Rationale for Developing and Fostering a Global Perspective through a Required Graduate Course in Sustainable Extension and Rural Development Programs

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Abstract

The understanding of the interdependence of people, cultures, environments, and resources in addressing global issues is an imperative in the world-culture of the 21st Century. The development of a global perspective is a prerequisite in becoming a professional in a complexly interrelated and rapidly changing world. Traditional extension education approaches require modification to enable graduates to become globally competent in terms of outlooks and practices, and to succeed as leaders in a global context. The development and fostering of a global perspective, skills, and attitudes through a required academic course will empower extension graduates to develop, implement, and cultivate effective approaches and partnerships in sustainable agriculture and rural development programs. A brief description of the proposed course is included. The paper concludes with comments on the educational impact of the outlined course on a personal and professional level.
Every man takes the limits of his own field of vision for the limits of the world - Arthur Schopenhauer

Introduction

Global changes caused by technological developments, economic global competitiveness, shifting societal demographics, and other worldwide issues have made it imperative to acquire a global perspective and understanding of issues (Samovar & Porter, 2001). A graduate course encompassing a global perspective cultivates in students “a perspective of the world which emphasizes the interconnections among cultures, species, and the planet” (National Council for the Social Studies, 1982). The acquisition of a global perspective serves as the initial step in providing graduates with the competencies they need to succeed in a competitive global marketplace. This required course will also provide extension professionals with effective leadership skills for diverse sociocultural contexts.

Colleges of agriculture and natural resources for the most part have not recognized the necessity for developing a global perspective as a critical competency for their graduates, although the need for such a perspective has long been acknowledged by colleges and schools of business. Academic programs in the fields of sustainable extension and rural development demand educational experiences that empower graduates to perform effectively in the world-culture of the 21st Century.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the importance and necessity of a course encompassing a global perspective as an integral part of a graduate program. This paper advances the urgency of developing global literacy to meet the challenges and demands of the 21st Century. This paper briefly describes a proposed course that establishes the foundation and facilitates the acquisition of a global perspective and eventually global literacy. The paper concludes with comments on the expected outcomes of integrating the proposed course in the curriculum of a graduate program.

Theoretical/Philosophical Themes and Sources

This paper presents a philosophical/theoretical perspective outlining the intellectual arguments for instilling a global perspective in extension education and rural development graduate students. This global perspective or mindset is the foundation for the development of the skills, knowledge and attitudes necessary to become competitive professionals and effective leaders in the world-culture of the 21st Century. The paper is based on a review of literature on global literacies and work and on the author’s observations conducted in Cameroon and the United States. No formal survey was conducted.

Discussion

A Global Perspective

Robert Hanvey (1976) defines global perspective as consisting of five elements: 1) perspective consciousness, 2) an awareness of the state of the planet, 3) knowledge of global dynamics, 4) cross-cultural awareness, and 5) an awareness of human choices. The American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) identifies a global perspective or mindset as a prerequisite for becoming globally competent and actively engaged in today’s rapid globalization of economies and society worldwide (2001). A global mindset is an attitude; it
is not knowledge or information. Attitudes are learned and therefore can be unlearned. We learn to be ethnocentric, and we can learn to be global in our perspective. Knowledge and understanding of the interrelationships between cultural, economic, ecological, and political events and trends are necessary to adequately assess the reasons for the deep and durable issues facing the world today (Kelleher & Klein, 1999). A global perspective is a prerequisite in developing global literacy.

Global Literacy

Becoming globally literate is a lifelong process determined by how we perceive and relate to others, the physical and spiritual world and ourselves. Global literacy requires self-exploration, psychological insight, intercultural and cross-cultural experiences and formal leadership education. The global literate understands his or her own cultural values and assumptions. A global mind is a flexible mind. It is a mind that remains agile as we travel across boundaries and borders. A global literate mind is comfortable with surprises and change, and it is able to contain conflicting and often opposing forces while creating cohesion and harmony from disparate parts. A global mind is comfortable with ambiguity and differences and it builds bridges across cultures, language, politics, and religions.

People with a global mindset look for the big picture; that is, they look for multiple possibilities for any event or occurrence. A globally literate individual leads and participates effectively in multicultural teams, and negotiates and approaches conflicts in a collaborative mode. The globally cultural competent person thinks and acts at the same time all with a sense of receptiveness and balance. A global mind combines linear, logical reasoning with circular, systemic thinking to address the challenges of the 21st Century world. The new millennium requires a new language of global business, thinking with an international mindset, and acting with fresh globalcentric leadership behaviors (Rosen et al., 2000).

Global Leadership

Global business success in the world-culture of the 21st Century requires a different leadership mindset. A global leader must have an understanding of how work processes are similar and dissimilar on a national as well as a global basis. Global leaders focus on the broader picture while being cognizant of context and looking for more than one explanation for an event. A global leader is one who has a multidimensional perspective in analyzing global challenges. By continually challenging their own paradigms, experiences and assumptions, global leaders seek to improve themselves (Moran & Riesenberger, 1994). Robert Rosen defines a global leader as one who thinks with an international mindset, is able to create fresh leadership behaviors, and mobilizes people in culturally mindful ways (2000).

A Course to Succeed in a Global Society

Currently, most graduates of programs at land-grant institutions do not require a course that offers a framework for understanding various, but equally valid, perspectives of events that define the modern world. Typically, the approach used in these programs is a unidimensional one that emphasizes one perspective over others. According to Moran and Riesenberger (1994), improved state education is critical if a country is to remain globally competitive. In the meantime, as graduates of their imperfect educational systems enter the workforce, massive entry-level training is required.

The proposed course will challenge the participants to look at the world using their
own perspectives as well as understanding those of others. It will also encourage them to think and discuss issues in a multidimensional context rather than asserting that there is only one right way to interpret world events. Understanding that different people use different perspectives to arrive at their varying opinions can help explain why the debate of global issues represent a major challenge. Members of individual sociocultural groups generally apply their own perspective, often unconsciously, when dealing with an issue. The understanding of world events, therefore, involves knowing what perspectives are being applied.

The course provides a beginning process for viewing and thinking about the world in a holistic manner; in other words, to arrive at the realization of the interconnectedness of cultural, linguistic, economic, ecological, technological, and political systems. The course is based on the premise that societies and cultures, from isolated villages to entire world regions, are caught up in processes that link them to events which, though geographically distant, are culturally, economically, strategically or ecologically quite near. For example, modern global consumption depends on certain cultural conditions; these concern people’s desires and identities, which are formed and experienced in particular localities and defined by a diversity of existing realities.

In *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*, Robert Chambers (1999) discusses the issue of socioculturally defined realities. He asks how much is the reality we, as “uppers” or powerful and dominant, inhabitants of The North, citizens of a core society, male, white, professional, outsiders, donors and teachers, perceive our own creation and not the realities of “lowers” or those of us who are weak, vulnerable, subordinates, poor, inhabitants of The South, citizens of rural, agricultural societies, female, persons of color, local persons, recipients, and pupils. Paulo Freire describes this transfer of reality by stating “It appears that the act of extension, in whatever sector it takes place, means that those carrying it out need to go to ‘another part of the world’ to ‘normalize it’, according to their way of viewing reality: to make it resemble their world” (1974). The unconscious transfer of realities usually results in standard, canned packages that often misfit diverse sociocultural contexts and unpredictable local conditions. It also results in the failure of the transfer of procedures and practices that require local people to conform to fixed timetables.

As participants in the field of development, we need to learn, understand, accept, consider and respect the realities of those with whom we partner and embark in extension and rural development efforts. We, as educators, need to empower graduates of these programs with the skills, perceptions, and attitudes to enable them to not only consider the realities of others, but to facilitate the expression of these realities and to ensure that these realities are counted. The Richard Maxwell, a scholar on international communication and political economy of media and culture states, “knowledge of local value assessments and how they differ inside and outside national territories is a geo-strategic asset.” (1996).

**Succeeding in a Global Society Course Content**

The proposed course consists of 10 units. Guest speakers, case studies, review of the literature, small-group and individual projects, are part of the course format on the first eight (8) units. These units are as follows:

1. A Changing World of People, Cultures, Places and Resources
2. Sociocultural System
3. Human and Environmental Systems
4. Global Interconnectedness
5. Globalization and Development
6. Role of Technology in the Globalization Process
7. Current Global Trends and Issues
8. Global Mindset and Attitudes - Becoming a Globally Literate Leader

The two (2) remaining units of the course consist on field trips. A visit to the local Ministry of Agriculture or in the US the Department of Agriculture office in Washington, D.C. will provide an opportunity to observe some of the issues stated as a premise for the course. Subsequently, a trip abroad will offer a view and experience of global interconnections. The trips represent practical field experiences, which will provide a viable opportunity to acquire some of the insight sought by the course and enrich the educational event in a relevant context.

Conclusion

Trading in agricultural commodities has become increasingly global. This and the increased awareness of environmental issues; the interdependence of people and resources; and the interconnections among demographic, technological, economic, social, political, and religious issues and worldviews, provide a rationale for cultivating a lifelong global perspective in today’s world. A course that enables the acquisition of a global perspective will allow extension graduates to more readily consider various points of views in addressing issues and applying theories. In sum, the proposed course has the potential to develop viable citizens, competitive professionals and effective leaders in a global world. Our challenge as educators is to enable our future leaders to approach the issues of the world knowing not only what they and others believe, but also why they believe it.

Educational Importance

A course encompassing a global perspective will prepare graduates for an increasingly globalized world. It broadens the students’ understanding of the rest of the world and the interconnections between cultures, species, and the planet. The course allows the participants to acquire the knowledge, skills, and attitudes needed to function effectively in a world that has limited natural resources and is characterized by ethnic diversity, cultural pluralism and increasing interdependence (National Council for the Social Studies, 1982).

The potential impact of this educational experience suggests that a combination of a conventional course format and innovative practical field experiences will enable the participants to analyze issues and trends from a global perspective and to realize the importance of increasing the international dimension of their education. Experiences that cultivate and enhance a holistic perspective on the dynamics of environment, culture, agriculture, and the global economy are an imperative in agricultural education and extension as well as rural development.

In conclusion, the proposed course represents an initiative to address the need to empower future extension professionals not only in developing solutions which are adaptable and applicable to local sociocultural contexts, but in engaging in sound and culturally relevant approaches and partnerships for sustainable extension and rural development.
References


