The excitement and challenges of introducing an introductory course

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Two months ago Lander Willem and I organized the first edition of the short course "Individual-based modelling in epidemiology: A practical introduction". The course took place at the Stellenbosch Institute for Advanced Studies, next door to SACEMA, and was attended by 22 participants, of whom two thirds were SACEMA students and staff. Without much marketing and advertising we received plenty of course applications, and we were excited at the realization that there are plenty of researchers interested in learning how to develop, explore and fit individual-based models to address questions in epidemiology.

However, in the final days before the course I remember being apprehensive about more or less every aspect of the course. This was not just the first edition of the course. For both of us it was the first time we would be teaching for a full week. Moreover, for pedagogical reasons we had chosen NetLogo as one of the main software packages in the course (next to R), but up to a few months before the course, we had never actually written any NetLogo code. Due to my limited teaching experience, and the fairly heterogeneous landscape of participants' backgrounds, I stressed about having included too few or too many concepts and techniques in the course.

Lucky for us, we had the most wonderful group of participants. During intensive workshops and courses that run over multiple days, a gradual decay in attention and corresponding increase in email and Facebook use is not uncommon. Not during this course. Instead, we were impressed by the dedication and enthusiasm with which the participants worked on their mini modelling project until the final hours of the course. During the week, we also received very useful and constructive feedback, which helped us through the classroom examples in a more interactive and time-efficient manner.

The feedback at the end of the course was overwhelmingly positive, which left us feeling empowered and encouraged to not leave it at this first edition. Participants appreciated the combination of printed course notes and online access to all course materials. They also enjoyed the combination of theory and practical applications related to the transmission dynamics of HIV, influenza and African animal trypanosomiasis. Perhaps the biggest lesson for us, in preparation of the second edition, is that *less is more*. In our insecurity about designing a sufficiently broad and deep introduction to individual-based modelling in epidemiology, we overcompensated by including too many topics. Therefore, participants of the next edition should expect an even more hands-on course, with more time to acquire skills in developing, exploring and fitting individual-based models. Two things we are hoping will remain unchanged in future editions are the contagious energy of participants, and the farewell coffee mug.

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