

Development and Instruction of a General Education Capstone Course in International Agriculture

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Abstract

A course titled Topics in International Agriculture was developed with the intent to teach about agricultural production on a global scale. Additionally, the course was intended to illustrate and discuss agriculture's connections with society in terms of sociology, history, economics, government, culture and other academic disciplines. The course included a trip to Italy and England to allow students to experience both agriculture and culture in these countries. Course goals, development, content, and instruction are presented and discussed along with considerations for future offerings of this course. It is hoped that this will both inform and aid colleagues as in the development of similar courses.

Introduction

College of the Ozarks is a four year liberal arts college which is unique in a number of ways including the fact that it has an agriculture department. Part of the College's liberal arts mission is students' cultural growth (College of the Ozarks, 2000) and it is toward this aim that the College has funded international travel for a number of years. Many of the agricultural faculty have varied professional experiences in other countries and this led to the desire to teach a course about agriculture from a global perspective and take advantage of the opportunity to combine classroom instruction with a tour of agricultural production systems in other countries.

The goals stated in the course syllabus were to

- 1) discuss common agricultural production in other western countries, specifically in western Europe;
- 2) discuss how political, economic, cultural, historical and other factors have resulted in differing agricultural practices and marketing strategies in the U.S. and Europe;
- 3) discuss how past and current agricultural trade agreements are affecting production throughout the world; and
- 4) describe the cultures and heritages of European countries in general terms.

Additionally, this course was designated as a General Education Capstone Course which added

certain prescribed guidelines that became a significant component of the course. Those guidelines included:

- 1) linkage of the major course topics with at least one other general education discipline (i.e. history, language, art, etc.);
- 2) a research project that was connected to the students major field of study; and
- 3) instruction that emphasized and encouraged skills such as critical thinking, writing, discussion and oral presentation.

Development of that course and associated travel abroad was undertaken and the results are described in this paper.

Methods and Discussion

Title

The course developed was entitled "Topics in International Agriculture." That title was carefully chosen as it clearly defined the scope of the course but also allowed for any number of areas that would eventually be included in the course. However, the title soon came under administrative scrutiny as it was seen to have limited appeal to students outside of those specifically interested in agriculture. The course was allowed to proceed as proposed after much discussion and reassurance that the course would extend well beyond "farming" and include study of the relationship between agriculture and societies around the world.

Countries of Study

It was decided to study Europe and specifically Italy and England as part of the course. These countries were chosen partly due to faculty contacts in each country facilitating travel to each, but also they are worthy of study in a number of agriculturally important ways. Italy and the United Kingdom offer many distinctions and similarities to the U.S. in terms of both culture and agriculture. Each country has and does borrow culturally from each other but each does maintain unique cultural traditions. Agricultural production systems also vary within each country. Italy and the U.K. produce many crops similar to the United States but production, for the

most part, is very different than in the U.S. Those differences stem largely from cultural, geographic, political and historical factors. The U.S. does share cultural similarities with Italy and certainly the U.K. but there are also noteworthy distinctions that lead to differences in agricultural production. Also, as members of the European Union (E.U.), Italy and the U.K. have very different interests than the U.S. and different interests from each other. Italy and the U.K. will each be affected in very different ways by potential E.U. enlargement as well as development in the central European countries. U.K. production has more similarity to the U.S. but there are significant differences not the least of which are increasing environmental consideration and concerns such as that for bovine spongiform encephalopathy (mad cow disease) and foot and mouth. From a purely cultural standpoint, Italy, the U.K. and the U.S. make a fascinating study for comparison and contrast.

Travel to Europe

The course of study began with a trip to Italy and England funded completely through the College's Development Office. The College is dedicated to providing financially needy students with a quality education (full time students work on campus in exchange for tuition) and, therefore, students were not required to pay for anything other than personal items and souvenirs. Eight students were chosen to participate on the trip and were selected from approximately 40 who initially expressed interest. The students were chosen according to their character, academic achievements and extracurricular involvement on campus. Since the trip was to occur prior to the course, students were required to sign an agreement that they would complete the entire course or would have to refund the College for the trip. This was to discourage students from participating in the trip and then dropping the course at a later date and we did achieve that effect. Two male and two female faculty/staff personnel accompanied the students. The itinerary began with travel to Bologna and residence at the University of Bologna hosted by Moreno Toselli of the Department of Fruit Science. While in Bologna we toured the following:

Day 1: fruit production and processing in surrounding areas including discussions with growers;

Day 2: tour of vegetable and agronomic production on a private farm with the farm manager;

Day 3: tour of cheese, animal and dairy production with producers.

At each farm and production facility the Italian growers and producers were extremely gracious and obviously proud to be displaying their work. This made distinct impressions on the students as they saw farms, processing areas and producers very different from what they had previously known yet

managed by knowledgeable, interesting and unique individuals. Our tours of agricultural sites in Italy were certainly enlightening agriculturally but perhaps more poignant for our students was that experience of meeting and interacting with those working the land in this unique country. Also, we purposely traveled to historical sites such as Ravenna and Venice and were constantly exposed to Italian culture and tradition. Venice is worthy of study by itself in terms of history and influence and it helped nurture the ideas of culture and heritage that we tried to foster during our travels.

In the U.K. we resided in London and had the following day trips:

Day 1: tour of University of Reading farms with Mike Collis

Day 2: tour of Institute of Arable Crops Research at Rothamsted

Day 3: visit to Kew Botanical Gardens

Our tour of the University of Reading farms was extensive and provided a day of much learning, insight and contemplation for the students. The University's Farm Manager Mike Collis made this a very enlightening day. Rothamsted provided some historical context for agricultural production but also a look at current research into agricultural technology and production. Our stay in London included guided tours of the city and thus much of the history and culture of that city. Our time in both Italy and England was a time of much growth for all who participated: growth in both agricultural knowledge and of other cultures and the commonness of man.

Regrettably, not every student who registered for the course was able to participate in the trip and this presented somewhat of a dilemma in terms of teaching the course. Based on exam questions and informal discussions, the students on the trip did learn much that we had hoped for with respect to understanding people of other cultures, their values, their similarities and their differences. We could certainly not expect to teach those same lessons as effectively to the remainder of the students in a classroom. We realized that we must console ourselves that we had indeed provided unique educational opportunities for as many of the students as possible and that we could now instruct from our own experiences and facilitate the student-to-student interaction that could share insights and gained knowledge.

Course Subject Matter - General Education

In developing the course material, it became necessary to break down the stated goals to exactly what we would discuss in class with the aim of meeting those goals. The four broad areas that would be discussed were-

- 1) agricultural production in the U.S., the U.K. and Italy;
- 2) history, agricultural history, geography and other basics of each country;
- 3) political factors and governmental policy in the U.S., the E.U. and the world
- 4) world trade, trade agreements, the future

As topics in each of these areas were discussed, consideration was given to the general education capstone guidelines of incorporating additional disciplines and the students' major fields of study. In particular, attention was given to the cultural factors of these countries and regions as we introduced and studied each. Factors such as history, government, economics, religion and especially sociology were discussed. Much discussion was made of the interrelationships of rural farm life, social structures and relationships and how these have changed over time and ultimately affected or were affected by agricultural methods and production. One such example would be the manor house in the U.K., its social structure, the corresponding agricultural implications and the existing evidences of that system in Britain today (Gres, 1925). An example in Italy would be the history of small holdings and share cropping in Italy and its evidences on current social relations and farming methods (Medici, 1949; Sereni, 1997). Additionally, classroom discussion centered on the effects of political systems on production, farm life and social relations.

Students were required to write two research papers and make oral presentations based on their papers. Students were free to choose the topic but each paper was required to combine agriculture, one other discipline (preferably their major field of study) and an international aspect. The chosen topics were approved by the instructors and a rough draft was previewed and returned with suggestions for improvement for the student to consider. Topics were indeed varied. One example was a paper entitled "Sweden - Its Agricultural History and How it Relates to Immigration to America." This particular student is of Swedish ancestry and included aspects of her personal life in the paper. It was a fascinating read as well as being rewarding from an instructor's point of view.

The research papers, examination questions, classroom discussion and various exercises were all designed to both teach and facilitate critical thinking, writing and oral presentation skills among the students. Students were encouraged to go beyond memorizing information to exploring the underlying causes and reasoning behind what has occurred and what is currently occurring in agricultural production, governmental policies, societal frameworks and the like. Every week we had round table discussions focused on current international agriculture news

and the implications on a local and a global scale. As is the case in most courses, the students demonstrated varying levels of competence of critical thinking and exploring underlying causation.

Course Subject Matter - International Agriculture

As previously mentioned, the four broad areas of coverage included 1) production in the U.S., the U.K. and Italy, 2) history, agricultural history, geography and other basics of each country 3) political factors and governmental policy in the U.S., the E.U. and the world and 4) world trade, trade agreements, and the future. Discussion of production was greatly enhanced by both the instructors' and students' travel and experience in Italy and England. The students who participated in the trip were given opportunities to share their insights including their thoughts on production practices. Additional background for discussion on production was obtained through research and dialogue with colleagues in Europe. Similarly, students who participated in the trip were able to elaborate on their cultural experiences in each country.

Discussion of governmental policies, world trade, and related topics was aided in part by the newspaper and other news sources. Virtually every day there was a news story driving discussion in these areas. Additionally, much has been written on U.S. farm policy, the E.U.'s Common Agricultural Policy and the World Trade Organization (Bowler, 1985; Brouwer and Lowe, 1998; Grant, 1997; Ingersent, et al.; Moyer and Josling, 1990; Sumner, 1995), thus, there was never a shortage of material for discussion. Again, attention was focused on the historical and political influences that gave rise to certain policies even though those policies may result in excess production and competing interests within the E.U. (Grant, 1997). A major theme was the concept that often policy is developed based on political, historical or other factors and less often by agricultural worthiness. One farmer in the U.K. discussed the attitude that the general public wants the look and aesthetics of the farmland but not the actual agricultural production. Implementation of policies for environmental and sociological reasons, gaining in significance in the E.U. and the U.S., and the effects on agricultural production were the subject of much classroom discussion.

These considerations and discussions were elaborated on by the students' study of Wendell Berry's book *The Unsettling of America, Culture and Agriculture* (1977). This book stimulated much discussion for several reasons but chiefly that it details a perspective that our agriculture students and, as we found out, our students in general have never before considered. Individual students found

themselves agreeing and disagreeing with Berry at the same time. Students routinely admitted that they had not thought of the perspective presented in the text and thus the book achieved our purpose of allowing students to grow in their thinking, their perspective and consideration of valid ideas of what agriculture should accomplish.

Other Course Components

The students were able to benefit from personal experiences of three faculty members that have international experience. The senior author has spent time in England on several occasions, has visited agricultural areas in Bulgaria as well as having worked closely with our Italian host and his colleagues. The junior author participated on an agricultural tour of Belarus in 1998 and was able to share much of his experiences and insight throughout the course. Both authors have research interests related to agricultural production in other regions of the world. Other faculty members have professional experience in other countries and they added to discussions as appropriate. While there were obvious benefits to having international experience of agricultural faculty, for a successful course it would not be necessary to have such international experience or that one's international experience be related to agriculture.

During the instruction of this course we were also able to benefit from the visit of scholars and farmers from Belarus. The Missouri Baptist Convention hosted several agricultural visitors from Belarus and they were gracious enough to speak with our students and answer questions. Also, a student at the College who previously worked in the Peace Corps presented to the students his cultural and agricultural experiences in Africa.

A number of exercises enhanced student interest and involvement tremendously. One such exercise was students' participation in an exercise in which they are each assigned a country with a set amount of agricultural resources and must trade with the other student-countries to obtain the food they require to support their population. The amounts of resources and food required were designed to both mirror realistic values and result in some countries having too much of certain products and not enough of others. Interestingly, some students immediately formed small 'trading blocks' and satisfied the majority of their countries "needs." Another exercise we intend to expand on is role playing in what has been termed "the tragedy of the commons." How many animals can one area, the "commons," support before it is overgrazed and production declines? We hope to actually set aside a 1000 square feet area and require each student to produce a minimal amount of agricultural product in competition with every other

student. Students could be assigned the same product (e.g. beans or peas,) or students could be assigned different products that could be produced in coordination in the amounts required. Students might also be made more aware of global population growth and the increasing pressure on the world food supply by each student providing a snack for all but one student or the instructor buying lunch for everyone except one. Forcing students to miss a meal or eat solely the staple food of a developing country for several days may foster understanding and empathy for other peoples and cultures. Another idea is to construct an exercise that is based on the economic principle of comparative advantage. The U.S. may be more efficient at producing each of two agricultural products than the E.U. but it makes economic sense for the U.S. to put more resources into the one product it produces most efficiently. This principle is the basis for much international trade and particularly agricultural goods (Carbaugh, 2002). Such an exercise is currently on the drawing table. No doubt other exercises could and will be incorporated in a course of this nature with the express purpose of teaching global scale agriculture to students and encouraging them to think and live with a larger perspective.

Conclusions

Our intention is to offer this course regularly as part of the agriculture curriculum and as part of the general education capstone series. Each time the course is taught, it can focus on different countries or continents, different cultural or historical factors or different segments of the agricultural complex. There is a plethora of options and possibilities for our students. While it may be desirable to teach a single course that covers the entire world and its agriculture, we deem that too difficult and unmanageable at the depth desired and required for the objectives of this capstone course.

There exists a large pool of potential speakers for such a course and these certainly include professors with expertise in other countries or fields such as history or economics. Also, a college community undoubtedly has persons native to other countries or experience in other countries that can add significantly to discussions.

We are hopeful that the College will continue to fund international travel for such courses but even so there is increasing competition within the College for such funds. This course may indeed be taught without an international trip but the value of such a trip is immeasurable. The ultimate goal of the capstone courses at College of the Ozarks is for students to "explore connections among the various disciplines" (College of the Ozarks, 2000, p. 48) in the general education courses and their major field of

study. A course in agriculture, and indeed international agriculture, naturally fills the objective as agriculture is interwoven in all of human life: in history, in culture, in art, in economics, in government, in religion and in every country on the earth. We solicit and welcome comments on and suggestions for this course.

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