*,<sup>2</sup> an online magazine written by Yr 1 students in the School of Physics & Astronomy on ILW events.

In 2012/13, only one application to run a workshop was received. The reasons for this are not clear, however it may be due in part to unavoidable and unplanned changes to the project team which made it difficult to maintain continuity and provide students with the same level of support.

## 5 Conclusions

The project was successful in many respects. A number of high quality, well-received workshops were produced and delivered by students and a robust supporting mechanism and infrastructure was created that has the potential for expansion more widely across the University. However, one of the underlying aims was to establish SLWs as an ongoing ILW activity and in this sense, the project can perhaps be considered a qualified success. A significant level of commitment was required from student coordinators, both in ILW and during the preparation stage in the first part of Semester 2. It was also clear from our experience that the SLW coordinator role is vital; SLWs are not sufficiently well-developed to be ‘self-organising’.

Nevertheless, there are a number of benefits from establishing a scheme such as this. The most obvious and perhaps most important is that SLWs are beneficial to both the student coordinators and the participants who take part

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<sup>2</sup>See [http://issuu.com/physastroed/docs/the\\_critical\\_angle](http://issuu.com/physastroed/docs/the_critical_angle)

in them. They also represent a unique way for students to take responsibility for their own learning in a small part of their undergraduate study. Student coordinators help to establish or reinforce a community of learning within and possibly across disciplines by working in close cooperation with staff and their peers to explore a topic they are interested in and motivated to further their learning of. Students taking part in the sessions, possibly from multiple years of the same or different programmes, have a greater opportunity to interact with each other.

It could be envisaged that a form of SLWs might be made available to students from across the University, either outwith or perhaps even as part of their undergraduate curriculum. The pilot scheme described here has demonstrated that such a scheme has the potential to positively impact student engagement and autonomy and even to bring about meaningful inter-school discussion outside the confines of established UG programmes.