

Lessons Learned in Teaching a Graduate Level, International Extension Education Course at a Distance

Pamala Morris

Department of Youth Development and Agricultural Education
Purdue University
615 W State Street
Agricultural Administration Building
West Lafayette, IN 47907-2053
Phone: 765-494-8293
FAX: 765-494-7420

Mark Russell

Department of Animal Sciences
Purdue University

Kelli Selby

International Programs in Agriculture
Purdue University

Abstract

A graduate-level “Principles of International Education and Engagement” course was designed to help extension staff and graduate students internationalize their extension program. This course has been taught for two year using a web-based curriculum and e-mail correspondence and the assignments align with extension workers’ job and community challenges. The syllabus is based upon the on-line curriculum “Strengthening Extension’s Capacity for International Engagement” developed in 2003/04 through a USDA/CSREES National Initiative to Internationalize Extension grant. The eight modules form a curriculum to develop the competence and confidence of Extension educators relevant to the changing global realities of their community. Most learners prefer face-to-face class methods so there is a need for lots of self-discipline and motivation on the part of the learner. Significant lessons learned include 1) the gap between students’ perception and reality of virtual interaction, 2) website usability, 3) visit with successful online instructors, 4) faculty must log on frequently and keep students informed, 5) keep assignments relevant to community or workplace issues, 6) be organized and to stay flexible, and 7) learning preferences are important. The selection of modules should be customized to match the program responsibilities of the educator. IP video and Vista 4 Blackboard technology may be more effective for some organizations. This course and method are effective in providing intercultural and international extension knowledge and skill development and could be incorporated into graduate degree programs in Extension education.

Key words: Distance, Graduate, International, Extension, Teaching

Introduction

Extension programs throughout the world are challenged to conduct professional development for staff assisting agribusiness entrepreneur clientele in a rapidly changing society. In a USDA/Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service (CSREES) paper entitled “Exploring New Opportunities for Extension” (2002), the question was posed, “How will the system respond to changes in agriculture, technology, evolving demographics, increased globalization, and broader public expectations?” A graduate-level extension education course was designed to help field extension staff members and other students internationalize their extension program. This course has been taught for two year using a web-based curriculum and e-mail correspondence. Rather than add to the workloads of extension workers, this course is designed in a way to make the assignments align with their job and community challenges and projects. The course can supplement a traditional extension education graduate degree or provide modules for professional staff development for international experiences. However, no innovative teaching method comes without struggles, benefits, and lessons learned.

Brief History and Objectives of Curriculum Development

The development of this curriculum was the result of a USDA-CSREES grant entitled “Cultural Competence and Global Competitiveness: An Educational Approach”. Prior to the development of this course, staff development programs at the state level focusing on internationalization or multiculturalism were few and far between, definitely uncoordinated and sporadically offered. During the time of the grant writing and implementation phases, the lead institution employed a graduate student, whose assistantship focused on international extension efforts, thus enforcing the importance within the system for international efforts.

The grant opportunity allowed the lead institution to partner with three other land-grant institutions to create curricula that could be used by extension to develop their confidence and competence in the area of international extension. The creation of the curriculum further promoted the importance of international extension, while providing a self-improvement opportunity for extension personnel. The curriculum was the result of the project; however, the interaction between the universities and within the systems to create the curriculum also strengthened the partner institutions and encouraged strategic discussions for future international efforts.

The purpose of the project was to develop a curriculum to be used to build the skills needed by Extension personnel to successfully engage in the international arena in the context of their professional assignments. The curricula modules developed are those that were discerned to be crucial to global competence in a changing world. Eight modules were written that, as a group, form a curricula to strengthen the ability of Extension educators to program activities relevant to the changing global realities in their communities.

Specific modules were designed with the following objectives: to build cross cultural competence; provide tools to assess needs amongst new clientele groups from multiple backgrounds; to contribute to workforce development in the context of new resident populations; to enhance local leadership skills to absorb changing populations and empower community leadership from new immigrant groups; to understand legal issues confronting communities with significant immigrant populations; to deepen educator’s knowledge of patterns of family life amongst new resident populations; to recognize and strengthen local opportunities to participate in the global market place; and to communicate effectively about the value and importance of international experience in the globalized world in which we live.

The major outcome of the project was a unique, needs-driven “virtual” curriculum consisting of eight modules that would be suitable for broad use across the United States. This curriculum was written by a four-state team of Extension personnel who were committed to the internationalization of the Extension dimension of the Land Grant mission. The curriculum was pilot tested with Extension personnel in the four partnering states.

The result of this project was a web-based curriculum designed for the staff development of Extension educators, divided into eight modules focusing on international and multicultural aspects of Extension. The eight modules include:

1. *Building Cultural Competencies*, Pamala Morris, Assistant Dean and Director of Diversity Programs for the Purdue College of Agriculture. Module 1 will serve as an introduction and starting point for individuals and organizations to begin that visionary journey toward becoming “culturally” or as most in the field are now saying, “interculturally” competent. This module is primarily designed to impact the culture of the organization, by surfacing both organizational and individual “mental models” and developing new ones. Module 1 will consist of three components – knowledge, awareness, and skills and abilities.
2. *Assessing Strengths of Your Community*, Mark Russell, Professor of Animal Sciences and Extension Specialist at Purdue University. This module will provide ideas and resources to Extension staff to better serve all residents of their county/state. It will help determine where and how to start educational programming efforts by providing ideas, strategies, resources, and examples in five units. The topics are difficult and often are barriers for education in responding to the demographic changes in communities. The effort to reach across cultures is no different than other Extension planning and programming in that it is based on designing, conducting, and evaluating educational programs that improve the lives of people in your community.
3. *Facilitating Workforce Development*, Uford Madden, Assistant Professor at Florida A&M University. This module provides a broad overview of the cultural issues that impact employment of new immigrants, and common issues that occur as they acculturate with a new environment. This module was constructed to address awareness of the participants own cultural perceptions and examine some major cultural issues and challenges that new immigrants may encounter in the work place. The understanding of culture, acceptance of cultural differences, and methods the extension professionals and educators can use to help in facilitating the new workers transition into a more diverse population will enhance better understand and improve working relationships between employee and employers.
4. *Cultivating Community Leadership*, Kathy Lechman, Leader of Diversity Development for Ohio State University Extension. Building leadership capacity is important, especially for immigrant populations but not at the expense of their cultural values. For example, gender and age are viewed differently with respect to community leadership in varying cultures. Teaching leadership is not simply something that we can just go into a community and do. There must be a desire on the part of the community members to increase capacity and not have the dominant groups impose their values. In addition, this module considers issues that existing local leadership must confront in efforts to satisfactorily absorb new immigrant populations into their communities.
5. *Understanding Legal Issues Relevant to New Populations*, Harriet Paul, Director of International Agricultural Programs at Florida A&M University. This module is designed for the extension educator working in communities with immigrant populations. A general overview of this module includes demographics of new immigrant groups in the United

States, their socio/economic history, and factors that will have implications for health and legal issues.

6. *Exploring Cultural Perspectives of Families*, Kimberly Greder, Assistant Professor and State Family Life Extension Specialist at Iowa State University. Families build the foundation of communities. As the demographic profiles of families in communities change, communities change. In order to design and deliver extension programs and services to effectively meet the needs of communities, it is important to understand the needs and wants of those who live there. This module can provide professional development to extension staff. However, activities in this module can also be used in extension programming to assist others in learning about the role of culture in families, how individuals can design and deliver programs and services.
7. *Discovering Global Trade*, Kelvin Leibold, Farm Management Field Specialist with Iowa State University Extension Service. The globalization of trade around the world will result in major changes in agriculture. Forces outside of the USA, such as the World Trade Organization, have major impact on agriculture, the communities where we live, and the needs of Extension clientele. By completing this module you will gain a better understanding of the impacts of trade, who a few of the major players may be, and resources available to you to better prepare yourself and your clients for these changes.
8. *Planning Your International Experience*, Barbara Ludwig, Professor and Chair of Extension at Ohio State University. Module 8 is designed as a set of reference materials for Extension professionals to use to increase their own understanding of internationalizing Extension. They are examples of materials developed and drawn from numerous sources and additional links that will be helpful to an Extension professional seeking additional background. This module relates to international experiences and how to apply those experiences in your personal and professional life. Unit 3 of this module is designed for the Extension professional without international experience. View this module as a supplement for Modules 1-7.

The modules are independent of each other, allowing the learner to utilize the modules that best fit their interests and needs; however, it is recommended that everyone begin their work with Module 1 “Building Cultural Competencies”. This module serves as a foundation and a framework for understanding the information and materials presented in the subsequent modules in this series. For further information the eight teaching modules can be found at www.ces.purdue.edu/iec (Morris, et. al., 2004).

Methods and Data Sources

This “*Principles of International Education and Engagement*” course is offered for three credits at the 500-level (dual) and as an Extension workshop through Continuing Education. A total of 14 students over two years have completed the course and most of those students used it as a pre-requisite for an *Exploring International Education and Engagement Opportunities* course in agribusiness marketing development in Costa Rica. A wide variety of students included on-campus students as well as staff from agribusiness, chamber of commerce, county extension, and national youth development organizations.

The spring semester domestic course was developed to increase international competencies of students, Extension educators, agricultural education teachers, rural leaders, and agribusiness professionals. This course is based upon the on-line curriculum “*Strengthening Extension’s Capacity for International Engagement*” developed in 2003/04 through a

USDA/CSREES National Initiative to Internationalize Extension grant. The curriculum was designed to assist in developing the skills needed by Extension personnel to successfully engage in the international arena of their professional assignments. The eight modules form a curriculum to develop the competence and confidence of Extension educators relevant to the changing global realities of their community.

The subsequent course, *Exploring International Education and Engagement Opportunities*, allows students to apply what was learned in the formal class to an international agribusiness marketing situation in Costa Rica. This four-week agribusiness education experience will be discussed in another paper. The real value of the course is not vested in the curriculum but in the relevancy of the assignments. All assignments were designed to apply the content of the course to the work and community of the students. The use of a prelection activity and guided reflections along with case studies added to the value of the experiences in learning. For example, application of census demographics to the student's community over time and describing the role of cultural difference in their workplace are assignments that relate the content to current realities. The project planning assignment requires them to develop a global extension program to a clientele of a different culture. All correspondence between students and faculty was via e-mail and sequential deadlines followed the module outline. The timeline and complete syllabi was developed and agreed upon by co-instructors before the course began. The course was taught synchronously to correspond with the spring semester of the host institution.

The educational model (Schrum, L., 1998) that served as a general framework for this course consisted of the following characteristics:

1. Each learning activity of the course was scheduled with clearly defined dates from beginning to end. Students had flexibility to study at any time of the day, as long as they meet with activity and period deadlines.
2. All teaching and learning processes were carried out via Internet and e-mail, without any requirements for students to attend face-to-face lectures or examinations. There were a few instances where programs were offered that required students to attend a lecture broadcasted by Satellite TV to a receiving site close to where students live, but these cases were rare.
3. To maximize flexibility, asynchronous interaction was preferred over synchronous one. Synchronous interaction was prohibited of course by work schedules and distance, but asynchronous interaction allowed students to adjust their daily participation to their own schedules and personal and professional responsibilities.
4. The course was developed on principles of adult learning, recognizing that adult students have special training needs they want to fulfill; they arrive to a course with prior knowledge, skills, and experience that they can share with the group and instructors; and, finally, they have high levels of intrinsic motivation, in contrast to undergraduate students who are more concerned about obtaining a diploma and earning parents' approval.
5. The curricula used for this course emphasized the idea of student-centered learning. Most courses, traditional and or web-based, propose a number of learning activities students must carry out. The emphasis here was not on what the instructor would do, but on what the students had to do to reach learning objectives.
6. Congruent with constructivist models, emphasis was placed on interaction. Most of the learning activities involved students' interaction with learning materials, with instructors, and with other students or co-workers at their respective workplaces.

7. The idea of collaborative learning had an important place in this educational model. Collaboration, rather than competition, was one of the underlying values that the instructors wanted students to learn.

Challenges

Learners throughout the world are demanding educational opportunities in an “anytime and anywhere” format, and institutions are providing substantial resources to develop online distance learning courses. Online learning has rapidly become a popular method of educational delivery for traditional and non-traditional students (Schrum, L., 2000). This learning method is especially palatable to adult learners who are motivated to succeed on their own. Faculty members are being urged to join this transition and put courses online. However, this is not a simple effort and comes with challenges and struggles to understand the relationship between the instructor, the student and the technology.

Most learners prefer face-to-face class methods so there is a need for lots of self-discipline and motivation on the part of the learner. If self-discipline is a problem, students find themselves falling behind on assignments making it difficult to catch up and as a result product quality is compromised. Students enrolled in online courses should be sure that they have a computer with adequate internet access. Employing this method requires good writing skills and basic computer skills with compatible word processing, internet browser and e-mail software. Posting assignments and students submitting assignments can be problematic if software is not compatible. Students need to have a level of comfort with using technology. It is frustrating to students and faculty when there is a need to overcome the discomfort of technology and grasp the content simultaneously.

Social interaction is also a challenge when using a distance learning method. Students are not able to hold verbal discussions since there are no face-to-face meetings. Therefore, social interactions are minimal if any at all. The selection of assignments and the deadlines are critical. Students become frustrated with slow response and feedback times from faculty.

The curriculum needs to be constantly updated and current and the links in web-based materials checked regularly to assure that the link is still active. More use of IP video or conference calls may help build relationships and contribute to the need for student interaction. Online support systems are needed, i.e. library portals, group chat sessions and individual contact through e-mail and phones. Personal comments and interactions can be an extremely enjoyable benefit of online courses if students have a designated place to go. Some on-site plenary meeting or activity at the beginning or the end would be an improvement.

Distance learning should not sacrifice its inherent strengths in an effort to imitate traditional styles of instruction. The traditional classroom has walls constraining and limiting the kind of learning that needs to take place in such an environment. Students, in many instances, are non-traditional they need to benefit from community and workplace environments in order to make the material relevant to their realities.

Lessons Learned

Gap Between Students' Perception and Reality of Virtual Interaction

Students had an expectation that faculty leaders were to be on call 24-7! When using this type of methodology there will be a lack of visual, kinesthetic and sound cues that usually facilitate learning and communication. During this course delivery, virtual interaction took place, as stated earlier, asynchronously where students and instructors sent e-mails at different times

and from different locations. As a result there was little closure on discussions which proved frustrating for both instructors and students.

Web Site Usability Must be Primary Concern

As mentioned above in the section on challenges, the web site consisting of the curricula developed into modules, should be kept current and updated regularly. There were too many dead links that precluded students from completing some assignments and adding on to student disappointment and frustration.

Visit with Successful Online Instructors, First

When instructors are interested in developing an online course seek advice from those who have been in the trenches. Hearing and seeing what works can save a lot of frustration for the student and the instructor. It might be useful to establish a set of standards and guidelines in the way online courses are structured on respective campuses to provide consistency for student success.

Log on Frequently and Keep Students Informed

Students need a reason to check in with the class as frequently as possible. It is easy for students to lose that motivation and become less disciplined in an effort to keep current with assignments. Students who have regular jobs can very often become distracted by the day-to-day operations at work! In addition, if instructors are not checking e-mail and or other means of communicating with students regularly, important messages could be missed that might cause a critical communication breakdown. Students need to feel that the course is as important to the instructor as it is to them. Student motivation and learning outcomes can be affected if the course does not appear to be a priority for the instructor. It is important to provide not only frequent feedback, but make sure that it is timely and of quality. Keeping students informed can also impact retention. Students can easily become disenchanted with the new method of online learning and just “give up”.

Keep Assignments Relevant to Community and or Workplace Issues

Adult learners are looking for solutions to real-world problems and challenges! Make sure that all assignments are relevant to issues and situations either in existence in the workplace or their respective communities. Adult learners are already bogged down with job responsibilities and an “add on” can become a quick turn off. Get students engaged and involved with co-workers and community members in finding solutions to address critical issues together and at the same time they are completing an assignment as part of the course requirements.

Important to be Organized and to Stay Flexible

Any successful online course should be structured and operate efficiently. It has been noted that course materials, syllabi, and a timeline should be sent to students in advance of the course start date. Being organized at the onset of the course can make life easier for everyone involved. Instructors need to stay open honest and responsive in order to have a successful endeavor!

Remember Learning Preferences are Important to Address

One key to success for any learner enrolled in a traditional or non-traditional course is that individuals must be able to identify their own abilities and learning styles in order to maximize the learning. Instructors have to keep this in mind when developing activities and other materials. A variety of modalities will assist the learner who has difficulty in just reading an assignment or those who are not only visual learners. Just as in any classroom, learning styles are critical for student success.

Conclusion

Distance education provides a viable method to educate and reach those who are fully employed or at a distance and cannot attend graduate classes on a campus. The selection of modules should be customized to match the program responsibilities of the educator. IP video and or Vista 4 Blackboard technology may be more effective for some organizations. This course and method seem very effective at providing intercultural and international extension knowledge and skill development and could be incorporated into graduate degree programs in Extension education.

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