“Agriculture and Man” (PRT2008: Pertanian dan Manusia): A course few want to learn it and to teach it

The course “Agriculture and Man” or “Pertanian dan Manusia” (course code PRT 2008) is perhaps one of the most maligned courses among UPM undergraduates. This course is compulsory for all undergraduates regardless of their degrees. So you have students from motley disciplines: music, social studies, engineering, medicine, and language studies gritting their teeth as they are “forced” to study a subject they complain has nothing or little to do with their degrees.

Uninspired students lead to blatant copying during an exam for Agriculture and Man (not my class!)
**Good heavens**, one batch of music undergraduates once exclaimed, **what has agriculture got to do with music?**

Good question. And to answer this question brings us to ask a much deeper and profound question: What is the purpose of a university? There are some popular misconceptions about the purpose of a university. Those in the academia field believe that a university is mainly about producing copious amount of research papers, patents, and commercialized products. Others in the public believe that a university is one that trains students for their future jobs.

Unfortunately, both of these groups miss the fundamental purpose of a university. Yes, yes, a university is a place to do research and a place to train future job employees. But the fundamental purpose of a university is to produce intellectuals – people who are aware of important issues and challenges in the world today and people who, by golly, can think and can solve problems.

Like a person who goes to a gym and builds huge muscles and become physically fitter, a university is liken to a mental gym where students come out with fitter brain muscles — mental capacities that are more alert, aware, sensitive, and proficient in thinking about issues and in solving problems.

We must not have students who are just proficient in their respective narrow field of expertise. In other words, we do not want engineering students, for example, who are proficient solely in, say, electronics, but they are ignorant on world issues such as the recent global financial crisis, food crisis, and climate change. Or ask proficient music students on their opinion about Malaysia’s plan to introduce genetically-modified (GM) mosquitoes to combat dengue, and those aforementioned students would only exclaim, “Mosquitoes that are what?”

Consequently, students in Malaysian universities should learn about agriculture. It is not because they can become potential back-up farmers but simply because agriculture is an important issue in Malaysia. Whatever happens to agriculture in this country affect us all.

Agriculture mainly produces food, and everyone — young and old, rich and poor, educated and uneducated — eats. No one escapes agriculture. Agriculture has helped to sustain our economy even in bad times. But agriculture is one of the main causes of detrimental climate change due to agriculture’s unsustainable activities (e.g., deforestation and emissions of nitrous dioxide). Malaysia faces
huge pressure from several international environmental groups on our palm oil industry. Topple our palm oil industry, and Malaysia enters into an economic crisis. Implausible? No, not when oil palm trees alone occupy nearly one-fifth of the total land area of this country.

Unfortunately, it isn’t just students who are whining about “Agriculture and Man”, but also some of the lecturers at my faculty. This is most unfortunate. My faculty should be extremely proud of this course which is offered as a compulsory course for all university undergraduates. This is a wonderful opportunity to “spread the word” on the importance of agriculture and inspire non-specialists to be enthused about agriculture. Instead, the overall impression I have is “Agriculture and Man” is treated as a burden by my faculty — something we can do without.

Professors, for example, are told not to teach this course. It appears that this course is beneath their level of expertise and not worth the professors’ time and trouble. Once, at a meeting, I suggested that my faculty write a textbook for this course. I even mentioned that I found a publisher who was willing to publish such a textbook. For my trouble, I was scolded. Yes, scolded for suggesting a textbook for “Agriculture and Man” be written! One professor even told me that I should think before I speak. Until today, I am bewildered on why I should be reprimanded for suggesting what academicians should do: write books for students.

In another case, one lecturer even remarked to his students in the first day of class that even he wondered why this course should be taught at all. When you have a lecturer who is uninspired to teach agriculture, are you surprised then that you get students uninspired about agriculture?

For me, I enjoy teaching this course, and I never turn down an opportunity to teach it every semester. I am glad to report that even though I start off with uninspired students at the beginning of the semester, at least some of my students feel differently about agriculture by the end of the semester. They grasp the importance of agriculture to them personally, the issues and challenges facing agriculture in the world and in Malaysia, and they also become more aware about the food items they see at the supermarkets.

Not all my students are converted, of course; only some — but I will take that.
Some of my students (Computer Science batch) and me in my PRT 2008 (Group 10): Session 1 (2010/11)

Why all the girls? Some of my students and yours sincerely for the Session 1 (2010/11), Agriculture and Man (Group 10)

See also

Rainbow Tears. A student’s blog on her (as well as her class’) blatant (and proud) cheating efforts during an exam for this course. Again, I like to stress emphatically that this is not my group.