

*Editorial***Time-saving Tactics for Improving the Value of Assessment**

This Volume of the *Bioscience Education e-Journal* contains a number of articles which should be of interest to teachers who are active and want their students to be active too. We all want our students to learn, but increasingly there is less time and classes are larger, so that supporting learning is more difficult. Therefore traditional methods involving small groups and effective feedback are being replaced by computer-based methods and 'blended learning'. A short communication by [Orsmond](#) discusses why educational research, carried out by educationalists, is not much studied by biologists. There is a lot of research out there in educational journals, and it is potentially useful to teachers, but few bioscientists will read it nor, often, understand the jargon. There have always been problems with jargon: educationalists use theirs and bioscientists use theirs. More seriously there have been few incentives for bioscientists to do their own educational research. One of the reasons for this is that little credit has traditionally been given for this in bioscience departments, and one of the reasons for the existence of the *Bioscience Education e-Journal* is to encourage such research and the publication of results. I suspect that 10 or so years ago, the average member of the teaching staff in a bioscience department would have not heard, or read, the words *formative* and *summative assessment*. That situation has certainly changed radically, and we are nearly all conscious of the value of feedback given promptly. However, we are also conscious that with large classes, giving timely and detailed feedback is next to impossible if we are to do anything else in life (e.g. research?). One way is to try to use computers imaginatively, and [Hejmadi](#) offers ways of providing feedback in a blended learning situation.

Assessment (and feedback, of course) is a constant problem, not only because of the issue of giving feedback to large classes, but also because some things are easier than others to assess reliably. Getting students to do multiple-choice tests, short answer questions and even essays, is what we most commonly use, and these are the easiest, if sometime tedious, to mark. They are typically used summatively. In a short article, [Willmott](#) offers some advice about essay-writing to improve students' essay-writing skills – which do not seem to be developed in schools these days. Fortunately we have an interesting example of essay writing to hand – the winning entrant for the Bioscience Student Essay prize for 2007; "What advice would you give to students starting your course?" by [Aneeqa Meedin](#)

Testing other skills is more difficult. In medical training, for example, it is important to test clinical skills and this has to be done by watching individual performance on a one-to-one basis. This is time-consuming, and to some extent subjective, but it has to be done to assure competence. If we list the skills that bioscience graduates require before going out into the world then we may conclude that these are not necessarily tested by getting students to write lab reports, for example. Any proper assessment of such skills tends to

be time-consuming. [Fraser](#) and colleagues' article offers a tool for mapping research skills in undergraduate curricula, in effect an electronic audit, which may be of assistance. [Hooley et al](#) describe how they have approached the problem of discriminating between M level and undergraduate level in data-mining exercises. In another article, [Baggott & Rayne](#) give details of the use of computer-based assessments in 'tutorial mode' to provide context-related feedback in a field biology module. They suggest that the use of such formative computer-based assessment can improve student learning.

There is constantly the question of ethics in biology and especially who should teach it. In an interview-based survey, [Bryant and Morgan](#) have investigated the differences in ethics teaching between the UK universities and staff ('faculty') in US universities and highlighted a number of areas where their approach is in contrast to that in the UK.

The Bioscience Education e-Journal continues to receive positive feedback from the Bioscience community. We expect readers will find articles in this Volume of interest to them, whatever their sub discipline or teaching level, and we welcome future articles on their experiences. We accept not only articles about serious pedagogic research but also suggestions, comments and "essays" about issues of interest to bioscience teachers.

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