

Introducing Worcester Weeks 2013 - 14

A personal reflection based on my experience in the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts

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Worcester Weeks were introduced at The University of Worcester as a university-wide initiative to 'provide an opportunity to create space for curriculum activity that cannot easily be delivered through the normal timetable' (Academic Development and Practice Unit, 2012).

At an Institute 'Away Day' last June, staff from the Institute of Humanities and Creative Arts met in inter-disciplinary groups to plan activities for Worcester Weeks for the following academic year. As you might expect from an Institute with 'creative' in the title lots of ideas were generated and, buoyed up by a spirit of enthusiasm, I left the meeting feeling that we were ready to implement these. In September with the onset of the new semester and implementing Curriculum 2013 the task felt a little more daunting.

Worcester Weeks were in fact full of surprises, the first of which was my appointment as Worcester Weeks co-ordinator for our Institute in September, with only four weeks before the first Worcester Week. Although there had been a lot of initial planning and significant groundwork was in place it proved to be a steep learning curve for me. I needed initially to liaise with everyone who had potentially offered to organise an event or activity in Worcester Weeks as well as a way of students finding out information about what was on offer.

The nature of the Institute is made up of different courses of different sizes and spanning many discreet disciplines. Embedded in the approach for Worcester Weeks was to view this as an opportunity for inter-disciplinary learning. Considering the incredibly short amount of time, staff provided a rich and varied diet of activities that were, almost without exception, well received by the students who attended. Twenty five different activities were named by students on evaluation forms from Worcester Weeks 1 and 2 as the best event they attended. These ranged from trips, talks and workshops to personal tutorials and included The Nowbrow Illustration Talk, Acting for Film Workshop, a trip to The Liverpool International Slavery Museum and a talk by author Helen Cross on creative writing to name but a few.

I attended a huge range of events and came into contact with many staff I had not met before and amongst many highlights was an esteemed English professor playing the accordion for a presentation on *The Book Thief*, some stirring poetry and folk songs during an *Open Microphone* night and the opportunity to *Move like a Diva* as part of a colleague's presentation on his PhD research.

The main problem was simply that some events, that had taken a lot of staff time and planning, attracted disappointing numbers of students. So can we do something about promotion and content to ensure greater participation next year or are we thwarted by factors beyond our control?

To try and answer these questions I implemented extensive evaluation with staff and students. After Worcester Week 1, questionnaires were distributed and collected by StARs (elected student representatives) for each course and after Worcester Week 2 an online questionnaire was emailed to all students in the Institute. Staff were asked to complete an online questionnaire after Worcester Week 3 and overall the most contentious issue has been the timing of Worcester Weeks. Some staff considered that: 'The two Worcester Weeks in semester 1 led to considerable student complaints about the disruption to the flow of module teaching' (Staff Questionnaire, 2014). I am certainly a supporter of two rather than three Worcester Weeks, one in each semester to provide balance across the curriculum. Although several alternative models were considered by the University and there have been assurances that further consideration will be given to this issue, the timing of the three weeks remains the same next year.

It seems to me there are two major tensions at the core of the Worcester Weeks' experience for students and staff that have emerged through the evaluation process. I identify these as firstly: Should activities be optional or mandatory? And secondly: Should activities be extra curricular or related to course?

In the Good Practice Guide to Worcester Weeks it is outlined that Worcester Weeks are 'intended to be integral to courses' (Academic Development and Practice Unit, 2012) and so 'students are expected to engage' (Academic Development and Practice Unit, 2012) as they would with any other aspect of the course. For some students this requires a degree of formality and students at the Fine Art Course Committee Meeting wanted 'registers to be implemented for course events to make it more official' (Course Committee Meeting, Fine Arts, 2014). Other students perceive that lecturers increase the tension: 'students received a

lot of work which lecturers stated they could catch up on during Worcester Week, but this was at the expense of missing out on Worcester Week events' (Course Committee Meeting, Creative and Digital Media, 2014).

The most striking statistic from evaluation surveys after Worcester Weeks 1 and 2 was the vast majority of students (67% in Worcester Week 1 and 86% in Worcester Week 2) wanted activities to be directly related to their course as opposed to extra-curricular opportunities. This is contrary to the expectations of a vocal minority of students who felt a 'wider circulation of events relating to other courses (e.g. Digital Film Production) would have increased interest' (Course Committee Meeting, Screenwriting, 2014). In a meeting convened in December, Worcester Week co-ordinators were invited to share their experiences and there seemed to be general agreement that events students regarded as beneficial to their course were better attended. As there were only three weeks between the first and second Worcester Week by the time feedback from students had been collated the second Worcester Week was already planned and it was unrealistic to implement major changes.

Given that we cannot change the unpopular timing of Worcester Weeks we can influence and change the content and promotion of them and 'we need to sell them a lot more effectively to students' (Staff Questionnaire, 2014). Conversations at Course Committees Meetings, Learning and Teaching Committee Meetings, Institute StARs Forums and from more informal conversations with colleagues lead me to suggest a few considerations for future planning.

Worcester Weeks need to be relevant to students' career aspirations and students were particularly keen on workshops or talks from industry professionals as 'it's inspiring and they can share real world experiences' (Worcester Week 2, Student Questionnaire, 2014). This linked to many suggestions of work or volunteering placement opportunities or 'people coming in and explaining to us what it takes to get into the industry' (Worcester Week 2, Student Questionnaire, 2014). The third Worcester Week had a particular focus on Careers with two days devoted to a 'Careers Fest' with its own dedicated co-ordinator. I think this clear targeting of events linked to employability was a more successful approach and that giving the first two Worcester Weeks a specific title may help to promote them and give a thematic coherence.

The timing of events makes a considerable difference to whether students are likely to attend them with a large majority (perhaps unsurprisingly) preferring afternoon sessions. It

might improve attendance to cluster events in particular year groups to create a full or half-day commitment of time or students could be offered a smaller number of longer sessions as 'StARs felt that many sessions were too short to entice people to come in specially' (Course Committee Meeting, Digital Film Production, 2014).

Some students are keen to take the initiative and want 'to have more input and organise their own events' (Worcester Week 2, Student Questionnaire, 2014). This may raise the profile of Worcester Weeks, as students at the Course Committee Meeting for Illustration thought the best way to encourage greater participation 'would be for students to encourage fellow students to attend via positive feedback on social networking sites' (Course Committee Meeting, Illustration, 2014).

The problem is that Worcester Weeks seem a somewhat distant memory and to avoid the frantic attempts last year, to collate all the Institute's activities at the last minute, thereby leaving no real time to promote them, we need to plan now. Again it will inevitably (and rightly) take second place to the planning and implementation of Curriculum 2013 for level 5 students.

The unfortunate acronym for Worcester Weeks (WW1 and WW2) hasn't caused any genuine confusion although it was pointed out to me it might. However the phrase 'under siege' has at points this year felt appropriate and there is still an up uphill battle in convincing some staff and students that Worcester Weeks are a good idea. This is in some ways harder as level 5 students were offered a Reading/Learning Week in the middle of semester 1 of their first year. This expectation gave rise to comments from a small (statistically) but vocal few: 'It's a stupid idea and we should just have a traditional reading week, so we can return home to spend time with family or friends who have moved away to other Universities etc.' (Worcester Week 2, Student Questionnaire, 2014).

Notwithstanding the confusion about the purpose of a *traditional* reading week, I am pleased to report that some students have taken a much more positive approach and want to get more involved. A group of StARs from across the Institute wanted to plan inter-disciplinary events for Worcester Weeks and suggested a TEDx¹ event inviting speakers from a wide

¹TED (Technology, Entertainment, Design) is an international series of conferences owned by the non-profit Sapling Foundation under the slogan 'ideas worth spreading'. TEDx supports this mission and helps independent organisations who want to create a TED – like event in their own community.

range of subject areas. The ambitious ethos of these talks is to be 'multidisciplinary, focused on the power of ideas to change attitudes, lives and ultimately, the world' (TEDx, 2014).

Although the regulations make it difficult to organise the event under the TEDx banner, the organisation's utopian vision has a synergy with the more modest local objective that Worcester Weeks should create an 'enriched learning experience to complement opportunities provided elsewhere in the curriculum' (Academic Development and Practice Unit, 2012). This still feels to me a worthwhile and not completely unrealistic aspiration. Indeed as a couple of students responding to the ways in which their experience of Worcester Weeks could be improved simply replied 'It can't' and 'All was great thank you' (Worcester Week 1, Student Questionnaire, 2013).

References

Academic and Development Practice Unit (2012) *Good practice guide to Worcester Weeks*, [Available at: [http://www.worc.ac.uk/adpu/documents/Worcester Weeks October 2012.pdf](http://www.worc.ac.uk/adpu/documents/Worcester_Weeks_October_2012.pdf)], Date Accessed 10th May 2014.

TEDx (2014) *TEDx Rules*, [Available at: <http://www.ted.com/participate/organize-a-local-tedx-event/before-you-start/tedx-rules>], Date Accessed 10th May 2014.

Biography

Alison Reeves is a Senior Lecturer at The University of Worcester with interests in Applied Theatre and Directing. She worked with *Language Alive* and *Voicebox*, bilingual Theatre in Education Companies in Birmingham and established *Equal Voices* festivals with The National School of Drama in New Delhi. She has recently directed four Theatre in Education programmes (2011 – 2014) that aim to raise educational aspirations and develop widening participation. They have toured extensively and have formed the basis of her research exploring their potential to empower young people to make decisions on educational progression with a particular focus on the use of interactive voting software.