



Evolution of the journal club: a creative approach to ever-changing student needs

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Presentation abstract

Building on a paper about an interdisciplinary journal club presented at the 2023 ALDinHE conference (Winter and McLay, 2023), we explored the innovative ways in which we have adapted this approach to allow students to engage more easily by addressing challenges, including limited staff time and student availability.

Feedback from the conference session and subsequent proceedings inspired ideas for developing the journal club model we had been using. A key strength of the club was the involvement of staff from across our Learning Development (LD) team (LD librarian, LD adviser and specialist in maths and statistics), but with limited staff availability, running four sessions was challenging. This, alongside feedback from student participants about the difficulty of attending multiple sessions, doing pre-reading and needing additional support and tools for reading and analysis, pushed us to think creatively about how to adapt to the evolving needs of our students.

Consequently, in academic year 2024/25, we replaced the four-session journal club model with a standalone workshop requiring no pre-reading. The workshop starts with a skim reading activity to develop students' reading skills and makes use of an article analysis document, developed to empower students to understand and critique articles more effectively through discussion with their peers. This new format maintains the original aims

and cross-disciplinary approach of the journal club, while giving both students and staff greater flexibility to engage.

It also inspired several spin-off resources and workshops, including a statistics glossary, an innovative online reading room, and 'tips and tools for statistics and data analysis' workshop at a dissertation event.

This session was of interest to delegates who are (or are wishing to) support students with critical reading and analysis and consider how this adaptable approach can be employed despite the resource and time shortages faced by many LD teams.

Keywords: journal club; iterative approach; interdisciplinary; student feedback.

Community response

The presentation was received positively by attendees. The interactivity and discussion that was generated amongst participants was a highlight for those in attendance. It was also great to see how this project had developed since it was first presented at ALDCon23. Indeed, the inclusion of this retrospective element was a key feature for one attendee, who praised the team's work as a good example of iteration, development and progression:

It was really helpful to see how the presenters laid out the different iterations of their practice over consecutive years. The narrative thread of the presentation highlighted the importance of working together to iterate in the face of disappointing outcomes. I think we have a tendency to want to 'throw out' ideas that haven't worked, either through disappointment, or maybe when a new person joins a project, however, this project demonstrated the value of persevering and adapting. I wonder whether the cross-disciplinary approach/team has helped make this happen, as the shared ownership across disciplines and shared interest in making the project work leads to a slower and steadier pace; when a resource or project is owned by one team, they can make quicker executive decisions, which may have good or bad outcomes.

The iterative approach of the project was supported and showcased to attendees by the inclusion of multiple examples of qualitative student feedback, alongside examples of how this feedback was acted upon in the development of the journal club. This inspired another participant who remarked that:

Listening to this, I realised the scope to draw on student reflections from workshops to inform our resources is really valuable and maybe under-utilised. I have previously built a writing FAQ sheet based directly on student interactions in a workshop, but am now thinking about how to more intentionally gather insights from workshops to make resources clearer and easier for students to engage with.

Authors' reflection

The feedback we received following our presentation and in the community reflections was heartening, showing that our creative approaches to adapting the journal club model were positively received. Given our own experiences and this encouraging feedback, we plan to continue with our current model next academic year, making sure to continue our good practice in drawing on student feedback to further develop the journal club workshop and offshoot projects where appropriate.

Suggestions from the audience about encouraging students to select journal articles themselves were interesting to consider, especially as this has the potential to reduce staff workload. While this approach might empower students and create a shared sense of responsibility, it would be challenging for students to select articles that were accessible for all levels and subject areas. In a previous iteration of the journal club, we did give students the option to select articles themselves, but none of the participants chose to do this. Additionally, we do not currently record the details of students who attend the workshop so there is no mechanism for us to contact them post-workshop. As such, this is not something we are likely to introduce for the workshop, but this approach may work better for any subject-specific and embedded journal clubs we undertake in the future.

Another helpful suggestion was to explore options that allow students to directly annotate the articles we analyse in workshops collaboratively. Our institution does not subscribe to Talis (the software suggested) but we plan to investigate other options which might similarly give students the option to annotate together.

We are grateful to all the attendees who joined and shared their thoughts with us and are happy to be contacted to continue the conversation.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all the contributors who shared their reflections and enriched our insight into this conference presentation and its impact on the audience.

The community response was edited by Craig Morley, who captured the key themes of the community discussion.

References

Winter, K. and McLay, J. (2023) 'Fostering belonging: an interdisciplinary journal club', *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education*, 32, Available at: <https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.vi32.1473>

Author details

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Jen McLay joined the University of Surrey's Learning Development team in 2017 after a varied career in industry, including academic publishing and event management. Jen is primarily affiliated with the Faculty of Health and Medical Sciences and delivers a range of learning development support for the faculty from embedded teaching sessions to one-to-one support. On a wider level, Jen is actively involved in the diverse range of activities and programmes that the Learning Development team at Surrey are engaged with, including multi-disciplinary journal club, resource development, events, workshops and more recently Academic Integrity practices. Jen was awarded FHEA in 2020.

Alice Batchelor joined the Maths and Statistics Advice team, part of the Learning Development team at the University of Surrey, in 2022. Prior to this, she worked as a statistician in contract research organisations. She delivers embedded maths and statistics teaching across a variety of courses and disciplines, as well as providing one-to-one support and facilitating open-to-all workshops. She also contributes to wider Learning Development team initiatives, such as the multi-disciplinary journal club. Alice was awarded FHEA status in 2024.

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