Teaching at the Department of Systems Biology and Bioinformatics

- Courses offered:
  - Modelling and Simulation with Application to the Life Sciences (Winter semester)
  - BioSystems Modelling and Simulation (Summer semester)
  - Both MSc courses are by now virtually identical. (We originally tried to target different audiences).

- Main Goal:
  - Providing an overview of methods, their application, challenges and opportunities
  - To the student with a background in the life sciences:
    - an appreciation for the role of mathematical modelling and computational analyses
  - To the student with a background in the physical and engineering sciences:
    - an appreciation for the complexity of living systems, and data generation

- Main Challenges:
  - Heterogeneity of the students.
  - Heterogeneity of the content.

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Teaching at the Department of Systems Biology and Bioinformatics

- We are teaching at the Masters level. Where do our students go?
  - Some students will seek ‘regular’ jobs in companies.
  - Some will go into research in industry.
  - A few will continue with research in academia.

- Our teaching is geared towards a career in research & development (industry or academia)
  - This has consequences on content and expectations

- Due to the length of the course,
  - we can only survey methods and tools
  - we cannot provide in-depth skills to develop mathematical and computational solutions.

- Our course is not the core of a masters programme but an element of several masters programmes
  - Our focus is not on examining the students for their qualification in their master programmes; if we could, we would not have an exam.
  - Our focus is getting them interested in (interdisciplinary) systems biology and bioinformatics approaches.

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Academic Learning

- Learning
  - In school you are told what to learn, and how.
  - At University you are told what to learn but not how.
  - In research you decide what to learn/research and you need to know how.

- At the masters level we are thus transitioning towards ‘academic learning’.

- Academic learning prepares for a position in research and development.

- Academic learning is a process that should put the learner in a position
  - to question the state-of-the-art,
  - to challenge established paradigms,
  - to go beyond the currently possible.

- You become a member of a tribe that establishes what is the case, true and valid (or not).
Academic Learning

We cannot cover all of those aspects, not properly but we should try to keep those elements here in mind as our teaching philosophy and the goal we have with our classes.

Adopted from and inspired by an article by Prof Ines Langemeyer (KIT)
Academic Learning

- Independent search for evidence, data, approaches
- Identifying and understanding of problems
- Recognising the state of the art
- Developing your own questions, formulating hypotheses
- Independent planning and execution of projects
- Independent testing and employing tools and methodologies
- Independent construction of workflows and arguments
- Analysing data and interpreting results independently
- Validating your own results
- Providing an argument, communicating your own work

Learning to develop and research; Knowledge as anticipation

Organisation of empirical and theoretical approaches

Questioning, arguing, judging, deciding and defending

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Academic Learning

Learning to understand; Knowledge as reflection

Identification and understanding of problems
- Providing foundations
- Demonstrating thought processes
- Survey problems and research gaps
- Provide examples of scientific questions/projects from current research
- Explain research tools and methodologies
- Discuss data generation and analysis
- Turn aspects of the ‘real world’ into research projects
- Testing the quality of data, questing the validity of results
- Practicing data analysis and mathematical modelling
- Demonstrate the research process

Organisation of empirical and theoretical approaches

Questioning, arguing, judging, deciding and defending

Identification and understanding of problems

Providing foundations
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Organisation of empirical and theoretical approaches
- Independent planning and execution of projects
- Independent testing and employing tools and methodologies
- Independent construction of workflows and arguments

Questioning, arguing, judging, deciding and defending
- Analysing data and interpreting results independently
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Academic learning and training

- We are a research-driven group. This influences the learning and teaching.

- Our teaching is aligned with research processes
  - Complex systems > Uncertainty > Abstraction > Mathematical modelling

- This implies that our teaching is touching the unknown, unexpected, controversial, uncertain.

- The learning of the individual must then be related to what the collective (society, science, politics …) accepts, considers relevant/true etc.

  - There is a social and philosophical dimension / responsibility

- Training PhD students: Preparing them for leadership position in industry and in leading academic institutions worldwide.

- Training for postdocs: Preparing them for professorships.

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Teaching objectives

- Motivating students, raising their interest in systems biology and bioinformatics approaches
- Developing their skills to understand ... problems and their solutions (knowledge as reflection)
- Developing their skills to develop and research ... beyond the state-of-the-art (knowledge as anticipation)
- Supporting the development of their personality and independence
- Train them to appreciate the complexity of living systems; to appreciate the necessity of multidisciplinary approaches
- Demonstrating the challenges and opportunities in inter/multidisciplinarity research
- Demonstrating the communication skills required in (interdisciplinary) research