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Drawing on Universal Design Principles in Interdisciplinary Teaching

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JAN LÜDERT, SEP 21 2016

To foster a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of complex issues interdisciplinary teaching holds much promise. Using universal design approaches and shared teaching styles in particular are useful for all those interested in exploring co-teaching opportunities across the physical/life sciences and the social sciences/humanities.

I had the chance to explore interdisciplinary co-teaching with Nienke van Houten, a faculty member of the Health Sciences at Simon Fraser University. We developed a teaching module for van Houten's virology course and my own course on International Organizations at the University of British Columbia. It might seem that these two disciplines have little in common but through a mutual interest in infectious diseases and in teaching innovation we found a common ground in the context of global health governance. We settled on Poliomyelitis eradication as a cases study because we realized that our respective students could benefit from new perspectives. We shared a conviction that if virology students are not aware about global politics and global health governance specifically their science background will be challenged and, conversely, if global politics students interested in global health policy do not have knowledge of basic science, its opportunities and challenges, that their policy recommendations alone will remain ineffective.

Perhaps most critically for us was that we were both using the BOPPPS model – a structured active teaching approach that organizes each lesson into six fairly distinct components. Our shared teaching approach not only meant that our own students were already familiar with the general class structure we followed in our respective courses. It also simplified our joint class preparations and integrated lesson planning. We agreed to co-teach one three-hour lesson to students in each course. We divided the lessons into a lecture component, various activities that explored the history, science as well as policy aspects of Poliomyelitis eradication efforts through the World Health Organization (WHO), and a final hour in which students synthesized their learning by drawing out lessons focusing on country-specific WHO scenarios in several small groups which we finally discussed in class as a whole.

A key innovation was that we did not simply run the same lesson for both cohorts but carefully planned learning objectives and activities for both classes that picked students up at their corresponding disciplinary content knowledge. This entailed to introduce students of International Organizations to the scientific fundamentals of epidemiology and to provide the science students with an understanding of global health governance, the role of diverse actors such as the World Health Organization, Non-Governmental Organizations as well as governments. In doing so our respective expertise really shined through and made it interesting not only to students but to us as scholars working in different fields. We were all part of the learning!

Perhaps most valuable was that our interdisciplinary focus on polio eradication had a marked effect on students learning. Not only were class discussions invigorating to our students they also gained a deeper understanding and broader perspective on issues which are otherwise restricted by the disciplines. The impact on students was equally evident when they offered positive feedback after class, on course evaluations, individual term papers and in their final assessments. In short, there is great potential in interdisciplinary co-teaching because our students require knowledge beyond global politics if they want to gain meta-disciplinary awareness and especially if they want to be effective as future professionals who do require to be conversant across intersecting fields.

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