

Editorial: Variety's the very spice of life

According to William Cowper (1731-1800) 'Variety's the very spice of life' and that thought remains popular today. A quick internet search brings up links to a range of applications from holiday destinations and exercise regimens to computer software and ecosystem productivity. Learning and teaching is no exception. There are increased calls to offer variety in both the delivery and assessment of topics to better serve the needs of the modern student body.

While obviously not a panacea, variety in learning and teaching is often a good thing. Right from its inception the UK Centre for Bioscience has been helping bioscientists get together to discuss learning and teaching ideas and share practice. Through this sharing the Centre has helped and encouraged academics to adopt new practices and enrich their teaching. This issue of Bioscience Education continues that tradition and the articles show some of the variety we deal with.

Since its inclusion in the Biosciences Benchmark Statement teaching ethics has been an area of rapid development in bioscience teaching. In his comprehensive article Pearce describes a bioethics module delivered at Newcastle University. As one would expect the article covers content and delivery but also addresses thinking and the practicalities of fostering and assessing students' thinking skills. This focus on thinking will be welcomed by many and critical thinking is a theme which runs through Adams' descriptive account looking at the trends within laboratory class teaching. There are many novel laboratory exercises designed to enthuse and stimulate students through active learning and his review highlights innovative methods that exploit computer-based approaches, encourage enquiry-based learning and in some cases involve undergraduate students in cutting edge research. Cobb et al. is a further example of a computer-based approach to support practical work, in this case using Second Life as a training arena prior to students performing the real-life practical. It is encouraging to see attention being paid to practical work and readers may like to know the UK Centre for Bioscience is taking part in a pilot programme for the release of Open Educational Resources (OER) following a successful bid for £250,000 from HEFCE/JISC, the intention being the resources gathered will become An Interactive Laboratory and Fieldwork Manual for the Biosciences.

With the ever present National Student Survey feeding back to students remains a timely topic and Scott et al report on the differences in the perceptions between first and second year students. Finally Carlson et al. add to the diverse mix with their reflective essay on 'backward planning' and how they used this concept to transform their teaching. Their piece reinforces the Centre's belief in the value of sharing ideas.

Stephen J Maw

Acting Editor-in-Chief,
Centre for Bioscience, the Higher Education Academy,
University of Leeds,
Leeds LS2 9JT

s.j.maw@leeds.ac.uk