

**Navigating Psychopathology: Peer-led Research and Teaching**  
**IATL Academic Fellowship Project Report, Winter Term 2015/16**  
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## **An Overview**

The key aim of the re-design of the Navigating Psychopathology module made possible by IATL's Academic Fellowship was to steer students away from being passive recipients of information, towards becoming actively engaged in research and the dissemination of that research to their peers. Postgraduate seminars in many subjects, and even undergraduate seminars in some subjects (e.g. philosophy and history of medicine) approach teaching and learning in this way. What made it a particular challenge for this module is that students came from a diverse range of disciplines, with quite different skills and prior knowledge.

So how well did the module meet its key aim? From the point of view of students' evaluation of the module, the aim was – on the whole – seen as worthwhile, and as having been met. On a scale of 1-5, with 5 being 'high or extremely good', all but one respondent gave a 4 or 5 to the questions 'Did this module meet your expectations?', and 'Would you recommend this module to future students?' (see sections 3 and 4 below for the evaluation of the module). From my point of view as module convenor, the module was largely – but not entirely – successful.

The main body of this report has 4 sections: the planning of the project, its implementation, its evaluation and finally a tabulation of student feedback.

## **The Project in Detail**

### **1. Planning**

The Peer-Led Research and Teaching project aimed to build on the success and experience of three years of teaching an interdisciplinary IATL module by radically re-developing the module's structure to focus on its core strengths of interdisciplinarity and student-led research.

The Navigating Psychopathology module has run very successfully for three years, providing 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> year undergraduate students from any discipline the opportunity to be introduced to a wide range of disciplinary perspectives on mental ill-health, taught by academic experts from Warwick, and other universities (e.g. Oxford and Durham). Perspectives students have been introduced to have ranged from History, English Literature and Philosophy to Clinical Psychology, Psychiatry, Neuroscience and Neuroimaging. The module has been assessed by means of a student-researched essay, and a reflective journal.

Despite its success, the module had been limited by an internal tension between on the one hand promoting independent research and learning (for the assessed essay), and on the other bringing students into contact with a variety of expert-provided perspectives. Placing student research and peer-led teaching at the heart of the module was intended to resolve this tension, and result in a truly innovative development in IATL's interdisciplinary methodology. It was envisaged that students

would be involved in the whole academic life-cycle, from research and the presentation of that research to their peers, to evaluation and reflection on the process they went through.

The innovative approach proposed was intended to complement the IATL-sponsored Student as Researcher (SAR) methodology (detailed in the SAR 2012<sup>1</sup> and 2014<sup>2</sup> reports), which supported students to conduct their own research and disseminate that research to a wider audience. This project set out to bring the SAR methodology full circle, by getting students to use their research to teach their peers, and to reflect, with their peers, on the process of research and presentation.

To achieve these aims, the plan was to begin with some questions that would provide a structure both for students' inquiry, and for the taught portions of the module. The framing questions would be accompanied by some initial grounding (e.g. in interdisciplinarity, and some basic concepts related to psychopathology). Students would then be supported to start researching areas related to mental health in small mixed-discipline groups, present their findings to their peers for discussion and review, and learn from each other.

The hope for this project was that it would build on the strengths of the existing module, which had a broad appeal to students from a variety of disciplines (students in past years have come from Life Sciences, Chemistry, Theatre and Performance, English, Film Studies, Mathematics, Sociology and Philosophy, to name just some). Using the experience gained, of facilitating interdisciplinary discussion and supervising interdisciplinary research for assessed essays, the re-developed module was intended to engage students in almost every aspect of the module, from researching in groups and informing their peers of their findings, to critically engaging with each other's work and reflecting on the whole process. This would help students develop a whole suite of transferrable skills while being engaged in a unique student-led experience that would showcase what is special about education at Warwick. More specifically, it was envisaged that students would develop their academic skills, as well as skills valued by employers.

In terms of academic skills, the most significant contribution the module could make would be in relation to undertaking research. Undertaking research, and presenting one's work, are both potentially daunting and bewildering. How does one decide on an appropriate research question? Which sources of information are reliable, and where can they be found? How can one tell if an argument is convincing or not? Students develop some of these skills within their own disciplines, but can easily feel lost and anxious when it comes to demonstrating these skills outside their own discipline. The temptation is to revert to being passive learners, focusing attention on recording information, rather than engaging with the new information through questioning and hypothesis-testing. Gaining more confidence with unfamiliar subject matter, it was hoped, would also help students in their own disciplines with subject areas they were less comfortable with.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/strategic/brewerton\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/strategic/brewerton_final_report.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> [https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/strategic/brewerton\\_2\\_final\\_report.pdf](https://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/funding/fundedprojects/strategic/brewerton_2_final_report.pdf)

In terms of skills valued by employers, the project was intended to nurture and develop the kind of skills highlighted in a survey commissioned jointly by the Confederation of British Industries (CBI) and the National Union of Students (NUS), (CBI/NUS (2011) Working Towards Your Future<sup>3</sup>). In that survey, 4 out of 5 students said they went to university to improve their career opportunities (p. 4). The survey also lists various self-management skills, such as the willingness to accept responsibility, readiness to improve one's own performance based on feedback and reflective learning, and time management. Other skill sets include team working, problem solving and communication (p. 13). A quarter of employers surveyed said they were not satisfied with graduates' self-management skills, and around a fifth said they were not satisfied with graduates' teamwork and problem solving skills (p. 15). These are the skills that students on the module would be using and developing.

## 2. Implementation

The previous section set out the ambitions for the re-designed module. As adumbrated in the Overview, these ambitions were achieved in large part, but not in their entirety. The original plan was structured on the basis of a group of 12 students. The actual number of students was 16, which had an impact on available time (more on this below).

The 16 students consisted of 5 from philosophy, 5 from sociology, 2 from English, and 1 each from psychology, Warwick Business School, engineering and physics. The ratio of female to male students was 13 to 3.

The module consisted of 10 x 2 hour sessions in the Winter term of 2015/16. I'll describe the first session in a little detail, and then summarise key features of subsequent sessions.

In the first session, students were informed of the module's aims: to develop their understanding of mental ill-health (psychopathology) broadly construed, and to achieve this partly through their research, and the presentation of their research to each other. By way of a rationale, they were provided with the CBI/NUS survey findings given in the previous section of this report. Students were also informed that the reading and presentation components would be scaled up as the module progressed. Other key pieces of information provided to students in the introductory session included a description of the assessment (essays and reflective journals), an introduction to interdisciplinarity, some basic concepts related to psychopathology, and two questions which would frame enquiry in the module:

1. 'What is mental ill-health?';
2. 'How does society treat (i) the *conditions* (e.g. depression or schizophrenia), and (ii) the *people* who experience mental ill-health?'

The session finished with a 'theory building' group exercise, initially developed as part of IATL's Open Space Learning.<sup>4</sup> The exercise involved students, in groups of four, using a set of 11 A4 laminates (an identical set for each group). All bar one of the laminates had a quote, and a related image. The quotes were all, in some way,

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<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI\\_NUS\\_Employability%20report\\_May%202011.pdf](http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross\\_fac/iatl/resources/outputs/osl-final/osl\\_practice/](http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/iatl/resources/outputs/osl-final/osl_practice/)

related to different aspects of mental health, and were from a diverse range of sources (e.g. from R.D. Laing's *Divided Self*, Pink Floyd's song 'Comfortably Numb', and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*). One laminate only had an image (Giorgio de Chirico's *Mystery and Melancholy of a Street*). Students were instructed to arrange the laminates on the floor in a way that made sense of them as a coherent whole. The exercise concluded with each group presenting their arrangement to the others, and talking through their rationale. They were assured, during the exercise, that there was no one 'right answer'.

The aims of the exercise were threefold. First, for me as module convenor to get a rough idea of the level of students' prior knowledge. Second, to get students to use their physical space to (almost literally) arrange their thoughts, and in this way start their active engagement with the topic. Third, to introduce students to each other. Each student group consisted of students from a mix of disciplines, with no more than one student from a non-arts subject in each group.

It became clear from the first session that there was a significant difference between the prior knowledge of mental health (and related matters) that different students had. As emerged during the course of the module, there were also significant differences in students' interests with respect to mental health (e.g. some had only a very general interest, while others were hoping to explore some fairly specific topics, in some detail). In previous years, neither of these factors were an issue, since the range of topics was always quite large, and differences tended to 'average out': there was always *something* new, challenging, and of interest, even if not *everything* was new, challenging, or of interest. This year, however, these differences were more difficult to manage, since a lot of the work was done by the students themselves. (I return to this point in section 3.)

The following week, students had to present sections of an article, in groups. The article provided a clinical psychological perspective on hallucinations, and was drawn from an interdisciplinary volume of research on hallucinations. Each group presented a different section of the article. Students were informed that each person in the group was expected to contribute to the presentation. Students then watched a short film (30 mins.) in which four people spoke about their own experiences of auditory verbal hallucinations, after which they added their comments on the film, written on post-it notes, to a piece of flip chart paper, which remained up for all of them to see.

With three exceptions, each subsequent week included student presentations. In week 3, the four groups of students split two articles between them, and in later weeks, each group presented a different article. The articles were all chosen for them, with the exception of the final week, when they were asked to choose their own topics, find their own sources, and present their research individually or in pairs.

An extensive range of resources, including articles, scanned chapters of books, and links to YouTube videos were provided for them on the module's website. As students expressed interest in a topic or issue, relevant resources were added to the module's resources page. Required reading was always available for download from the resources page, and a short list of books available from the library in both print and electronic formats was also added. Despite this, I found little evidence of students' use of these resources except for the required reading.

Each week except weeks 6 and 10 ('Reading week' and the concluding week) focussed on a different aspect of, or perspective on mental ill-health. Aspects of mental ill-health focussed on included hallucinations and delusions. Perspectives on mental ill-health included history (with a guest lecturer), psychiatry (guest lecturer) and neuroscience (guest lecturer), as well as a critical examination of psychiatry. Several students had made me aware that they would be returning home for week 6, which is a 'Reading week' for many subjects. That week, I focussed on essays and reflective journals with the students who did attend. The last week, week 10 of the module, was devoted to student presentations that they had researched themselves.

As already mentioned, the introductory week and three other weeks did not include student presentations. Those three weeks were week 4 (psychiatry), week 6 ('Reading week'), and week 9. There was simply too much content in week 4 to include student presentations and leave time for questions. This was also an issue in week 5 (neuroscience), where student presentations, despite being shortened, left insufficient time for the guest lecturer to deliver her whole lecture as planned. In week 9, presentations were replaced with group work, as several students had informed me they had deadlines for assessed work for other modules that week, or the following week (the implications of this are considered in the next section).

The time initially set aside for student presentations on the assumption that there would be 12 students in total had to be adjusted for the larger number (16) that ended up taking the module. As described earlier, students were divided into four groups of four for the purposes of reading and presentations, with a mix of disciplines in each group. All groups were given a guide time for their presentations, but rarely managed to keep to this, almost invariably going over it. This had an impact on the time available for questions after presentations, and consequently some of the learning opportunities for both the group presenting, and their audience.

Assessment for the module is by means of an essay (2,500 words for the 12 CATS option, and 3,500 words for the 15 CATS option), and a reflective journal. The journal is intended to encourage reflection on what has been covered each session, with the finished piece supposed to be an edited analysis of how and why the student's thoughts and feelings about the subject matter of the module have changed (or, if they haven't, why they haven't). The essay is on a topic chosen by the student, in consultation with me. Given the diversity of students' own disciplines and interests, this flexibility is, in my view, necessary. The assessed work will be submitted after the writing of this report.

### 3. Evaluation

From my point of view, as the module convenor, one of the most successful outcomes of the re-designed module was the level of student engagement with the reading and presentations. Before this year, it was quite easy for students to avoid doing required reading, and make only minimal contributions to discussions. Though each year most students have made the effort, this year the module was actually structured around student engagement.

That said, with the benefit of hindsight there are several areas in which the module could have done better. In the previous section, I identified some issues with the implementation of the module. One of them was the significant differences in students' prior knowledge about mental health. In practice, my approach to this was to try to ensure the least well-informed of the students were able to keep up. As the student feedback shows, one student found this very frustrating. Comments from that feedback form describe this module, and another (unspecified) IATL module as "entirely unchallenging". It is the only feedback form with this criticism, which together with another comment from the same form leads me to speculate that some of the problems this student was experiencing stemmed from his or her interaction with the group he or she had been assigned to.

Groups were changed around every week for the first two years the module was run, Last year that had been reduced to cope with the number of students (29). This year, I was reluctant to change groups around, as I was worried that might unsettle students, and make them feel less confident about their presentations. Informal feedback from a student after the end of the module suggests that I missed a trick here.

Another of the issues I identified in the previous section was that the re-design of the module relied on a scaling up of the responsibility and independence students were supposed to have in relation to their research and presentation. This failed to factor in students' workload from other modules. Given that presentations for this module were not assessed for credit, there was overwhelming incentive for those students who had assessed essays for other modules due in weeks 9 and 10 to prioritise the assessed work. A better design would have made the final student presentation assessed for credit.

Thought there was certainly room for improvement, there were also a lot of positives. I end this section with some of the positive comments from students' feedback forms.

"I've learnt lots and really enjoyed it - thank you!"

"It was great working with people from different disciplines"

"Lecturer was very helpful, always replying to email and offering extra reading when asked - thank you!"

"This module was great... Thank you"

"I really enjoyed this module!"

"I enjoyed preparing the presentations, it really helped me understand the content and reflect on my own ideas."

"I was able to improve and practice both presentation and teamwork skills"

### Student Feedback\*

Questions	5 (High/Extremely good)	4 (Above average)	3 (Average)	2 (Below average)	1 (Unsatisfactory)
Did the module fulfil its aims?	4	6	1		
Was the module well structured?	3	6	2		
Did you find the workload manageable?	4	2	4		1
Were the seminars stimulating?	4	6		1	
Was discussion well guided?	4	6		1	
Were you encouraged to speak?	3	4	3	1	
How would you rate your attendance at seminars?	7	3	1		
How would you rate your preparation for and contribution to seminars?	5	4	2		
Did the seminars form a coherent series?	2	8	1		
Was the order logical?	2	5	3	1	
Were the subjects of a sufficiently wide range?	5	4	2		
Were the preparation tasks at the right level?	4	6			1
Did you engage with staff from disciplines other than your own?	7	2	1	1	
Did you engage with students from disciplines other than your own?	8	2	1		
Did you identify anything from another discipline to use in your own work?	4	4	3		
Have you benefited from keeping your journal?	5	3	2		1
How helpful was feedback on your essay title?*	3	4	3		1
Was the library provision adequate?	2	4	4	1	
Did this module meet your expectations?	5	5			1
Will the work you did be useful to you in the future?	5	4		1	1
Would you recommend this module to future students?*	8	2			1

\*: Out of 16 students, 11 returned feedback forms.

\*\* : Some students have yet to decide their essay topics.