

EXPLORE INTERNATIONAL EDUCATION

In-Depth with Sonia Massari



Sonia Massari is director of the Gustolab Institute, Center for Food Studies, and academic and program director of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rome Center. She is the 2014 recipient of NAFSA's Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship Knowledge Community (TLS KC) Innovative Research in International Education award.

TLS KC Past Chair Susan Mennicke*, associate dean for international programs at Franklin and Marshall College's Joseph International Center, connected with Massari in November 2014 to discuss the growth of food studies worldwide and examine the important intersections between food experience design and international education.

Introduction

Food experience design courses are a pioneering and innovative direction in the field of international education.

The Gustolab Institute was the first center for study abroad programs dedicated to food studies. It was not only the first international study abroad pilot center implemented within food studies, but it was (and still is) a model for other centers, which were opened later in Italy and other countries.

Food studies is a new and innovative discipline. As recently as 10 years ago, the subject was rarely investigated (especially from the point of view of pedagogy and didactic methodology). When she began her work, Massari found it very challenging to explore food studies' transdisciplinary and multicultural approach, and to transfer certain methodologies to international education.

This is why Massari has studied the subject of food and has blended it with "design thinking" methodologies, creating innovative programs in study abroad that feature hands-on cultural immersion; intercultural and multicultural comprehension; and a critical approach for studying systems that are directly or indirectly linked to food cultures.

Massari concluded that new solutions were necessary given the need for a convergence of professional and academic competencies. These included the creation of new competencies that could sustain the processes of development and competitive change.

This approach has provided students in Gustolab's programs with a double benefit: making them knowledgeable and responsible consumers in the globalization age and offering valuable opportunities to advance their career through professional paths in the food field. By building these types of academic programs in the food field, students are able to work on real cases, create concrete projects, and obtain results that enrich their professional portfolios. For Massari, this approach includes new teaching and learning methods based on the use of video and storytelling techniques, ethnographical research, focus groups, interaction design methods, and future workshops, as well as design thinking techniques.

How would you describe the central importance of food experience design courses to international and global education?

The right to food is an inalienable right for every human being, offering regular access to a sufficient and adequate amount of food to be able to lead an active and healthy life. It should be understood not as a right to be fed but as a right to be in a condition to obtain food with autonomy and dignity.

The main goal of this course is to teach students to design new behaviors and create tools to support new healthier and more sustainable food cultures. "Design thinking" applied in settings such as nutrition could truly make a difference by providing new choices for the user and by creating options where they are not present.

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In my course, I use the design approach of "human value-centered design" or "people-centered design," which is a step forward in the evolution process of the design discipline. Design acts, in this case, as the promoter and facilitator of participatory and international exchange of knowledge, especially given that the users now increasingly tend towards sharing economies and experiences rather than only individual consumption.

The food experience design course influences the flexibility and originality in the problem-solving capacity of the student, and also helps the student to learn and better understand the particularities of different cultures. The student is not expected to design immediate and intuitive solutions to current problems within the food system (like marketing strategy), but to identify innovations that allow the end-users (consumers) to create their own paths and generate new knowledge and hence culture.

Designing a human experience is therefore, in my opinion, an important ability that everybody should possess, regardless of the chosen path of study.

In what ways does inquiry in this area represent innovation in the way we think about global education?

Transdisciplinarity, unlike multidisciplinary, allows for more interesting possibilities when highlighting the results of study and research in food studies. The process of scientific collaboration that is active in the food studies discipline involves the co-construction of knowledge rather than only an exchange of ideas and methods. Research results are the culmination of united knowledge using a principle of coherence rather than knowledge through the simultaneous use of different disciplines (as often happens in the multidisciplinary approach).

My main idea is to create higher and international education that are non-ideological or politically influenced. My purpose is educating students who will then be able to expand their "vision" in a critical way, by using as the means of study a complex domain such as food and nutrition and studying every level of the food supply chain from production to final consumption.

In this sense, I believe that the didactic model that I propose has significant benefits, because it is an educational method in which students gain the tools to analyze local and global reality and learn to work within them.

You highlight the importance of the "user" in the conceptualization of design courses. Can you say more about the importance of the interaction between the "expert" and the "end user" in your project?

The key idea in the food experience design course is the design of new tools and interactive artifacts and the creation of new food cultures through them. The course has to be developed together with the end-user communities, so that the new functionalities designed will support their real needs. It is a project-based course where practice is united with theory, and the conventional activities in classroom are designed to interact with the people community.

What topics would typically be covered in a food experience design course?

The course covers topics such as the exploration, research, transformation, and communication of food. An important part of the course is ethnographic research that is not limited to the study of the historical and sociological aspects of food, but encourages an analysis of the production, distribution, consumption, and communication of food.

Design thinking methods are used to give solutions to problems that are also not directly tied to the act of 'eating,' such as those relative to agriculture, stocking, production and distribution methods, and communication systems designed to support larger education, public awareness, and professional training.

What do you feel are the major challenges facing the world in terms of food production and food security?

One real challenge regards the search for sustainable methods of production. How is the food that we eat cultivated? How do we use the term 'sustainable' and do we truly know what it means? In the past decades, intensive agriculture has exploited fields to maximize productivity. The chemicals (pesticides and herbicides) used to support industrial agriculture do so at the expense of the environment, weakening the soil and reducing biodiversity.

Supporting sustainable agriculture means looking for alternative and innovative solutions, including through new digital technologies. Transitioning into the future, numerous social, economic, and environmental issues loom ahead. Today however, we are fortunate to find ourselves in a time unrivalled by any other, where technology and consciousness enable people to work together to understand our complex food system. Sustainable agriculture is the kind that, even when used for a long time, does not harm people who eat its products, nor does it negatively affect the communities that live around the productions and fields. For all these reasons, it merits to be promoted.

Another challenge is malnutrition. There is much work to be done on the paradox of malnutrition and obesity using information and especially education.

Finally, there is the challenge of food waste. In the world, an alarming 30 percent of food is wasted, not eaten or thrown out, not gathered in the fields or lost during distribution. This topic is very complex and brings to light the delicate subject of the value of food.

Therefore, we welcome design courses that facilitate the understanding of the value of food in culture and the creation of new solutions that are healthier and more sustainable. The food experience design course is a good practice that enables students to work collaboratively and to interact with a wide range of actors, such as citizens, policymakers, business actors, academics, and researchers.

How do NAFSA's goals for international education intersect with some of the solutions to food scarcity and insecurity?

Among NAFSA's goals, I will highlight the importance of encouraging and supporting intercultural learning to develop global competencies of students; identifying critical trends and issues; creating and disseminating knowledge and resources; and providing professional development opportunities responsive to the ever-changing needs of the field. These goals describe the current global needs very well.

We need consumers to be responsible and knowledgeable, able to understand and highlight diversity. We need food experts able to analyze and solve problems.

With food studies and the application of "design thinking" in academic and international curricula, we have a big opportunity: to unite different and contrasting materials of study; to study the evolution of phenomena through different perspectives; to design didactic processes and instruments for education where knowledge acquisition comes through practice and cultural experience; to build language and communication channels to enable the interaction of researchers, stakeholders, and users; and to diffuse the results of their research to a heterogeneous and large public.

Mennicke was chair of the TLS KC when this interview was conducted in November 2014.

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