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# **Building and Maintaining a Website On-Location**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Participation in an international study program provides students with invaluable exposure to another culture and a multitude of academic and life experiences. Rapid advances in communication technologies now make it possible for students to share these experiences with their support network at home as they occur. The responsibility of doing so by means of a web page built on-location 1) motivates students to increase their awareness of, and participation in, their surroundings, 2) changes how students view their surroundings and activities in which they participate, 3) increases content learning, 4) extends the number of people involved in the international study program, and 5) results in a professional written and visual documentary. Faculty involved in supporting an on-location web site are advised to develop the web site prior to the trip, ensure the equipment and internet access can support the task, improve their computer literacy, and exercise flexibility and patience.

## **INTRODUCTION**

A student with an understanding of and appreciation for international issues is increasingly valuable to the wide scope of agribusinesses in the United States and worldwide. Redman et al. (1999) identified two means by which colleges can increase student awareness of international agriculture: creating special international courses and revising existing courses to include more content on international agriculture. Arguably, the most effective type of international course is one that includes study in a foreign country. Courses which include a study abroad component allow students to learn about and experience the history, economy, politics, culture, and agriculture of a foreign country. Today, technological advances allow us to extend the benefitting audience beyond the participating students. During the summer of 1999, a group of students and faculty capitalized on the growth in internet use to extend the number and scope of individuals participating in their study abroad experience. When 63 students from five universities spent a month studying agriculture in France, their peers, faculty, co-workers, families, and friends at home went with them.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

Use of the internet in education is now common and ranges from simple web pages that offer students course materials to interactive courses taught completely through the internet. The Department of Agricultural Economics at North Dakota State University (NDSU) has used the internet to facilitate information flow from faculty and staff to students since 1995. What began with offering information about the University, Department, curriculum requirements, faculty and staff, and student activities and clubs, has evolved into a resource wherein students can access lecture notes and related web-based information via links, review their course progress, and interact with one another and their instructor outside of the classroom using e-mail and discussion forums. Internet use has evolved from an important tool in one-way information sharing from the Department and the various organizations it supports to an interactive link to the

world. We extended our use of this resource to allow our students studying abroad to communicate on a real time basis with the University, their families, friends, and the world.

North Dakota State University is in its third year of a partnership with Federation des Ecoles Supérieures d'Ingénieurs en Agriculture (FESIA), a consortium of five schools of agriculture in France. During the summer of 1999, 19 students from NDSU, along with 44 students from four other American universities spent a month in Europe including three weeks in and around Angers, the city which houses our FESIA partner school, Ecole Supérieure d'Agriculture (ESA), and eight days on the road visiting Brugge and Brussels in Belgium and Lille, Paris and the Normandy region of France.

### **Student Assignments**

In past years, student assignments have included a combination of individual work (two issue papers), team work (a team journal), connection with folks at home (a progress report faxed to the department and thereafter sent to student families through the mail), and application of their in-country education (a follow-up letter in French). Past participants have indicated that this combination of written work provides important advantages and, as such, makes their experience more meaningful. Making their journals available on the web also helps students participating in subsequent years prepare for the trip and improves the relationship between our College of Agriculture and the directors, faculty, and staff at ESA in France. For the first time, in 1999, we published student work on the web concurrent with the program.

Students received the following assignment two weeks prior to our departure. It was one of five written assignments which, in combination with participation in scheduled activities, allowed students to earn six graded semester credits.

*Day as Web Master Assignment. Each of you will be responsible for the pictures and content of our web page for one day. You will receive a digital camera and brief instruction on its use. Your task is to take at least four good pictures representative of the day's activities (more as you deem appropriate). Before you submit your disk to me, you will have deleted any pictures that you do not believe to be of web page quality or content. In planning or selecting your pictures, consider the following suggestions: 1) pictures of people are going to be as interesting to your families and friends as pictures of famous sites; 2) plan your pictures well; envision each picture on the web page; a simple picture of one cross or Star of David at the American Cemetery will very effectively represent the lives lost in Normandy; 3) the accompanying caption you provide puts the picture in context; be creative here.*

*You are also responsible for providing the text that describes the activities of the day. You do not need to be verbose but you do need to capture the essence of the day. Do include such things as a description of your daily routine, pictures and comments about your host family or student and their home. It will be interesting for our web page visitors to know what you ate, how you got to school, and what you felt. They will be provided with a schedule so, for example, they know you*

*attended a class on European geography. They do not know that you were surprised at how little you knew about the location of the countries of Europe and how country locations create conflicts in developing European environmental policy.*

As Program Director, I took responsibility for the first three days of the web page which consisted of an evening of travel and the weekend in France before the program began. I also took responsibility for the final day of the program which included the trip back to the United States.

## **Educational Motivation**

Why did we support a web page? In her book, *Tools for Teaching*, Davis (1993) identified five useful methods to encourage students to become self-motivated, independent learners:

- Give frequent, early, and positive feedback
- Ensure opportunities for student success
- Help students find personal meaning and value
- Create an open and positive atmosphere
- Help students feel they are a valued part of the learning community

The level of student motivation to *learn* in a foreign environment rather than simply travel to a foreign environment can be the difference between an enjoyable and effective learning experience and one that simply passes the time. Davis provides a useful pre-implementation check on a teaching activity or method's appropriateness for student learning. A student designed, on-location web page addressed four of the methods Davis proposes. Students (and their support network) would see the results of their work within 24 hours, often earlier (*early, positive feedback*). Regardless of how many or few pictures they took or how much or how little they wrote, their work would be published on the internet (*ensure opportunities for student success*). Family, friends, peers, co-workers, and faculty and staff in the United States and in France would provide immediate feedback so students would recognize they are an important part of something much larger than themselves. As their support network back home began to send word they were printing out pages as they were published, students soon realized their work would serve as a journal of the trip and, as such, its value became personal. With four of the five motivators inherent in the assignment, the Program Director's job was simply to ensure students considered their participation to be in an open and positive atmosphere.

## **Implementation**

We performed a practice run during a spring trip to Atlanta with the National AgriMarketing Association (NAMA) student team. The department staff agreed to review the web site daily and provide feedback. The result was a diary of the NAMA student team trip for the club notebook. From Atlanta, material (pictures and commentary) was published to a server at NDSU using a phone modem. Expensive long distance rates from Europe and the relatively

slow speed of file transmission over a phone modem supported our decision to use an ethernet connection to publish from France. A laptop was used to build and successfully publish the web page on the NDSU server from ESA for two weeks. Our difficulties in publishing began during the third week as we traveled to Belgium and throughout France. We later determined that the laptop simply needed an address for the server from which it was publishing. It took a full day at ESA to reconfigure the laptop and successfully publish the pages created during the week of travel.

### **A Mechanism for Feedback**

External software would enable us to keep track of the number of visitors to the site and generate a detailed list of the server address of each visitor. This was to serve as useful information in prioritizing our efforts. We could identify, for example, which of the participating universities was receiving the most visitors and target our photographs and commentary appropriately. We also hoped to learn when and how often folks were visiting the web site to gauge the timeliness with which we should be publishing. We were also interested to learn whether we could “train” visitors when to check for web page updates by publishing on a regular schedule.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

As challenging as this activity turned out to be in its debut, there were many important benefits. Building a web page on-location gave students ownership and, as such, it:

1. *Sharpened student awareness of, and participation in, their surroundings.* The responsibility for reporting on activities increased student awareness of what was going on around them, not only on their day as web master, but also for the remainder of the program. The assignment also motivated students to become actively involved in their surroundings. One student began an interesting conversation with two guards walking near the Eiffel Tower when he asked them to pose for a photograph. Students visiting an open air market were invited behind the counter of a meat vendor to take photographs. Several other vendors then gathered around the students to see the resulting pictures.
2. *Changed how students viewed their surroundings and the activities in which they participated.* Students needed to not only articulate what they saw and did but also do so in a context that others, particularly those not on the trip, would understand and enjoy. Students learned to be editors and took the job of recording their adventures more seriously once they realized that the writings and pictures they published on the internet were public record. They also quickly learned that creativity was important as their families and friends at home and their peers on the trip commented on what was published. One student, reporting on his reaction to the Hall of Mirrors at the Palace of Versailles wrote “walking down the Hall of Mirrors was very special because I thought about what Louis XIV must have thought as he looked into the very same mirrors.”

Another student used creative photography and a descriptive caption to demonstrate a simple example of the many challenges associated with not knowing the language.

3. *Increased content learning.* Students were responsible for reporting, in context, what they did and saw. It was not uncommon for students to read about a company, historic site, or concept before or following a visit or presentation so they could capitalize on the teachable moment provided each time someone visited our web site. One student expressed it in the following way, "It takes me ten minutes to read about the history of Paris in a book. If I write about it well, all of the other students and our families and friends will know not just what I saw in Paris, but how Paris came to be. This is fun to know."

The student serving as web master for the visit to the memorial museum in Caen did not even need to go inside to instill in our visitors the somber and patriotic mood that descended on us as we visited Normandy. She shared with our visitors the dedication written over the entrance of the memorial. "La Douleur m'a brisée la fraternité m'a relevée de ma blessure a jailli on fleuve de liberté" [*The pain broke me, the fraternity resurrected me of my wound from which gushes the river of freedom*]. She also shared the most striking statements from allied forces, each etched in a unique individual stone:

From the United States was the order of General Dwight D. Eisenhower to the troops on D-Day, June 6, 1944.

The eyes of the world are upon you. The hopes and prayers of liberty loving people everywhere march with you.

Perhaps the most beautiful is from Canada...  
War is death, peace, life, liberty, hope.

And from Greece is the simple but powerful...  
We prefer peace to war.

4. *Extended the number of people involved in the program.* Participating through daily visits to the web page were family, friends, peers, co-workers, and faculty and staff at the universities. This improved student morale and increased student connectiveness with those at home. Several parents noted that they found it comforting to see pictures of their children engaged in familiar activities such as walking to school and working in the computer laboratory. Short references on the web page to specific activities, sights, or ideas also generated discussion between students and web page visitors during the program.
5. *Resulted in a professional quality written and visual documentary of the program with a wide variety of input.* For example, one student chronicled the three farm visits of a day during the fourth week. Her comments about one farm demonstrate how effectively

information about agricultural production in France can be placed in a context every American family can relate to.

*“Our first stop was a seed producing farm. Here they farm 30 hectares of corn, vegetables, and flower seed. The seed is produced and sold under contract with various seed companies including cooperatives and Pioneer. The soil here is so sandy and light! Technology is all very similar to that used in the United States except the tractors and other equipment are smaller because farms are smaller. Our tour guide commented that he should be irrigating but some mice have decided to make a home in his pump...these types of farm problems seem to be universal.”*

The use of pictures was a particularly effective way to describe French agriculture. One does not need many words to share the unique attributes of machinery at a French horticulture operation.

### **Role of the Faculty Member**

Students were advised up front that they had ownership of, and thus responsibility for, the web site. As such, responsibilities of the faculty member were limited to editing and publishing. Supporting a web page from an off campus location has a learning curve. The learning curve is steep as one quickly becomes proficient at utilizing software. Publishing the web page, however, has a discrete outcome; it either works or it does not work. Our initial attempt in Atlanta with a modem connected to a phone line was very successful; it was no more difficult than connecting to e-mail from any off campus location. We simply needed the ftp address of the recipient server and a password for access. Publishing using an ethernet connection was a bit more complicated. In addition to work by the students that comprised the content of our web site, I dedicated two hours every day to the activities of loading pictures, typing and editing the captions and text provided by each student, and publishing the page.

We heavily advertised the web page prior to our departure. Therefore, it became a priority to publish every day whenever possible. Our visitors expected this and were quick to remind us when we fell short of this expectation. We learned an important lesson; if you want people to check in regularly to keep up with your progress, you need to update your web site often. As such, I often missed lunch, an interesting class or field trip, or worked well into the night. However, even when I was not in class with the students, I was easily accessible to them.

The second important role of the faculty member is editor. Student work was clearly identified as their own. However, the web site also represented the Department, College, and University. Students tended to judge what was appropriate for the web page based on their values and those of the family and friends who would be viewing their work. It was my job to decide which pictures were published and how the captions and supporting text were worded based on the values of a much wider audience. Examples of my controversial editing are many. While difficult and at times unpopular, these ultimately were my decisions to make.

### **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**



The important points in this article are two; the intangible benefits of supporting a web page from on-location can far outweigh the costs of doing so, and there are some important things to know before you undertake this activity. We devoted the bulk of this paper to supporting the former. Here are our recommendations for implementation.

1. *Set up your web page ahead of time.* Design how it will look to save time on-location. Student ownership of the web site will begin earlier if they are responsible for what it includes and how it is organized. Before the program begins, students can be actively involved in gathering background information and can identify links associated with the activities for their day. Request the program schedule ahead of time so it can be added to your web site before you leave. Students and those who comprise their support network will be well-served by knowing where students will be and what they will be doing each day.
2. *Plan ahead.*
  - Research computer and internet access at the site before you arrive. Ensure that the server to which you will publish your page can communicate with the software you used to create your page.
  - Have all of the information you do or potentially may need; particularly important are the home server ftp address and password.
  - Have the correct equipment. If you are using a digital camera that stores pictures on disks, bring several. Double check that you have all of the correct computer cards, extra batteries, and any adapters you may need.
3. *Improve your computer literacy.*
  - Learn something about your computer and its operating software. Often the problem that prevents you from publishing is a simple one if you know what you are looking for.
  - Know key computer terms in the country's native language.
4. *Have a back-up plan;* computers crash, cameras get dropped from tall, historically important structures, and computer technicians find new jobs.
5. *Be flexible and patient;* it is not always going to work right the first time. If supporting a web page will reduce the value of the trip for your students in other ways, it may not be right for your program.

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