
**TEACHING AN EXTENSION PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT COURSE IN AN
INTERNATIONAL SETTING:
CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES**

Rama B. Radhakrishna

Associate Professor

Department of Agricultural and Extension Education

The Pennsylvania State University

e-mail: brr100@psu.edu

Abstract

Internationalizing the curriculum coupled with encouraging students to participate in Study Abroad Programs have been recognized as key components for preparing global-ready graduates. In the last decade a number of higher education institutions in the United States have embraced internationalization as a key factor for infusing international concepts into the curriculum. This study provides a glimpse of a teaching assignment that this author completed in Russia that involved teaching of Extension Program Development course to Russian and American students. The course was designed to provide an understanding of the U.S. land-grant system with a special emphasis on Cooperative Extension System. There were 16 students, nine from Russia and seven from the U.S. A total of 16 students, nine Russian and 7 American enrolled in the class. Before departing to Russia, the instructor had developed the syllabus, a course packet, exams, and assignments. In addition, session outlines were translated into Russian language. In spite of the advanced preparation, the instructor had to make several changes (incorporating more group discussion, use of case studies reflecting Russia and the U.S., and exam format) to facilitate student learning. Language was a major challenge. However, the translation of session outlines was helpful especially for Russian students. Format of exam was also changed to "oral" reflecting Russian system of testing. Instructor experiences, changes made to facilitate student learning, and strategies to infuse international concepts are discussed in this paper.

Introduction

Internationalizing the curriculum coupled with encouraging students to participate in Study Abroad Programs has been recognized as key components for preparing global-ready graduates. In the last decade a number of higher education institutions in the United States have embraced internationalization as a key factor for infusing international concepts into the curriculum. One aspect of this approach is to encourage faculty to teach courses in international settings. Literature on the value of study abroad programs and/or teaching courses in international settings is well documented.

A host of researchers have studied the challenges and opportunities of teaching a course in international settings. For example, Sefton (1998) in her study of teaching physiology in an international setting and/or context suggested two key elements that should be included in designing courses that are taught in international settings. Sefton's elements are very much applicable to the context in which agricultural courses are taught. The elements include: 1) introduction and sequence, 2) the curriculum, and use of newer educational approaches and strategies that incorporate active learning, computer usage, and integrative and problem centered

learning. Each of these elements is critical to the successful preparation, delivery, and evaluation of agricultural courses in international settings. In addition, Sefton suggested that context of teaching should include student needs, political and economic context, educational structure and diversity of student body. Bruening and Carey (2003) in their article on authentic learning echoed the elements suggested by Sefton (1998). Bruening and Carey concluded that authentic learning helps students to transfer learning from a passive classroom context to a dynamic active learning situation. Incorporating experience-based activities such as hands-on learning labs, student-centered-in class and outdoor activities, field trip/tours, etc. provide real opportunities for students to put knowledge gained into practice.

Kennedy (2006) offers three important reasons why one should teach overseas: 1) seeing how people live, 2) working in challenging situation, and 3) gaining a global perspective. Kennedy says that living in another country for couple of weeks or months helps one to absorb the local culture and learn how other people live and function on a daily basis. According to Kennedy, collectively, these three reasons promote tolerance and understanding and helps in gaining global perspectives on many important issues.

Berneart (2003) developed a grid of competencies for international teachers. In this grid, 10 competencies were defined: 1) knowledge competence about schools around the world and policies of international organizations, 2) competence to infuse international concepts, 3) competence to introduce citizenship, 4) project management competence, 5) evaluation and dissemination competence, 6) action-research competence, 7) intercultural competencies, and equal opportunities, 8) language competence, 9) competence in active and innovative learning methodologies and approaches, and 10) portfolio development competencies.

Other researchers have examined the benefits of Study Abroad Programs (SAPs) and other international experiences on participants (Zhai and Scheer, 2002; Tritz and Martin, 1997; Radhakrishna, Leite, and Domer, 2003; and Carey and Bruening, 2002). Synthesis of findings from these studies suggest that SAPs and other international experiences: 1) provides cultural awareness, 2) improves communication abilities and language skills, 3) provides necessary tools needed for international development work, 4) helps understand diversity and prepares them to work effectively in a culturally diverse society, and 5) enhances global perspectives.

Recently, this researcher completed a one-month assignment in Russia that involved teaching of an Extension Program Development course. This program was sponsored by ACDI/VOCA under the National Security Education Program (NSEP), involving four U.S. higher education institutions: Montana State University, Penn State, University of Nebraska, and University of Florida and the host institution, Moscow State Agroengineering University.

Purpose and Objectives

The goal of this paper is to share experiences of the author in teaching a course in international settings. Specifically, the following aspects were discussed: 1) brief description of the course, 2) course preparation prior to the assignment, 3) description of students, 3) challenges faced and adjustments made, 4) recommendations for host institution (MSAU) for continued collaboration and participation, and 5) author/instructor reflection.

Methods and Data Sources

Prior knowledge and experience of teaching Extension in the U.S. and other countries and interacting with a Russian graduate student served as data sources. Development of syllabus, class assignments, tests and projects were also used. For course evaluation, standard

student rating forms of teaching effectiveness was used. Three questions on teaching performance were also asked: 1) what did they like best about the course? 2) what did they like least about the course? and 3) suggestions for improvement.

Results

Description of Course

The major goal of this assignment was to develop and teach a course in agricultural and extension education with a special emphasis on Extension program design/development and delivery. Specifically, the course (AEE 496A – Extension Program Design and Delivery in Russia) was designed to help students, both American and Russian, understand the history of the land-grant system in the United States, including Cooperative Extension. Students explored the history, organization, structure, and philosophy of Cooperative Extension. In addition, students had the opportunity to study, discuss, and understand the principles, methods, models, and practices of Cooperative Extension system in the United States and around the world. A major part of the course dealt on the program development/planning process, including implementation and evaluation of Extension programs.

The class met two days a week (Mondays and Fridays) for four weeks from 9:00 am to 4:00 pm. This class schedule resulted in a total of 8 sessions with 48 contact hours. Morning sessions included lecture and discussion, while afternoon sessions focused on group activity, hands-on exercises and discussion of case studies. Both Russian and American students were teamed up to reduce the language and communication barriers.

Facilities in terms of class room and equipment were provided by the MSAU. Drs. Chumakov and Konstantin provided needed support for the volunteer. Mr. Curt Fiedler, a doctoral student at the University of Florida provided logistical support (copying materials, tests, classroom maintenance, etc.). In addition, initial briefing and discussion with Vladimir Soldatenkov, and Michael Harvey of ACDI/VOCA, Moscow, helped the volunteer to refine/modify course offering.

Course Preparation

A course packet containing the syllabus, session objectives, lecture notes, handouts, PowerPoint presentations, and additional references was developed. It also contained due dates for exams, assignments, projects, and final presentations. A copy of the course packet and course assignments was given to all students on the very first day of the class. The instructor primarily used lecture, discussion, in-class exercise, and case study as instructional methods to enhance understanding and learning. Course material relative to objectives, glossary of terms, and selected topics were translated into Russian language for the benefit of Russian students.

Description of Students

A total of 16 students (7 Americans and 9 Russians) were enrolled in the course. Of these 16 students, 6 were male and 10 female. Most students were either in their sophomore or junior year in college. All Russian students were majoring in Farm Mechanization, while American students majored in a number of disciplines: Agricultural Education, Food Science/Nutrition, Horticulture, Farm Mechanization, and Veterinary Science.

Major Course Project

The volunteer assisted groups of students in program development efforts. Based on

Extension programs that have potential for pilot testing in Russia were developed. The programs developed were: 1) Farm Safety Training for Farm and Mechanization Operators, 2) A Recycling Program for Russian Towns and Cities, 3) Healthy Life Style Program for Youth and Adults, and 4) Establishment of 4-H Clubs in Rural Areas of Russia. The students used both what they learned in class and their own experiences in identifying these topics and developing them. In addition, each team of students made a 15 minute PowerPoint presentation to the entire class.

Organized Field Visits/Trips

Volunteer attended the field trips organized by the MSAU. The first field trip was a visit to the Green Houses located on campus of MSAU. The visit was very educational and helped the volunteer better understand the practices that Russian plant scientists follow for better green house management. We visited two green houses—one maintained by the university while the other was a commercial one. Both green houses were in good shape and had followed the latest technological advancement in green house management. Most of the produce (lettuce, dill, tomato) grown in the green houses were sold to local markets in the Moscow area.

The second field trip was a visit to dairy and meat processing enterprises. This field trip was an eye-opening experience for me in the sense that I could easily compare and contrast the dairy enterprises in America, India and Russia. The vice-president of the enterprise took us to the dairy farms, milk processing units, and meat processing plants. Again, these visits were educational as well as informational. The volunteer did not participate in the third field trip to a poultry enterprise.

Course Evaluation

Student performance was assessed through a variety of measures: quizzes, exams, including oral exam, short assignments, group projects and presentations. Standard grading procedures were adopted to assign grades for successful completion of course requirements (See attached course and assignment packets for details). In addition, course evaluation was completed using a seven-point SRTes (Student Rating of Teacher Effectiveness form) developed by Penn State University. Three open-ended questions were also asked to get a qualitative assessment of the course: 1) what did they like best about the course? 2) what did they like least about the course? and 3) suggestions for improvement. The quantitative results for:

Overall quality of course - 5.00

Overall quality of the instructor – 5.67

Enrollees offered the following comments for the three open-ended questions:

What did you like best about the course?

“I enjoyed the group project. Doing the project made me actually think about my own ideas and develop my own conclusions. This was also a great way to interact with the Russians and get there perspective of the material.”

“The flexibility and relaxed atmosphere provided a very good learning atmosphere. Also all the material was in the book. I thought the class was presented well and I had never taken an extension class so I was quite interested.”

“I liked best Rama’s enthusiasm and flexibility to help us outside of class. He stressed learning – not getting some letter grade. The course was very helpful.”

The class dealt with real issues and problems. It allowed us as students to learn about the way extension programs help these problems. How they help real people with real problems.”

What did you like least about the course?

“There were too many slides in the course and there is no text in the textbook for better understanding.”

“Difficult to understand the program planning process (some parts).”

“I would have enjoyed more hands on learning, maybe some small group activities that involve developing our own ideas and conclusions.”

“The class could have had different learning instead of PowerPoint the whole time.”

“Home assignments were not clearly formulated, especially the first.”

What suggestions you have for improving the course the next time it is offered?

“To make it easier for Russians we need to translate the book.”

“Less talk, more “hands-on”. More time for application. In-class discussion, debates would’ve been appropriate.”

“Panel discussions, debates, mock program for the duration of the entire course to help us apply concepts immediately!”

“I enjoyed the PPT, but maybe less talking and less slides. I suggestion switching up the teaching methods from day to day—just for something new.”

“None, well bringing us cookies and candy would be quite nice.”

Challenges Faced and Addressed

Language was a major challenge for both the instructor and Russian Students. However, this challenge was somewhat limited because of translation of class materials into Russian language. This helped Russian students immensely. Afternoon sessions were changed to more of a discussion format with sharing of examples of how Extension is organized around the world.

In addition, Russian and American students were teamed together for better understanding of the concepts taught in class. This group exercise helped quite a bit in terms of reducing language barriers and understanding of Extension program development process and concepts.

The concept of Extension program development was totally new to almost all Russian students and some American students. It was surprising that some American students were not aware of Cooperative Extension. In addition, organization of Extension in various countries around the world should be included.

The instructor had limited time to make changes due to lack of educational resources—textbooks, guest speakers, field visits, etc. Use of the Internet plus equipment in terms of computer availability should be addressed. Additional resources (books, Extension publications, video, etc.) should be provided so that the students are exposed to a variety of information relative to extension program design and delivery. Perhaps a reference room is needed to display these materials for student's use.

The instructor relied too much on one method of instruction (mostly lecture) was not appreciated by the students. Better selection of teaching methods will help students to learn the subject better. The instructor should develop more hands-on and problem solving examples. The selection of examples should reflect Russian and American situations. In future, the instructor should recognize the lack of awareness and value of Extension to Russian students. Prior contact with Russian Extension faculty and staff would help address this issue. Team teaching with Russian extension staff should be explored for mutual benefit.

Exam format was changed into oral not only to ease the difficulty of writing in English, but also to reflect the Russian system of examination. For example, one written test was changed to oral exam. Oral exam for each student lasted 10 to 15 minutes in length. The change in exam format eased the fear among Russian students. They were most concerned about writing essay or short answer questions.

Finally, the instructor developed a schedule to meet with students one-on-one each week to discuss specific problems relative to the course and teaching.

Educational Importance

Based on the reflective experience of the author, the following recommendations are offered:

- 1) better selection of teaching methods and use of additional resources and educational materials,
- 2) develop hands-on and problem solving examples,
- 3) recognize lack of awareness and value of Extension programming among Russian students,
- 4) make prior contacts with Russian Extension Service for meaningful dialogue and resource sharing.

For those involved or to be involved in teaching courses in international settings, the following recommendations are offered:

- 1) be flexible, always adapt to situations,
- 2) be receptive to student needs and concerns, LISTEN;
- 3) always think of ways you can help students to learn, understand, and apply,
- 4) always make an effort to understand how the education system works in the host country, and
- 5) always respect the people, their culture, if possible, make an effort to learn the language. These experiences and challenges will be of value to all faculty teaching agricultural and extension education courses in international settings.

The following recommendations were offered to the host institution (MSAU) for enhancing this study abroad program:

Recommendations for MSAU

- Faculty and staff at MSAU should explore additional course offerings for both Russian and American students. Potential exists for offering courses relative to Agricultural Education, Extension Education, Program Evaluation, Methods of Teaching Agriculture, Research Methods, International Agricultural Development and Agricultural Business Management, Rural and Community Development. It is recommended that MSAU equip classroom by including overhead and/or LCD projectors.
- Both MSAU and American universities should find opportunities to translate Extension publications into the Russian language. This will be of tremendous help to Russian farmers, families, and children. I believe, this will provide avenues to disseminate information to a larger audience. Since the literacy rate/level in Russia is very high, Extension should capitalize on this important activity. Perhaps, a request for funding from international funding agencies should be solicited. American universities can provide scholarships/assistantships for prospective Russian students to undertake this work.
- Need exists for training Russian Extension personnel on Extension methods and programs and issues of importance to Russia. Exchange programs for Russian Extension personnel should be offered in consultation with U.S. universities. One cost-effective way of achieving this is through utilizing distance education or arranging faculty exchange visits to the U.S.
- Exchange of Russian students to the U.S. and vice-versa should be given top priority. Potential exists for developing and offering graduate level programs for Russians and American students.

I believe this program (joint effort between MSAU and ACADI/VOCA) has graduated over 140 students in the last seven years. It is important we document the outcomes of this effort. A survey or interview of former students should be conducted. Key aspects such as the benefits of this program to students in terms of: 1) appreciation of other cultures, 2) exposure to other cultures, people, and the way of life, 3) education and career opportunities, and 4) overall influence of this program on their professional and personal lives

Instructor Reflections

Finally, for this instructor, it was a great and rich experience. In addition, it provided a unique opportunity for him to blend his Indian roots, American education, and experience.

In doing so, I have learned tremendously from my Russian friends and has a better understanding of the issues in Russia and how to help. I strongly encourage U.S. faculty to do volunteer work in international settings and incorporate experiences into the classes they teach in the United States. Collectively, our goal for Russia's future is to continue what we have done in the past several years. Such a goal, I believe, is critical to Russia's future development, progress, and prosperity.

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