



Methods in a place: bringing together language, ecology, and geography for a final-year undergraduate field course

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Presentation abstract

The ability to work in interdisciplinary teams is becoming increasingly important in academic environments and the workplace. However, few university programmes deliver course content in truly interdisciplinary formats, instead structuring coursework around traditional disciplinary boundaries. This project's aims were to:

1. Include student partners in designing an interdisciplinary, experiential course where content was structured around a shared physical place rather than disciplinary boundaries.
2. Embed authentic interactions with external stakeholders to enhance learning through an enquiry-based approach.

Staff and students from across three colleges within the University of Glasgow co-designed activities for a cross-disciplinary, final-year undergraduate field course, following Gibson et al.'s (2019) 'three-faculty rule'. During spring 2024, a team of five staff and eight students representing the Schools of Geography and Earth Science, Biodiversity, One Health and Comparative Medicine, and Celtic and Gaelic Studies worked together to

structure and then deliver lecture- and practical-based course content centred on the cultural heritage, language, landscape, and species conservation of the Isle of Lewis in the Outer Hebrides. The programme consisted of a one-week intensive set of lectures delivered primarily by the student partners, followed by a one-week residential visit to this location. While on-site the team met with a range of stakeholders and visited locations that provided a central focus for student enquiry. After the course, student partners authored draft intended learning outcomes (ILOs), proposed assessment methods, and provided feedback on the stakeholders, locations, and sessions from their experience.

The informal spaces and novel surroundings created by the course facilitated learning and an awareness of the value of different disciplinary approaches to a shared problem (Chan and Wheeler, 2023) and deepened student appreciation of their discipline. Overall, this project demonstrated that interdisciplinary coursework at the final-year undergraduate level can be highly successful due to a more holistic approach and increased student confidence.

Keywords: experiential learning; peer-to-peer learning; enquiry-based approaches; stakeholder engagement; employability; teamwork.

Community response

The co-design of this field course stands apart from traditional instructor-led language courses, both in its delivery and its interdisciplinary learning outcomes. As Mathers described during the presentation, the course includes ‘a real variety of activities’ and places strong emphasis on post-graduation employability. By encouraging students to reverse roles – becoming both designers and teachers – the course equips them with practical, transferable skills that extend beyond the boundaries of a typical academic module.

The community responded positively to the course’s innovative structure and ethos. During the presentation itself, one participant explained how the opportunity ‘sounds amazing, lucky students’ and highlighted that the experience went beyond the ‘purely transactional’. The course’s participatory design resonated with the community, many of whom recognised parallels with their own efforts to create more inclusive, student-centred

learning environments. The emphasis on co-creation and real-world application was seen as a powerful model for rethinking how language and field-based learning can be delivered in higher education.

Next steps and additional questions

Whilst the course's flexibility and co-creative approach are among its greatest strengths, they also introduce practical challenges. Staff are required to invest significant time in co-ordination, site visits, and preparation, demands that are intensified in a residential format. As Mathers noted, 'a barrier is having to request students' financial contribution ... which diminishes the course's inclusivity'. Despite these constraints, the team has fostered a collaborative and engaging learning environment, with the inaugural iteration already yielding positive outcomes, including post-course employment opportunities for some students.

Looking ahead, future iterations of the course offer exciting opportunities to deepen student co-creation, refine the balance of roles between staff and students, and enhance the development of course materials. The authors' presentation suggested a strong foundation for ongoing innovation and impact. As the course evolves, several important questions emerge that could shape its future direction:

1. How can the course's impact on student learning be maximised?
2. What measures could be taken to address logistical and budgetary challenges, especially those related to inclusivity?
3. How can the course design continue to foster greater student co-creation in future iterations?
4. How do the relationships between students and staff play out over time in this collaborative and dynamic learning environment?

Authors' reflections

We set out to work together to explore how students interacted with each other. Our aim was to provide some structure, both in terms of topics and specific places on the island, and encourage the student partners to revisit their previous learning to teach peers at the

same educational level who were unfamiliar with the content. Given that Lewis is one of the best places anywhere in the UK to study aspects from all these disciplines, deciding on places to visit was easy. Deep-diving cetaceans can be viewed from land at Tiumpán Head; the Lewisian Gneiss is the oldest geological formation in the UK; machair and peatlands are unique terrestrial habitats connected with culturally embedded community practices; and the island is one of the few bilingual locations in the UK where Gaelic is widely present. We had expected student partners' learning to increase primarily in the disciplinary areas with which they were unfamiliar, but instead, their confidence in their own disciplinary knowledge increased. They also gained increased appreciation for how their discipline fits in with the others, especially where overlaps in content and approaches occurred.

In terms of budgetary challenges, we kept costs down by using shared ground transport, including ferries and minibuses, and self-catering bunkhouse accommodation. These approaches had additional benefits. Using ferries rather than flights, for instance, kept the course's carbon footprint much lower, making it a far more environmentally sustainable alternative to overseas field courses, while still introducing students to new species, habitats, and, for most, cultures. Requiring all students to contribute to the self-catering aspects was highlighted by the student partners as one of the best parts of the course. Not only did it foster social connections, creating opportunities for students to get to know each other and informally ask questions about the course content to 'fill in the gaps' during the timetabled sessions, but it also required some of them to engage with life skills that they had not previously used.

One of the other key pieces that made delivery and co-design of this course successful was the shared feeling of trust across the group. In the initial design phase, student partners were given tasks related to exploring content they felt comfortable to teach to their peers, as well as planning out the domestic tasks needed for self-catering accommodation on-site. During this phase, they were mentored in single-discipline groups but largely directed their own progress around a set of clear objectives. In the second phase, the lecture week delivered at Glasgow, there were a mixture of lectures and active sessions in which students worked in interdisciplinary teams to deliver their lectures. Staff then led several active learning exercises, including jigsaw puzzles, a scavenger hunt, and a GIS mapping activity. We felt these two phases were important in establishing an effective partnership, through feelings of trust across the team, and in fostering ownership

of content and course topics among the students. Having staff that listened to the student partners in deciding what would be included was crucial in encouraging them to use their voices. Finally, by the time we reached the third and final phase of delivery, the residential fieldtrip in Lewis, students were extremely comfortable with each other and ready to accommodate the challenges of working in the field:

In this course, there aren't any stupid questions and I feel good being able to be open about it. I don't feel like anyone has ever been in a position in this course (my personal experience, though) where we felt like bad for missing something because we've all been supportive of each other, and *I think that is really the course I had dreamed of*. [Prospective students] shouldn't fear the peer learning aspect. The transfer of knowledge can facilitate the development of a new perspective.

Fostering these aspects going forward may be more difficult, but we think that by providing set tasks (such as writing an informational lecture on a topic from prior coursework) and having staff provide training around enquiry-led processes, we can encourage greater student ownership of stakeholder interactions. We also think that incorporating students from more backgrounds might add valuable perspectives to the experience. For example, archaeology, law and policy, and veterinary students are involved in degrees with topics relevant to issues on the island. Bringing their knowledge to the course would expand and further challenge the information and views expressed by the stakeholders visited. Finally, allowing more time to apply methodologies in situ and to embed self-directed reflective practice would help deepen the learning experience for students on the island. Instead of simply viewing and talking about places, students could quantify key aspects from their perspectives. Reflective practice can be used in different ways, and, in this course, it is essential to make those relevant connections across disciplines (see Van Beveren et al., 2018).

Experiential learning and being able to engage students with physical spaces provides a much more holistic perspective on a place. In addition, working in interdisciplinary teams and having direct interactions with stakeholders provides an experience that cannot be replicated through teaching in the classroom. It offers a much more authentic transition into the workplace, which can be a difficult step for many graduates, given the clear difference in identity between students and graduates. Despite some additional financial costs and administrative logistics, we found that the added value of bringing students from different degrees together in a shared place, and providing them with some structure to

guide their experience, while also bringing in their own prior perspectives, training, and experience, led to a high-quality learning experience. Overall, this course was a pleasure to be involved with, particularly because we have found it to be an experience that is shaping the abilities and confidence of our students for their future careers and, hopefully, their lives.

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