

Science Learning and Teaching Conference

The bi-annual Science Learning and Teaching Conference (SLTC) brings together those interested in teaching and learning from the Bioscience, Materials and Physical Science disciplines to share practice, hear about developments and meet and network with colleagues from across the UK. The 3rd SLTC, held at Heriot-Watt University on the 16th and 17th July this year, brought together 142 delegates to hear about topics ranging from “using student ambassadors to improve retention of first year students” to “enquiry based learning in a multi-disciplinary group”.

Feedback from the Conference was positive, with many delegates valuing the time available for discussion and networking.

- “This was a good platform for sharing experiences in an informal & friendly atmosphere”
- “Some very novel ideas in use and lots of opportunity to network.”
- “Reassuring that there are many staff who are active in subject research and have an interest in learning and teaching.”

The Conference website (www.sltc.info) brings together the proceedings, presentations and posters from the Conference, with full papers from a number of presentations available soon.

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A Delegate Reflects

I had missed the SLTC last time round (2007 in Keele) and so was determined to attend and present at this one. Heriot-Watt has a purpose-built conference centre and everything from accommodation and conference rooms to catering was really handy. This helped to encourage a friendly feel to the gathering, and ensure people's faces quickly became familiar.

The conference programme was packed with talks, workshops, interactive presentations, and posters (with well-spaced refreshment breaks though; thanks!), and at times it was difficult to choose between parallel sessions. Presentations that particularly interested me included those on student projects and lab work. Jane Saffell's talk on student lab experiences and their perceptions of research was revealing, and an excellent insight into bridging gaps between teaching and research. Vivien Rolfe's presentation on VAL, a Virtual Analytical Laboratory designed to supplement student lab work and build skills and confidence, was extremely useful. According to Vivien the pages on spectrophotometers and serial dilutions are among the most popular, and as this has direct relevance for classes I teach, I will certainly be investigating this further. Debbie Bevitt presented a novel practical alternative to final year projects, and it was encouraging to see how some resource issues actually can be overcome.

Other areas of interest to me include plagiarism, and a session on this after lunch on the first day, when my colleague Barbara Cogdell and I were presenting, was crowded. This was pleasing (no-one wants to speak to an empty room) but also a little worrying (is there so much of this about?). Several people asked questions after my talk and it was encouraging to see we are thinking along the same lines regarding what the important issues are. Kate Tobin then spoke about such

issues in international students, who face incredible hurdles to overcome with academic writing. I particularly liked her approach of involving the library in the design of strategies and resources, and is something I will think about in my continuing development of class workshops. Kate and I spoke after her talk and we have since been in touch; some colleagues of mine at Glasgow University are doing similar work with international postgraduates and it could be useful for them to talk.

The Conference Dinner was a great experience; the food was lovely, wine was flowing, and conversations very varied! I sat next to my colleague Barbara (someone I know) and Paul Green (someone I don't know), whose talk I had heard earlier in the day. We started off discussing this but then moved on to international travel and living in different places, as the wine bottles mysteriously kept emptying. The after-dinner speaker was Dr Mark Lewney, a guitar-playing physicist, who entertained us with various talents comic, musical, and indeed scientific. The Ed Wood Teaching Award was also presented here; 6 runners-up were given certificates, and the winner was Mark Huxham of Edinburgh Napier University. The Teaching Awards had been re-named after Professor Ed Wood, a fitting tribute to someone who had dedicated much of his professional life to encouraging students and inspiring those who heard him speak. I myself had heard him recently at a Centre event in Glasgow, and realise now how privileged I was.

The networking opportunities at SLTC 2009 were fantastic, and the conference was an excellent means of validating the importance (and indeed essence) of learning and teaching, which is often overlooked. Practical suggestions and ideas were invaluable, interspersed with more theoretical aspects to give a powerful blend. Both conference organisers and participants contributed to the success of this event, and I for one will look forward to the next SLTC in 2011.

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David Adams, Centre Director, addressing the conference