

## Editorial: Lost in e-Space?

It does not seem so long ago that developing any kind of web-based resource for your students gave one a feeling of being a radical pioneer, a technological Pilgrim Father. How quickly, then, we have reached a situation where a University *without* Blackboard, WebCT or some other Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) is the exception rather than the rule. The mere existence of cyber-resources does not necessarily equate to good teaching, and scholarship about the best ways to unleash the potential of VLEs is an important and growing field.

In the current volume, Badge *et al* investigate issues relating to the rollout of a VLE in their institution. They demonstrate that staff are generally willing to utilise Blackboard as an information repository and communication conduit, but are more reticent about employing other features, the very tools that offer greater pedagogic value. Some consideration is given regarding ways to enthuse and equip staff to take this important second step towards better educational use of the VLE.

Also in this edition, Hartford describes a module in which WebCT was used to facilitate asynchronous discussion as part of a group activity. Unlike other group work, where interactions tend to take place away from the gaze of tutors, the team interactions via the VLE are automatically archived and there is therefore potential to exploit these records as part of the assessment process.

Chevins has been considering other means to supplement traditional lecture-driven learning. Specifically, he evaluates the impact of substituting a schedule of prescribed reading instead of lectures. The value of these developments is shown by improvement in assessment scores and student endorsement (when the reading is used to replace some, but not all, of the lectures).

Harland and colleagues return to a common theme in recent volumes of Bioscience Education, the final year research project. They examine the factors influencing the selection and allocation of projects and reveal some interesting differences between tutor's expectations regarding the students' motives and the motives reported by the undergraduates themselves.

Project work is also a major way in which students are introduced to the concept of research. It is, however, only one of several approaches that can be taken. Sears and Wood have conducted a "meta-analysis" of different schemes being used in Higher Education to help bioscience undergraduates to develop their research skills. Their hope, and thus our hope in publishing their study, is to both inform colleagues about the variety of strategies being employed, and also to challenge us all to be more creative in developing this crucial aspect of student learning.

Teaching students methods of acquiring, interpreting and analysing biological information, i.e. research, is one of the goals of undergraduate education highlighted in the Benchmarking statements produced by the Quality Assurance Agency. The same document requires universities to equip their bioscience students to assess the ethical impact of their subject. This is the focus of the final paper in our current volume, where Downie and Clarkeburn share lessons they have learned through the introduction of bioethics into their curricula.

Also in this issue we announce the winner of the Student Essay Competition 2004 - 2005 titled "What makes the best learning experience for you?". A prize of £150 brought forward a wealth of ideas and comment from students of the Biosciences from across the UK. Good feedback is always valuable and this exercise has provided an opportunity for the recipients of our teaching to let us know what works well in their eyes. A Short Communication reviews the key issues raised by the competitors.

Thanks, as always, are due to Jill Anderson-Clarke and Terry McAndrew at the Centre for Bioscience for their hard work behind the scenes in the production of the Bioscience Education E-journal. Potential contributors are alerted to the fact that the submission date for the next volume (and subsequent autumn editions) has been brought forward a month, and is now at the end of August. You are reminded, of course, that BEE-j is a rolling publication, and as such these dates only serve to identify the volume in which a given paper will be archived. Submissions are welcomed at any stage, and accepted articles will appear on the journal website as soon as they have been formatted. I therefore declare Volume 6 open for business.

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