

## A Delicious Connection: Global Learning through Structured Multimedia Dialogue

### Abstract

Global connections are key to undergraduate research, but educators and students rarely connect globally using media that can make education interdisciplinary, engaged with local communities, and maximally sustainable. This article discusses a project that accomplished the aims of the Association of American Colleges & Universities “global learning” criteria, involving interdisciplinary study, external engagement through documentary production and photography, and cultural sharing focused on sustainability. Coordinated by anthropology, Asian studies, and communication studies faculty and carried out with students from these fields and sustainability science, the project combined social sciences, natural sciences, and the humanities to address cultural differences and changes in food production in the United States and China. Outcomes and assessment of independent study and work-study are examined, and recommendations are offered based on lessons learned.

**Keywords:** *documentary filmmaking, food production, global learning, interviewing, Southern agriculture (U.S.), southwest China, sustainability,*

It did not start with a major revelation but with a last-minute grant idea: what if anthropology research in China could be brought to the local level in the United States by teaming up university faculty and students interested in local media work?

Global learning should be key to undergraduate research, but efforts usually are focused on international study programs. Media, when used appropriately, can help educators to cross disciplinary boundaries, assist students and faculty in engaging with local communities, and foster a focus on sustainability.

Building on trust established through interdisciplinary work at the university, the faculty members in communication studies and Asian studies submitted the grant application. Two grants, to be applied to technology, local travel, and student pay, came from the Associated Colleges of the South (ACS) and the Duke Endowment, under the working title of “Food Systems Transitions in Southwest China and South Carolina: Fostering a Multimedia-Enhanced Dialogue.” Student-faculty teams then were created to produce videos, work on subtitles for the videos, and nurture dialogue on the videos through in-person and online screenings.

According to the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), global learning entails an education that “prepares students to critically analyze and engage with complex global systems, their implications for the lives of individuals, and the sustainability of the earth” (Whitehead 2015). Students participating in this project were charged not only with deploying critical analysis skills and negotiating the complexity that might be a part of any global humanities course or independent study but also with drawing connections between different disciplines and translating knowledge in a practical and personal dialogue across global contexts. We argue that multimedia dialogue can accomplish these goals of global learning sustainably, both in terms of foci and resource usage.

One faculty-student team developed a documentary and photo exhibit about food and farming in South Carolina, focusing primarily on the upstate region where Furman University is located. Another team worked with footage and photographs from previous trips to China to create a documentary and photo exhibit about similar topics in Yunnan, a southwestern province. With three students enrolled in independent study during the 2015 spring semester and additional students contributing on an ad hoc basis, the projects were completed in time for summer screenings at Furman University and in Yunnan, China. From conception to completion, the project required students to collaborate on multiple levels that began within the institution, moved to community outreach and engagement with local food producers, and ultimately expanded to international dialogue facilitated by media exchanges.

Discussed below are three topic areas (interdisciplinary approaches, local community engagement, and international dialogue), lessons learned, and the application of the global learning rubric of AAC&U (2014). The analysis indicates that multimedia dialogue offers global learning opportunities for other faculty-student teams. Particularly well suited to ecological issues with interdisciplinary interest and practical implications, it can be adapted to a wide variety of other topics of global importance.

### Interdisciplinary Approaches

The two faculty members involved in this grant, Tami Blumenfield and Brandon Inabinet, were members of Furman University’s David E. Shi Center for Sustainability’s Affiliate

Faculty Program. Affiliate faculty frequently exchange information on small grant awards, invite speakers from the local community whose work connects to research and pedagogy of multiple faculty, and provide input to Furman's sustainability goals. Thus it was a natural fit to connect personal interests such as sustainable agriculture and organic farming with specific research interests in southwest China and South Carolina. Faculty members regularly present ongoing research at the center, attracting collaborators and making the often-obscure disciplinary "silos" of research familiar to one another (Halfacre et al. 2013).

Students were invited to participate in the project through various advisers and majors. Efforts to provide context and understand the topics for exploration came first. The reviewed literature ranged from underpinnings of Southern Agrarians and local food traditions in the U.S. South (Grey 2014; Prody and Inabinet 2014; Prody 2013) and articles on the environmental impacts of agriculture and the U.S. Farm Bill (Quinn and Halfacre 2014; Foley et al. 2011) to a study in multimedia ethnographic research methodology (Tobin and Hsueh 2007). Students also learned about the culture of the Na and Nuosu villages of southwest China to gain deeper understanding of the audiences that would participate in the media exchange (Blumenfield 2003; Blumenfield 2014). Such background knowledge would be key to understanding how to communicate across differing cultural norms and move from preparatory knowledge to interaction (Deardorff 2006).

Students discussed the literature in a weekly reading group around a circular table in the campus dining hall. Informed by different disciplines, these discussions shaped pre-production plans, as students designed interview questions of *where* people farm (economic systems), *why* they farm (social systems), and the technical information of *how* they farm (environmental systems). Students subdivided these questions into six subheadings of food production: economic systems into agricultural inputs and markets, social systems into education and values, and environmental systems into management practices and forecasting measures. Even though the list of questions could take more than an hour of interview time, farmers appreciated the students' thoughtfulness in adjusting liberal arts concerns to the requirements of agriculture.

Interdisciplinary systems-thinking and collaboration also occurred in adding English and Chinese subtitles in the post-production process. Students worked to translate difficult terms between cultures. For example, relatively common key terms such as *farmer* and *food producer* in the Chinese subtitles had connotations of *peasant*. Given that the types of U.S. food producers portrayed included large-scale agribusiness, Christian nonprofit community gardening, and organic and

hydroponic rooftop tomato producers, the Chinese subtitles needed further clarification that revealed cultural difference in terms of social class and politics. Chinese students also viewed archived footage from a previous faculty research trip to southwest China, transcribed the content, and added English subtitles. Student collaboration with peers from other majors and cultures allowed the film in the early and late stages to undergo rigorous discussion from multiple academic perspectives and capitalized on students' unique strengths in translating systems-thinking to common, practical parlance and in adjusting language between cultures for intercultural competence.

## Local Community Engagement

Students next engaged individual farmers and community gardeners in South Carolina, with a central component of global learning to connect large-scale systems to individual practices and beliefs. After consensus on the interview questions was reached via the weekly lunch discussions, students then worked in the second month of the semester to contact local food producers. Contacts initially were made through lists held by area farmers' market organizers and from university personnel who regularly consult with farmers in the area. The two communication studies students (Amanda Richey and Callie Yow) leading the videography portion of the project interviewed two small-scale farmers and three urban community gardeners who work with low-income populations. To also portray local agribusiness, the professor monitoring the work interviewed a large-scale conventional farmer during the university's spring break.

Interview sessions in South Carolina were composed of a two-part process. Students began by interviewing food producers for an hour using pre-established questions, then asked them to lead walking tours of the properties, to illustrate agricultural production practices and capture "B-roll" footage that could be added over the interview audio. With novice interviewers and farmers eager to talk, questions that appeared later in the list often would be answered at the outset of the interview. Although coached on technique, students would still sometimes respond or laugh during interview segments, making the footage unusable. Students worked with more than eight hours of footage and roughly 100 photographs. By cutting and color-coding the useful footage in a video sequence in Adobe Premiere Pro, achieving a usable narrative became much easier. Outtakes were used after the credits to reveal the very human connection established with local farmers during the process, as students began to really enjoy learning from the people who grow their food.

By the end of the semester, the larger group of students had finished discussion of the readings, and the two independent-

study students had conducted and coded all interviews. Faculty then had to work quickly in the early summer to use grant funds for hiring work-study students and editing the footage into final form. Obviously, since the emphasis had been on global learning rather than technical expertise, this worked well to accomplish the goals of the grant. Faculty learned about each other's fields in the process: the ease and importance of acquiring good technology in communication studies, the methods of storytelling in anthropology, and the competencies of the students in the two different majors.

In June 2015, students and faculty members hosted a screening at the Shi Center for Sustainability of nearly complete versions of the two films: *Growing Food in South Carolina: Farmers' Perspectives* and *Food Systems and Farming in Southwest China*. The farmers and food producers who were filmed earlier in the semester were invited to attend and to share their questions and concerns. Interviewees commented on the "professionalism" of the student interviewers but wished the work could have been done in June, when the bounty of the fields would be evident.

The reaction to the film documenting Yongning's food culture was even stronger, as farmers in South Carolina questioned the accuracy of the peasant farmer transition toward urban and rural tourism portrayed and imagined the "real story" was closer to the American one, in which a wider diversity of pressures were at work. Given the recent banning of the documentary exposé *Under the Dome* and China's ecological disasters near the major cities of northern and coastal China, Americans were especially interested to see the reflection of large-scale news stories rather than the individual transition more common to daily life in southwest China. Both videos also reflected the cultural lens of American farmers-as-media-consumers, who primarily expected the narrative of agriculture to focus on the controversy between sustainable practices and agribusiness in South Carolina and China. Yet the interviews revealed more concern for intergenerational living situations and concerns about the feasibility of "back-to-the-land" rhetoric (Prody 2015).

Farmers were appreciative of the chance to work with a local liberal arts college, as their primary contact for farming research had often been the agricultural extension office of the major land-grant university 30 miles away. Only two of the six interviewed food producers had previous connections with the institution. As a result of this project, local farmers were able to witness and discuss communities unlike their own. This liberal arts benefit, described by Martha Nussbaum, was realized when food producers, as global citizens, debated representations and political issues surrounding people they had never met but for whom they now imagined a narrative and vested interest (Nussbaum 2002).

Overall, students' global learning benefited from the exterior community engagement component of the project. In many cases, students are still in contact with the farmers and gardeners that they interviewed—either through volunteer work with their community gardening organizations or through weekly encounters at the farmers' market. In their reflective essays at the end of the term, students who received course credit for the project reported being "more invested in the outcome of the project and therefore more invested in the learning process" than a traditional classroom experience. Students left the bucolic, gated campus to meet food producers in declining urban neighborhoods, worksites full of recycled goods, or warehouses and fields not yet reflecting a harvest that would allow the farmers to thrive another year. Students reported gaining "more nuanced conceptions of agriculture in the American South" that gave a cultural appreciation and illuminated individual stories that often become lost in global systems theories.

### International Dialogue

Global learning depends on reflection and dialogue across borders—critical engagement with a diversity of audiences to foster self-awareness and responsibility. The overarching goal of this project was the "deliverable" of connecting two disparate groups in dialogue about the common challenge of food production and sustainability. During summer 2015, faculty from Furman University traveled to Yunnan Province, where they conducted several film screenings. The first screening followed a format similar to the screening at Furman University earlier in the summer and hosted community members, educators, and students from Yunnan Minzu University and farming families. Subsequent screenings were much less formal, taking place in the homes of village families with just a few people gathered around a TV set (see Figure 1). At these screenings, anthropologist Blumenfeld (who had spent several years in the villages) was the only outsider present, which provided a very different dynamic from the first screening.

Attendees at the screenings raised many questions about South Carolina's food system and, by extension, about food production and consumption practices in the United States. For example, one community gardener featured in *Growing Food in South Carolina* discussed his work employing teenagers at Mill Village Farms to encourage entrepreneurship within low-income communities in Greenville, South Carolina. Elderly women who saw the film in Yunnan were shocked that young people could be paid high hourly wages for doing very basic farm work and wanted to know exactly how much they earned. Another difficult issue was an explanation to the rural Chinese audiences for the high-sugar, high-carbohydrate diet of many Americans. It was hard for

them to understand why the South Carolina farmers were so passionate about growing their own food and changing cultures of food consumption, because they could not imagine a lifestyle where people did not eat hot meals prepared from scratch every day. Thus Blumenfield, who was translating the *Growing Food* film for village audiences who could not read the Chinese subtitles, had to pause and explain how junk food had become common in the United States, subsidized by federal support with nearly untraceable constituent ingredients and piled on shelves in huge stores.

Although villagers could empathize with South Carolina farmers who described children leaving farms for service-sector jobs in the cities, they had a hard time understanding the other part of the “back-to-the-earth” movement in which luxury consumerism was attached to food sourcing in small-scale, often inefficient, local gardens in the United States. After all, the Chinese government was in the midst of promoting increasingly mechanized agricultural production, one component of a nationwide push to reduce rural populations and expand urban ones (Blumenfield 2014).

The other profound conversation topic that recurred at several of the screenings was that the Yongning villagers had farmed organically in the past, using organic waste as fertilizer, but without much effect. They could never produce enough to keep starvation at bay, until the synthetic agricultural products of the Agricultural Revolution arrived. Nearly everyone attending the screenings still remembered those hungry days when organic farming was a necessity. The fascination of U.S. farmers with long-discarded cultivation methods seemed foreign, especially as a consumer lifestyle choice.

When Blumenfield and Inabinet returned to Furman University in the fall, they shared questions and observations with the students in the project. Late in the fall 2015 semester, students and faculty again collaborated to capture these final layers of dialogue via a website that seeks to model the project for replication and alteration to other contexts and themes in higher education (Ferguson, Inabinet, and Blumenfield 2016; see <http://medialogues.wixsite.com/home>). Because of the central role of multimedia in this project, students were able to help foster an international conversation without leaving South Carolina. Expenditures and travel were minimal when compared to a traditional semester program of study abroad, yet students still reaped the benefits of heightened global awareness and personal connection.

## Challenges and Lessons Learned

Learning does not happen in a protected space. Students must take risks with new skills and technologies in work with communities beyond their comfort zone. The students

who participated in the multimedia project were mostly unfamiliar with videography, video editing, minority communities in China, or even the culture of the food producers and farmers in their own neighborhoods. Even with frequent faculty consultation and oversight, most questions were only answered when students were out in the field. Students had to troubleshoot technology and methods during their interviews, from working with backup equipment when the brand new Canon DSLR failed to capture video (because of a slower writing speed of the memory card) to going off-script to ask a taciturn farmer about genetic modification or the limits of sustainable agriculture. Students also found that getting lost on winding rural roads on a stormy afternoon could be an enjoyable and refreshing break from typical schedules.



Figure 1. Chinese Villagers Gather for a Home Screening of *Growing Food* in South Carolina: Farmers’ Perspectives and Food Systems and Farming in Southwest China.

Back on campus, students charged with editing and transcribing the footage learned that the post-production process spurs self-reflection as well. Lengthy interviews hid narrative threads. Coding the footage took so long that the students who envisioned the entire project had little part in constructing the final videos. Post-production challenges slowed the project until after the semester, when most students had left campus, requiring an unplanned editing marathon by Inabinet. The additional time required for these steps left barely enough time to add subtitles to the videos before the trip to China.

A few suggestions may be offered to meet these challenges. First, a careful plan should be made for effective communication among team members. Instead of relying entirely on conventional forms of communication such as e-mail and face-to-face appointments, an online document, discussion

board, listserve, or even group text-messages may be useful. These mechanisms can help student leaders in the project boost morale and offload some of the supervision from faculty. Second, some structures will make more sense than others for involving students in the project. Will independent studies offer the greatest incentives for engaged participation, or will paid work opportunities be more enticing? Work-study hours funded through a grant might be better motivation and could create intentional global learning for both work-study and independent-study participants.

In addition to communication with students about the work, finding the right balance of practical remedies in environmental, economic, and social systems is key. It was anticipated that food producers in China would be especially interested in learning new and old technologies like hydroponics and *hugelkultur*. This turned out to be a correct assumption, but differences in social value of the food produced—the efficiency mind-set of American consumers and the luxury market attached to the slow food movement—had been forgotten. Similarly, although social systems—the family connection and loss of younger generations to service-sector urban living—would be common to the two cultures, the importance of land pricing and economics had not been factored into that discussion. In all of these areas, additional editing time was necessary to determine which interview threads and dialogue would best serve the film. Systems-learning takes time.

Given the constraints on fitting a complex project into one semester with a few students, moving the project to one undertaken as a special-topic “action course” (or Problem-Based Learning course) could be a better strategy. Such a scenario would allow a sense of full devotion for at least several phases of the project. This might also allow the dialogue in all its phases to be undertaken in the course. Asynchronous, edited dialogue would allow students and faculty to post and circulate reactions to the interviewed clips to find the greatest points of global learning (such as those that best embody important global systems in individual practice, garner most self-awareness or perspective taking, and foster a higher sense of responsibility and care toward others).

We recommend six phases for effectively structuring multimedia dialogues:

- Phase 1: Establish infrastructure for effective collaboration, including file sharing of electronic files (PDFs) and others for joint editing.
- Phase 2: Film interviews and take photographs on location, ideally using DSLR cameras.
- Phase 3: Code and edit the video using Adobe Premiere or similar software.
- Phase 4: Conduct synchronous viewing and dialogue sessions with local participants.
- Phase 5: Hold curated, asynchronous international dialogue sessions with curated photograph displays or social media posts.
- Phase 6: Build an accessible public presence for long-term sharing of the entire project, on platforms such as Wix websites and university institutional repositories.

## Conclusion

Incorporating structured multimedia projects with a global focus into traditional undergraduate research can greatly affect not only student education but also help address global challenges. It can serve as an effective “milestone” on the global learning spectrum, one that can be furthered with coursework as well as undergraduate and graduate experiences outside the United States. In the case described here, the U.S. students who interviewed farmers developed some locally relevant intercultural skills as they learned to navigate relationships with people whose lives and backgrounds diverged from their own. The Furman students from China who participated in the project—who had to juggle acculturation issues, disciplinary pursuits, and project work, unlike their U.S. classmates—learned more about U.S. farming practices as they watched the documentary footage and worked on subtitles.

Through this process, U.S. students attained some of the same personal intellectual experiences and insights that can be obtained through international study, without the expense. However, a deeper understanding of farmers in southwest China on the part of the U.S. students would have required a more intensive effort by project faculty in continuing to monitor student learning through discussions and written evaluations with participants until all sharing had concluded.

Although beyond the scope of this grant project, a minimum of quarterly, mandatory discussions for all students, even those who participated in only one production and dialogue phase, is recommended. A diamond structure to promote student learning might be feasible, beginning with student-faculty conversations; widening into a broad array of filming, photography, editing work, and media-structured dialogues; and returning to student-faculty analyses of the work. In the case described here, participants did reconvene in the spring of the second year of the project to develop the project website, but with both faculty members on sabbatical leave and three student participants studying elsewhere during the fall following the project screenings, discussions were more piecemeal and more focused on modeling the project to other institutions rather than assessing the global learning outcomes.

Despite these limitations, the multimedia dialogue represents

a first step toward deeper understanding by many of those involved, from the farmers in southwest China and South Carolina and the students who immersed themselves in the work to the university faculty from China and South Carolina who attended the screenings. Students became more invested in their educational experiences and gained more nuanced understandings of problems from theoretical and practical perspectives. They developed interviewing skills and technical knowledge, worked in collaborative teams, and gained some of the benefits of off-campus study.

Meanwhile, the media produced through the project became widely accessible through websites and sharing. For example, about a year following the project's completion, Blumenfield shared *Growing Food in South Carolina* with Chinese citizens at the U.S. Embassy's Beijing-America Center in April 2016 as part of a lecture on organic farming and urban gardens in the United States. The audience loved seeing the farms and hearing directly from the farmers, learning how a technologically advanced and relatively prosperous country approaches vexing issues that affect people around the world, regardless of nationality. Those audience members, already living in a nearly post-apocalyptic environment with polluted soil, water, and air, had no hesitations about the necessity of organic farming. Their biggest question was one of trust: how can one possibly trust a person who claims to be farming organically? They composed a totally different audience than the one in southwest China. The project thus continues to foster conversations related to sustainability that affect us all.

On the U.S. side, Furman administrators, grant coordinators, and department chairs have praised the project and commended it to others as a model tied to the university's strengths in Asian studies, sustainability, and community engagement. The project was the keynote lecture at the 2016 ASIANetwork Conference to dozens of liberal arts institutions' faculty. The website has been promoted through the David E. Shi Center for Sustainability, the Duke Endowment network of four higher education institutions, and the ACS.

Perhaps in the future, a network of student-faculty teams can be drawn from elsewhere in the world and pair global learning with multimedia dialogue, thus broadening global perspectives and systems thinking, examining these areas in individual practice, and challenging us in nurturing better dialogue and solutions to the world's most pressing issues. As described here, a dialogue on food production and culture between China and the U.S. South composed a delicious place to start global learning. 

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*Tami Blumenfield is an anthropologist and assistant professor of Asian studies at Furman University and was principal investigator on the grants that funded the project. Her published research focuses on resilience in Na and Nuosu cultures of Southwest China and on cultural heritage in China. In 2016 she was a Fulbright Scholar affiliated with the Research Center for Studies of Southwest China's Borderland Ethnic Minorities at the Institute of Ethnic Group Studies and Sociology, Yunnan University.*

*Amanda Richey is a senior earth & environmental sciences and communication studies double major at Furman and served as one of the three independent study students who participated in the media project. She contacted farmers in South Carolina, conducted three of the interviews, and coded video clips for editing. She has published in the Young Reporters for the Environment annual competition, edited a user manual for a farm-scale biodiversity assessment tool, and conducted pond biogeochemistry research at a USDA-certified organic rotationally grazed cattle farm.*

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