

Co-learning in a Graduate-Level Food Systems Course: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Course-Based Action Research



Rachael E. Kennedy ¹, Dr. Kim Niewolny ¹, Sarah Ciamillo ², Philip D'Adamo-Damery ¹,
Sarah Jonson ³, Lorien MacAuley ¹, Havva Savran Al-Haik ¹, and Alexander Trutko ⁴

¹ Department of Agricultural and Extension Education, Virginia Tech

² Department of Animal Science, Virginia Tech

³ School of Public and International Affairs, Virginia Tech

⁴ Horticulture Department, Virginia Tech

ALS 5234G, *Advanced Concepts in Community Food Systems*

- Graduate partner to ALS 4204, *Concepts in Community Food Systems*, **Civic Agriculture and Food Systems (CAFS)** minor at Virginia Tech.
- Comprehensive & interdisciplinary examination of current issues related to the emerging study of **community food systems**.
- The USDA- AFRI funded **Appalachian Foodshed Project** acts as theoretical and practical backdrop for class discussion and coursework .
- Philosophically and practically based using **Action Research** principles.

Appalachian Foodshed Project (AFP)

- The AFP is an integrated project with NC State University, Virginia Tech, West Virginia University, and community partners. **Funded by a 2011 USDA NIFA-AFRI Grant (Award No. 2011-68004-30079).**



- AFP uses a *foodshed* concept to address issues of community food security in West Virginia and the Appalachian regions of North Carolina and Virginia.
- Using a community-based research approach, the AFP aims to cultivate resilient food systems that have long term benefits for all people in the region.



Pedagogical Framework & Guiding Concepts

- **Community Food Security:** “A situation in which all community residents obtain a safe, culturally acceptable, nutritionally adequate diet through a sustainable food system that maximizes community self-reliance and social justice.” ¹
- **Community Food Systems:** Are a system by which “food production, processing, distribution and consumption are integrated to enhance the environmental, economic, social and nutritional health of a particular place.” ²
- **Course-based Action Research:** Build and implement course as a group of learners using democratic decision making methods. Process of course development is foundationally rooted in pragmatic, critical science and shaped by community-university partnerships ^{3,4}

Participatory Learning Expectations

Participants will be expected to:

- Choose, assign, and read course material with close attention to concepts and ideas for application in course discussions and assignments.
- Draw upon newly learned (and previously obtained) skills and strategies to organize and lead class discussions and activities.
- Develop and implement course assignments.
- Learn and follow a consensus model for decision making.
- Be patient, courteous, and sincere throughout the learning process.

Methodology: Our Process

- **First class:** Inquiring using World Café: *What do we want to explore?* Commit through consensus.
- **Second class:** Digging deeper. *What do we REALLY want to explore (assignments and teaching)?*
- **Every class:** Begin and end with process/strategy development, co-learning, built in reflection time.



“Complete and committed participation is a core principle in which the course operates.” ~from the syllabus

Sharing of power for co-learning

- Instructor prepared initial syllabus & readings; relationship building w/AFP, submitted IRB; guided process, managed Scholar.
- Students “co-teach” course:
 - Select & design themes, readings, & assignments
 - Facilitate discussion & activity
 - Reflect & co-manage process
- All shared content on-line

1. *Principles for framing a healthy food system* ⁵
2. *Food and Society* ⁶
3. Urban Agriculture
4. What is Food Security? Why Do We Care?
5. Food Access and Identity
6. Food Access and Health
7. Community Engagement for CFS
8. The Politics of the Food System I: Farm workers
9. The Politics of the Food System II: Marketing

Evaluation and Learning “Products”

Course Eval.	Points
Participation	50%
Student Mid-term	25%
Student Final	25%
TOTAL POSSIBLE	100% (100 Pts)

- Weeks 1-3 Develop process, read “Food & Society”, etc.
- Week 7: Mid-term due
- Week 15: Final and Participation Response

- Syllabus by consensus
- Mid T: CFS Literature Review
- Final: AFP Practitioner Profile
- Field visit to Plenty!
- Hosting Dr. Lee Meyers (SSARE Director)
- 4204/5235G Community Panel
- Compendium of Works Cited
- Community Food Systems Reflective Abstract
- Course Participation Reflections
- NACTA Abstract/Presentation

Extending the Learning to (and with) the Community



- Discussion with *Plenty!*, a local food organization and AFP member



- Practitioner Profiles w/Virginia AFP Community Partners

Insights: This worked!

Tangibles and intangibles

- Built in time for process and reflection
- Commitment to intense learning
- Community of learners established
- Consensus: all voices heard and valued
- Everyone contributed their authentic learning desires

Enthusiasm

Trust & Respect

Engagement
FN&9&6W6Nf

Commitment

Engagement

“...I was able to make the learning, *my* learning. I came into the semester with a lot of questions about CFS, but, because of the course structure, **I did not have to shelve my questions in order to engage the content.** Rather, I was able to engage the topics by raising my questions. This was further supported by the diversity of perspectives in our class. **The questions I brought to class were shaped and molded by the questions of my classmates,** who were also bringing their own questions from their unique vantage points within the food system.”

Empowerment

“This might be my first encounter with a course grounded in AR principles. **My concern was what will I know about community food systems, how am I going to decide what to learn** in “advanced community food system “? Out of this course I learned that community food systems demand incredible amount of knowledge: how to grow, process, market, distribute and cook food that is connected to people in a particular place and time. **It was pleasant experience and great opportunity.”**

~Havva

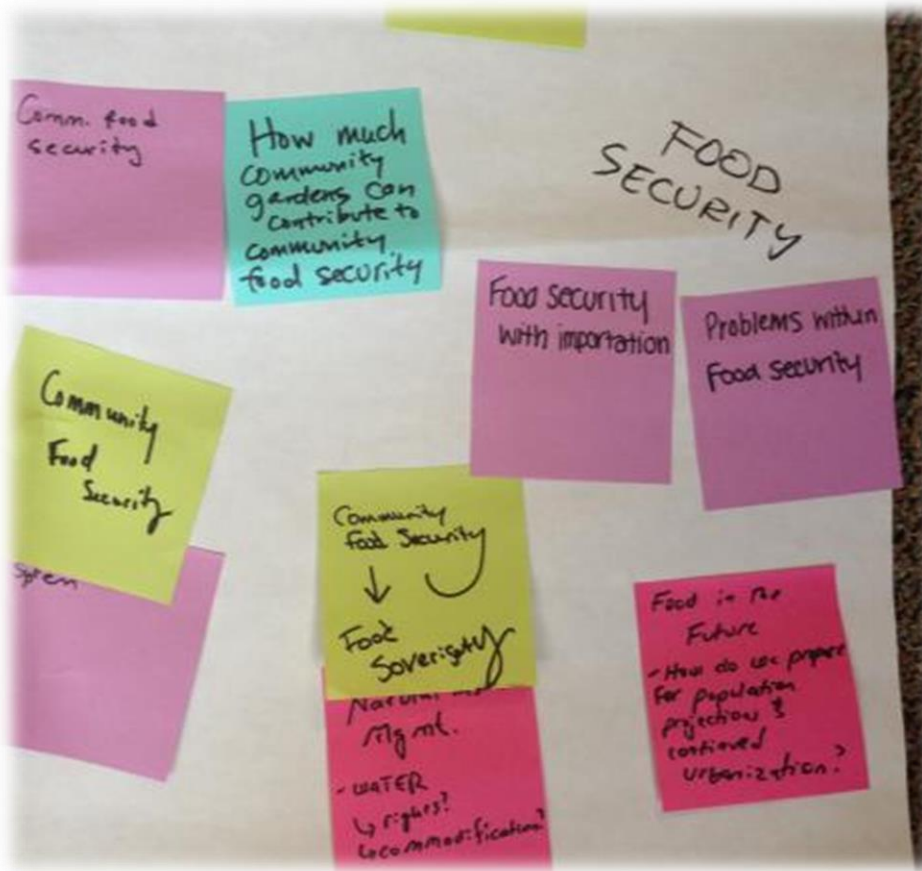
Trust and Respect

“...actively participating in this class allowed me to learn in ways that were possible only through an active pondering of the concepts through conversation. Through social engagement we are not only shown new elements of a topic in an abstract way, **we find how it is personally relevant to others, while sharing with others how it is personally relevant to us. This builds more meaning around a topic that would otherwise be more distant, abstract, unfelt.**” ~Lorien

References

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4. Hoffman, N. G., & Rosing, H. (Eds.) (2007). *Pedagogies of praxis: Course-based action research in the social sciences*. Jossey-Bass: San Francisco, CA.
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Thank you!



www.appalachianfoodshedproject.org

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Cultivating Community Food Security