From Experiment to Generalizable Model?

Institutionalizing graduate-level, collaborative online learning in the Netherlands & United States, seven years on

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Abstract

- This talk shares experiences over 7 years in developing, implementing & institutionalizing a collaborative online graduate course in Syracuse, New York, and Wageningen, the Netherlands.

- In the joint “International Environmental Policy Consultancy” (IEPC) course, graduate students in the social and natural sciences, engineering & other fields work together, using multiple information communication technologies, to meet science-policy analysis needs of an international ‘client’ organization based in New York City.

- Taught annually since 2013, the course has become an established vehicle for collaborative and advanced service learning by masters and doctoral students in a variety of academic programs, departments, and institutions.
Today’s talk

- Part 1 recaps the initial experiment: aims, design, implementation of the “International Environmental Policy Consultancy” graduate course
- Part 2 provides additional detail on the consultancy aspect of the course
- Part 3 describes steps and challenges in institutionalizing the course at Wageningen University and SUNY-ESF
- Part 4 summarizes key accomplishments and explores future prospects for the course & related curricular development
Acknowledgments

- Wageningen University, for course development, design, & implementation via an Innovation and Distance Learning grant
- Administrators & colleagues at the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (SUNY-ESF), Syracuse, New York; and Wageningen University, the Netherlands
- Colleagues in the Policy Analysis Branch, Division of Sustainable Development, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, New York
1. The Initial Experiment
Catalysts

- History of collaboration, including in classroom, between WUR’s Environmental Policy Group & first author
- Failed attempt to organize a summer short-course in the Netherlands with students from NY: @ $2000, cost prohibitive
- Administrative encouragement to use the SUNY COIL model, providing place-bound students opportunity for collaborative, international experience w/out incurring expense of travel
- WUR’s amalgamation with smaller institutions across the Netherlands & growing use of distance learning technologies
Course design

- Modeled on WUR’s well-established and highly successful master’s level “Academic Consultancy Training” program.

- Our course designed to help address research needs of international organization(s) engaged in environmental policy and governance. Students ‘commissioned’ by ‘client’ to carry out specified assignment. Team members propose & implement solution(s) to meet client’s work requirements.

- Students learn consultancy (communication, project management, research, reporting, presentation) & team-building skills (division of labor, leadership, intercultural communication), while deepening knowledge on ‘commissioned’ topic(s) & key actors in international environmental policymaking.

- In the course of the collaboration, students gain experience as a virtually-networked international team, working across time zones and space, utilizing variety of information communication technologies and platforms.
Course scheduling & products

- Given divergent academic calendars at the two institutions, the course is scheduled both sequentially & synchronously:
  - *ESF students launch the course in the last week of August, as a 3cr/15 week class. Typically they are taking 2 or 3 other courses, too.*
  - *WUR students join in the last week of October, in a 40 hrs/ 8 week course. Their full focus is on this class only.*

- Consultancy results are communicated via formal presentation and report, delivered to client in mid-December, 1-2 weeks after the normal end-of-semester in New York. ESF students who work through the end of the project receive +1 cr.

- Client organization receives and reviews consultancy product(s), submits formal evaluation in the first week of January. 50% of course grade.

- Early in the project, students set personal goals; after submission of the final report, they review and evaluate their accomplishments.
## Scheduling & Integration

### Planning & Coordination Timeline

**Joint Master's Course, "International Environmental Policy Consultancy" (ESF, WUR)**

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- **Joint sessions**
  - joint course launch
  - academic consultancy begins
  - mid-term presentations from ESF
  - student interaction (ESF, WUR)
  - prelim. product
  - student interaction (ESF/WUR)
  - final product, presentation

- **Client**
  - client intro
  - consultancy launch #1
  - consultancy launch #2
  - client feedback
  - client review, approval

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March 16-17, 2018
Student participation

- Masters and PhD students
  - ESF: targeted at professional master’s students
  - WUR: Science and policy majors (Biochemistry, Environmental Science, Organic Agriculture, Natural Res Mgt, etc.)

- Strong draw for international students
  - 10 countries in first year
Skills modules/ videoconference

Students collaborate in multiple modes – real time/ asynchronously, site-to-site/ cross-site sub-groups/ one-on-one, etc. – using a variety of technologies.

Largely task-driven, the course includes also several real-time ‘skills modules’.
(Here, Dr. Machiel Lamers discusses multicultural communication w/ students in NY.)
2. Consultancy Experience
Ideally, consultancy focus is established in late February/ early March, in time for student recruitment at ESF, prior to the fall pre-registration period in late March/ early April.

For last 5 years, ‘client’ organization has requested research & analysis services, producing ‘science-policy briefs’ on emerging topics in sustainability science, helping provide an information base for esp. developing countries meet global Sustainable Development Goals.

Emphasis on developing rigorous scientific, evidence-based, expert-validated analyses, balanced viewpoints. Produced for a broad, educated audience of international policymakers, gov’t officials, citizens, and others.
Implementation

- Student consultants (‘externs’) first scope out, deliberate, and articulate how they propose to fulfill the Terms of Reference.
- Incorporating client feedback, their proposal is modified & the consultancy is off and running.
- Students organize into cross-site work teams, systematically reviewing recent developments in sustainability science, evaluating debates and controversies, interviewing experts, outlining policy recommendations.
- With critical mass, drafting of science-policy briefs begins.
- All briefs validated through expert review.
Presentation of findings

Live, formal presentations of preliminary findings & recommendations…

Excellent ‘client’ feedback provides critical guidance in finalizing scientific briefs & policy recommendations
Final consultancy report

Incorporating client feedback, w/ science-policy briefs & methodological notes appended

Cumulative experience: each year better than the last
Web-based open access

Science-policy briefs widely available via online platforms
3. Institutionalization & Challenges
Wageningen University

- **2013** – Initially launched as project within master’s level ‘Academic Consultancy Training’ (ACT) program
- **2014** – Recast as component within ‘European Workshop’ consultancy, under the ACT framework
- **2015 to present** – Integrated part of new ‘Sustainable Development Diplomacy’ graduate certificate program. Required course for first-year MSc students from the social sciences/ international relations.
- Instructional resources provided by Environmental Policy Group/ Dept. of Social Sciences
- Continuity through multiple changes of lead instructor, evidencing successful integration, institutionalization, albeit with repeated learning curve and some discontinuities/ shifts in instructional design
SUNY Env Science & Forestry

- 2013-16 - Ad hoc, ‘experimental’ course via Environmental Studies graduate program.

- Targeted at professional masters (MPS) students. Open to all graduate students, incl. also PhD, MS & others. Including also at Syracuse University and SUNY Upstate Medical University.

- 2017 – Formally approved, regularized course

- 2017 – Degree requirements for MPS Environmental Studies program modified to accept group *practica*, including this course, in fulfillment of capstone project requirement.

- Instructional resources provided by ESF’s Dept. of Environmental Studies

- Original instructor provides continuity for both course and interinstitutional relationship; not yet full institutionalization for course.
Course challenges

- **Structured inequality (course design)**
  - *Scheduling: divergent instructional terms*
  - *Intensity: one course among several vs. single intensive course*
  - *Enrollments & demographics of students @ each site*
  - *Integration: additive or redundant? Building cohesion...*
  - *Expectation management/ social learning*

- **Entropy (coordination/ management)**
  - *Inter-site coordination, at multiple levels.*
  - *Instructional resource management/ continuity (shared resources, client & student relations, course archives)*
  - *Communication management/ coordination/ archiving (incl. with ‘client’ organization)*)
Program challenges

• Program administration/ resource management
  • Instructional continuity, training, and support
  • Regular, face-to-face meetings/ planning sessions
  • ICT infrastructure/ classroom/ technology support

• Consultancy client(s)
  Building capacity to move from single ‘client’ organization to working with other/ potentially additional organizations

• Multi-party collaborative learning?
  Encouragement from ‘client’ organization and partner institutions to extend model to include other academic institutions, esp. in Global South, e.g. Latin America, Africa, the Middle East.
Institutional challenges

- Partners are specialized, internationally-oriented, doctoral-granting STEM research institutions. Each institutional context highly dynamic.

- Both institutions expanding & generalizing online and distance learning:
  - Open SUNY
  - Online courses and certificates
  - Massively Open Online Classes (MOOCs)

- Growing pressures to expand practical training/ service learning opportunities for all students, including at the graduate level

- Excellent moment to extend the ‘Academic Consultancy Training’ model to accommodate additional collaborative online international learning projects.

- Need for clear and consistent instructional technology infrastructure, support, and strategic development.
4. Conclusion
Accomplishments

- Over a 7-year period of development, implementation, and institutionalization, the ESF-WUR “International Environmental Policy Consultancy” course has become a vehicle for rich student experience, consistent third-party ‘client’ satisfaction, and individual, programmatic, and institutional learning.

- It has evolved from an ad-hoc, bottom-up experimental, applied, ‘Academic Consultancy Training’/collaborative online international learning (COIL) type course, to become a key course within graduate programs at both partner institutions.
Institutionalization

- Since its initial conception nearly a decade ago, the course has been designed, implemented, and institutionalized/regularized at both partner institutions.

- Even so, the interpersonal and inter-institutional relationships underlying the course have yet to be fully institutionalized.

- Upper academic administration has changed over the last five years at both institutions. Fortunately, new chief academic officers are not only sustaining predecessors’ interest in collaborative online international learning, but also further developing internationalization.
Future prospects & challenges

- As educational institutions further embrace collaborative online/ distance learning instruction, the ESF-WUR “International Environmental Policy Consultancy” graduate course can serve as one established model or path among several for program development.

- Signature characteristics:
  - Integration as a multi-sited, group capstone project/ applied service learning course at the graduate level
  - Utilization of information communication technology not only for student collaboration, but also for engagement with and service to third party ‘client’ organization
  - How to broaden/ extend the model to include more students & additional institutions?
Comments, questions welcome!