

TOWARDS FLEXIBILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Beyond the comfort zone: enabling student managed learning through a flexible curriculum and the use of local and regional community resources

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Abstract:

Whole-organism biology is essentially a practical subject which is well suited to enquiry based learning. Conventionally, however, delivery has been through formal class teaching, and there has recently been a tendency in UK undergraduate courses to reduce field work and to make less use of real plants and animals. Here we present the outcomes of a project which allowed students to exercise their autonomy in selecting a local environmental resource around which to develop elements of the curriculum of a module which aims to develop an understanding of the inter-relationships of people, organisms and their environment.

This contribution recognizes that local and regional community resources (e.g. living and museum collections of plants and animals; gardens and allotments; wildlife habitats and nature reserves; people and societies who undertake recording, study and conservation of wildlife) are potentially valuable aids to learning about whole-organism biology but are largely neglected by undergraduate students. We wrote a guide that selected and introduced fourteen diverse community resources in and around Hull and East Yorkshire; emphasis was on how the resources might stimulate study of the inter-relationships between people, organisms and environment and study themes for exploration were suggested (<http://www.hull.ac.uk/biosci/CommunityResources.pdf>). This guide was designed for use by Level 5 BSc Human Biology students as an aid to student-managed learning in a new module *People, Biology and Environment*. After preliminary site visits, the community resources selected and used by student groups were the collection of small animals at Pearson Park Conservatory in Hull, the whaling exhibits at Hull Maritime Museum, and the zoological collection and gardens at Sewerby Hall, Bridlington. Assessment was by student presentations of posters, flyers and oral contributions at an end-of-module conference. Evaluation of the student-managed-learning experience showed that the students were more aware of hitherto neglected local and regional resources and had by-and-large enjoyed the learning experience; they considered, however, that they had been required to study themes that were beyond the proper remit of human biology - a view that was shared by some academic staff. The students understood, however, that there had been an intention to take them beyond their comfort zone.