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Backwards by Design 2013/2014 Assessment Project

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Course Description

The Backwards by Design workshop inspired me to think deeply about how to construct meaningful assignments that would help students learn not only content and knowledge but application and deep understanding. I wanted to create enduring understanding that students would apply in their careers. Tourism can be a tool for social, environmental, and economic justice; however, this is not part of the current tourism industry's paradigm. Thus, my task is to teach course curriculum through the lens of justice, not capitalism. REC 379 Foundations of Ecotourism is a course about the history, concepts, principles, marketing, and planning of ecotourism. I have taught this course before in a module format where students should learn each concept and how each concept is part of a complex system where one influences the other. In the past, students often failed to understand the complexity of the system and seemed to isolate each concept without placing it within a broader context. In the past, I used tests to help motivate students to study and learn material, however, tests further reinforced the idea that information was to be regurgitated or memorized instead placed within a systems approach. Thus, opportunities are needed for students to integrate and synthesize material in a meaningful way within a new paradigm of social, environmental, and economic justice.

Focus of Study

To help create enduring understanding and a new paradigm I utilized several techniques that I learned at the Backwards by Design workshop. I created a quarter-long project that culminated in a comprehensive foreign tourism itinerary constructed to provide social, economic, and environmental justice for the host cultures while also providing a once in a lifetime travel experience for a particular market (population of people). This project had the potential to be an over-whelming experience, thus (as recommended in the working retreat), I staged and sequenced each component of the plan (medium stakes assignments) in a logical manner to help build the project over the entire quarter. The project was comprised of a resource inventory, competition analysis, target market analysis, trip design, and promotional strategy. Each component was broken down into manageable parts where students reflected during class time through low stakes assignments, peer reviews (verbal and written), and group discussions. After all the components were completed, students had the task of utilizing an eagle's eye perspective to synthesize all components into a powerful persuasive pitch to "sell" their travel product to a travel company. Students had to sell the idea that profitable tourism itineraries can provide positive economic, environmental, and social impacts to host communities while also being tailored to an underrepresented or trending travel market (adults in transition, Chinese adventure travelers, LGBT community members, or families with a child with autism). Their pitch also included a marketing strategy that culminated with an oral marketing presentation to the class (travel company). Students practiced their oral communication and presentation skills and educated their classmates about foreign destinations, target markets, and enduring concepts of justice.

Summary of Results

The results of this study suggest that this project was successful at meeting the course objectives and far surpassed previous methods such as tests and traditional research papers. Formative rubrics were created to assess each component of the plan and provide direction and suggestions for improvement and revisions. In-class peer reviews and discussions were also found to be helpful and informative. A summative rubric was used to assess the final project (presentation and document). Although some students stumbled during the semester and needed to complete major revisions, the final projects ranged from very good to professional. In fact, several students presented their final documents during internship interviews and feedback indicated that internship supervisors were impressed.

Student feedback suggested that this backwards by design approach was a useful way to teaching the content, challenged them to think deeply, and they were proud of their travel products. They did indicate that the project was too much work but that they still prefer it to tests and research papers.

One area for improvement that I would like to work on in the future is helping students better grasp how to create lasting positive economic, social, and environmental impacts through their travel products. Student focused more on the traveler's experience than on the host communities.

Future Plans

Because of the success at meeting course outcomes and student satisfaction, I plan to utilize this assignment again. However, I will retool the resource inventory component so when students design their itineraries and choose resources, they will choose resources that promote positive local environmental, social, and economic impacts. In the initial assignment students researched all resources of a destination; this was overwhelming and the positive impacts got lost in the milieu.