



Agroecological Learning From Stakeholders on Their Turf: Student Reactions and Reflections

With additional support from:

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Outline

Course background & goals
 Course & reflection structure
 Student perspectives

- Short term
- Longer term



A popular stand at the Moscow, ID Farmers Market

2001: Need identified to develop both upper & intro level courses in “sustainable food systems”
 (Regional WA/ID WK Kellogg FSPE project)

Course goals and objectives developed by multi-institutional, multi-disciplinary team

Goals include (among others):


- Understanding sustainability issues in current food systems
- Recognize wide variety of world views, disciplinary approaches, and decision-making processes
- Recognize the connections between different disciplines, professions, & world views.

Next Question: *How to design so students learn this?*

Existing Agroecosystems Analysis course inspires our approach

WSU & UI jointly pilot course Summer/Fall 2003 as “Special Topics”
 Permanent, cross-listed course approved Fall 2003
 “Field Analysis of Sustainable Food Systems”

Catalog description:
 “Experiential course visiting farms, food processing, and marketing facilities to develop understanding of issues and relationships in sustainable food systems.”



NE Iowa Prairie

Prerequisites: Jr or higher standing, completion of all science and social science GERS

How the course works

- > Pre-readings, discussion
- > Meet together for 7 Days (and 7 nights!)
 Example Day:
 - Wittman Brothers Farm (Sack lunch – Nez Perce Historical Park)
 - Port of Wilma
 - Genesee Union Warehouse
 - Affinity Farm (Moscow) (Group dinner)
 - Evening debrief, discussion, & reflection
- Day 6: Students develop/implement group interactive presentations
- Day 7 (am only): debrief, discussion, & reflection on the week

> Group and individual written projects due following field component

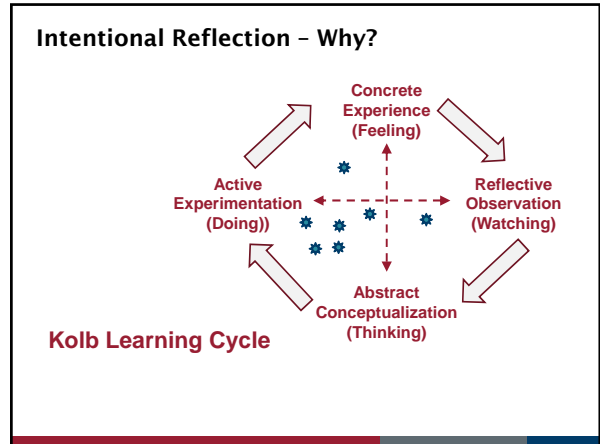
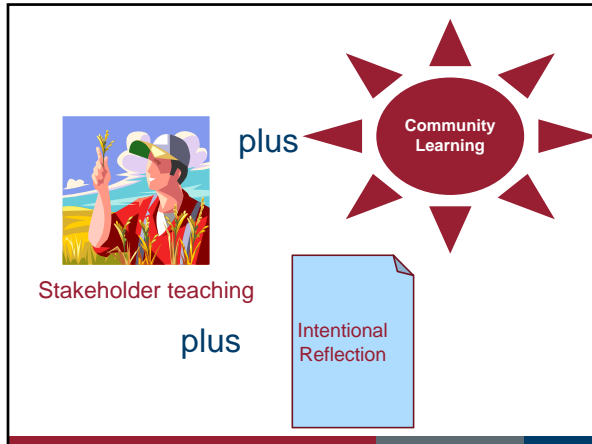
Day 1

Introductions, team-building, orientation

Instructions/guidance from faculty team regarding interaction with site hosts

- Focus on “what” and “why” of their decisions to understand the relationships & drivers
- Use of ALL your senses and observational skills
- Be respectful
- Review questioning approaches

Small group time planning next day’s questions



Reflection Questions During Field Week (a subset)

Daily:

- What were my most important insights today?
- What new considerations were raised today?
- How and to what extent did today's activities help me recognize and understand:
 - agricultural networks & systems
 - the interplay of economic, environmental, social and policy factors in food production and delivery choices
 - how this interplay affects the success of enterprises

End of field week:

- Above, plus:
 - Rating of overall learning, course value, site visit value, immersion / community learning experience
 - Extent the course affected your values, worldviews



Short-term perspectives (end of immersion week)

Quantitative ratings across six years (1=very low to 5=very high)

	<u>Mean</u>
Overall level of learning	4.5
Value / quality of site visits	4.6
Value of immersion approach & community learning	4.4
Overall value of course	4.7

To what extent did the week help you: (1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very much")

	<u>Mean</u>
•...recognize networks & systems	4.5
•...understand interplay of socioeconomics, environment, policy & production factors on food systems	4.6
•...understand food systems contexts and affect on farm/ranch success	4.4

Student Comments

- Interplay of environmental, economic & social factors

"It helps to see the system in motion, farmers farming, wheat processing, etc."

"We saw them whole. It could be no other way."

"I never really thought they were all connected but now I do."

"Brought together so many elements that in my mind, were previously separate."



On-farm composting

To what extent did the week help you recognize:
(1 = "not at all" to 5 = "very much")

Mean

...the effect of personal choices 4.4

...your own values, worldviews, and biases 4.5



"I became more confused, which is a good thing."

Student Comments

- Personal choices; values, worldviews

"The conversations opened my mind and helped me consider things I would probably not have."



"The intensity and consistency of the course opened my eyes to so many different points of view and ways of looking at the world."

Q: What were the 2 or 3 most important things you learned in this week?

"How other people think (farmers & students)"



Student Comments

-The immersion / community learning approach

"...my classmates made observations I hadn't."

"I loved the diversity [of my classmates] – very educational & good experiences & new learnings – how to write, organize, argue, think outside the box."

"This was a good approach to allow interaction between people from different background [sic] to delve into socially complex choices."



"More down time, being around this many people for so long is too intense!"

"14 hours straight every day? Bless me."

"It is exhausting, long, hot, living. But I don't know how else you would get so much info in a short time."



A wheat & cattle rancher explains his crop rotation to our first cohort of students

Student Comments:

-The value and quality of site visits

"The diversity of operations really put things into perspective."

"I was amazed at the openness and quality of the speakers"

"What better way to learn than by all of your five senses being put to use!"

"These types of experiences are not just classes but life-changing in nature."

"Incredible."



Unloading wheat at the Port of Wilma

"...[spending more time at a site] builds trust... so that you are being shown and told more. It is easy to judge until you get involved"

"...the [name deleted] farm...we all thought he was cooky, but also saw the underlying intelligence and sustainability."



Longer term impact?



Planning presentations

Recent responses from 2003, 2004, & 2005 course alumni

Q1: Value of learning from stakeholders on their turf... compared to ... classroom setting?

"The value is in the real-life settings, the heartfelt sharing of success/failure/challenge/disappointment/new ideas - what works and what does not - all of this is what is valuable. It comes from those who are actually doing it."



Q2: Value and longer term impact of the course (if any!) on you personally and professionally?

"...empathy, or at least a deeper understanding, of the enormous challenges...."

"It is invaluable. How can we measure it?"



Q3: How has the course affected (if it has) your program delivery regarding food / agricultural systems and sustainability?

"[The course] impacted my consequent education and even now still shapes how I perform my County Extension work every day."
- former undergraduate

"...I now try and involve producer-to-producer education whenever possible. I first learned the value of this ... in the field class."
- former Ph.D. student



Closing comments:

"I have never learned so much applicable and important knowledge in such a short period of time." - *a student (2008)*

"[Participating in this course gave me] hope in the youth and in the resilience of the American farming systems."
 - *new co-instructor (2005)*



Thank you!

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