

A Little Here, a Little There: Introducing Some Non-American Examples and Contexts to Our Curricula

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A limited understanding of life outside the United States becomes problematic when students graduate from college and enter a variety of job markets. This gap stems from the nature of college curricula, which often focus on books, examples and other course materials within the American context. With an increasingly integrated job market, it is imperative that university level educators broaden the scope of course content, not necessarily by having students do more work, but rather, by providing opportunities within the syllabi for students to explore ideas from other countries.

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INTRODUCTION

An inevitable consequence of globalization is the rise in number of international students and faculty. As a result, the concept of internationalization has also gained popularity as an area of study and higher education institution priority (Söderlundh, 2018), often times with contrasting trends (Guri-Rosenblit, 2015). It has been argued that the term is becoming another catch phrase and possibly losing its meaning (Knight, 2011). This dynamic multifaceted term has two key components; faculty and students, as discussed by Amblee (Amblee, 2018). Faculty contributions generally occur through collaborations with other institutions. Students, on the other hand, become key stakeholders when they study abroad as international students. Underlying assumptions including the role of international students in internationalizing a campus are not uncommon (Knight, 2011).

No argument for or against the scope of internationalization is made in this work. Rather, an example is provided to address the rather monotonic nature of the curricula and context of higher education in many American universities. This is in response to a personal observation made by an international student, whose experience is well represented in an article addressing the experience of foreign students abroad (Knight, 2011). This idea was recently presented by the primary author at the 2020 biannual Internationalizing the Curriculum and Campus Conference, which showcased current programs, research, and initiatives to internationalize the curriculum and campus at the University of Minnesota.

SIMPLE BUT EFFECTIVE

People are inherently apprehensive towards change. With this in mind, the two examples presented here to iterate the point being made were designed to illustrate how even the smallest modification to *the way we have always done it* can open doors to interesting discussions.

This idea was tested in two courses: Introduction to Microbiology and Food Microbiology offered at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Four normal 50min class slots (two for each course), were requested from the professor teaching both courses. Because the syllabus for each course was designed to have two open slots to allow students the opportunity to try new ideas, there was no disruption to the normal course progress.

Example 1: A Consideration for Food Safety in Developing Nations

In this example, students were encouraged to discuss what they knew about developing countries, and the challenges that might be encountered, from a food microbiology perspective. They also weighed in on the implications of poverty, famine and drought, in relation to the consumer choices in seemingly unsafe local markets. Some prompt questions were provided to guide the discussion, as follows:

1. How does knowing more about a country help in thinking about and proposing solutions to food safety risks?
2. What roles might cultural views and acceptance of food play in adapting new safer food handling techniques?
3. Is it reasonable to talk about food safety in a situation where people lack the necessary infrastructure, e.g. refrigeration (often due to lack of electricity)?
4. In what ways does the size and type of food business influence food safety challenges?

The goal was obviously not for students to come up with concrete solutions, but rather to think about situations that are otherwise abstract to their daily conversations and encounters. For instance, the market shown in **Figure 1** compounds food safety concerns and any ready-made answers fail here. It is not enough to know the microbiological risks of having fruits (which are ready to eat foods) on the ground, exposed to animal waste. The students must then determine how to communicate these risks to an audience that would most likely not be familiar with microbiology terms such as zoonotic diseases, spread from animals to people.

In an environment such as the one proposed here, appreciating the socio-cultural and economic complexities allows for the proposal of sensitive, yet effective ideas to address a problem. With little financial investment, the community presented below can come together, build simple market stales, a water tank and a pit latrine. In doing so, the food would be off the ground and the sellers can safely handle produce. However, it would be fundamental for the ‘foreigner’ proposing these solutions to have a full understanding of this community, the challenges they face, and their general view of food safety. Assuming that they don’t know anything, and the experts come in with ready-made solutions could backfire.

Discussions around these kinds of ideas push students out of their comfort zones. They start to consider how difficult life is for some people around the world, and develop an appreciation for the advantages of having a well-organized, regulated food system. Students also realize how much bigger the world is, and consider that a good portion of the food consumed in America is imported from countries where food producers face these same hurdles.

FIGURE 1
A LOCAL FOOD MARKET, SHOWING SEVERAL FOOD SAFETY CONCERNS



Photo credited to: Angela Sevin from SF Bay Area, US - roadside market, CC BY 2.0,
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=3766352>

Example 2: Changes to the Gut Microbiome When We Change Locations

Often times, students struggle to determine the relevance of information provided in the classroom when the semester ends. To tap into this impatience, the second discussion was tailored towards helping them see an example where there is a clear connection.

In this case, a short assignment was given. Simply, they needed to read the abstract of a paper focusing on the human gut microbiome and the changes that occur when we move from one country to another (Vangay et al., 2018). As in the previous discussion, prompts were provided:

1. What is the gut microbiome and why should we care?
2. How often do you think about your gut microbiome when you choose food items?
3. What types of foods are being marketed as healthy for the gut microbiome?
4. How does knowing more about the gut microbiome help you live a healthier life?

5. Have you ever developed discomfort after a meal in another country, and did you think about your gut microbiome response, rather than a foodborne illness?

Students shared their experiences with diet, as they travel across and outside the country. The role played by the gut microbiome in these situations were considered, including the potentially negative health implications of an unbalanced microbiome. Specifically, we addressed the risk associated with monoculture of bacteria, and the concept of fecal transplants to help people whose microbiome have been destabilized primarily by taking antibiotics. Students also considered their own gut health, and the choices they make about food. Most students were surprised about how much research has been done, and the relationship between food, individual microbiome profiles and health.

OBSERVATIONS

The critical requirement during the sessions was an honest engaged discussion and a focused consideration for these very real situations. At the end of the discussion, a summary was made of the key points learned and students were asked to share their impression of the experiences. There was no need for a formal evaluation, because this was not in any way meant to add more to the already busy student schedules. As such, the five primary observations made by the teaching assistant about all four of these experiences were:

1. The students were surprised to have a graduate student (teaching assistant) teach a formal class, and address ideas that were not part of the normal curriculum.
2. The first few minutes of the discussions were awkward, but as more comments were made, the conversations became more fluid and un-aided.
3. Some students were honest about their misconceptions of Africa, her People and the general living conditions.
4. There was a resounding appreciation for the opportunity to relate the textbook ideas to experiences and challenges faced by millions of people around the world.
5. The discussions highlighted potential career opportunities for students interested in developing countries and microbiome research.

CONCLUSION

Any university that educates students from all over the world should seek to broaden the scope of content covered. A good example is by allowing students to evaluate how stereotypes affect problem solving. This exposure to a wider range of viewpoints allows them to relate different aspects of education, and life after graduation. Taking the time to understand the realities in different parts of the world allows students to contextualize ideas, problems and possible solutions, which if effectively done, leads to buy in from the communities we seek to serve.

This is by no means a challenge of dogma, but rather of the status quo, which in some ways goes against the intended goal of education. I argue that university education should at the very least prepare students to face a broader set of encounters, which in our current world often fall within interdisciplinary multicultural spaces. As such, the ability to quickly understand cross-cultural perspectives, limitations and opportunities provides for a richer experience after graduation. Whereas any well trained student accrues valuable technical skills, success in today's world demands a reasonable awareness of individual shortcomings especially when dealing with foreign cultures in whatever capacity.

It is my hope that sharing this very simple, yet effective variation to the normal course schedule allows college educators to realize that introducing the world to students in the classroom does not require much effort. There is no need to curve out much time, or change the syllabus significantly to get students thinking about different scenarios in the global context, especially when the variables are unknown. As

mentioned in the title, if every educator added just “a little” out-of-America to the discussion, students would develop a much broader understanding of the world in their respective disciplines over their college education timeline.

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