

## STRATEGY FOR TEACHING ABOUT SOCIOCULTURAL CHANGE

STEPHEN CHILDS, PROFESSOR, ANTHROPOLOGY, SOCIOLOGY & CRIMINAL JUSTICE, VALDOSTA STATE UNIVERSITY

The occupational futures of most of my students will not be played out in classroom settings. Instead, they will find themselves in real world situations characterized by fluidity rather than textbook certainty, and they will have to make decisions based on information they can secure and interpret quickly. The following instructional approach, used in my Sociocultural Change course, departs from the traditional lecture format in that it employs independent problem solving and utilizes E-mail communication.

The course begins with students being assigned readings consisting of (a) a major ethnographic work of a rural peasant village and (b) a collection of theoretical articles which address, among other topics, cultural, social, and psychological barriers to directed change, and firsthand accounts of applied anthropologists who have directed rural development programs. Each student is assigned a different village study, and completes that part of the course assignment independently. The theoretical articles are read by the entire class, and are the basis for a series of classroom lectures and discussions which extend through the first seven weeks of a ten week quarter.

By the eighth week, each student has completed reading their ethnographic study, and has developed an in-depth familiarity with the sociocultural fabric of "their" particular village. At this point, each person is assigned an innovation to introduce into their village. The innovation may be a new hybridized strain of corn, a vaccination program, or a district-wide literacy program. Since I am already familiar with the ethnographic case studies I assigned, I select the particular innovation to be introduced to each village. Having received their assignment, each student is required to develop a comprehensive program proposal which outlines the types of cultural, social and psychological barriers expected to be encountered, the strategies to be employed for overcoming these, and a program justification which emphasizes how the design strategy insures a maximal "fit" between the innovation and the broader sociocultural fabric of the community.

The proposal, and its justification elements, together constitute a focused application of the theoretical and methodological readings covered in the course to this point.

The proposals are graded, and students meet with the me individually to discuss critiques; in these meetings they are given advice and suggestions for improving the change design. Following this meeting, they are given 72 hours to make alterations to their proposals, and the proposal is then re-submitted. Armed with the revised proposals, which in essence consist of refined analyses of obstacles to

change and strategies for overcoming these, and with each student's E-mail address, instruction now shifts to E-mail.

Over the following two weeks, I communicate with each student individually via E-mail. In these communications, I inform the student of unexpected events which impact upon the implementation process. For example, if a student is introducing a vaccination program to the village, I may inform that student that within the past few hours a child who has received the vaccination has become sick. While the sickness is unrelated to the vaccine just received, the villagers are not certain of this, and rumors are emerging which link vaccinations to an experimental biological program secretly funded by the C.I.A. The student is given a specified period of time to devise a strategy for quelling these fears, and in so doing insuring the continued success of the program.

The time limit for an E-mail response to these situations is typically 48 hours following notification of the new turn of events. The effective time may be less than this, since I may notify the student of the crisis in the wee hours of the morning! The response will necessitate going back to the ethnographic data as well as lecture notes. Each student is presented with a series of four such challenges.

Conducted in this fashion, the outcome of the course is a portfolio consisting of an initial proposal, a revised proposal, and four reports outlining action reconfigurations and the rationale for each. For the student, the course represents an opportunity to design a program which incorporates actual data, and which is limited only by imagination and ingenuity.

My experience with this type of course design has been extremely positive. Since students are informed of course requirements on the first day of class, they become immediately aware of the need to read assignments in a somewhat more reflective manner, with an eye toward application. In addition, class discussions tend to be more lively and questions more focused. Simply put, thinking becomes more active. Student response has also been positive. The notion of designing and implementing a plan of one's own seems to have real appeal—this is perceived as something that one can "get into." The fact that there is something of a "gaming" behavior involved seems to further enhance the experience. Finally, I find students developing collaborative unions in which they share ideas for designs, discuss readings, and, not infrequently, commiserate with one another about design challenges sent during early morning hours. \*