

Institution:	Edge Hill
Programmes:	BSc Earth and Environmental Science BSc Physical Geography and Geology BSc/BA Geography
Module:	Coastal Zone Environments and Management
Activity:	Mini-Conference: Student Oral Presentations in a Real World Setting
Level/Year:	3
Learning hours:	150 (15 credit module)

Work-related learning outcome(s)

Successful completion of this module allows students to obtain and develop key skills and obtain learning outcomes as follows:

- Team working and interpersonal skills - by developing and instigating an independent group research project.
- Liaison and links with external agencies in the world of employment - including local government and non-government organisations e.g. the National Trust, English Nature, Sefton Council, BHP Petroleum.
- Experience of a real world scenario – by presenting research findings to, and alongside, external agents in a formal conference setting.
- Experience of conference organisation and the preparation of materials for dissemination to participants.

Description of the teaching activity which achieves the learning outcome(s)

This module begins with introductory formal lectures and one or two full-day field visits to the Sefton Coast on Merseyside. The students then embark on research projects of their own design based on coastal studies with a distinctly regional flavour. The students work in small research groups and liaise closely with organisations, researchers, land managers and users of the coast in Sefton. As they collect data and develop their research activity, they also help to prepare for and organise a one-day mini-conference. This is an opportunity for them to present their findings alongside guest speakers. The audience is made up of other Level 3 students and invited guests. Some students also prepare posters and other displays with a coastal theme.

Rationale for the selection of the teaching activity

For many academics and researchers, presentations at conferences are seen as an integral part of the dissemination of research findings. That is also true outside the world of Higher Education, in commerce, industry and other professional organisations. This mini-conference provides exciting opportunities for students to engage with postgraduate study and with the world of work: firstly through independent research activities; and then through the conference experience itself. Key skills such as independent thinking, team working, effective time management, communication, presentation and organisation are integral parts of this innovative approach to learning. By working with external agencies in order to facilitate their research, and then by preparing for conference presentation, students experience first hand the real world pressures and rewards of meeting deadlines and communicating effectively to external practitioners and employers.

Assessment – approach and detail

The group oral presentations on conference day are assessed by a combination of tutor, peer and external agent assessment using strict guidelines and criteria. The module assessment also requires the submission of an individual report of the research activity in the format of a journal paper.

Future developments

The mini-conference has now run for 3 years, the first event taking place in December 2000 and has grown in size and popularity. It is envisaged that the event will be used in other modules. More specifically, it is hoped to develop the use of external agents as assessors in the light of the positive responses so far. The tracking of student grades in comparison to their achievements in other modules must also be examined. Early indications are that there is some evidence of higher attainment in this module although a proportion of the marks have been awarded by external agents.

Some suggestions:

- The mini-conference could be used in a wide variety of subject disciplines. All subjects studied in Higher Education see their academic staff active in research and participating at conferences, so this idea would be acceptable in any subject discipline.
- The mini-conference could be used at other Levels in the undergraduate programme. Although used at Level 3 in this instance, it could also be used at Levels 1 and 2. As well as inviting professionals and academics as participants, the invitation could be extended to 6th form students. This was trialled at Edge Hill last year and it worked very well. The response from the 6th form colleges was extremely positive.
- The mini-conference can be used to develop external contacts for staff as well as students. Conferences are crucial in academic life for the dissemination and discussion of ideas. The students and staff benefit from the interaction and networking afforded by the event. The two-way flow of ideas and interests is stimulating for everyone.
- The mini-conference can be used to stimulate and motivate students. The confidence levels of the participating students giving presentations increases dramatically, giving rise to the suggestion that one of the most important outcomes for students is that they achieve higher marks in comparison to other modules.
- The mini-conference could be used for very large as well as small groups of students. Where class size is more than 30, the various 'jobs' involved in conference preparation can be divided between the students, with the assessment strategy adjusted accordingly.

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