

Learning Through Assessment
University of York
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Delegate Report

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The UK Centre for Bioscience event 'Learning through Assessment' held on September 29th at the University of York, Department of Biology was an opportunity to seek new ways to crack a hard and slippery nut – how to assess students' learning and make it beneficial for both parties?

After a welcome address from Julie Peacock (UK Centre for Bioscience), Chris Rust launched into the Keynote address – '**Engaging students in Assessment and Feedback**'; a talk well punctuated with quotes from high level reports that together make it hard to miss the point that there is need for improvement within HE. A memorable acronym that was offered to us was that for students to take feedback on board they needed 'MOM' (best with an American accent) which turned out to be Motive, Opportunity and Means. Given the increase in the number of undergraduates on our courses, feedback has increasingly become a mark or report – in essence a one way message and not a dialogue. The solution – well developed self- and peer-assessment that includes clearly defined and agreed criteria.

After a break for more caffeine and cakes Stephen Gomez explained the benefits of **using video in feedback**. Everyone in the room acknowledged the time required to properly annotate a student essay and that if one anticipates working one to one with a student, one would normally talk through the feedback rather than write it out. Most people also accepted that there are cues in the tone of voice that convey more than the words being used. There was even evidence that students listened more intently to verbal feedback whilst admitting that they might not even read written feedback. However, for many academics this would be a venture into new territory and the necessary training and support infrastructure would need to be in place to maximise benefit and minimise time cost.

After lunch Emma Millard spoke about the work of TechDis and the challenge and importance of **making assessments more accessible** especially with respect to common disabilities, particularly hearing, vision and dyslexia. Examples given included the impact of question design on the output of text readers.

The last full talk of the day was given by Stephen Merry and, like the other Stephen (Gomez), he advocated **using technology to provide feedback to students**, in this case MP3 audio files. No one took issue with the idea that audio feedback would be quicker for the academic to 'produce' and it would be more likely to have the all important examples of 'things' you should consider including in your next piece of work, than would written feedback. The issues were again largely related to resource, who would upload all the files?

The meeting concluded with a series of five short swapshop presentations of 10 minutes each. Presentations were from Andy Bond, Phil Langton, Graham Currell, Janet Dyke and Caroline Smith. Common themes through these sessions were '**how to get students to engage, to think and to take and active part**' and '**how to best inform busy teaching staff about *best practice* approaches**'. These action packed presentations certainly generated a good deal of discussion, no drifting off to sleep at this event, and rounded out a successful meeting very well.

The meeting concluded on time and participants, it seemed to me, departed feeling the day had been well spent and with a list of contacts to follow up – I know I did the very next day.