

Teaching Tips/Notes



Student-Designed Course in Land Ownership Changes

Introduction

Changes in land possession and ownership have been a part of agriculture and food systems ever since humans moved from hunting and gathering to more sedentary life styles and organized communities. Ancient civilizations achieved a degree of scale efficiency in food production that liberated many to become artisans, soldiers, teachers, and administrators who were not needed for direct food growing. Mechanization in the industrial revolution provided efficient alternatives to human labor and further stimulated consolidation of farmland into larger holdings supported largely by fossil fuel based inputs of fertilizer and pesticides. Colonial powers exploited the natural resources and food production capacity of other lands to feed their own people and factories. But today there are sweeping changes of land ownership, often called “land grabs”, and often legal within current local laws and dominant free market system. These transfers are reshaping the management of soil and water resources and distribution of benefits on a scale not seen in recent decades.

Our goal is to better understand this ongoing process. From the course syllabus, *“The loss of farmland to other uses, as well as concentration of ownership, has immediate effects on potentials for local food production and food sovereignty. Ownership changes reduce access to land by limited resource and beginning farmers, while free market policies and scales of production efficiency for commodity food production clearly drive consolidation of lands in a process claimed to be the only viable way for feeding a growing global population. Research and education on these land ownership issues are vital to inform policy, development agendas, and strategies for long-term sustainability of food production and ecosystem services.”*

With this perspective on changes in land ownership, we launched an on-line course to inform ourselves about the multiple issues surrounding use of land for food and other production outputs and to provide a foundation for a future course that will be accessible to students in the Nordic Region, Nebraska and around the globe. The case study method pioneered by medical and business schools was chosen as the primary learning approach (Barnes et al., 1994). Different methods of using the case approach have been explored (Cliff and Nesbitt, 2005) and how design of cases impacts learning (Lundeberg et al., 1999). Applications in agriculture have been published by the American Society of Agronomy (ASA, 2006). In this course, we evaluated and then applied the open-ended case strategy where situations are not yet resolved (Francis et al., 2009). The course itself was open-ended and students were fully involved in shaping the activities. We used adaptive management to meet the goals and explore innovative methods of learning that will help future students efficiently access information and pursue an action learning approach to the topic. One output of the course is a series of six open-ended case studies that can be used by students who take the class in subsequent years.

Methods

We recognized the need for a university course that would guide students in learning more about massive changes in land ownership that have occurred over the past two decades. There is substantial information emerging from international conferences and technical journals in social sciences about the magnitude of changes and the impacts on former residents and farmers on the land, but limited attention in universities through formal courses; one exception is the International Institute for Social Sciences [www.iss.nl/education/] in The Hague, Netherlands.

Land Ownership Changes was offered as a graduate level independent study opportunity to a select group of students from University of Nebraska—Lincoln and Norwegian University of Life Sciences

who were all appointed as special teaching assistants for three months and provided a modest honorarium for their work in developing the course. The course was three semester credits in U.S. or five ECTS in Europe. A syllabus was prepared with these course goals:

1. Develop an understanding of land use ownership changes at the local and landscape level: impacts and consequences on food production, economics of farms and communities, environmental impacts and social dimensions.
2. Explore potentials of case study methods to understand dynamics of land ownership and impacts on food production and sustainability, long-term ecosystem services and interactions in food systems among production practices.
3. Develop competence in case study development by each student crafting one open-ended case based on a local land ownership situation that has not yet been resolved.
4. Engage in critical assessment of case study papers done by peers in the course and discussion of alternative methods of learning about impacts of land use changes.
5. Provide critical examination of course methods and outcomes in order to improve the course for future years.

In keeping with course ownership and adaptive management of goals and activities, we first examined course priorities and requirements. The class met each week for two hours over Adobe Connect[®], with students joining the course from India, Germany, Norway, Colombia and the U.S., for a period of twelve weeks. A technical specialist [D. Leingang] with experience in distance education was also one of the students and provided valuable assistance with navigating in the electronic classroom and associated web site at UNL where documents were stored [passel.unl.edu/pages/].

After extensive reading and discussion about methods of case construction and their use as a learning device, each student developed a case based on one land ownership change in a country where they had personal experience and could access relevant resource materials. We reviewed these cases as a group and made specific comments to the authors on how to improve them. The course was evaluated using a detailed survey of participants to assess organization, quality of the learning experience and recommendations for the future. Each student prepared an individual reflection document to summarize their personal learning in the course.

Results

1. Cases developed for future students

Six open-ended cases were developed on situations that reflect current challenges resulting from land ownership change and each of which includes dimensions of food production, economics and distribution of benefits, environmental implications and social change. The topics were:

- Sugaring Up the Locals to Palm Over Their Land? A Look at the Effects from the Emerging Sugarcane and Palm Oil Industries in Guatemala [J. Simons].
- Yes, We Have No Bananas: Development versus Exploitation? Case Study of a Multinational Food Corporation in Philippines [C. Francis].
- A Journey Back to the Land, Las Pavas Case (Colombia): Land Restitution: Making Things Right or Legalising Land-grabbing? [K. Sanchez and H. Scharff].
- Defining Socially- and Ecologically Responsible Foreign Agricultural Investment: A closer look at a Norwegian “reforestation” company in Madagascar [J. Smith].
- Special Economic Zones in India: Land Acquisition: Lawful or Just-less? [C. Bradburn].
- Bakken Boom: Curse or Boon? Examining the impacts of oil extraction in North Dakota [D. Leingang]

Through real-time discussions, we went carefully through each of these cases to examine their structure according to an agreed-upon outline [attention grabbing segment, introduction, goal, rationale/background, stakeholders, student activities, references]. Although we recognized the need and

expected to encourage creativity in case design, the group concluded that a common structure would be useful to guide students in performing a “compare and contrast” exercise across cases and in writing their own cases, and that innovation could be introduced in each of the sections. We further decided that a list of key stakeholders with their roles should be provided, but that an open-ended table would encourage students to expand this list through their reading of each case. We intended to strike a balance between providing too little information, giving a case that would perhaps discourage all but the most motivated students, and too much information, that would allow students to engage the questions without doing much research on their own.

The study questions at the end of each case were described as two types: those that are generic to studies of land ownership changes and those that are specific to a particular case. The former will be included in all cases and provide an obvious start for students to compare issues across cases they study in the course, while the latter will help them delve into case-specific issues that are unique to the context, stakeholders, or nature of the land acquisition or its specific use by new owners and participation by former occupants of the land. We decided that the generic questions would likely be required, while the specific questions could be given for the students to choose a subset of what they consider most important. For example, there could be five generic questions required, then students could pick five of ten specific questions that they consider most relevant for the specific case. Students could also be required to provide one or two additional priority questions and answers to them. We have yet to decide the parameters for how students should answer the questions, but a general guideline is to require some independent research beyond the information provided in the course and to develop a half-page response to each question plus references.

2. Evaluation of learning in land ownership distance course

An end-of-course survey to assess learning and provide guidance for shaping the new course next year included 24 statements with responses of “completely disagree” (1) to “completely agree” (9). The sample was too small to analyze statistically, but the responses provide valuable insight on the learning process. Students found the syllabus useful in a general way, with clear goals, but that more specific details would improve this for future students. From the start, students felt strong ownership of the course and appreciated being responsible for their own learning. The initial organization into three modules was quickly abandoned, as the team embraced one continuous process of learning about ownership changes that was not readily divided into sections. The students appreciated their role in “adaptive management” of the course.

There was consensus that more concrete organization of informative material was needed in the introductory sessions to build interest and awareness among future students. Although several general references on land ownership were useful, this list should be expanded to include videos, excerpts from news broadcasts and other relevant visual materials to capture the urgency of the land use issue. Students found that the in-depth readings, for their own cases, were most useful along with those they accessed to be able to evaluate and suggest improvements for other student cases. The in-depth discussion we organized for each case was found to be particularly valuable to building general appreciation of the course topic and to take advantage of our group as a learning community.

3. Recommendations for future course

In our final group evaluation we recommend more information up front in the syllabus including readings and other relevant resources. Having students read and respond in writing to questions on several current cases would be valuable, and discussion of those cases in small groups would be important to learning. One idea was to establish a discussion room where students could asynchronously add comments to previous ideas and later meet on Skype or other electronic “classroom” to discuss results. Having each student develop a case related to a geographic area of personal interest and experience would be highly valuable to learning. This could be subjected to peer-review in small groups,

as well as to oversight and review by the instructor. A reflection paper on learning at the end of the course was seen as valuable, while a final exam was not viewed as necessary. As with previous experience in conventional and distance courses, feedback from the instructor was highly valued.

Conclusions

This one-semester experience in learning about how to design a distance course provided recommendations about organization and content, and results will inform the design of an expanded course from these two universities in the future. Among the conclusions:

- Organizing the course into three modules is not useful; it should be one three-month course for three semester credits [UNL] or five ECTS [NMBU]
- Synchronous meetings of students and instructor may be more valuable for first introductions, but are technically cumbersome; an asynchronous schedule with weekly assignments is preferable
- More detailed instructions and better content including references to articles, chapters, and current cases are needed at the start of the course
- Course ownership with students is possible with a small and select group, but less feasible with a course having open enrollment and larger number of students
- Reading prepared, open-ended cases is valuable and written responses to questions contribute to solid preparation before a discussion of each one
- Having each student develop a case is a valuable strategy to learn more about one land ownership situation in depth, and should be a component of future courses
- Small group discussions are extremely important to developing a balanced perspective and challenging personal assumptions
- Engaging in peer review process provides a valuable learning opportunity and demands high level of engagement and responsibility to classmates
- It is difficult but essential to approach issues in an objective way, with focus on understanding both benefits and negative consequences of ownership changes
- Individual student action as a result of the course should be an integral goal: letters to the editor, articles in newsletters, other methods of promoting action
- Writing a final reflection paper increases potential for self-assessment and is integral to the learning process
- Evaluation of student learning should include grading responses to questions on several cases, individual cases developed by students and reflection papers

We conclude that issues surrounding changes in land ownership, specifically the impacts of “land grabbing”, are among the most critical questions of our time. Access to land influences food production, distribution of benefits from agriculture, food security and food sovereignty. Although there are clear ethical guidelines publicized by international public and private non-profit organizations, it appears that these are rarely followed on a voluntary basis by national governments, investors within and from outside a country and international funding organizations. We feel that this global issue should be a concern to anyone interested in the future of farming and food systems, included as a vital component of the educational programs of our universities and critical to food security for the future.

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