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Field Report

No syllabus, no problem: Let's co-create a world of food, agriculture, and society

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Abstract

The intimate relation people have with food provides unique opportunities for teaching. In this field report, I will describe and reflect upon the method of student-centred learning I use in a first-year university course entitled Food, Agriculture & Society. The aim of the course is to provide students with a broad understanding of how food and agriculture have shaped society and can contribute to a more sustainable future. Consistent with food pedagogy, a premise of the course design is that the intimate relation students have with the food they eat reflects their personal values and responsibility for their choices. An innovative element of my approach is that I co-create the syllabus. The course starts by writing the word "Food" on the blackboard. I then facilitate a multi-step process with students to co-create the syllabus. For most of the course, students lead the preparation and delivery of lectures on their selected topics. In this report, after describing the course design, I reflect upon my approach in relation to the tenets of food pedagogy, as well as discuss student feedback and my experience of teaching the course.

Keywords: Food pedagogy; food; agriculture; society

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Introduction

To open the first year NREM 110 Food, Agriculture & Society, I explain to students that this course may be different from other courses, and that I don't have a full syllabus, required text, or set of readings.[1] But I do have one word to get things started. I then write "Food" on the blackboard. And the course begins.

In this field report, I reflect on my approach to and experience of teaching this course at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC). The content centres on interrelations among food, agriculture, and society. Students learn not only about food and agriculture, they also learn how agriculture and food shape society, thereby gaining insights about the structure and dynamics of the world we live in. By reflecting on their own food choices, students learn about themselves.

My approach to this course has several aspects that I believe are innovative. Importantly for this special issue of the journal, this innovative approach reflects a unique power of food pedagogy—that "Not only is food an object of learning, but it is also a vehicle for learning" (Flowers & Swan, 2012, p. 422). One aspect that makes my approach unique is that I start the course with a single word, "Food," as noted above. This word also begins a novel process to co-create the syllabus with the students. After identifying the topics to be covered in the course, students prepare and deliver most of the course lectures.

In this report, I start with a brief description of the institutional setting before describing the course, including aims and objectives, lecture content, assignments, and forms of student engagement. I provide specific details about the process of co-creating the course syllabus. After describing how I teach the course, I reflect upon student responses to the teaching method and my experience of using this approach. Given that I developed this course before the foundational articles on food pedagogy were published (Flowers & Swan, 2012; Sumner, 2013), I will discuss the extent to which my approach is consistent with the aims and objectives of food pedagogy.[2]

Institutional setting

UNBC is small, with about 3,500 students. The University does not have a food or agriculture program and Food, Agriculture & Society is the only course offered with a primary focus on food and/or agriculture. The first-year course has no prerequisites and is open to all students at

[1] My institution has not raised any concerns about this approach. However, some institutions require instructors to finalize their syllabus at least a week before the start of classes. In such cases, I advise instructors to meet with their institution to discuss how such an approach, if permitted, can be accommodated within existing policies.
[2] This body of literature also includes food literacy.

the university. One of the benefits of a small university is that students are more likely to look at courses offered by all programs at the university.

I have been using the approach described in this report for more than ten years. This approach was developed initially for a second-year environmental planning course that I taught from 2009 to 2014. In that course, I used food as a lens to explore relations between environment and society. Thus, food shifted from being a teaching tool to being both a tool and the explicit subject of study in Food, Agriculture & Society. The course is scheduled as a weekly, three-hour class offered in the evening.

Aims and goals of course

In the syllabus (Connell, 2020), I describe the course this way:

> The food we eat reflects the values and choices of the societies we live in and of the families and friends we grow up with. Agriculture and food are also directly connected to the natural resources we consume and the state of the environment. Therefore, through this course, students examine a range of choices, values, and uses associated with global and local food systems from different perspectives, including social, economic, environmental, health, and political. The aim is to provide students with a broad understanding of how food and agriculture shape society and can contribute to a more sustainable future.

Consistent with a values-based approach (Galt, Clark, & Parr, 2012), a goal of the course is to enable students to understand their values, choices, and place among the relations between food, agriculture, and society. Based on these aims and goals, the course covers a wide range of content, as described next.

Course content

In the following description of the content of the course, I organise the discussion in three parts. First, I describe the process I use to co-create the syllabus. Given unique aspects of this process and the centrality of food as a catalyst, I cover this first part of the course in some detail. I then discuss lectures that I deliver in order to position food and agriculture within a societal context, and to stimulate student interest in the course content. In the third part, I focus on additional topics covered in the course, including topics that students contributed to the syllabus over the years.

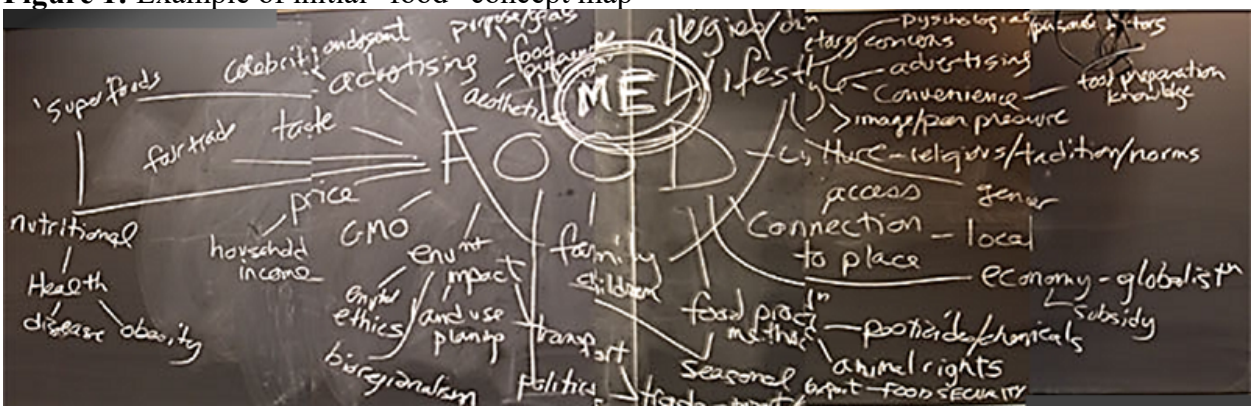
Co-creating the syllabus

Week one (first class)

After writing the word "Food" on the blackboard,[3] I invite the students to share whatever topic comes to mind when they think of food. I add their ideas to the blackboard to generate a concept map. I try to fill the blackboard as much as possible and get each student to contribute something, but full participation is not critical at this stage. I then give students a moment to examine and reflect on the outcome, which looks messy (see Figure 1). The effect of the exercise is twofold. First, students get a sense that almost anything can be connected to food in some way. Second, each student gets a sense that they have something to contribute to the topic, and that they come to the class as experts in their food choices.

I highlight the purpose of the course by returning to the blackboard and writing "Me" in the tangle of words. I then introduce the aim and goals of the course by emphasising that, in the midst of all that is related to food, each student makes choices, that each choice has a ripple effect beyond what we captured on the backboard, and that the aim of the course is for students to examine food choices, and how their personal choices shape the agri-food system and the world we live in.

Figure 1: Example of initial "food" concept map



We are now about thirty to forty-five minutes into the class and students have connected in some way to the purpose of the course. After completing the "Food" concept map as a class, I divide students into groups of three or four. Each group gets a sheet of brown craft paper (about one square metre) and markers. They are asked to do the same exercise: write "Food" on the paper, share their ideas, and explore these ideas in more detail.

[3] This approach also works with synchronous on-line learning using a virtual blackboard.

I move from group to group, spend a few minutes with each one to assess how well they are doing, see what they are writing, contribute to their discussions, and encourage discussion by each student as needed. I usually do two or three rounds. Each group then presents their ideas to the whole class.

The effect of this second step of the syllabus-creation process is to provide space for small group discussions in which all students, especially students who are less comfortable speaking in front of the whole class, have a more private space to share ideas. The exercise reinforces the sense that each student has something to contribute to the course. Collectively, the ideas shared by all groups highlight a breadth of topics as well as areas of shared interest. After this step, I close the discussions with the following quotation:

> Food shapes and reflects all levels of the human experience. It demarcates cultures, borders, nations, and generations, while its significance cuts across all of these categories. Food's smells and tastes account for some of our most sensuous, intimate, and salient memories. On a larger scale, its production brings both order and disorder to local, regional, and national landscapes and controls economies throughout the world. A lack of access to food can cause death, destruction, migration, disease, and even war, reminding us how ecological realities and power relations complicate any simplistic narrative of warm and cherished memories that many of us from relatively privileged societies and backgrounds might associate with the rituals and pleasures of eating. Food shapes families, establishes civilizations, creates relationships, and binds the peoples of the world to one another through trade. Could anything be more important than food? (Chester & Mink, 2009, p. 309).

After sharing this quotation, I describe the purpose and scope of the course, including the assignments. Most importantly, I inform the students that together we will complete the syllabus, and that they will deliver many of the course lectures. This approach becomes clearer to students when I show them the partially completed syllabus. Because the first group to deliver a lecture will need a few weeks to prepare, I deliver the first three lectures (weeks three to five). Thus, to start the course, there are up to six weeks of lectures to be defined, developed, and delivered by students.

Between the first and second classes, I compile all of the ideas captured on the blackboard and brown papers. I group the ideas under similar topics to the extent possible. All of the ideas, grouped by topic, are captured on a single page, printed, and distributed to students at the start of the second class.

Week two

The second class begins by students reviewing the list. Students are instructed to review the list on their own and identify about ten ideas that are of interest to them.

Then, I ask each student to identify their top three choices from among their selected items. Students then share their first choices with the class as I record their responses. When this reporting and recording process is complete, we have a good sense of who is interested in what topics and arrange students with shared interests into groups. Knowing there are up to six weeks of lectures to fill, we aim for five to seven groups now organised by shared interests. We consider second- and third-ranked choices as needed. There is some movement of students between topics as they see what others are selecting and have an opportunity to reconsider their own choices.

The next step is for each of these new groups to create another concept map, starting again with "Food" at the centre of the paper. This time they focus their discussions on their shared interests. Most often, there is sufficient overlap within the smaller groups that their interests align reasonably well. All of the groups return to the classroom to report on their theme. The outcome is a list of potential lecture topics that students identified themselves and, at this point, have already spent about two hours discussing. Throughout each step of the process, students have an opportunity to confirm their interest in a topic or switch topics as we work to finalise groups. Ideally, at this point, students are gaining a sense of ownership over the content of the course and excitement about what lies ahead.

The next step is to draft the syllabus. First, I list all of the group topics on the blackboard, in no particular order. Each group is asked to review all the topics and consider an appropriate order of lectures. I encourage them to think of the whole course as a story, such that the order of the lectures builds from one to the next. Each group then reports back to the whole class and the order of topics is recorded in a table on the blackboard. The class reviews all the group responses and an open discussion ensues about similarities and differences, the rationale for the order proposed by each group, and suggestions for a final order. We also discuss appropriate names for each lecture theme, which also includes suggestions for splitting or combining topics. Sometimes we agree on a final order; more often, we don't reach consensus on everything, so I make the final decision before the next class.

The outcome: a co-created syllabus.

Instructor lectures: The societal context

With a completed syllabus, students have a better understanding of the scope of the course. Over the next three lectures (weeks three to five), my aim is to situate questions and issues related to food and agriculture within a broad societal context.

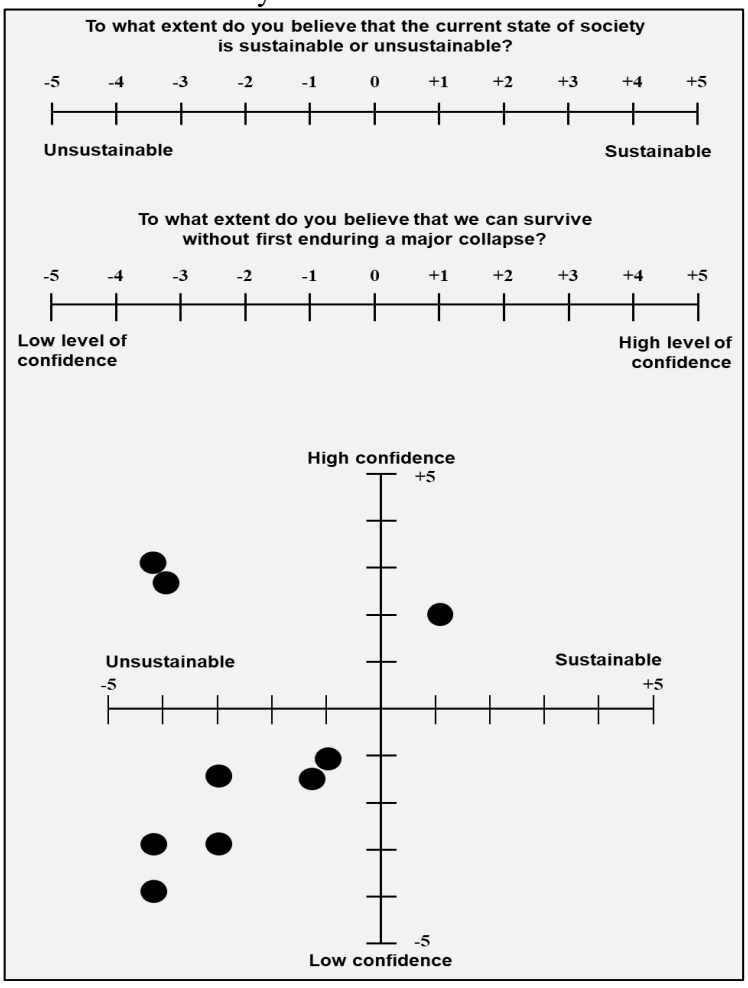
In week three, for example, I start the class with a "sustainability" exercise (see Box 1). I ask students two questions:

- To what extent do you believe that the current state of society is sustainable or unsustainable?

- To what extent do you believe that we can survive without first enduring a major collapse?

I then plot their answers on a chart that forms four quadrants. The upper right quadrant represents the most optimistic outlook; the lower left is the most pessimistic, with a view that society is in an unsustainable state with low confidence that society will avoid collapse. When I do this exercise, the majority of students tend to cluster in the most pessimistic quadrant (as illustrated in Box 1). However, the aim is not to label students but to generate discussion, which leads to insights about one's perspective in relation to time (near to long term), scale (local to global), and scope (personal to societal). Students tend to have different answers to the two questions depending on which perspective they adopt. I then pose a question for students to consider throughout the course: What is the role of the agri-food system in this context, as a contributing problem and as a potential solution? I do this exercise again at the end of the semester as a means for students to consider how their outlook might have changed.

Box 1: Sustainability exercise



After the sustainability exercise, the remaining class time is used to watch *Surviving Progress* (Louis et al., 2011), a film inspired by Ronald Wright's book *A Short History of Progress* (Wright, 2004). These materials are excellent resources to get students thinking about society's reliance on progress as a moral beacon. Among Wright's many insights, I draw upon two elements to help set food and agriculture within a societal context. The first is Wright's use of Gaugin's painting to introduce three questions: Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? (2004) I also draw upon Wright's concept of "progress trap," which is "when a particular technology of progress (e.g., weapons) reaches an impasse by threatening to destroy the planet on which it is developed" (2004, pp. 5-6). Whereas Wright focusses on civilisation as a "great experiment," I focus on Wright's description of the change from hunting to farming as the first progress trap (2004). Most students (nearly all) are not aware of the relation between agriculture and the history of civilisation.[4] Once introduced, this concept of progress trap comes up throughout the course. For example, the question of whether the agri-food system is caught in a progress trap relates well to the persistent use of technology to "improve" agriculture.

In *Hungry City*,[5] Steel provides a compelling account of the relation between agriculture, food, and the physical spaces in which we live, which is the subject of another lecture (2008). This perspective reveals important insights about how society is shaped physically by the food we produce and consume. Steel's (2008) concept of "sitopia" combines *situs* and *topos* to mean "food place."

I use Steel's (2008) work to get students to think about their ideal, sustainable society. For this, I review a history of utopian ideas, from Thomas More (1516/1965) to today's ecovillages and eco-cities. Like Steel (2008), I emphasise the place of agriculture in each of these utopian visions that cross five centuries of societal development. I then lead students through an exercise to imagine their utopia. On their own, they contemplate their utopia using maps, images, and words with consideration for scale, physical features, size of population, economic systems (including the extent of trade), political systems, equity, and level of food self-sufficiency. For the latter, students consider where food is grown (how far away), what kind of food is grown, what foods do people eat (e.g., standard North American diet, vegetarian, vegan, hunting and gathering), supply of food, and how to bring in and distribute food. After students share aspects of their vision with the class, they are divided into groups based on the population of their utopia. Within their groups, students discuss what their shared vision of utopia might be.

[4] The term "civilisation" itself often generates discussion regarding its association with a Western view of society and its history of colonialism. I use the term here, and in class, following Wright's definition of civilization as one kind of culture with the following characteristics: large, permanent settlements; based on the domestication of plants, animals, and human beings; vary in their make-up but typically have towns, cities, governments, social classes, and specialized professions (2004, pp. 32-33).

[5] Steel released a new book in 2020, *Sitopia: How food can save the world.* I expect to incorporate this text into the next offering of this course.

One challenging aspect of this exercise is for students to reconcile the land and labour needed for their desired level of food self-sufficiency with expectations about quality of life, interest in technology, and reliance on external trade. Their vision of utopia is something they reflect upon during the rest of the semester.

I end this class with a quotation from Steel, "Once you start seeing the world through food, everything changes. Seemingly unconnected things turn out to be closely linked, apparently confusing relationships spring into relief. Food, as we know, is one of the greatest forces shaping the world" (2008, p. 308).

Range of other topics covered

The range of topics covered in the rest of the course is driven by the personal interests of students. The following list includes themes introduced by students over the years of using this approach:

- Food production
- Food security
- Food sovereignty and food justice
- Food waste
- Fast food
- Environmental impacts of agriculture
- Culture of food and food cultures
- Indigenous food systems
- Values and ethics
- Local versus global
- Consumerism
- Land use
- Agri-food in developing areas of the world
- The role of regulations in agriculture and food and society
- Small-scale farming
- International trade
- Technology and agriculture (including genetic modification)
- Farmland protection
- Health, nutrition, and diet
- Water
- Food processing

These topics have been covered from multiple perspectives. For example, genetic modification of food has been presented as a positive and negative technological contribution. Overall, most students adopt a critical perspective that aligns with local food systems and agri-food systems that advance fair trade, food security, and social justice.

In addition to the topics and materials discussed already, there are other materials that students do not always address, that I try to work into the syllabus. For example, at some point in the course (the earlier the better), I incorporate a discussion about the history of civilisation and the place of food and agriculture within it. Other topics include farmland protection, power and concentration in the agri-food industry, and food hubs. Also, each year towards the end of the semester, I hold a "farmers forum" during class time. For this activity, I invite about six farmers to come to class to talk with the students. To open the discussion, I ask each farmer to express their view of the current state of the agri-food system and of the prospects for future farmers in the region and beyond. Thereafter, the discussion flows freely with students asking questions and farmers responding to each other.

The final class of the semester is a time to reflect on the course as a whole, to do the sustainability exercise again, to return to their personal visions of utopia, and to discuss what they learned and will take away from the course.

Assignments

Students complete different types of assignments throughout the course, which enables them to express themselves in different ways. For example, personal reflection papers (30 percent of course grade) are due after most lectures (usually about eight), and within twenty-four hours of the lecture. Their task is to examine what they feel and think about contemporary issues and opportunities raised during the lecture. A term paper (25 percent of course grade) is a larger, more comprehensive version of the personal reflections that is due at the end of the course. Students are instructed to use a personal perspective to express their values and choices, and about the positive and negative effects of their choices on society and on the environment. Students must also demonstrate knowledge of a range of concepts and issues relevant to their understanding of society-food-agriculture relations. In this way, the term paper addresses the main focus of the course.

In the remainder of this section, I will focus on the student contributions to the course, including student-designed and delivered lectures.

Contributions

The course is designed to engage students and relies on student contributions to both in-class discussions (participation and attendance) and lectures. Contributions to lectures can take several forms, including, but not limited to:

- participating in group discussions about what materials will be included, how the material will be delivered, and helping deliver the lecture;
- researching materials in support of the lecture;

- and presenting materials through, for example, formal lecture, facilitating discussion, or leading an exercise.

A combination of all or parts of the above is acceptable. The full range of possible contributions are worth 20 percent of the course grade.

The grading scheme aims to accommodate different skills and interests of students. Not all students are comfortable speaking in public, while other students are delighted to be in front of the class. This situation is heightened because this assignment is not a fifteen minute "talking head" presentation; it is a lecture that can last over two hours—in a first-year course. Therefore, as much as possible, I try to reduce the level of anxiety among students while encouraging all students to embrace the opportunity. Most importantly, students are not graded on their ability to deliver the lecture. If a student is terrified of speaking in class, I still encourage them to try, because it will not affect their grade. The grading scheme enables students to contribute to the lecture in other ways. Thus far, every student has participated, to varying extents, in delivering lectures.

The primary aim of the lecture is to engage the class in discussions about the topic while also providing the class with sufficient information in order for them to complete the reflection assignment. In other words, the students leading the lecture are instructed to not focus on content as if their fellow students were to be tested on the materials; rather, they are to share information and their own views that, ideally, expose their fellow students to new ideas and different perspectives about food and agriculture and their relation to society.

There is another important aspect of the lecture: students do not develop the lecture on their own; I participate in the process. Typically, the development of the lecture follows a three-step process, as laid out in instructions to students on "how to prepare a lecture": (1) brainstorm to develop the topic and lecture ideas; (2) refine ideas and organise the lecture; (3) final preparations. These instructions also describe "key elements of a successful lecture." Each group is encouraged to meet with me at each step. Working directly with students to develop the lectures has three important benefits. First, being involved provides a way for me to support the students to develop and deliver a good lecture. Second, the meetings become informal tutorials to develop core competencies of communication that help students to acquire appropriate information, transform ideas, and make connections with others. The intended benefit is that students learn how to organise and focus their ideas into a format that is meaningful to their peers. Third, meeting with the groups is an important means for me to evaluate individual contributions to the process.

A research paper (20 percent of course grade) is tied directly to the student lecture topics and is essential to a good lecture. As such, the research paper is due one week prior to the scheduled date of the group's lecture. While the lecture is delivered as a group, the research paper is completed individually. The aims of the paper are for students to demonstrate an ability to think critically about their selected topic and to demonstrate their knowledge of relevant concepts, issues, and/or opportunities.

As a complement to the research paper, students must also submit an annotated bibliography (5 percent of course grade), which is posted on the course website as a resource for their fellow students.

Pedagogy

As noted above, my specific approach to teaching Food, Agriculture & Society was not directed by an explicit understanding of food pedagogy, given that the primary literature emerged after I developed my approach. With this context, in this section I will reflect upon the extent to which my approach is consistent with the tenets of food pedagogy.

The literature points to many ways to think about food pedagogy, the subject matter alone seems limitless. Even the articles included in the special issue of *Australian Journal of Adult Learning* (Flowers & Swan, 2012) and the edited book, *Food Pedagogies*, by Flowers and Swan (2015) cover only a partial range. Broadly, food pedagogy can cover social, political, economic, ecological, agricultural, cultural, class, gender, race, health, identity, labour, morality, and more topics. Given this wide range of possibilities, focusing on food offers advantages that helps make my course design effective. Starting with a word like sustainability, environment, health, community, or water can produce a great concept map, but none, I would argue, has an equivalent combined quality of intimacy and practicality as food, while also connecting personal choices to so many aspects of society and the environment. Herein lies the power of food as a teaching tool. As Sumner states, "Food catalyzes the potential for experiential learning" (2013, p. 47). By starting the course with "Food," the course immediately has access to the full potential of food as a catalyst for learning. It is my task to make the most of the opportunity. As Gerstein states, "It is the teacher's responsibility to *structure and organize a series of experiences* which positively influence each individual's potential future experiences" (2012; original emphasis). I believe that the design of Food, Agriculture & Society fulfills this responsibility. At the same time, the process of co-creating a syllabus with students can be applied to any topic. I suggest that it is not the topic as it is the aims of the course that enables (constrains) an instructor to use this approach. In this sense, food pedagogy is not essential for co-creating syllabi.

As Flowers and Swan (2012) state, teaching about food is not only about the subject matter, but also a vehicle that facilitates the learning process. This aspect of food pedagogy is evident in the literature and reflected in the definition of food literacy by Yamashita and Robinson (see also Classens & Sytsma, 2020), who identify the following four components: "(1) examine one's own values with respect to food systems; (2) grapple with multiple values and perspectives that underlie food systems; (3) understand the larger sociopolitical contexts and factors that shape food systems; and (4) take action toward social justice in food systems and sustainability more broadly" (2016, p. 273).

In relation to Yamashita and Robinson's (2016) definition, I believe my approach resonates strongly with their first three components. The aims and goals of my approach emphasise the values and choices at both the societal and personal levels. The course also emphasises a broad understanding of how food and agriculture shape society, and vice versa. The premise of my approach to teaching Food, Agriculture & Society is that the intimate relationship students have with the food they eat reflects their personal values and responsibility for their choices. This intimate relationship provides unique opportunities for students to gain a broad understanding of how personal choices shape society and can contribute to a more sustainable future. In particular, the intimate connections students have with food fosters learning by bridging critical thinking with personal and social awareness and responsibility, enabling them to consider what a socially just and ecologically rational food system might be.

Although my approach embraces a normative approach to food pedagogy (Greenstein et al., 2015), the course does not include the fourth component of Yamashita and Robinson's (2016) definition, which refers to taking action toward social justice, as an explicit goal. The normative dimension of my approach centres on the aim to consider a more sustainable future and the role of food and agriculture as part of the solution. However, this normative dimension falls short of a *critical* approach to food pedagogy. Critical food pedagogy has an explicit focus on action, change, and social justice. For Sumner, the goal of their graduate course centred on transformation, empowerment, and action informed by reflection "that addresses power and injustice" (2013, p. 45). Similarly, as a component of their definition of critical food pedagogy, Classens and Sytsma include "empowering them to incite socioecological change within the food system" (2020, p. 10). This emphasis on a critical food pedagogy is evident elsewhere in the literature (Flowers & Swan, 2015; Harris & Barter, 2015; Jones, 2019; Lewis & O'Neil, 2019; Ma Rhea, 2018; Swan & Flowers, 2015; Truman et al., 2017; Walter, 2012). Although my course design does not adopt an explicit critical approach, I am pleased and very supportive when students challenge the foundations of the dominant global food system, identify issues of power and injustice, and feel empowered to make change.

In the absence of an explicit critical food pedagogy, my normative approach relies on the open-ended question about whether the dominant agri-food system is, in and of itself, a progress trap. This question helps to open a door to reflection without presenting specific criteria to evaluate agri-food systems. As an element of experiential learning, as much as possible, I leave it to students to consider the question in their own ways, to identify issues on their own terms, and to consider how they might respond. In this context, when the question of a progress trap is complemented by the exercise of articulating a personal vision of utopia—and where agriculture and food fit within and shape their vision—students must begin a process of reconciling critique with solutions, and vision with practicality.

Although students in the same class have expressed opposing views on the same topic (e.g., genetic modification), the opposing views have been treated respectfully. The most common point of debate has centered on the consumption of meat.

Many students who have taken the course are vegetarian or vegan, encompassing a range of ethical, health, and environmental motivations. Many other students are avid hunters. The discussion about this and other opposing views have been respectful. The recent attention given to regenerative agriculture as not only an agricultural practice but also as a response to climate change, has served to open avenues for discussion that help to bridge these opposing views.

Although my approach can embrace a critical food pedagogy more explicitly, I do not feel it is necessary for the context in which I teach. By context, I mean that this is a first-year course (although not all students are in their first year) with students from across campus with many perspectives. As well, a premise of my food pedagogy is that students are experts in their own food choices. This premise is the starting point for co-creating the syllabus and providing space for students to explore their own interests. Adopting an explicitly critical approach to studying relations among food, agriculture, and society may compromise the course design by favouring this perspective when not all students might agree that the agri-food system needs to change. This concern is shared by Yamashita and Robinson (2016), who note that critical food pedagogy often relies on a dualism, through which alternative agriculture opposes conventional agriculture. The potential pitfalls are "oversimplified views about which food systems (and therefore what types of food-related behaviors) are sustainable and unsustainable" (Yamashita & Robinson, 2016, p. 273). On the other hand, giving students space to explore their interests also means that I give up some control over the content of the course and, to some degree, also lose some control of the power of food as a vehicle for learning.

Student responses to the course

To maintain confidentiality, I will not use direct quotations from students in their feedback of the course. A mix of students have taken the course, with the total number of students per semester ranging from nine to thirty-one. The environmental studies version of the course was required for some degrees and an elective for others, thus attracting most students from environmental programs. The majority of these students registered for the course to satisfy degree requirements, with some also having specific interests in food systems, including participation in on-campus food-related activities. For the past two years, Food, Agriculture & Society was not listed as either required or an elective for any degree; it was completely optional. Students take the course out of interest or given the lack of prerequisites and scheduling as an evening course, out of convenience. With this change in the course, I have noticed two things. Over the past two years, a higher proportion of students had a specific interest in agriculture and food and represented a wider range of programs, including anthropology, commerce, engineering, English, geography, health, psychology, and other programs. As this new course becomes established, I expect that more students who have specific interests in agri-food studies will register.

Through formal course evaluations, students have expressed some consistent themes. On the positive side, the most consistent comment is that students highly value the opportunity to pursue topics of personal interest to them and of which they can take ownership. Many students who, prior to the course, had not thought about much about the food they ate, expressed appreciation for the opportunity to gain insights not only about food but also about how food shapes society. These insights were also evident in course assignments, especially the term paper. Students frequently demonstrated they were more aware of the consequences of their choices, from multiple perspectives. For example, students wrote about no longer feeling like the same person when they go grocery shopping, and about the increased time it takes them to shop for food because they spend more time reading labels. The farmers forum is often highlighted as a favourite class of the semester.

The most common concern expressed by students is that I did not deliver enough content throughout the course, and that I should deliver more of the lecture materials. This concern has been expressed consistently since the start of using this approach. Although I do not know the specific reasons for their concern, I presume that these students feel they are not getting enough content from the student lectures. It could also be that students expect instructors to deliver the lectures. Another concern, which seems related to a desire for more instructor-led lectures, is that some students stated they did not learn much more than they already knew about food and agriculture. In response to both of these concerns, I now deliver more content throughout the course with a specific effort to cover current issues and new innovations, some of which are noted above. In one semester I taught the course, a few students expressed concern about the course material not being relevant to their degrees, although I am not certain why.

My reflections on the course

My first time using this course design, it was easy to get excited about trying something new, but I was anxious about the risks involved and had doubts that the approach would be successful. The course was about environment and society, not about food; students had no idea that I would be using food as a vehicle for learning. Not only might they not like studying food, they may not like delivering lectures themselves or not having the instructor deliver lectures. Another major source of doubt arose from me not knowing what quality of lectures students would—or could—deliver. As I told my program chair, I knew it was risky to adopt the approach for teaching the course but, as I also explained, my application for promotion to Associate Professor was already under review. If the course design failed, at least it would not affect my current application.

I am pleased to say that, overall, my first experience was very positive. I was inspired by the written comments students provided about how much they valued having more control over what they learned in the classroom and about how much they learned of themselves and society through the lens of food. I was convinced that, for many students in the first class, the intended

outcomes of food pedagogy had been achieved. Each year thereafter, I remain convinced that food pedagogy works. However, there have been challenges and compromises along the way.

The most difficult experience I had was with a class of thirty-one students, which was the most students I have taught using this approach. From this experience, I learned that this number of students was problematic for the course design. Given the limited number of lectures in a semester, having thirty-one students in the course required more student-led lectures, which reduced the content that I delivered, and required larger student groups for each lecture. Although the course design was able to accommodate thirty-one students, the experience taught me that the disadvantages outweighed potential benefits. It was also during this semester that some students expressed concern that the course did not contribute to their degree, although I am not certain this concern was related to the class size. A more suitable maximum class size is about twenty-five students, although this lower enrolment may not be feasible in some institutions. I suggest a range between fifteen and twenty-five students works best for the approach described in this report.

Although the suite of assignments has remained consistent, modifications have been required. Regarding the quality of the student-led lectures, I found that the quality improves in proportion with the amount of time I spend with the student group. However, getting students to meet with me has been a challenge and the process is demanding. Consequently, over the years, I have relaxed requirements to meet with me and have accepted a greater range of lecture quality. I suspect that the cohesiveness of a lecture as a whole means more to me than it does to the students in the class.

I relaxed another, related aspect of the lecture development. I used to insist that a student lecture group identify an underlying theme that connects all of their ideas and contributes to a more cohesive lecture. This theme was also used as the basis for the personal reflection assignments. When the theme worked, it worked well. Too many times, however, the theme worked only weakly to bring the lecture topics together, and sometimes was more cumbersome than constructive. The theme worked less well for the reflection assignments. Now, for the lectures, I explore possible themes with the lecture groups only when there is an opportunity; I do not require students to work with a theme. For the assignments, I dropped the requirement for students to focus on the lecture theme. Instead, students reflect on any aspect of the lecture that stood out for them, for whatever reason.

Conclusion

Through this field report, my aim was to share and reflect upon my experience using an innovative approach to teaching a course on Food, Agriculture & Society in a postsecondary institution.

The course design enables students to exert ownership over their learning by incorporating their interests into the learning process and deepening learning through collaborative group work. Starting the course with the word "Food" is exciting, with each co-created syllabus being different. It is also risky, especially when combined with a commitment to letting students develop and deliver most of the lectures, as it gives some control of the course over to students. But this level of student engagement in the learning process is also what makes the experience mutually rewarding. The tenets of food pedagogy are consistent with the course design and, from my perspective, have been central to the success of the course.

Based on my experience with food pedagogy, I firmly believe that food is a powerful catalyst for experiential learning. As Sumner states succinctly, "Food is a necessity of life – people have to eat every day" (2013, p. 42). I also believe, to paraphrase Steel (2008), once you start teaching about the world through food, everything (in the classroom) changes.

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