

The teacher as co-learner

In interdisciplinary education the teacher is often not the expert on the topics that students research. The role of the teacher changes from being the provider of knowledge to becoming a co-learner. Principal Teaching Fellow Elizabeth Hauke becomes a students' co-learner in the Imperial Horizons course *Lessons From History* at Imperial College London.

'Lessons From History is a course that requires students to study historical disasters in teams and consider whether these events have impacted our approach to safeguarding our society and natural world,' Hauke explains. 'The course uses a collaborative curriculum, whereby the students determine their areas of focus, and can even nominate additional events to study in the latter part of the course.'

'We tackle the events in a three weekly cycle. In the first week we explore the event together – finding out what we already know as a class, deciding what is critical for us to find out in order to have an understanding of the event and identifying things that we think are curious. In the second and third weeks, the students negotiate a perspective (so that every team is taking a different approach) and they then define a research question. They collect and evaluate evidence and finally write a very short (250 words) answer to their own research question, citing the five most relevant pieces of evidence they have found. All of this is documented online, and the students can review the work of other teams at any time.'

'While as the course lead I know the basic facts of each event, and have an idea of various perspectives that the students could take to gain some depth in their analysis, I do not deliver any content or assign these perspectives.'

For example, while studying the emergence of HIV, the first session consisted of the students creating a timeline of events that we stuck up on the wall around the room using sticky notes. Each team of students had picked a different focus, and we colour-coded the timeline to highlight key dates and facts, policy decisions and scientific and technical breakthroughs. As class leader I curated the timeline. The students asked their own questions and researched material to add to the timeline. At the end of the session, we read through the timeline together, and I highlighted some areas where further reading might be beneficial by asking questions such as 'have you ever wondered how...? Or 'isn't it strange that...'. Additionally, I highlighted areas of 'conflicting information' that the students had collated as areas for further investigation.'

'The students then developed their research questions and began their detailed research. After the students complete their written answer in week 3, they receive face to face feedback about their approach to the research, their documentation and analysis of the data, their research question and written answer, and their team working. '

'With six cycles in total, we often find that from the third session, students are able to take the lead in some sessions. While as the class leader I am quite active in the initial cycles, I am needed less and less as the course progresses. I commit to remaining in the class room during lesson times and provide ongoing feedback throughout each cycle, but often the students go elsewhere to work or access

resources and I end up sitting alone. It is a strange feeling as a teacher to sit alone in a room, while your students are working elsewhere. However, they drift in and out to ask questions, review their progress and check to see if I am really there. If a student team is struggling with an aspect of the work or with a particular topic or question, we research, write and plot a path past the impasse together. Knowing that I am there in the classroom, and am willing to get stuck in to their research where needed, gives them the confidence to take such an independent approach, to trust their own instincts and to pursue their own curiosity.'