

CASE STUDIES

Teaching and Learning Centre Case Studies

Gender Studies student research conference



Since 2014, the Department of Gender Studies has ended the Lent Term with a conference by students on GI422 (Sexuality, Gender and Globalisation). Exhilarated students present their original papers on themed panels, and respond to insightful questions from their peers and staff members. The fierce but friendly discussion continues during lunch, and after the event at an evening reception. Dr Jacob Breslow from Gender Studies and student participants described why the conference is both a challenging and a rewarding format for learning and assessment.

Students need multiple abilities to perform well at the conference, and GI422 provides activities during contact hours to develop these. Each week of term, students both attend a lecture, and a workshop focused on preparing and presenting their own research. The skills addressed in these sessions include abstract writing; participating in a panel, and the salient differences between a conference paper and a written essay. There is also hands-on work related to public speaking - including anxiety management and voice coaching. This support is evident in the final papers, which are polished and engaging.

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Students at the 2017 conference noted that they were keen to develop their skills at communicating in ways other than formal writing. Jacob believes that condensing an argument, and public speaking, are invaluable abilities for any future career. These skills also have particular relevance for academic research and, so far, at least two PhD students have progressed from this conference.

The sense of community at the conference is palpable and group-work is used to reduce the isolation of a solo research project. This becomes self-perpetuating, and students meet outside scheduled hours, as critical friends in the research process. This community builds enthusiasm for the conference; helps to reduce anxiety, and, as well as pragmatic support, students appreciate the chance to learn from one another.



Faculty and students from across the department are invited to the conference, so students can present to a large and well-informed audience. Student presenters may also invite other interested friends and colleagues. A key strength of the event is the depth and variety of papers. Students from varied backgrounds use the critical skills from the course to interrogate their specific experiences and interests. In 2017, papers grew out of students' connections with France, Haiti, China, Iran and India. The topics included reproduction, immigration and religion, and the materials interrogated ranged from parliamentary debate to adolescent blogs.

"In the past two weeks, we kept meeting because we trusted each other - both that we wouldn't inflate each other, and that we wouldn't rip each other apart."

"It really did a lot to be in such a safe setting, where you know people aren't going to ask you hostile questions."

"It really enriches the experience when you can learn from your peers. It's part of why we're here - obviously there are amazing teachers, who are giving us so much information, but when you can also extract that from the people who are on your course, it's really exciting."

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Jacob explained that the course content (and the discipline itself) is located at the intersection of the personal and political, and therefore offers a chance for students to work on topics close to their hearts. *“Students think: if I have to, I may as well talk about something I’m passionate about!”* This opportunity (to explore an area of enthusiasm with new critical tools) can progress both students’ subject knowledge and their self-understanding.

The conference takes place on the last day of term, and students receive feedback on their papers within a week (a tight turnaround for the staff). Students then complete their essay and submit on the first day of the next term. The conference performance (including final abstract, presentation, and response to questions) forms 30% of the students’ final grade, with the remaining 70% allocated to a written paper based on the presentation. Jacob notes that students are sometimes nervous about the transition into the final written paper. But students have received not only formal feedback from a staff member, but also questions and discussion from attendees to help them shape their material. Student presenters expressed confidence in their familiarity with the material, *“In January, we were told, you’ll research it so much that you’ll find that you’ll know what it’s going to say. I thought that’s impossible. Now when I say research suggests, I know exactly who’s talking.”* Students also felt that their research would be the part of their programme they understood and remembered most profoundly, *“This is seared into my brain!”*

This mutually supportive community reduces the isolation and the misunderstandings that can contribute to poor academic practice. In addition the gradual development of an original project, and the questions from attendees, require students to demonstrate ownership of their work at every stage. The conference format creates an atmosphere which celebrates and rewards original student research. As one student noted,

“When you write an essay, and you know it’s good, then you’re happy with yourself. But with this, you’re genuinely proud of yourself.”

If you’re considering introducing a student conference to your course or programme, you may wish to discuss it with your TLC contact. There may also be funding available through [the Teaching and Learning Development Fund](#), which provided financial support for the GI conference for its first two years.