

# Coaxing chemists to communicate

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PROCEEDING

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A module *Communicating Chemistry* has been designed and incorporated into the curriculum for the penultimate year of the BSc (hons) Chemistry Course at Heriot-Watt University. The module is taken by a cohort of about 50 students and occupies 100 hours of student effort over an 8 week period. The module consists of 10 exercises each of which is built around a chemical scenario and engages students in plausible chemical problems and tasks. In combination the exercises provide opportunities for students to develop skills of information retrieval, team work, problem solving, critical thinking and communication (oral, visual and written). One exercise is described in detail. The exercises could be incorporated into any BSc Chemistry Course.

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## Introduction

There is widespread recognition of the need for graduate chemists to be able to communicate effectively and for undergraduate chemistry courses to ensure that these skills are developed<sup>1,2,3</sup>. This view is also held by employers<sup>4</sup>; the particular concern of the chemical industry was recently expressed succinctly by the Director of the Chemical Industries Association as follows:

*"Ask employers what are the skills that freshly recruited graduate chemists most often lack, and you will get a very short list, on which interpersonal and communication skills figure large. Employers need staff who not only are good at chemistry but also can operate as part of a team, have the potential to manage others, and can communicate clearly and enthusiastically with a wide variety of people."*<sup>5</sup>

Communication skills are a clear example of the skills which must be discovered and developed by individual students through what has been called 'experiential learning' (see for example Laurillard<sup>6</sup>). Experiential learning is time consuming; it involves practice, reflection on performance, and further practice in order to build on the experience. All this requires serious academic support. It is my impression that, with ever-increasing course content, and pressure to achieve high pass rates, the development of communication skills is inadequately supported at many universities.

At Heriot-Watt University in 1995, we decided to address this problem by establishing a module on *Communicating Chemistry* within the penultimate year of the chemistry degree course. Here I discuss the rationale behind the design of the module, describe one particular exercise in more detail, and present some student feedback concerning the whole module.

## Rationale behind the *Communicating Chemistry* module

### Why a module?

Communication skills were already a modest integral part of our existing courses. We wanted to enhance and extend this provision. There were several reasons why we chose to develop a specific module on *Communicating Chemistry*. Firstly, we wanted the communication skills components of our courses to be more clearly identifiable and to some extent quantified. Secondly, if communication skills are learnt rather than taught, we had to earmark sufficient time for the student to learn through first hand experience – and the only simple way of guaranteeing adequate blocks of time was by creating an appropriate module. Thirdly, we agreed that a topic of such importance as communication skills needed a well coordinated educational package. Such an educational package need not necessarily be a module, but exceptional co-operation from most colleagues is required in order to produce an effective package that is fully integrated into the rest of the degree programme. There is a real risk that the learning of chemistry will take precedence over the communication skills, so that some students can avoid full participation and so fail to realise their full potential, and also that tuition will be highly variable. A module with the theme of *Communicating Chemistry* raises the status of skill development to that enjoyed by other key topics. An important reason for placing the module in the penultimate year of the course was the difficulty of creating a suitable slot in the curriculum during the earlier years.

### Why a chemistry module?

Communication skills are largely generic, and many universities advocate centralised teaching by 'experts'. Whilst this may appear to be economical, I believe it to be misguided for one simple reason; for students to really discover and develop their communication skills, the tasks they undertake must seem interesting and relevant. This point is made in the Royal Society Report which advocates that the development of personal transferable skills (including communication) "*must be fully and carefully integrated into courses*"<sup>3</sup>. For chemistry students, this means using chemical situations for developing their communication skills. There is, moreover, a bonus with this approach – it is easier to convince colleagues of the value of a communication skills module if it requires students to discover, explain and use chemistry, rather than "*wasting their time on wishy-washy generic exercises, when their basic chemistry needs reinforcing*". A good education:

## The Module structure

Two constraints strongly influenced the design of the module. Firstly, a single module is expected to involve 100 hours of work over an 8 week period for each student; secondly, the number of students in the cohort is about 50. We identified the following aspects of communication skills that we wished to address within these constraints:

- information retrieval;
- written delivery;
- visual delivery;
- oral delivery;
- team work;
- problem solving.

We then developed 10 exercises, most of which were designed to address two or more of these skills and which, taken together, would achieve a fairly balanced coverage. Each exercise was designed so that it could be run by a single tutor working with the whole cohort of students. However, for several exercises, the involvement of two or more tutors is hugely beneficial. Concerning the nature of written, visual and oral delivery, the exercises involve concise reports or articles (surely the most important yet under-developed written skill for many graduates), poster presentations, and

short talks. In several exercises, the students work in groups or 'companies'. These are established at the beginning of the first exercise (see below). The content of the exercises is summarised in table 1.

Exercise 1, the Fluorofen Project is used as an ice breaker and it establishes the companies which will work together in exercises 2, 7, 9 and 10. It is self-contained and, with tight control, can be completed within one hour, though it could easily be extended. I describe it in some detail because it illustrates the approach adopted, and the typical interactive nature of the timetabled sessions. Further information on the other exercises is available<sup>7</sup>.

## The Fluorofen Project

The objective of this exercise is to provide the students with opportunities to develop the skills of collaborative team work, problem solving, and critical thinking. The latter two terms are defined in many ways; here they are used to describe the kind of thinking necessary to tackle the kind of problems regularly faced by professional chemists and which require judgements (see also refs 2 and 4). Although the exercise is appropriate for the penultimate year for chemistry BSc (hons) students, related team exercises pitched at this level have been

**Table 1:** Summary of exercises in the 'Communicating Chemistry' module

Ex. No	Title	Description	Time (h) *	Info. retrieval %	Written delivery %	Visual delivery %	Oral delivery %	Team work %	Prob. solving %
1	The Fluorofen Project	Exercise to solve a chemical problem (teams)	1 (1)	0	0	0	0	50	50
2	Scientific paper (ref 8,9)	Exercise to dissect a chemical paper (teams)	3 (3)	20	0	0	0	30	50
3	Keyboard skills	Basic skills with Word and ChemDraw (individuals)	10 (1)	0	10	90	0	0	0
4	New Scientist article	A short paper is turned into a NS article (pairs)	18 (1)	20	40	30	0	10	0
5	WWW treasure hunt	Introduction to the Net, BIDS, and email (individuals)	8 (3)	90	5	0	0	0	5
6	Dictionary of chemistry	Write brief entry for Dictionary of Interesting Chemistry (include lit. search) (pairs)	20 (1)	35	35	20	0	10	0
7	Research poster	Produce poster on a new area of research based on NS article (teams)	12 (1)	20	25	40	0	15	0
8	Annual review talk	5 minute talk to 10-12 peers on any interesting chemistry, as part of their company's annual review (individuals)	12 (3)	10	0	20	70	0	0
9	Interview	All are interviewed by another company (CV required), AND carry out interviews for their company (individual and teams)	8 (3)	0	25	0	55	20	0
10	Hwuche-Hwuche bark (ref 10)	Business game with real chemical problems, leading to oral presentation (teams)	8 (4)	5	0	10	15	45	25
	Total		100	20%	14%	21%	14%	18%	13%

\* Figures in brackets show the amount of time spent in class with a tutor present; the rest of the hours are unmetabled independent

**Figure 1:** Timetable for the Fluorofen Project

- 3 minutes: introduction
- 2 minutes: organise groups
- distribute *Hand-out 1* (see Figure 2)
- 15 minutes: group discussions 1
- 10 minutes: plenary session 1
- distribute *Hand-out 2* (see Figure 3)
- 20 minutes: group discussions 2
- 5 minutes: plenary session 2 and conclusion

Total 55 mins.

modified slightly to make them suitable for first year general science students, or for final year honours chemists. The timetable for the exercise is shown in figure 1 and Tutors' Notes for the Fluorofen Project are presented below.

### Tutor's notes on the Fluorofen Project

#### Preparation by the students

Recommendation – do not require any preparation by them! This has two advantages; there need be no (dubious!) assumptions about the students having carried out background reading, and the exercise has immediate interest and impact value when started.

#### Introduction and division into groups

The key feature of the Introduction is that it should engage the students' attention; individual tutors will choose an approach with which they feel comfortable. This may vary from simply arranging the students in groups and providing them with the information on handout 1 to (my preference) addressing the whole class in a role play. A possible introductory presentation runs something like this:

*"Thank you for coming to this important and urgent meeting. As you know, our parent company A.C.E. has several chemistry subsidiaries; my name is \*\*\*, and I'm Head of 'PharmAce', the Medicinal Chemistry subsidiary. You may wonder why I've asked you, a top R&D team from the Agrochemicals subsidiary, to a meeting this afternoon. It concerns a pharmaceutical that is shortly to come off patent, and so our competitors will be able to manufacture and sell it too. We have well substantiated evidence that Zenaxo will be selling the drug at 30% less than our current selling price, soon after the patent ends in 6-months time. We cannot afford to lose our customer base, and we will match their price for a few months at zero profit, whilst we try to discover how we can cut our costs. As this is a large scale production pharmaceutical, your R&D expertise at scale up is invaluable ... and we also feel that a fresh look at the problem, and your proven track record at solving difficult chemistry problems, may help you come up with possible solutions by the end of this brainstorming session. Here is some more information about the drug (one can use a simplified OHP version of handout 1; don't distribute the handout yet, or they will read it instead of listening to you).*

*The drug is called 'Fluorofen'<sup>11</sup>, and it has anti-inflammatory and analgesic properties. It turns out that it is excellent for treating period pains, and this has ensured a large, sustainable market worth*

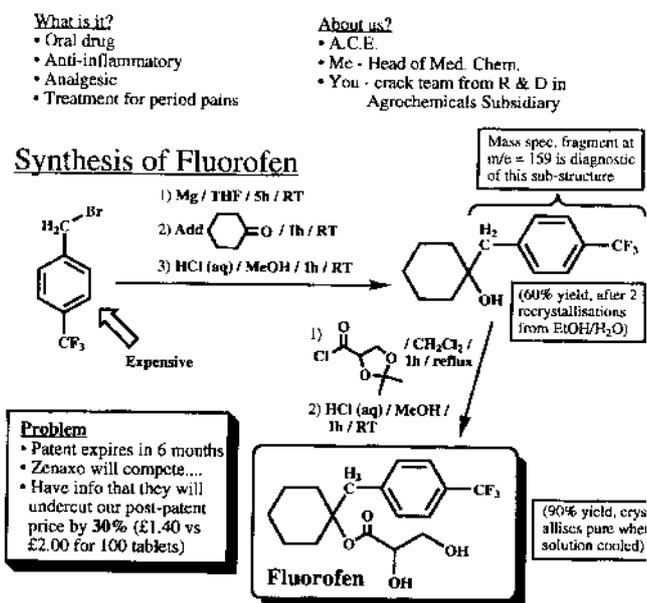
*about £50M p.a. in sales. The structure of 'Fluorofen' is shown this overhead, and you can see the synthetic sequence that we to manufacture it. I have only provided the bare essentials of synthesis, so that you can perhaps focus more easily on likely reas for Zenaxo undercutting us – once you've come up with so possible avenues to explore, I will provide additional informati I would like your R&D group to identify 5 or 6 possible reas why Zenaxo are able to quote such a low price for 'Fluorofen will collate these ideas in 15 minutes.'*

The key to the division into groups is that it should be done quickly (see figure 1). This is difficult if students are allowed to form their own groups, and the recommendation is that they be allocated more or less at random to pre-defined groups. We refer to them as subsidiaries of ACE, and they are encouraged to invent a company name. Once they have reorganised themselves into their groups, and have received *handout 1* (see figure 2), it is important that they identify a spokesperson, and that they start to write down ideas – wait until you will ask each group for suggestions when the 15 minutes are up. If one group is stuck or slow, guide them to some of the suggestions below.

#### Plenary session 1

Pool suggestions on the board or OHP, picking on various groups for one suggestion each. Some of the suggestions we have obtained are given in table 2.

**Figure 2:** The Fluorofen Problem (part 1)



1) How might Zenaxo be getting their price so low?

**Table 2:** Some suggestions for cutting the cost of 'Fluorofen'

General ideas	Specific ideas
Lower non-chemistry production costs	Cheaper starting materials Less on packaging/marketing
Lower production costs (chemistry)	Better reaction conditions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Temperature</li><li>• Pressure</li><li>• Solvent</li><li>• Reaction time</li><li>• Cheaper reagents (e.g. catalyst)</li></ul> More efficient purification Recycling: <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reactants</li><li>• Solvents</li><li>• By-products</li></ul> Improved yield(s)
Cheaper route	Completely new route Alternative key step Cheaper analogue of 'Fluorofen'
Cheat	Zenaxo selling 'Fluorofen' at a loss while they corner the market!

Accept all ideas; some (e.g. making an analogue) are not practicable, but nevertheless can lead to useful (brief) general discussions. At the end of the plenary session, summarise the results of the brainstorming session as follows (verbally, or on an additional handout):

'From your suggestions, it seems that the mostly likely source of cost-cutting is by improving the efficiency of the Grignard reaction. In particular, you identified:

- High cost of starting material (but note that it probably cannot be bought or made more cheaply)
- Poor yield
- High running costs (long reaction time and high purification costs)

If the reaction took place more quickly and cleanly, then the cost should be reduced. (If time, ask for suggestions about how to achieve this). Rather than changing conditions by trial and error, you could try to identify impurities; this might allow you to see where the mechanism is being diverted, and then design conditions that would reduce the formation of the by-product(s). (One can use a simplified OHP version of handout 2 at this stage). As it happens, we already have some information on the major by-product, and this data, together with guidance for the next brainstorming session, are provided on handout 2.'

Then distribute Handout 2 (figure 3), and ask them to work through points 2-5.

### Group discussions 2

They should need little tutor input by now. Note that a little common sense (and minimal chemistry) will identify the by-product as a dimer of the  $\text{CF}_3\text{-C}_6\text{H}_4\text{-CH}_2$  sub-structure, and its formation is also quite obvious (figure 4). The tutor need only guide those groups that are starting to lag behind a bit, and it works well during the Group Discussions to ask one company to put up the structure for X on the board/OHP

**Figure 3:** The Fluorofen Problem (part 2)

**Key Synthetic Step**

**Data on X**

- MS gives parent ion  $M^+$  at 318
- $^1\text{H NMR}$  at 60 MHz:

**3) The mechanism for the formation of the desired product D is shown below. Add arrows to indicate how X is formed.**

**Mechanism for formation of D**

**2) What is the structure of X?**

**4) What change in the concentration of reactants would generate less X?**  
Higher [A]?  
Higher [A] and [Mg]?  
Higher [Mg]?  
Higher [ketone]?

**5) How would you achieve your aim in 4)?**

**One solution:** there are lots of ways that Zenaxo may be undercutting us - we would probably want to have a team *optimising* conditions (perhaps done imperfectly 10 years ago), to economise on solvents, reagents, running costs (time, heat), waste disposal. But you have identified a key problem which John Brown's group in Oxford had to solve because of another Grignard reaction they were studying; they went back to the literature to find clues to a solution (ref. 1), and carried out a careful study that provide a general procedure (ref. 2). This should work well for the Fluorofen problem, don't you think?

Refs: 1) A. Mendel, *J. Organomet. Chem.*, 1966, 6, 97.  
2) K.V. Baker *et al.*, *J. Org. Chem.*, 1991, 56, 698.

Comm. Chem. (14.3CC3);  
Pat Bailey, HWU (18/04)

company to suggest the mechanism for its formation (perhaps adding arrows to your overhead). At least one group needs to have an idea close to the answer for Q5 before the final plenary session.

### Plenary session 2

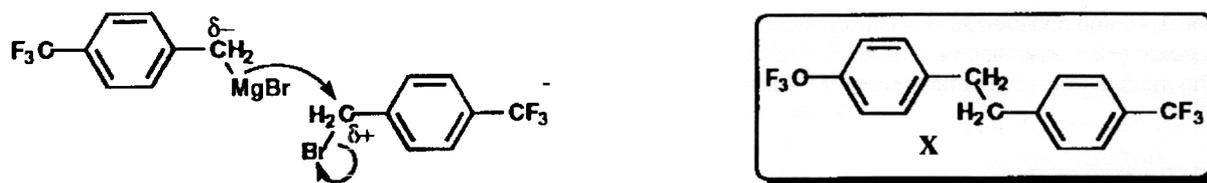
This really ought to be run as an interactive session. The key points to cover are:

- the structure of X;
- the mechanism for the formation of X;
- that less by-product X should be formed if the [Mg] is increased;
- high [Mg] effectively means high surface area, and (amazingly) stirring dry magnesium under an inert atmosphere achieves this simply and cheaply.

Here is a possible summary, which could be presented interactively, or as a verbal statement, or in the form of a memo from the parent company:

'You have come to the conclusion that the structure of the impurity is X, and that it has been formed by the following mechanism (see OHP or board or handout). If the [Mg] could be increased, then the formation of the Grignard would be quicker and there would be less time for the dimer by-product to form before

**Figure 4** The structure of X, and the mechanism for its formation



running costs, as the reaction time would drop, and the purification of the product should be easier if there are less impurities. How could you increase the  $[\text{Mg}]$ ? The only obvious way, for an insoluble metal, is to increase its surface area. (If time, ask for suggestions: powder it, use a thin film, or precipitate/deposit it onto a porous material were suggestions we received.) There are lots of ways of doing this, but no cheap, effective, and practicable method had been developed by 1990. However, as summarised at the bottom of Handout 2, the 'dry-stir' method was developed in 1991; this is a cheap and efficient way of producing powdered Mg with a high surface area, and would probably solve the 'Fluorofen' problem – amazingly, by simply stirring dry magnesium metal under an inert atmosphere of argon or nitrogen, it breaks down into a highly reactive, high surface area material, ideal for 'difficult' Grignard reactions. Your brainstorming has guided us to two key references, and this method will now be looked at in the PharmAce R&D labs, to see if we can win the price war with our rival manufacturers. Your chemical know-how and team work has led to a possible solution – thank you for your help.'

### Assessment

We chose not to assess this exercise in isolation, although most of the communication skills exercises in the module did generate marks or feedback, often through peer assessment. The students' effectiveness in team work was peer-judged at the end of the module, and 'The Fluorofen Project' exercise contributed to this. Assessment could be readily incorporated into an extension of the exercise – see below.

### Extending the exercise

There are many ways in which the exercise could be extended, building on the basic format and scenario described above:

- Data on a number of by-products could be provided, so that the exercise had a larger component of structure determination (which could be assessed).
- Submission of a brief report to A.C.E. could be required from each group, summarising their findings.
- There could be a follow-up literature search, leading to proposed synthetic conditions.
- The paper exercise could be followed by laboratory experiments, to try the proposed new method (probably on a model system).

### Student feedback on the *Communicating Chemistry* module

We obtained student feedback concerning the whole module on *Communicating Chemistry*, from questionnaires com-

pleted before the start of the module and after it had finished. The first part of both questionnaires included an identical list of skills given in table 3. The pre-module questionnaire asked students to state their confidence with each skill. The post module questionnaire asked about the relevance of the module to each skill, and whether the module had led to some improvement of the skill. The data are summarised in table 3. The pre-module questionnaire also gave students a 5-point scale on which to make self-assessments of the following list of personal attributes:

- I am computer literate
- I can retrieve chemical information
- I can explain chemistry
  - in a brief report
  - in an oral presentation
  - in a poster
- I can compete strongly for a job
- I can solve chemical problems.

The post-module questionnaire also asked for a free response to the statements:

"The best thing about the module was ..."

"One thing that would have been improved (or included) was ..."

Particular features of the responses were:

- Whilst some students started the module already confident about many of the topics, all were reticent in some areas – and these areas of concern were spread across the whole range of topics. For example, most were confident with computer-based tasks, but those who were not benefited hugely from computer-based components of the module. This is not readily apparent from the averaged figures shown in figure 3;
- The two areas of communication skills they felt were the most important in the module, and in which they thought they had most improved, were the retrieval of information on chemical research, and on giving oral presentations;
- The aspect of the module they most enjoyed was team work.

### Summary

Most chemistry degree courses include significant components that are intended to develop communication skills. In our experience, these skills are best learned within intensive exercises, as well as being reinforced elsewhere in the mainstream chemistry course; and the exercises are most

**Table 3:** Summary of student feedback for the components of the module (average feedback from 42 responses).

Responses were requested on a five-point +2 to -2 scale as follows: a) self-assessment of ability before the module (+2 = very confident, +1 = confident, 0 = some confidence, -1 = little confidence, -2 = no confidence); b) retrospective assessment of the value of the components of the module (+2 = essential, +1 = useful, 0 = no preference, -1 = not very helpful, -2 = useless); c) retrospective self-assessment of impact of the module (+2 = big improvement, +1 = useful improvement, 0 = about the same, -1 = worse).

	a) Confidence	b) Value	c) Improvement
Write a report on a word processor	0.9	0.8	0.8
Insert images from a chemistry drawing package into this report	0.3	1.1	1.1
Give an oral presentation on a familiar area of chemistry to the class	-0.2	1.7	1.2
Produce a CV which would lead to an interview	0.6	1.4	0.6
Solve an industrial problem with degree level chemistry knowledge	-0.2	1.0	0.9
Use the internet to find information	0.7	1.0	0.8
Describe a chemical concept to a non-chemist	0.5	1.1	1.2
Research an unfamiliar topic using chemical journals	0.0	1.3	1.4
Use a database to find a piece of chemistry research	0.0	1.3	1.3
Interpret a chemistry research paper	-0.3	1.2	1.1
Produce a scientific poster	0.2	0.8	0.9

effective when they are built around a chemical scenario, and involve plausible chemical problems and tasks. It is my view that, if possible, many of the basic skills associated with effective (chemical) communication should be introduced early in a degree course – a view also expressed by many of our students. Moreover, I would advocate ensuring that a wide range of communication skills are covered – there were no areas in which all of our students were confident, and many were surprised by their improvement at aspects in which they had thought they were already strong.

Our *Communicating Chemistry* module provides one way of giving reasonable opportunities to students to develop a range of communication skills in an integrated educational package, using realistic chemical tasks that the students generally enjoy. The primary aim of the module is not to produce brilliant communicators, but to show each student where his/her strengths lie, and to enable them to improve their communication skills during the module and subsequently. Moreover, I believe that we should be encouraging our new graduates to be enthusiastic not only about their chemistry, but also about communicating their chemistry to others.

### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. John Garratt for his enthusiastic support for my teaching ideas at York and subsequently at Heriot-Watt, Esso for funding the *Esso Teaching Resources Room* which has helped us develop the module, colleagues at Heriot-Watt who have helped in the running of the module, the Royal Society of Chemistry for a Cutter bequest award to support the development of a teaching package and booklet on *Communicating Chemistry*, and especially Sara Shinton for helping to develop, disseminate and assess the teaching material.

### References

1. *Report of the degree courses review group 1992* (Royal Society of Chemistry) section 5.2
2. *Teaching and learning in an expanding higher education system 1992* (Committee of Scottish University Principals) Appendix A
3. *Higher education futures 1993* (The Royal Society, London) section 3.4
4. *A wider spectrum of opportunities 1995* (Council for Industry and Higher Education) sections 3.11 and 3.20
5. Finer F. 1996 *Chem. in Brit.* October
6. Laurillard D. 1993 *Rethinking university teaching* (Routledge)
- 7(i) Much of the material for this unit is available on disk, as hard copy, or through the Heriot-Watt WWW (URL required) – contact Pat Bailey on p.d.bailey@hw.ac.uk or 0131-451-3100.
- 7(ii) The RSC are supporting the development of a *Communicating Chemistry Teaching Package*, to be available from early 1998; this will include several exercises on developing communication skills in a chemical context, with tutor's notes for running the exercises in various formats, and guidance for modifying the content. More information will be available towards the end of 1997.
- 7(iii) The RSC is also supporting the production of a booklet on *Communicating Chemistry*, which will be provided free of charge to all final year undergraduates in 1998.
8. Bailey P and Kerr W 1993 *Proceedings, Variety in Chemistry Teaching 1993* (ed. M Aitken) (Royal Society of Chemistry)
9. Garratt CJ and Overton T 1996 *Educ. Chem.* 33 137-138
10. Bailey P 1996 *Proceedings, Variety in chemistry teaching 1996* (eds. CJ Garratt and T Overton) (Royal Society of Chemistry)
11. To the best of my knowledge, the name 'Fluorofen' has not been previously used, the compound so named here has not been synthesised, and there is no reason for supposing that it has the properties ascribed to it.