Bridging Borders: Enhancing Critical Thinking through International Study Tours
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Introduction
The development of critical thinking skills in agricultural audiences has been identified as an especially important need, based on findings which suggest potential deficiencies in terms of our students’ ability to think critically (Rudd, Baker, Hoover & Gregg, 2000).

In agricultural extension education, it is well recognized that undergraduate programs should be preparing society-ready graduates, and that much useful learning can take place outside of the classroom. In most businesses today, employers are looking for skills and competencies that extend much further than just technical subject matter. Gorchels (1999) denotes that cultural adaptability and work ethic are traits that could be hired into an internationally-related position. Moreover, she states that adaptability is likely to increase with exposure to different cultures. In a comparison of US and European business schools, it was found that European schools sought higher levels of internationalization, and they placed more emphasis on international experience (Fugate & Jefferson, 2001).

One typical way of developing international competencies is through the international study tour. But, to what extent does participating in such activities enhance our students’ ability to think critically about the experience and stimulate the application of logic and reasoning skills to the international context?

Purpose
The purpose and objectives of this project were to utilize an existing study abroad program as a means of developing international competencies and furthering critical thinking skills. This project served as a means of developing and measuring these skills and competencies.

Methods
The University of Florida’s College of Agricultural and Life Sciences and the University of Guelph, located near Toronto, have jointly developed a pilot “exchange” program that represented a first for each university.

In 2002, the groundwork was laid for an exchange program between the two universities. The purpose of the exchange was to expose undergraduate and graduate agricultural communication students to agriculture, agricultural communications, and culture in the other’s country. Ten University of Guelph students traveled to Florida for one week over their winter break, and ten UF students traveled to Canada during their spring break. While on their study abroad tours, students met with university administrators and agriculture industry representatives, toured agricultural facilities, and visited cultural locations. Students’ critical thinking and perceived international competencies were assessed both before and after the exchange using both qualitative and quantitative instrumentation.

Educational Importance
This study represents a first attempt to explore the relationship between international study tour participation and development of critical thinking and international competences. As such, this study provides an opportunity to generate evidence as to the value of such programs in developing competency and skill areas that employers find important. In addition, results of this study may identify, as well as suggest, some ways to directly connect students’ international study tour activities and opportunities to think critically about what they are learning and experiencing.