

Lab Practicals and Small Group Teaching

This document brings together a summary of the discussion outcomes from the session on Lab Practicals and Small Group Teaching, led by Morven Shearer and Joy Perkins at the event 'Teaching in the Biosciences: an Introduction for Postgraduates and Postdoctoral Teaching Fellows'.

Delegates discussed what makes a good demonstrator and how demonstrators could contribute to good teaching practice; they then considered four potentially tricky situations that could arise in small group teaching.

Demonstrating

What makes a good demonstrator?

Approachable:

- Enthusiastic and engaging
- Visible - walking around the practical session and mingling with the group
- Asking questions – do you understand what you're doing?
- Friendly - smiling and open
- They don't cross their arms, look bored and look at the time / watch
- Give feedback – verbal and written
- Ask for feedback on their role as a demonstrator

Knowledgeable:

- Knows the theory and practice of experiment
- Knows where things are
- Confident – can answer questions clearly
- Knows their limits / willing to admit they don't know
- Answers the "burning questions"
- Doesn't assume students knowledge

A good demonstrator tries to:

- Help to student to understand the practical
- Enthuse and encourage students
- Be prepared: 5 P's – Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance

Uses positive language:

- "that's a good question"
- "you've done very well"

Is enthusiastic:

- About both teaching and science

Is patient:

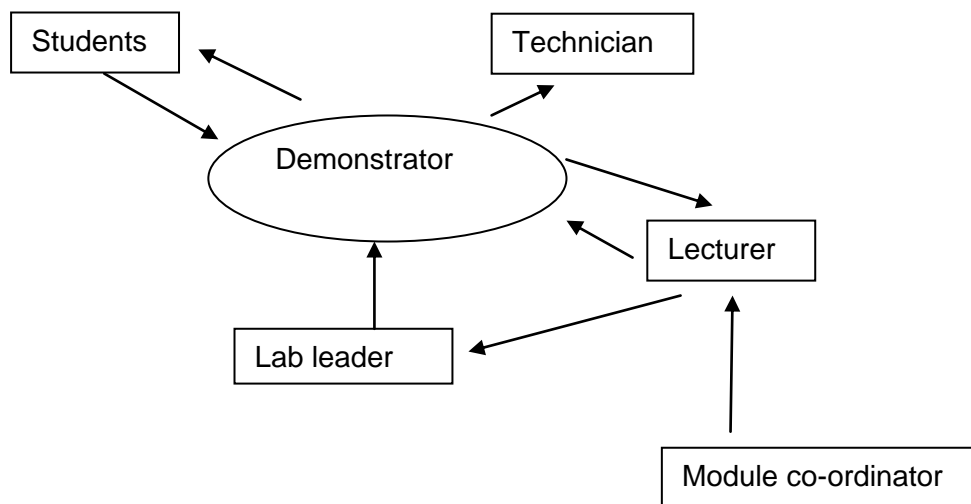
- Willing to repeat / explain in different ways e.g. drawing diagrams
- Takes the time to identify problems and misunderstandings
- Controls / Shepherds students when needed

The role of a demonstrator might include:

- Delivering the aim of practical
- Highlighting safety aspects
- Deadlines
- Acting as a point of contact – on same level
- Giving advice on basic practical technique

How should demonstrators contribute to good teaching practice?

Interaction with teaching team



Demonstrators have had little to no input/feedback about practicals merely given a brief about the practical and a workbook with the answers

In our experience do we find this system appropriate?

Yes – can turn up on the day and rest of time can be spent on research

No – we're all here because we want to be involved

Getting feedback on your role as a demonstrator or in small group teaching

Ask your students to give you 2 stars and a wish

The two stars are two things the teacher is doing well and the wish something the student wishes they were doing.

These can be written on a post-it and left in a box – anonymous.

Dealing with potentially tricky situations

Delegates considered 4 different situations

1. *You have noticed that during your biology tutorials Jennie has been very keen and enthusiastic, but beyond the point of being genuine you feel. She has also started to appear early for your tutorials and remains behind to talk with you afterwards. As well as this, you have been receiving a lot of emails from her and now there are phone calls as well. You feel that you need to deal with this. What can you do?*

- Are they infatuated? Try having an "adult" conversation with them
- Are they lonely? Talk to their tutor, take it to a more senior member of staff

Available from

www.bioscience.heacademy.ac.uk/events/manc280410.aspx

- Are they not feeling stretched or finding the work too easy? Is there anything further you can give them?
- Keep professional boundaries in place
- Don't give them extra attention
- Don't talk to them outside of the tutorial / work setting
- Do you need to answer all the emails they send? Perhaps just respond to those that are necessary
- Don't be with the student on your own – take discussions into the corridor where there are other people
- Is it unique to you as a tutor or have they done it before? Again talk to a more senior member of staff

2. During each cell biology tutorial you find that David is answering all of the questions you ask and tending to dominate class discussions. One or two other students in the group are getting annoyed, but most are simply switching off and ceasing to participate once he starts speaking. What can you do to retrieve the situation?

- Actively involve the whole group in discussions
- Establish ground rules in the first tutorial – make all members feel they are welcome to contribute and set out the expectation that you expect all members to contribute
- Specify who can answer each question
- Talk to David and explain that you would like to give all group members an opportunity to contribute
- Pair off students and get them to discuss, then ask a member of each pair to contribute one or two points – everyone gets the chance to discuss in their pairs
- Give each student a set number of tokens (e.g. 4 poker chips) this is the number of points they can make, once they have made a point they put one chip in the pot in the centre of the group, no more chips means you can't make any more points in the discussion

3. For the last four group sessions Kevin, a student in your group has never spoken. Even when you have asked him a simple, direct question you have received only a monosyllabic answer, a grunt or silence. Today you try again. You ask a question. Kevin says nothing. What do you do?

- Try to find out why they are being quiet – are they shy, do they have a speech impediment? Talk to their tutor or a more senior member of staff
- Establish ground rules at the start of the sessions – expect all to contribute to the discussion
- Speak to his tutor – is he having problems?
- Shouldn't leave it so long before trying to find out what is wrong
- Don't want to have to force him to speak

4. *You have just begun your third session with a group of six students. Suddenly, Mary a student, leans forward and says angrily: "I'm sick of these bloody sessions. I'm pissed off with the whole course. When are we going to do something useful?" What do you do and say in the next few minutes?*

- Don't lose control – keep calm
- Ask her to leave the room for a minute
- What is it that's annoying her? Is it the tutorial sessions? The course as a whole?
- Find out what her expectations are – what does she expect of these sessions?
- Say she is welcome to leave if she doesn't find these sessions to be of use, but she is disrupting other people's opportunity to learn