Course design

Interview case study: Masterclass on Mitigating Illegal Wildlife Trade

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Contributors: Dan Challender & Amy Hinsley, Department of Biology

What are your roles within your department and in relation to the Mitigating Illegal Wildlife Trade course?

Amy Hinsley:
I'm Senior Research Fellow in the Biology Department. I work on different types of wildlife trade and related questions. For the course, Dan and I are co-leads on the grant funding our masterclass courses, so we work together on their development and delivery.

Dan Challender:
I'm also a Senior Research Fellow in Biology. My research focuses on pangolins and more broadly on wildlife trade policy.

How did the course come about, and what were the aims for developing it?

Amy Hinsley:
It originally came from a discussion quite a long time ago about putting on a masterclass for mitigating illegal wildlife trade. When considering applying for funding, the Leventis Foundation expressed interest—particularly if the course focused on Nigeria and West Africa. So I asked Dan to co-lead the proposal with me. We proposed something small group and masterclass-style, offering cutting-edge approaches to mitigating illegal wildlife trade. In the proposal, we gave the funders options of different types of modes of delivery. They chose a hybrid model: delivering one course online, one offline course, and to assess the best approach after the pilot.

It's a three-year project. The first year we were to spend developing the course and deliver online, though there were delays. Year two is about refining it the course and delivering in-person version and year three is focused on transitioning to a sustainable model, moving away from philanthropic funding.

Dan Challender:

That's one of the key challenges that we have. We've gone through the process of developing the first version and we'll go through the process of developing the second and third iterations of the course. But then the key challenge is assuming we want to continue to deliver these courses, what does a business model look like? This is what we've been looking at.

What are you considering as sustainable financial models for continuing the course?

Dan Challender:

We're exploring different options, everything from sliding-scale fees based on geographic location, to bespoke corporate training for private sector organizations, like those in finance or transport, and using the revenue generated from those courses to support us to deliver online or in-person versions of the masterclass to participants in parts of the world that might benefit from it.

We're gathering information from a few different places. Some of it's our own research, understanding the landscape of existing courses and how much people pay. Some of it from feedback on our courses, some working with colleagues in the Biology department to think about costs and how it work work going forward.

Amy Hinsley:

Some of it as well from the first round of applications for this first iteration of the course, we specifically said it's for West Africa but more than half who applied were from outside of West Africa. So it showed there is actually a demand outside of the current targeted region.

What originally prompted the idea to create a course on this topic? Was it always intended to be online?

Amy Hinsley:

Initially, it was going to be more executive education-focused, based on demand from industry. From the original intended funder there was a demand from executives needing this type of course. And then, in the end, we tailored it to the Leventis Foundation who was keen to fund it. I don't think we thought about it being online originally.

Dan Challender:

The online element came in because we were aware of the emerging interest at Oxford around delivering online courses as part of the future strategy. So we had conversations with colleagues in Biology and were made aware that online courses are prevalent in Higher Education and certainly other universities were ahead of Oxford in delivering on some of this. There is an appetite within Oxford to do more of this and it seemed like this was an opportunity to contribute to this effort.

Was the funding proposal process similar to research proposals, or different?

Dan Challender:

It was fairly standard. We submitted one or two different drafts of the funding proposal outlining what we're going to do. And we had a little bit of back and forth on some of the KPIs. It was fairly typical. Partly because the funder had an existing relationship with the University. If it had been a new funder, then they might have been different. But because it was an existing funder, I think it helped in this regard.

How much experience did you have with developing and teaching online courses before this project?

Amy Hinsley:
We used to do some during the pandemic. We used to do a Masters module as part of a wider Master's course at Oxford, in Geography and during the pandemic, we did that online. But it was similar, a six week course. It actually inspired the structure of the Masterclass. So we'd done a bit before, but not a lot.

Dan Challender:
I guess one of the benefits of doing this, Amy and I working as a team, is that we have a very similar academic pathway to some extent. We also did our PhDs and worked in the NGO sector for a while, then came to Oxford and co-delivered the module in Geography. We continue to collaborate on wildlife trade, beyond this project, and this series of courses. We had an existing working relationship that really helped, I think.

When you first started designing the course, what did you think the main benefits and challenges of online delivery would be?

Amy Hinsley:
I thought the challenges would be mainly technical, like getting people to be able to access things, especially with the region our students were located. That's something I brought up a lot, that it might be quite difficult to get some things to work on a phone, for example with very poor internet connection.

Dan Challender:
Yeah, getting engagement and reliable technology, wi-fi, people accessing the course through their phones, laptops. Mac vs Windows, all these things pose potential challenges. So we did recognise these challenges of technology allowing us to deliver the course or not. This could happen to different degrees on any given day or week, subject to what's happening. Power outages in West Africa, for example, meaning the internet is down. What happens then? All that sort of stuff. I think one of the benefits was the potential for scale and scaling what we offered to participants in different parts of the world. Because if you're doing an online course you can do it from a university building or home.

It needs to be thought about carefully because one of the lessons we clearly learned from the development of the courses is it's very much not just turning Zoom on and giving a lecture, doing that once a week for six weeks. You need to consider the latest developments in higher education, online education, pedagogical trends, and consider all of those, and then design a course that is top notch and Oxford grade. It commands a lot of time and effort. So, scale is possible, but there's

a lot of work that needs to go into thinking through the design of the course; the types of learning, the activities, feedback, who's going to engage and why and how.

How did those expectations match reality? Were there any surprises?

Amy Hinsley:
Not so much the technical challenges, they all came true. I think lots of people struggled, people dropped out of calls when the breakout groups started. I think sometimes that was people not wanting to participate. You could see from the data who was in the room, which people would drop out and then come back. That was surprising.

Dan Challender:
There were some surprises, certainly at a weekly level. People going into breakout groups and then removing themselves from the call. Perhaps because they didn't want to engage, or weren't comfortable chairing that session or reporting back to the group. I think there's also a broader course level surprise as well, because 40 people signed up. We had a lot of applications, over 300 per course, 150 or so from West Africa. But then we had weekly engagement of around 20-30 people. So I was surprised that people would sign up for a course at Oxford on this really interesting issue and then not participate. And there's probably some good reasons for that, related to people taking time away from their job or that it's Friday and they're going to prayer for instance, rather than joining the call. So there were some weekly issues but also broader ones related to the wider course.

Amy Hinsley:

On that, one thing that did surprise me was that we had some people who were so, so engaged, emailing us a lot, still emailing us now, doing everything in advance, coming to all the sessions. People were so engaged, we were getting people to go into breakout groups presenting usually no one in those breakout groups to lead the discussion or facilitate anything. And in fact, I tried to join one group once and they said, can you just go because we actually really just want to discuss between us and it's much easier without anyone there. And then the presentation back, people clearly thought about the questions that we were asking. It wasn't just people weren't just turning up and not really doing it. They were really, really engaged. I thought it might be more somewhere in the middle.

What do you think contributed to strong engagement from some participants?

Dan Challender:
My initial response to that question is I think we tried to set the expectations early that this is a course where our expectation is that you will be active as opposed to passive. So, when people went into breakout groups initially, Amy and I said we're here if you need us, but otherwise it's over to you. And then letting people self-organise, in those potentially uncomfortable, first two minutes

when you're in a breakout group. I think one of the things that we did really well was just to let them get on with it because the clock is ticking and they've got to come back to plenary and report back on their discussions. I think we set expectations well in doing that, and that incentivized people to self-organise. I think had we not done this, the engagement might have been different and people might have ended up thinking well, we don't actually have to do much because somebody's going to come in and lead this discussion for us.

Did you receive feedback from participants who didn't attend?

Amy Hinsley:
We have various different grades of that in our feedback survey. One student who never even clicked the link to Canvas, he never even logged on. We had one who did in the last week and then never actually did anything. We had maybe ten people who did the odd thing, like came to one live session but didn't really do anything else. Some people emailed us to say family commitments or work commitments prevented them from doing some stuff. Others said that it wasn't clear exactly the expectations or the timelines for doing things, and I think that would actually be fair. For some of the online sessions, we anticipated that people would do some of the online activities in preparation for the live session. But I don't think we made that clear enough so they weren't doing the things in advance. And then we would turn up to the live session and people hadn't always done it, but they would do it like two weeks later. But we haven't had any feedback from people who just didn't come at all.

Dan Challender:

On reflection, Amy and I have been considering that we probably tried to pack too much in. We had lots of activities for people to do in any given week and one of the lessons I think we've learned is that for that level of activity and engagement people probably would need two weeks or, if we can do it on a week by week basis, then we need to reduce the number of activities that people do in any given week. I think it was a lot for them to do and that is probably reflected to some extent in the stats on engagement.

Did you estimate how many hours they'd need to do per week and the reality didn't match?

Amy Hinsley:

We did estimate that, around 10 hours per week. And I think people just didn't have ten hours in a week, which we should have anticipated really.

Dan Challender:

If we did it again, we'd probably do no more than five hours in a week.

Amy Hinsley:

Yeah, maybe even like three or four.

Dan Challender:

Each week varied between three and ten, most seven or ten, with ten being one big module which we made people aware of. But it was clearly too much.

Amy Hinsley:

And some of it was complex as well, it wasn't just, go away and do some reading. It was get your head around this, watch all these videos and get your head around this new concept, which some people did really engage but others just didn't.

Dan Challender:

There was lots of really good, enthusiastic engagement. People would join if they could, despite travelling in China for work, they still took part in the course, joining from the airport in Beijing. People would join from the back of a moving car because they're really keen to take part. So, despite a few people not attending that signed up, the other extreme was also there. People were attending no matter what.

Amy Hinsley:

What we really carefully thought about was the progression and structure of the course and we worked with Curio to do this. How it worked was, the first week was an introduction, then in the second week, you built a map of your wildlife trade system and then in the third week you were meant to add things to your map, and then in the fourth week you were meant to add things to your map. The whole thing was built around something you were meant to have done in the second week. But only three or four people did this, which meant that we really quickly had to change everything because we couldn't build up this piece of work week by week. And the idea was that at the end they would come out with this piece of work that would then help them in the future so they would have this thing which would give them an understanding of the Wildlife trade system. It would give them an idea of who to speak to, the interventions that they would need to do, and all of it was meant to be a bespoke thing that they were going to build up week by week based on what we were doing. And we just couldn't do that. And actually going back to expectations, I really did expect people to have done that thing in the first week, which is why we created the whole course around having that done. So, I think that was a major thing that meant that week by week we had to change, we had to go into Canvas and change what we were expecting people to do before we uploaded it and let people see the module, because they hadn't done the thing that underpinned it.

I don't think anywhere we clearly said what you produce will form the basis of everything you do in this course.

Q11: What didn't go as planned in terms of course design or structure?

Amy Hinsley:

We had structured everything around building a system map in week two that would be used throughout the course. But very few people did that task on time, which forced us to restructure other modules week-by-week.

Dan Challender:

That task was complex, and we didn't communicate its centrality clearly enough. People needed more time than we had given them.

Q12: Did you find that some participants were using ChatGPT in live sessions or applications?

Amy Hinsley:

Yes, likely. Some application answers looked AI-generated. And during live sessions, there were moments when breakout group answers seemed copy-pasted from ChatGPT.

Dan Challender:

That's a challenge. Perhaps we need to better frame expectations around AI use.

Q13: What was the process like working with Curio to develop the course?

Dan Challender:

We started with internal workshops, then mapped the course structure with Curio using Miro. Curio helped guide us on best practices—like optimal video lengths, types of learner engagement, etc. They supported us through weekly meetings and technical setup in Canvas.

Amy Hinsley:

Curio added structure and external pressure that kept us moving forward. But they sometimes recommended overly technical tools—like Miro or Padlet—which didn't work well for our audience. We had to adapt quickly when those tools weren't used.

Q14: How did you find your participants? What was the application process like?

Amy Hinsley:

We created an online form, kept it short, and promoted it through social media, mailing lists, and professional networks. We got over 300 applications—more than half from outside West Africa. We shortlisted and selected 40 people with a balance of sector, country, and experience.

Q15: What are your key takeaways for future iterations, especially the upcoming in-person version?

Dan Challender:

The in-person course will be a week long. Because participants will be fully present, we can reduce some content and focus more on facilitated sessions and group work.

Amy Hinsley:

We're simplifying the activities and not relying on complex tools. For the online version, we'd reduce the number of tasks or extend the timeline to two weeks per module.

Q16: How are you sharing what you've learned with the wider department?

Amy Hinsley:

We've been invited to present at a departmental meeting and are talking to key staff involved in online education strategy.

Dan Challender:

We're also sharing lessons informally with colleagues and student committees.

Q17: What would you do differently if you were starting again?

Amy Hinsley:

Start with fewer participants. Use fewer tech-heavy tools. Prioritise simplicity in design. Our simulations, which took ages to develop, weren't well received.

Dan Challender:

Focus more on delivery and live engagement, and less on making every technical detail perfect in Canvas. Also, allow more time in live sessions—two hours wasn't always enough.