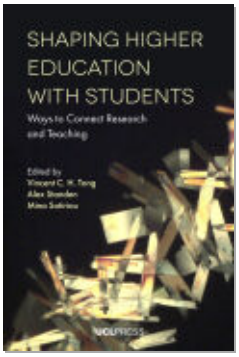
PROJECT MUSE®

3.8. Meet the researcher



Published by

Tong, Vincent C. H., et al.
Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching.
University College London, 2018.
Project MUSE. https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81931.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/81931

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.
[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-19 00:47 GMT)

3.8

Meet the researcher

The use of interviews to connect first-year undergraduate students to research staff at UCL

Julie Evans, Alex Standen, Alastair McClelland and Siir Saydam
Faculty of Brain Sciences, UCL

1. Introduction

There is considerable international interest in the relationship between teaching and research in the higher education sector (for a review, see Malcolm 2014) and, in particular, the concept of strengthening the link between them as a way of enhancing the student experience and improving learning outcomes (e.g. Healey et al. 2010; Healey 2005).

UCL offers an intensive research-embedded education that expects students not just passively to receive the wisdom of scholarly activity conducted by our academic staff, but to be actively involved in their own research as part of our larger institutional research community. The first dimension of the UCL Connected Curriculum is on 'Students connect with researchers at UCL and have an opportunity to learn about the institution's research' (Fung and Carnell 2016, 4). On both the BSc Psychology and BSc Psychology and Language Sciences programmes in the Faculty of Brain Sciences there is a clear 'research throughline' from Year 1 through to the project in Year 3 which is a piece of empirical research conducted by each student under the supervision of a member of staff. Research methods teaching and the opportunity to participate in empirical studies starts in Year 1, but students have not had the opportunity to engage with members of the research staff in the faculty. The aim of the 'meet the researcher' initiative was to give first-year students some exposure to the research community within the faculty in the first

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-19 00:47 GMT)

term of their degree programme by getting small groups of students to interview a researcher in the faculty.

An important concept underpinning the initiative is that of learning communities (Lave and Wenger 1991), and the relationship between such communities and a successful academic experience for students. The general framework was outlined by Belaczyc and Collins (1999) and expanded upon by later authors (e.g. Stassen 2003; Hafferty and Watson 2007; Rosenbaum et al. 2007). Key developments pertinent to an enhanced student experience are: (i) members of learning communities can include students enrolled in several common programmes; (ii) learning communities can include academic staff and students from all years of the programme; and (iii) there is a method for sharing knowledge within that learning community (Moser et al. 2015).

2. Methodology

2.1 Researchers

The Faculty of Brain Sciences consists of four institutes (Ear Institute, Institute of Cognitive Neuroscience, Institute of Neurology and Institute of Ophthalmology) and two divisions (Psychology & Language Sciences and Psychiatry). A call to participate in the scheme was sent out to all staff, and 42 researchers volunteered to take part. Each of these researchers was filmed while they answered three key questions: what is your major research question? why is this important? and what have you found? The videos can be viewed at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/brain-sciences/videos.

2.2 Students

Each year, approximately 150 new students are recruited onto the BSc Psychology and BSc Psychology and Language Sciences programmes, and are allocated to seminar groups of 6–10 students which meet on a regular basis. For the purposes of the 'meet the researcher' scheme, each seminar group was divided in half to create two smaller 'meet the researcher' groups of students.

2.3 Procedure

The first author met with the students during Induction Week to explain the initiative, and further detailed information about the scheme was

provided to the students via the Moodle Virtual Learning Environment. This included guidance about how to prepare for their interview (e.g. gathering information on the staff member, suggestions for the sort of questions that they might ask) and how to structure a PowerPoint presentation about the interview which would be shown to the other half of their seminar group later in the term.

The students in their 'meet the researcher' groups were required to watch the videos, rank order three researchers they would like to interview, and then contact the Faculty Education Officer via email with their choices. The Education Officer had information about the researcher's availability and was able to allocate students a time to meet and interview the staff member. Each group then met with their allocated researcher and interviewed him or her for a minimum of 30 minutes (although some interviews lasted up to an hour).

Finally, each 'meet the researcher' group gave a short PowerPoint presentation to the other half of their seminar group in the presence of their personal tutor. The tutors provided feedback to their students on their presentations and facilitated discussions about the research that had been presented.

3. Feedback

3.1 Quantitative Feedback

Students were asked to complete a 10-item questionnaire to provide feedback about the initiative, with an option to add additional comments, and complete data was obtained from 47 students. The results are presented in Table 3.8.1.

3.2 Qualitative feedback

There were some very positive and useful comments from students, researchers and personal tutors.

Comments from the students:

Excellent experience, and I would very much like to take part in more initiatives like this.

A fantastic idea and overwhelmingly positive experience! *I hope you roll it out widely for years to come.*

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-19 00:47 GMT)

Table 3.8.1 Responses to the 'meet the researcher' questionnaire

	Percentage endorsement		
Question	**Strongly agree/Agree**	**Neutral**	**Disagree/ Strongly disagree**
The 'meet the researcher' project was overall a good experience for me	94	6	0
Guidelines were clear and helpful	77	17	6
I enjoyed watching the videos	43	34	23
I enjoyed meeting my allocated Researcher	90	10	0
I was encouraged by my Personal Tutor to take part	77	17	6
My Personal Tutor gave me feedback on my presentation	72	13	10
Taking part in this initiative has helped me understand better the research culture at UCL	85	15	0
I developed my skills in interviewing, presenting and peer evaluation	66	23	10
Working as part of a team was an effective way for me to get to know other students	79	13	8
It was helpful to get comments about our presentations from other students	60	17	15

Notes: Percentages are rounded. Some students responded 'N/A'.

Our researcher was very keen to talk about many aspects and interesting topics of his field.

It was not only a brilliant opportunity to gain some additional knowledge, but also we could make connections and see how the career of a researcher develops.

I loved meeting the researchers because it was really interesting and inspiring to meet those I hope to emulate one day. Researchers gave such good advice and insight and I'm very thankful.

A short summary of their research to be provided along with the videos to help determine whether students are interested in the topic would've been nice - rather than having to spend time watching every single video

Comments from the researchers:

> *I really enjoyed participating in this project. I thought this was an interesting initiative and every step of it was well organised and enjoyable. I would love to participate again. I found it very interesting and well organised. I've used the short film as teaching material so it's been useful to me. Happy to participate next year.*
>
> *The two interviews that I had were both good. The students had prepared good questions and seemed engaged when we discussed it. The videos look good and I was pleased to see a lot of variability in the way people chose to do them – I think that worked well. I'd certainly be happy to be involved in future versions.*
>
> *I found it a pleasure to take part and very well organised. The students seemed very engaged and enthusiastic. The video is great and showcased on my website*!

Comments from personal tutors:

> *I think the scheme helped the students with interviewing skills and it gave them an experience of presenting as a group which is a nice introduction to presenting.*
>
> *Yes, I think it helped students understand the research culture at UCL.*
>
> *I think the students were really motivated and enthused about studying psychology by speaking to real academics about their research, I think it is worth doing in future years.*
>
> *They felt especially engaged in research and 'being part of something bigger'.*
>
> *From my perspective the presentations were fantastic, and the students were really engaged in discussing each other's presentations as well (including relating the research themes and approaches to their module content).*

4. Discussion

The quantitative findings strongly suggest that the main aims of the initiative have been met; the majority of students felt that meeting a researcher had been a positive experience, and had given them insight into the research culture at UCL. There were also other perceived benefits concerning skill development, getting to know other students and receiving feedback from peers. The comments made by students echo these findings and in addition, there was clearly a very positive response to the initiative from both the researchers involved and the personal tutors.

[136.0.111.243] Project MUSE (2025-01-19 00:47 GMT)

One aspect of the scheme which appeared to be less successful was the use of videos. It was evident that the students found watching all 42 videos in order to select three researchers they wished to interview rather demanding. In response to this feedback, we asked the participating researchers this year to provide a 50-word description of their research in addition to the video, as an aid to the students when making their selection. Here are the thoughts of Siir Saydam, a first-year BSc Psychology student in 2015–16 and the fourth author of this chapter:

> As a new undergraduate student, getting accustomed to the methods of teaching and different ways of learning at university can be disorienting, and I think it is very important for students to be in contact with those who can provide them with an insight into and greater knowledge of the academic world. I was initially unsure about what was expected from me as a first-year psychology student, and I also felt that I needed assistance to plan how best to make use of my education at UCL. One of the projects that helped me through this process was 'meet the researcher'. I was able to meet with someone who had once been occupied with similar questions and had gone on to become an academic researcher. The information I received was very valuable to me, and made me feel confident about what was expected if I were to pursue a career in academia. Although I had an idea about what being a researcher might entail (in terms of possessing a certain set of skills and a specific work ethic) I was not sure about the process of developing these skills. Therefore, the experience of meeting a researcher at UCL is one of the most useful things that can be offered to first-year students who are yet to discover the nature of their chosen field of study.
>
> As I browsed through the names of the researchers, the descriptions of their research and their videos, I felt intrigued about their subjects and I was also very impressed by the knowledge they demonstrated in their respective fields. This led me to formulate questions that I was genuinely interested in, as I was preparing for the interview with my group mates. I did not just want to know about the content of their research, but also about the process that led the researchers to focus on their specific subject areas. I think my questions also helped my group mates to think more about the researchers as people and colleagues who can be approached – rather than just names on academic papers. That, I believe, was the most important aspect of the project; not only to provide subject knowledge but to make

the researchers approachable to the students. There are still some aspects of the project that could be changed. For instance, some of my peers were unsure about the type of information they were expected to deliver in their presentations about the researcher. Most of them focused on the content of their research which I believe resulted in a limited interaction with the researcher. Therefore, the project could be improved by clearly informing the students that the interviews should be about the process of becoming a researcher and the researchers' personal experiences in the academic field as well as the content knowledge of the research area.

The project is also useful as it develops the students' learning skills via group work and in the preparation of a presentation, plus students are given feedback from their personal tutors. Personally, at the end of the project I felt more prepared and confident about presenting in front of my peers as well as starting to consider a career in academic research as a result of the interview. Lastly, my experience of 'meet the researcher' allowed me to be more conscientious about the process of preparing, conducting, and writing up the experiments I encountered through the first year of the BSc Psychology programme at UCL.

5. Meet the Researcher at UCL and future directions

It is interesting to note that the use of student-led interviews of research staff as a means of connecting the teaching and research was pioneered at UCL within the Department of Geography in the 1980s (Dwyer 2001). A survey by the third author revealed that 'meet the researcher' schemes are operating in a relative small number of undergraduate degree programmes in the University (e.g. Linguistics: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/case-studies-news/research-basedlearning/meet-researcher-linguistics [Accessed 20 September 2017]). All have two things in common: (i) a small group of first-year students meet and interview a researcher – typically for 30 minutes and produce some form of output, and (ii) all the schemes have received extremely positive feedback from students, researchers and tutors.

However, these interview projects do vary somewhat across a number of dimensions: some are incorporated into the tutorial teaching whereas others are a component of a module. In some schemes, students are able to choose a researcher but on others they are allocated a member of staff to interview. The nature of the questions varies: on some schemes students

are given the questions to ask, on others they formulate the questions themselves within a guidance framework. This means that some interviews have a relatively narrow focus on the research being undertaken, but others are broader so that the students get an idea of what it is like to work as an academic researcher in a research-intensive university. Finally, they differ in the output produced by the students: commonly this takes the form of an oral presentation, but on some schemes the students produce a piece of written work which carries a percentage of marks for that module.

In his role as a Connected Curriculum Fellow, the third author has been actively promoting 'meet the researcher' across UCL. Ideally, we would like to see some version of the scheme on every undergraduate programme as a first-year activity – and clearly there is the potential to extend the initiative to postgraduate taught programmes.

References

Belaczyc, K. and Collins, A. 1999. Learning communities in classrooms. A reconceptualization of educational practice. In C. M. Reigeluth (ed.) *Instructional design theories and models, Vol. II*, pp. 271–92. Mahwah NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Dwyer, C. 2001. Linking research and teaching: A staff–student interview project. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 25(3), 357–66.

Fung, D. and Carnell, B. 2016. *UCL Connected Curriculum: A Guide for Educators and Programme Teams.* London: University College London, UK. Available online: www.ucl.ac.uk/connectedcurriculum

Hafferty, F. W. and Watson, K. V. 2007. The rise of learning communities in medical education: A socio-structural analysis. *Journal of Cancer Education* 22(1), 6–9.

Healey, M. 2005. Linking research and teaching to benefit student learning. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 29(2), 183–201.

Healey, M., Jordan, F., Pell, B. and Short, C. 2010. The research–teaching nexus: A case study of students' awareness, experiences and perceptions of research. *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 47(2), 235–46.

Lave, J. and Wenger, E. 1991. *Situated Learning. Legitimate Peripheral Participation*. Cambridge: University Press.

Malcolm, M. 2014. A critical evaluation of recent progress in understanding the role of the research-teaching link in higher education. *Higher Education* 67(3), 289–301.

Moser, L, Berlie, H, Salitric, F, McCuiston, M. and Slaughter, R. 2015. Enhancing academic success by creating a community of learners. *American Journal of Pharmaceutical Education* 79(5), 70.

Rosenbaum, M. E., Schwabbauer, M., Kreiter, C. and Ferguson, K. J. 2007. Medical students' perception of emerging learning communities at one medical school. *Academic Medicine* 82(5), 508–15.

Stassen, M. L. A. 2003. Student outcomes: The impact of varying living-learning community models. *Research in Higher Education* 44(5), 581–613.

Acknowledgements

This work was supported by two small grants from CALT to the first author.

We would also like to acknowledge the support of all the UCL researchers who made this initiative possible, their names, titles and research areas can be found at http://www.ucl.ac.uk/brain-sciences/videos