

# A class in research, culture and entrepreneurship

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## Abstract

This paper presents specific course strategies used during an independent study course that exposed students to qualitative research methods, cultural perspectives of an Amish quilting community, and the entrepreneurship strategy of niche marketing. Students enrolled in the course were involved in content creation; they discussed readings, role-played interviewing strategies, designed research projects, conducted research, and presented the results. Suggestions for developing effective independent study courses for other programs are presented.

Students learn most effectively when they are actively involved in the process of learning. Cooperative learning environments promote higher levels of student achievement, satisfaction, and more positive teacher-to-student and student-to-student relationships (Barr & Tagg, 1995). During spring semester 2007, the authors developed an independent study class for undergraduate students in a textiles and clothing program at a land-grant university. The purpose of the course was to actively engage students in the understanding and application of concepts in research methods, cultural perspectives, and niche marketing. Because of our subject, textiles and clothing, we combined a product category that has historic and cultural connotations (quilts) with a business practice and income focus (entrepreneurship).

In our independent study course, students discussed course readings, role-played interviewing strategies, and conducted small group research projects from inception of the research idea through data collection, analysis, and writing. The goal of the active style of learning and teaching was to foster greater student participation in order to create more meaningful and longer-lasting learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995). This paper presents specific course strategies used throughout the independent study. Ideas can be generalized to other disciplines.

## The Independent Study

The course, facilitated by a \$950 competitive grant from the Helen LeBaron Hilton Fund, The College of Human Sciences, Iowa State University, concentrated on studying the history and culture of the Midwestern Amish-Mennonite community of Kalona, Iowa. The grant permitted two trips to the community, a guided tour of the community, and such course materials as the printing and copying of course readings for the students. The course included twelve one-hour meetings throughout the fifteen week semester incorporating discussion of assigned readings. The readings included *Qualitative Methods in Social Research* (Esterberg, 2002), Kalona and Amish-focused journal and newspaper articles ("Quilts and quilting in Kalona," 2005), and book chapters focused on Amish quilts (Pellman & Pellman, 1984).

Two required field experiences were included in the independent study. In the first field experience, the students and instructors participated in a formal tour of the research site

that included brief preliminary visits to several independent retailers in the downtown business district, a tour of the community's quilt museum by its director, a visit to a country store, and a full noon dinner prepared and served in an Amish-Mennonite home. After the formal five-hour tour, the students were allotted 90 minutes to explore the downtown area and complete a more thorough and in-depth assessment of its quilting shops. The second visit as a class to Kalona focused on sharing the results of the students' research through a poster presentation at the community's annual quilt show and sale, attended by approximately 500 individuals. The course was advertised through an informational email. The students enrolled in the course met our criteria: successful completion of a cultural perspectives class and recognized abilities of an effective team member. Our goals for the course included:

- Applying ideas learned within the undergraduate curriculum to a "real" environment that stimulated critical thinking and analysis.
- Gaining professional competence within the realms of developing a research question, conducting interviews, and writing research reports for various audiences, including a small community newspaper and an academic research report.
- Practicing communication and cooperation skills by working in teams and as a class in learning about a hand-process, issues unique to collecting data in an ethnic community, developing research plans, meeting with team members to accomplish the research, and writing research reports.
- Engaging in community service by reporting research results to the local community.

### **The Research Site**

The research site of Kalona, Iowa was selected for a number of reasons. Kalona is home to the largest Amish-Mennonite settlement west of the Mississippi River. As such, many residents of the community practice their faith and demonstrate adherence to its principles in their dress, possessions, lifestyle, and interactions with the mainstream non-Amish-Mennonite or "English" culture of the area. Kalona is the self-described "Quilt Capital of the World" and is a haven for those interested in purchasing a hand-made quilt, learning how to make quilts, searching for unusual quilt designs, finding inspiration, or understanding the history of quilts, the "blankets filled with love" ("Quilts & Quilting, 2005, 7).

Although Kalona is small, approximately 2,300 people in an area covering two square miles, at the time of the independent study the city supported five independent quilt shops. Kalona holds an annual quilt show and sale to promote the quilting industry in the community that attracts a wide range of people, including former President Ronald Reagan. Kalona is also home to a quilt and textile museum that highlights historic Amish-Mennonite quilts created by Kalona's founding citizens. The subject of quilts is one not covered in the undergraduate program at our university. However, the Amish quilts of Kalona are important to study for both their visual qualities and the cultural adaptations demonstrated in the quilts. Further, the quilts provide the opportunity to study the unique intersection of Amish-Mennonite design ideas with mainstream non-Amish quilt design (Smucker, Crews, & Welters, 2003).

The locally owned and managed quilt shops in Kalona have survived dissolutions of other area businesses; the development and dissolution of partnerships; and global issues related to changes in the producers, quality, and costs of the quilting supplies. Because of these challenges, Kalona represented an interesting case study that would allow the student research teams to focus on the ways in which a small town can

survive and thrive in a culturally and historically important rural community. Further, because small businesses represent 99.7 percent of all employer firms and employ half of the total U.S. private payroll, it is important for graduates to understand the role of small entrepreneurs in rural development and their economic impact (Kauffman Foundation, 2008). The independent study actively engaged students in the understanding of both a culturally-significant Amish-Mennonite community and the difficulties and strategies of operating and owning a small business.

### **Qualitative Research Methods Seminars**

The instructors used *Qualitative Methods in Social Research* (Esterberg, 2002) to guide the discussion of research methods. Examples of information discussed from the book included the research process, strategies for beginning research, ethnography, the types of qualitative research interviews, analyzing responses, making sense of qualitative data, and writing as a process. Questions emailed to the students prior to class meetings included general ideas, such as “How can researcher bias affect the research process?” More specific questions were posed to the students asking them to relate the text’s content to our particular research setting of Kalona, Iowa. These questions included prompts such as, “Write down possible research ideas that can be explored through interviewing resident quilters of Kalona, Iowa.” Students were guided in role-playing exercises and modeled effective interview preparations, dress, and strategies in front of their classmates.

### **Amish Mennonite Culture and Quilts**

The topics of Amish-Mennonite culture and quilting were explored through readings and discussion. During the initial day of class, students illustrated a portion of their own life-story by creating a quilt square made of paper. Students examined a quilt created by an Amish-Mennonite quilter to explore the quality of fabrics and quilt-making techniques. The Amish-Mennonite culture is based on Christian religious practices where many modern conveniences are eschewed because of their worldly connotations. The philosophy and daily practices of the Amish-Mennonite combine several sects or subdivisions within the community ranging from very conservative approaches to much more contemporary approaches. Traditional Amish-Mennonite quilts demonstrate some of the philosophical approaches in use of color and prints, design motifs, and hand versus machine quilting. Many young girls in the community learn quilting in a family setting. Skill in hand-stitching is gauged by the part of the pattern the quilter works on and what the individual does when women and girls gather to quilt.

To help the students understand the process of quilting and designing a quilt, students were asked to construct a paper quilt using one or more parameters related to Amish-Mennonite quilts: the use of geometric patterns, no red fabrics allowed, and hand-constructed. Students shared their paper quilt with the class and described the process they used in selecting the colors and pattern.

### **Niche marketing**

Niche marketing is a competitive strategy focused on specialization. It is the carving out of a smaller segment of a larger market with common needs or purchasing habits with an emphasis on a particular geographic, demographic, or product segment (Turner, 2006). Although this strategy may seem risky because the size of the potential market is reduced, the niche strategy tends to have lower business costs, faster word-of-mouth

marketing, and easier to identify customers (Sander & Sander, 2003). Within niche markets, customers tend to have a distinct set of needs and will pay a premium price to the firm that best satisfies these needs.

The niche marketing strategy was deemed important to the research site of Kalona by the course instructors. The retail quilt outlets in Kalona have each specialized on selling a distinct aspect of quilting: finished quilts created primarily by the Amish-Mennonites, partly-finished quilts for finishing at home, patterns and fabrics for home-quilters to use in constructing their own items, gifts and crafts, classes, and equipment and tools.

### **Class Projects and Outcomes**

Following discussion of qualitative research methods, the Amish-Mennonite culture, quilt making, niche marketing strategies, and the initial field experience to Kalona, the class discussed potential research questions. The topics selected by the students included exploration of a niche marketing strategy of competitive cooperation among the Kalona quilt shop owners, quilters' beliefs regarding design piracy, and the qualities consumers' desire when purchasing a quilt. The interview schedules contained demographic questions, ex., how long have you owned a quilting shop in Kalona; and topic-specific questions, such as; what differences exist between the quilting shops in Kalona (business cooperation study), are you aware of design piracy among quilters (design piracy study), and for what reasons do you purchase quilts (consumer behavior study).

Following data collection and analysis, students presented their research results in written and oral format. These projects included a term paper for course instructors and a short popular press article to be submitted to the local Kalona newspaper. In addition, students completed a journal that recorded their impressions about the course, their completion of the projects, and the people of Kalona. Results of the research projects were presented through a poster presentation at the thirty-fifth annual quilt show and sale in Kalona that displayed over 200 contemporary and historic quilts representing various quality levels, aesthetics, and prices.

### **Student Learning and Feedback**

During the final class meeting, students provided written and verbal feedback to instructors on the impact of the independent study course both personally and educationally, namely, their assessment of how the course enhanced their understanding of qualitative research, cultural perspectives, and entrepreneurship. What follows are reflective statements regarding the projects from student reports.

When we visited Kalona to interview three shop owners it was like this secret we've been wondering about all along was finally revealed to us! Why do the stores compete in a friendly manner? It's because they depend on each other! People seek out the town of Kalona because there is a variety of quilt shops.

The quilt shop owners of Kalona had different opinions about design piracy. One owner does not allow photographs of individual quilts and posts a sign stating no photos/sketching of the quilts. Another owner believes that protection of quilts would increase creativity. Two other retailers were knowledgeable about design piracy but allowed customers the opportunity to copy patterns.

Consumers we interviewed purchased quilts for a variety of reasons; for decoration around the home, display, or a functional use as a bedspread. Everyone [we] talked

with said that quilting or quilts they have purchased enriched their personal and business lives immensely.

Students provided useful feedback regarding the independent study course. Students seemed enthusiastic about the course design especially the creation of their own research projects.

I really liked that the class wasn't one-sided like most lectures are; we were all involved in the class. I feel like I learned more because of the discussion format.

I really liked the small class setting and that we had so much freedom in our projects. It was weird at first, but I did like being able to choose what I did and what our group was able to study. All of our groups are focusing on something different; we will each learn something from each other.

This class gave me a lot of wiggle room, as far as developing my own project. This is good, because in the professional world there won't always be a "How-to" list of instructions.

Students also commented on their improvement of communication and cooperation skills by participating in teams and as a class in the development of their research project, and in the writing and presenting of their research reports.

We worked together efficiently as a class. This experience was unlike any other group project that I have done. Our poster is professional looking and targeted to the quilt show audience. We will be representing Iowa State University. I am proud to be doing this and want to make sure [our work] is fair and accurate.

I learned a lot about teamwork. Working with my partner, and then later as a group to develop the poster presentation, I learned about adjusting my time and the need for flexibility.

At first [at the quilt show and sale], I was disappointed at the lack of interest in our poster. Things got a lot better when I just said hello to someone and introduced my classmates. The people we talked to learned something and actually thought about what we said after they left the show. It was great to see our hard work on display being well received. That was the highlight of the day.

Changes that students recommended to the course were largely logistical. The first tour was cancelled early in the semester due to a blizzard. This moved our scheduled tour and introduction to the community to the middle part of the semester, reducing the time available to students to visit Kalona for data collection. Students recognized that even without the setbacks caused by the weather, their projects required more time than allocated.

### **Implications and Ideas for Future Courses**

Student evaluations were positive, and the instructors concluded the course was beneficial to students. To better integrate students with the community, future independent studies will incorporate guest speakers from the community of interest. Students might also benefit from a more in-depth service project in the community. For our project, it would have been worthwhile to team with the local quilt museum and have our students work on a display within the museum, a conservation project focusing on one or more quilts in the museum, or a product development project to enhance selection in the museum's shop. Any of these projects would have further

integrated content-specific apparel program knowledge with real-world experience and provided the students with a more prolonged interaction with residents of the community. Possible future classes include summer session explorations of select textile cultures in Iowa or distance education courses in which students conduct research projects closer to their homes.

The revised strategies of this independent study course can be applied to other areas of study. For example, students in business courses could focus on marketing strategies employed by different cultural groups; students in anthropology could focus on acquiring a better understanding of distinct cultural practices related to dress or leisure practices; students in food science or dietetics could focus on foods specific to a cultural group; students in interior design could focus on how cultural aesthetics influence interiors; and students in child development could focus on child rearing practices within different cultural settings.

The key elements of this independent study that may be generalized to other disciplines include helping students understand qualitative research methods; applying their research knowledge to a sub-culture to which the students would have limited exposure; and enhancing the students' communication, cooperation, and team-work skills. Overall, the experience leading an independent study course allowed for both student and instructor growth and new knowledge development particularly in working as a team to conduct meaningful learning.

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