



Cherry, left, and addressing students

Cherry Hopton of Angus College recounts an Icelandic adventure that has led to new thinking and partnerships across Europe

Co-operative learning

In 2008, I was asked to look at courses being run across Europe to encourage staff to take up EU-funded training. I would like to say my enthusiasm for selecting the first course was driven by professional considerations, but actually I just really wanted to go to Iceland.

That initial course was run by InterCultural Iceland and delivered by sociologist Gudrun Petursdottir in a town 70 miles from Reykjavik. The topic 'Intercultural Sensitivity' seemed somewhat sociological and related to my teaching interests.

At first, I was underwhelmed at the course content – stereotypes – but, as the day progressed, I realised what was being presented was in fact a fully joined-up version of lots of random unconnected ideas that I had mulled over for several years. The ideas are

completely joined up; first, the attitude of the teacher – that all students are individuals, all have potential and different skills, and that “culture” is more than nationality or ethnic background, and therefore all classrooms are intercultural. It was also emphasised that learning should be fun and meaningful, and present all students with the underpinning ideals of co-operation, the benefits of diversity, social and personal responsibility, peer learning and team work.

Students' self esteem is a key component and this is driven by tasks that are varied enough to show their talents through the inclusion of creative

visual tasks, in addition to reading, writing and numeracy.

Barriers between subjects are broken down and the starting point becomes the concept. While this project-based approach appears to fit well with younger learners, we have used it to good effect with undergraduate students.

Gudrun's philosophy starts with the intercultural approach to diverse learning groups and moves into the use of co-operative learning methods (structured, time bound, cross curricular group work).

I emailed Gudrun to say how much I had gained from the course. Several emails later, and the idea emerged to put the course on at Angus College with participants



Cherry and sociologist Gudrun Petursdottir



Cherry's visit to Iceland opened up whole new outlook

from across Europe. It was a great success. Since then, I have participated in other courses run by Gudrun and linked to the key ideas of co-operative learning and intercultural approaches, and these have become the cornerstone of my teaching methods.

In a lucky accident, the approaches fit perfectly with Curriculum for Excellence and I have been able, with Gudrun's guidance, to hold courses for teachers through Scotland's Colleges and within my own college via our co-operative learning network. Gudrun and I have produced learning materials and I have helped her deliver courses, most memorably at an Environmental Education Centre near Kavala in Greece.

Aileen Duffy at Scotland's Colleges has been a great

champion of these ideas. She has been instrumental in organising training events, where the ideas can be shared, and in commissioning learning materials.

The relationship has led to other projects. In 2009, we worked on a two-year project concerning Strategies for Retention – the SERVE project. We had partners from Iceland, Belgium, Turkey, Finland and Scotland, several of us 'graduates' of Gudrun's courses. We are now in our second year of project 'Everyday Racism at Work' with partners from Iceland, Germany, Italy and Scotland.

Recently, we visited an African Migrant Centre in Germany and I have been fortunate to visit schools, universities and colleges in Turkey, Iceland, Finland, Greece, and Belgium, to name

a few. In each, I realise we are all concerned about the same things.

The impact on my students has been greater than simply the teaching methods and improvements gained from the courses. We now teach in rooms designed specifically for this form of teaching. Students have met and worked with educationalists from across Europe. This has increased their confidence and given them access to ideas and people, enhancing their performance in areas such as the HND Graded Research Projects.

It's strange to think that it all began with a simple desire to visit Iceland. **CH**