

Ethic of Food: A Student Initiated Course at a Small,
Public Liberal Arts University

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Name Of Course: Ethics of Food – IDSM 320

Catalog Description: Ethics of Food. A discussion-based course that surveys the rich and diverse viewpoints surrounding moral principles in relation to food. Subjects discussed include ecology, economics, agriculture/food technology, theology, and philosophy.

Subjects will be explored starting from the question of "How ought we act?"

During the grant period, the course was designed and taught. The construction of the course was accomplished by both the student initiator and faculty mentor the spring semester prior to the course offering in the Fall of 2009. A course syllabus was created, including a schedule of assignments and readings, a list of goals and objectives, policies, information regarding how grades would be earned, and an explanation of how the course connects to other disciplines and courses offered at Truman State University (TSU).

During the Fall of 2009, the course was instructed by the student initiator under the guidance of the faculty mentor from the Department of Biology and the chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at TSU. Together, they used several teaching techniques to facilitate student learning. While the typical class included class discussion and lecture, variations in pedagogy were used to enhance student enthusiasm. Within a constructivist teaching framework, students defined terms, clarified and analyzed arguments, and summarized conclusions through poetry, drawing, and listing ideas at the chalkboard. These techniques contributed to the distinctive creative classroom atmosphere.

Several students in the course attended a conference “From Commodity to Community: Food Politics and Projects in the Heartland” in Des Moines, Iowa sponsored by the Community Food Security Coalition. After the conference, they shared their experiences with the class. This conference allowed both students and educators that attended to examine real world issues related to food ethics by visiting farms employing various agricultural practices.

Guest speakers included Dr. Peter Goldman (Biology), Dr. Michael Seipel (Agriculture), and Dr. Mark Campbell (Agriculture). These guest speakers, along with a joint-course screening of “Food, Inc.” between IDSM 320 “The Ethics of Food” and Dr. Seipel’s AGSC 415 “Ethical Issues in Sustainable Agriculture,” helped draw connections both academically and professionally between both the Biology and Agricultural Science Departments. Drs. Martin Fregene and Mark Halsey from the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center presented a university-wide talk on “Improving Food Security and Nutrition in Africa with Cassava Biotechnology.” The event was organized by the student initiator and attended by approximately 100 members of the Truman community. The course was completed during the Fall 2009 semester, and grades were reported.

By establishing clear goals regarding student empowerment and learning before the course began, the student initiator felt better able to facilitate discussions. Student responses and discussion between the student initiator and faculty mentor noted these achievements. Members of the course communicated effectively. First, Blackboard was used for the majority of assignment submissions. Students and the student initiator were better able to engage with each other outside the classroom since response papers were made available online. Secondly, the high degree of communication between the student initiator and students contributed a team-like quality to learning particular to SICs. The student initiator and students were able to communicate through multiple avenues including email, social networks, phone, texts, and face-to-face interactions at student events. This degree of access is unique to this course and may be due to the personalities of those attracted to SICs. Finally, the high degree of interaction between the faculty mentor and student initiator improved the course in many ways. Guidance in grading,

interacting with students, and teaching occurred frequently. The student initiator and faculty mentor met in class (twice a week), before or after student initiator office hours (three times a week), and via email (approximately once per week). Also, as a result of the high degree of interaction, the student initiator felt comfortable teaching, taking criticism, and adapting his teaching to the needs of the students.

Difficulties experienced include determining how much guidance to provide students in regard to their service learning component (SLC), how to assess the SLC, and understanding administrative procedures. In IDSM 320, students designed and executed their own SLC projects. Much class time was dedicated to planning this endeavor; however, students had trouble identifying community needs. The SLC coordinator gave a presentation on service learning early in the semester, yet students were still unsure about where they wanted to take their projects. Once SLC proposals were submitted, students continued to have difficulty realizing their goals and struggled with changing their projects as some avenues proved fruitless or unrealistic given their time and lack of a dedicated SLC budget. A possible solution to this would be to show students more examples of previous SLC projects and provide more guidance regarding event planning. Overall, the student initiator had difficulty dividing credit for the SLC into clear categories since the projects were disparate in regards to their goals, student efforts invested, and learning outcomes. Students earned credit based on evaluations by both their peers and the student initiator. To improve assessment of the SLC, the SLC coordinator could work with the student initiator to develop clear evaluation methods. Also, rubrics specific for each project could be made by the student initiator and students together early in the course in order to provide everyone with better articulated goals and

clarity regarding grading. This would allow for better student initiator feedback throughout the semester. Finally, a meeting with all student initiators and faculty mentors involved in SICs would be helpful before the courses transpire to address administrative procedure and to exchange ideas about their classes.

Written reflection and discussion were the primary instruments used to measure and assess participants' experiences. Students were required to reflect within their response papers on their life experiences in the context of their class learning. Also, they reflected on their SLC experience in their SLC assessment paper. Final course evaluations were made available for confidential online submission. However, due to the fact that they were posted the week after classes ended, few students responded. To improve the number of responses, course evaluations should be distributed during class time. Students learned about the complexity of agriculture and food production in the U.S. and related ethical considerations. In addition, they learned about the variety of ways food, and its production, has been valued. By defining food and ethics for themselves, students progressed to more applied questions that addressed issues such as the ethical implications of developing modified organisms for consumption, to patenting organisms and the technology used to produce 'better' food, and labeling food based on its production. Many students noted that they came to new conclusions regarding questions they thought had clear ethical answers. For example, some students who entered the course in full support of a particular ethical program regarding food left with a greater awareness of the reasoning behind multiple ethical considerations.

Both the student initiator and faculty mentor participated in self assessment through discussion. As noted above, the frequent interaction between mentor and initiator allowed

for continued mutual assessment of their experiences throughout the course during both its development and implementation. These interactions were critical to the learning incurred by the initiator. The student initiator learned techniques to make grading more fair and efficient. He also learned how to create rubrics that tried to maximize student creativity while informing students clearly as to how their credit would be earned. He learned that to be an effective teacher, a great deal of planning and dedication is required by both the instructor and the student. Time management was crucial to maintaining an academically successful classroom in that time spent on material had to be limited in order to cover the major topics regarding the ethics of food. The student initiator struggled at the start of the semester with assigning low grades and learned from this experience that such grades are necessary to be fair to all students and to encourage student effort. The experience helped him clarify his own current and previous instructors' expectations of his work. The timing of this experience (during the initiator's final undergraduate semester before entering graduate studies) helped prepare him for future scholarly work outside of TSU.

The faculty mentor became acquainted with additional basic ethical principles, which she anticipates will also be useful in applied ethical concerns in environmental and biological work with students. During the development and planning phase of the course, she read many course and outside materials on food and ethics, and learned additional content by discussions with the student initiator and by attending events and interacting with people involved with related service to their communities. During the course, it was also interesting to note the breadth of majors, initial knowledge, viewpoints, and critical thinking abilities of the student participants in the course. This created a challenge in

determining how to create a comfortable yet challenging learning and sharing environment within the class. Had she expected the level of caring and generosity shared by the students as they developed their service learning projects, she would have found more formal ways early on to help them connect with community resources. She also realized that focused skill development is needed early in the course for 1) the student initiator in fine-tuning planning for individual sessions and for 2) the student participants in conducting service learning projects. Topics might be a) group process, b) event planning skills, and c) securing guest speakers. A big surprise was the students' level of tolerance for differing viewpoints within the class! In general, it was a challenge for the faculty mentor to be sure that suggestions were made to the student initiator and students as a *mentor*, rather than a *supervisor* or even a *teacher*, even though elements of the latter two roles are also required in mentoring.