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Bennett, M., & Rogers, K. (2014). First impressions matter: an active, innovative and engaging method to recruit student volunteers for a pedagogic project. *Reflections*, (18), 6-7.

**Published in:**  
Reflections

**Document Version:**  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:**  
[Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal](#)

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# First impressions matter: an active, innovative and engaging method to recruit student volunteers for a pedagogic project.

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To undertake a successful pedagogic study will inevitably involve students and key to the success of the project will be the recruitment of willing, interested participants. So how can we enthuse students and recruit motivated students for a pedagogic project – students who will engage with you, often outside of normal timetabled classes and maintain commitment throughout the project duration and possibly even beyond it during the dissemination phase? We believe the key is hosting an engaging recruitment event that captures the imagination of potential participants, making them keen to learn more about the project and become involved. This article describes our recent experience working with year one undergraduate nursing students and how we have successfully recruited a group of very enthusiastic students for a short series of workshops aimed at enhancing students' engagement with anatomy and physiology.

Finding time in a busy year one undergraduate timetable was the first challenge. A brief 20 minute slot was secured at the start of a 2 hour lecture, with the support of the year one coordinator and teaching staff.

Good preparation for the event was key to its success. We were very mindful that we did not want to stand at the front of the lecture theatre and just talk about the proposed workshops. We knew that to get students interested we had to make our initial contact with them engaging, fun and memorable. We also wanted it to reflect that the project was underpinned by the principles of active learning, creativity and partnership learning.

We prepared a brief activity for students to undertake. Everyone was given a torso outline and a small sealed envelope, which they were instructed not to open. We were delighted to recruit the help of several students before the lecture to assist with distribution. Suspense and speculation started to build among the class, about the contents of the envelope and their individual involvement. We succeeded in catching their attention before we even spoke to the class!

We structured the activity around a five slide PowerPoint presentation, which started with a background to the project. The students then got active. They were instructed to open their envelopes to reveal four organs of the human torso, which they were asked to identify and position on a page which had an outline of the human torso (Figure 1). There was a great buzz of activity in the room as the students worked on their "torso jigsaw". Even in the short time there was evidence of peer learning. Many students engaged directly with us as we walked around the lecture

theatre. We brought the activity to a close by returning to the PowerPoint presentation to identify the organs and their correct positioning. The presentation ended with a final slide giving our contact details to register an interest in participating, a deadline by which to express interest and a note saying that a further session would be organised for those interested.

This initial session lasted just under 10 minutes which we were very pleased with given that there were over 263 students in attendance.

The impact of the session was immediate as we received a number of expressions of interest by email before we had even left the room. In total we had 41 expressions of

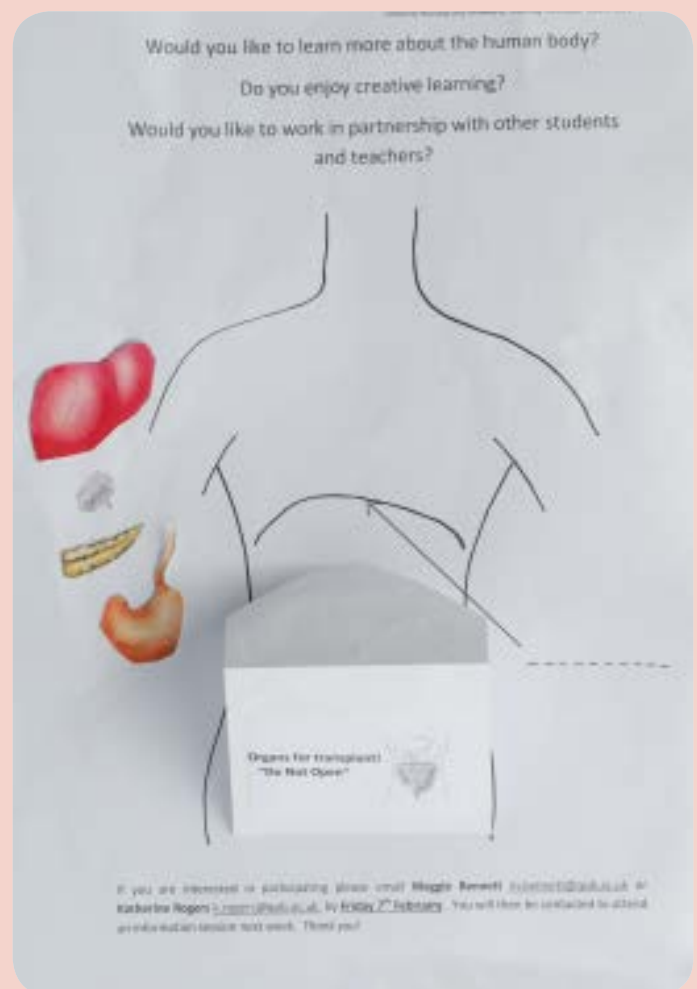


Figure 1 – "Torso jigsaw" activity



interest after the initial session. Everyone who expressed interest was invited to the further information session and they all attended. The aim of this second event was to provide the students with some more information on what the workshops would involve.

At our further information session we started with an ice-breaker, asking students to pick a card, tell everyone present their name, why they chose the card and what prompted them to attend the information session or why they wanted to participate in the project. At this session we wanted to emphasise to students that we would be working with them as partners so we asked when would be most suitable for them to hold the workshops. Interestingly there was an almost unanimous suggestion that Friday afternoons would be favourable – this surprised us immensely.

We finally selected 12 students to take part in the workshops. It was difficult to have to disappoint so many willing volunteers, but we assured them that should a similar event run in the future we would notify them to offer the opportunity to participate.

A number of students reported that the nature of the initial meeting stimulated their curiosity and enthusiasm to participate in the workshops. This supports our theory that an active and interactive information session will engage students and generate greater interest and enthusiasm from potential participants.

Key points to hosting a successful student recruitment event:

- Speak to students at the beginning of a lecture if possible.
- Keep verbal information to a minimum – you don't want your target audience to lose interest before you get started.
- Make it fun and interactive – stimulate curiosity, make it memorable!
- Facilitators should move around the room rather than stand at the front of the lecture hall waiting for participants to finish the activity.
- Try not to be too specific in the details of the project – that is not necessary at the initial event.
- Provide email contact details only of 1 or 2 members of the team to reduce the confusion of cross-posting when students reply.
- Respond to expressions of interest promptly using a standard format letter. In it detail the time and venue for the next information session, if they need to bring any materials and if refreshments will be provided – not surprisingly, we found "refreshments" were a real incentive for students to attend!