

It's time to stop reinventing the learning and teaching wheel!

Heather Sears

Where do HE educators find advice and resources to support bioscience teaching? The Learning and Teaching Support Network aims to meet this need.

Academic staff simply do not have the time to wade through the alphabet soup of acronyms adopted by the numerous projects and national initiatives in learning and teaching. Consequently, the wheel has been reinvented many times, with the duplication of projects and inadequate dissemination of results. Fortunately, the LTSN (yes, another acronym!), has been established to co-ordinate and share information in a coherent and accessible form within higher education. LTSN stands for the Learning and Teaching Support Network, a national network of 24 subject centres distributed at universities around the United Kingdom and a generic centre, based at the network headquarters in York. The LTSN Centre for Bioscience, based at the University of Leeds, is the subject centre for the life, food and agricultural sciences.

The diverse range of subjects that falls under the bioscience umbrella certainly has its own unique challenges. Bioscientists identify most closely with their particular discipline (what's your response to 'So what is it you actually do?' Probably not 'Well actually, I'm a 'bioscientist'). Biologists also tend to be more receptive to ideas when they are talking to their own species. That's why LTSN Bioscience has three Subject Specialists (all biologists, with different backgrounds and expertise), to act as discipline-specific contacts. Our experiences in research and teaching means that we are only too aware that many academic staff work in a research-driven climate, where teaching excellence often goes unrecognized.

● Teaching ideas and material; practical, solid and tangible

One of our first activities was to survey the community, asking what our priorities should be. The overall response is summarized from one of the replies: 'Teaching ideas and material; practical, solid and tangible'. Here are the most popular requests and what we're doing about them.



Digital image bank.

Microbiologists are fortunate that the ASM already hosts an excellent bank of high quality images that are cleared for non-profit educational use (www.microbelibrary.org) but other disciplines are less lucky. The images that are available are distributed across innumerable individuals and organizations. We are currently collating existing material and defining areas of high priority. Many lecturers take a risk in using copyright material in lectures and handouts – we aim to make images freely available for educational use.



Compendium of good practice and innovation.

Case studies are a useful and quick means of deciding which methods and techniques established elsewhere could be applied to your own teaching. Thus, we are collecting case studies of good practice and innovation in learning and teaching from across the sector. In addition, we aim to provide a central repository of tried and tested practical classes, including evaluated alternatives to traditional laboratory exercises, as this vital component of a life science degree is under considerable pressure due to reduced funding, increased student numbers and diversity of student abilities.

Assessment. Increasing student numbers have also put pressure on the assessment process. LTSN Bioscience has considerable expertise in alternative assessment methods such as peer assessment and is sharing it in a series of workshops and articles. We are also part of a major project, headed by the LTSN Generic Centre, looking at various aspects of assessment.



OPPOSITE PAGE:
LTSN Centre staff: Dr Heather Sears (right) and Mrs Trish Walker (left).

THIS PAGE TOP:
Students using microscopes.
PHOTO COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS.

BOTTOM:
The group photograph shows (from left to right): Professor Ed Wood, Centre Director; Dr Yolande Knight, Subject Specialist; Mrs Trish Walker, Centre Manager; Dr Heather Sears, Subject Specialist; and Professor Ian Hughes, Centre Co-Director.

Special interest groups. We will shortly be forming our first special interest groups to address and develop specific topics from a biology perspective. Following on from the issues raised above, unsurprisingly, the most requested topic for discussion is assessment!

The Knowledgebase. Where are all the resources going to be stored? In our on-line information service, the 'Knowledgebase', accessed through our website. Now developed and ready to grow, users will have rapid access to evaluated information on a wide range of learning, teaching and assessment strategies and products.

● We need your help!

Although we can provide information, resources and advice, it is up to you to decide to share your expertise and experience with others. You might be surprised to find that your normal practice is another's innovation and vice versa. The first step is to register with the Centre to find out more about the services that we can offer you and your colleagues. We look forward to working with you.

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