

### Example Two – Snails and Rain: Leading a ‘Welcome Week’ Biology Practical

This field practical took groups of ~16 newly arrived biosciences undergraduates around campus, where they were tasked with recording and marking garden snails, as an introduction to population monitoring. Whilst there was a scientific underpinning to the activity, this was the students’ **very first** taught university experience. The practical was designed to make a good impression, provide social bonding opportunities, and help students get to grips with the layout of campus. These latter purposes are what I placed most emphasis on.

Most of the students had come immediately from A-level teaching, and it became quickly apparent that some did not adapt to being led by a near-peer as readily. Near-peer teaching is something I support wholeheartedly, particularly because of its proven benefits in providing role-models and improving ambition amongst students (Bulte et al., 2007), and seemed ideal for this practical. I attempted to encourage a more informal rapport from the beginning, providing information on my background and science. From experience this is usually well received, however a major hurdle was the absence of any yet developed specific scientific interests from the students – they hadn’t been biologists long enough. This was not a problem I had encountered before when teaching, but was similar to outreach experiences. It now acts as reminder for me to better adapt my approach based on academic level.

Once the practical was underway I tried to push more general conversation and give something of a tour, partly so the students could get to know each other and become familiar with the campus. This had a mixed effect – some students reacted well, and naturally began conversation offshoots amongst themselves, leading me to think I will apply that approach in future. Others – who were particularly enthusiastic about the science at hand – clearly found the perceived tangential direction of the discussion to be frustrating. Whilst I feel comfortable respecting and dealing with the needs of individual learners in terms of ability, I found it difficult to balance different priorities amongst the student group. This difficulty became aggravated when we were caught in prolonged rain. Those students who were keen on continuing the practical were at odds with those who would rather keep dry and discuss non-snail-related matters. This kind of field incident is widely ignored in much of the education literature (e.g., little mention of field teaching in Race (2014)), as it is highly discipline specific. I discussed this motivational difficulty with other PTAs more accustomed to field work after the session, as well as the module convener as to whether it was correct of me to offer an early finish to those group members who were clearly not enthusiastic about the session once it began to rain. No students did in fact opt out early - and being made aware it was their choice to stay seemed to improve moods, interest and group cohesion. I therefore consider my decision to have been the right one. Retrospectively, I see the experience as a lesson in providing choice to undergraduates with respect to their learning.

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Bulte, C., Betts, A., Garner, K., Durning, S., 2007. Student teaching: views of student near-peer teachers and learners. *Med. Teach.* 29, 583–590.  
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