

Teaching Tips/Notes



Building a Social Learning Community

Learning takes place inside and outside the classroom, most notably in social environments with stakeholders and other members of the local community. We recognize and foster this engagement of students with instructors, with those outside the immediate agroecology group on campus, and with each other through informal events that bring people together to get to know each other better.

Learning Objectives are to 1) promote communication and trust among students and with faculty and stakeholders, especially important in a learning group with people from different countries, native languages, and disciplines, 2) establish a non-hierarchical communication structure among members of the learning community to promote information exchange and trust, and 3) explore personal and cultural interests and promote improved understanding among diverse people through events in a social setting outside traditional classroom and field activities.

Methods that have proven especially effective to build social learning among the diverse students and instructors in the Norway MSc Programme in Agroecology include *potluck dinners* organized by faculty. We have taken advantage of the space and facilities available in the university guest house to sponsor two dinners each term where students prepare food and share with the group in an informal setting on a weekend night early in the semester. The first potluck includes dishes made by students to represent local foods from their countries, often a challenge to find needed ingredients if they come from a very different food culture. The second has been a meal prepared entirely with local ingredients, with “local” defined by the group in a short session in class a couple of days before. We debate whether this should be within the county, the agroecoregion of southern Norway, the country, or some larger foodshed area. Most years the decision is to use only Norwegian ingredients, and this presents some challenges. *Informal group dinners* are organized by teams that work together in the field projects, by students in nearby living areas, or around celebrations of birthdays or other events. These are often held in the student dormitory area, and include friends of the current year agroecology students and from previous groups. *Weekend waffle breakfasts* have been organized for several years by visiting faculty to bring small groups of 4-6 students together with people from the local community, and often five or more of these are held to include all students at least once during the term.

Outcomes we observe are based on informal observations and discussions with students, and not on any formal evaluation process. In general, the social events are a great surprise to many students who have never found this type of activity as a part of the learning environment. Some come from academic cultures where instructors just don't invite students to their homes, and instructors are not invited to student gatherings. Since the dormitories are not integrated into the local community, many students do not make the contacts in the Norwegian community that could enrich their cultural experience, and they spend all their time with fellow students. The potluck dinners and breakfasts help to bridge this chasm between town and gown. There are always graduate students, visiting faculty, and other instructors who participate in the agroecology course who are invited to the dinners, and this further expands the student contacts.

In 2010, a student from Iran arrived an hour late, and informed us that he would be able to eat after sunset. He had prepared Persian food to share with the group. He later wrote in our small guest book, “Today is the first day of Ramadan, and I was just so lonely in my flat because this is the first time in my life that I have been outside my country and so far from family and close friends. I almost did not come to the dinner. But then I came and tonight you are my family.” What an incredible emergent property from the potluck dinner!

The informal dinners in the dormitories are sometimes organized around a celebration, or a group meeting in the evening, or at times for a seminar on a specific topic that people feel needs enrichment and more information from someone within the group. At times they appear to be spontaneous meals or dessert gatherings, sometimes with music or games, but usually just rich conversation. These often attract flat-mates and friends who are not agroecology students, and faculty are sometimes invited, and we find this a way to expand the ideas of holistic learning and importance of community.

The waffle breakfasts introduce students to a food new for many of them, and to people from the community. With a small group around one table, the simple fare of waffles, fruit, juice, coffee and tea appears to go over well, and we are sometimes joined by graduate students who live in the guest house. People from the community are especially popular, since they can answer many questions about Norway and cultural things that students have observed and not been able to ask about. These social events have been highly popular, and our informal evaluation affirms that all of them should be included each year in the agroecology activities.

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