

*Innovative Teaching Strategies for the Undergraduate Introductory Course in an Agricultural
Science Education, Communication, and Leadership Department*

M. Susie Whittington, Ph.D.

Whittington.1@osu.edu

Robert J. Birkenholz, Ph.D.

Birkenholz.1@osu.edu

Emily B. Buck, Ph.D.

Buck.210@osu.edu

Scott D. Scheer, Ph.D.

Scheer.9@osu.edu

Department of Agricultural Communication, Education, and Leadership

The Ohio State University

2120 Fyffe Road, Room 208

Columbus, Ohio 43210

614-292-6909

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Need for Innovation

The first course taken by undergraduate students in their major is critical for continuation and completion of their degree. It is also when many students are unsure about their major and are sharing their interests and academic plans with classmates who ultimately may switch or keep their major. Majors such as Agricultural Science Education, Communication, and Leadership often offer their own introductory courses while being part of one department. Issues that arise from such arrangements include inconsistencies in degree requirements, competition for students, and lack of departmental unity.

It is rare today to find departments of Agricultural Education that solely focus on Agricultural Science Education. Rather many departments in our field include areas of Agricultural Communication, Education, Leadership, and Outreach/Extension Education. How these departments are structured by major can vary depending on university/college formats and organization. An important consideration for our department with multiple majors was to intentionally explore offering introductory courses for each major or as one course across majors.

Methods

During a time of transition, this department underwent a complete overhaul and review of all its academic courses and majors. Much attention was given to both its undergraduate and graduate programs. One particular focus was on its undergraduate introduction courses. The department offered three undergraduate majors of Agricultural Communication, AgriScience Education, and Community Leadership in which multiple introduction courses were offered. Faculty across all majors worked together to plan requirements for each degree to best prepare students in their chosen major and future career opportunities.

One area that we explored was team teaching and that format's potential benefits for an introductory undergraduate course. Various studies have found advantages related to team teaching such as students large undergraduate classes valued diverse expertise and teaching styles (Hanusch, Obijiofor, & Volcic, 2009), another study on team-teaching across multiple undergraduate classes of the same course found the most critical factor for success was the composition of the instructors on the team (Yanamandram & Noble, 2005). They reported that "good teachers" were more important than "experts" of content knowledge. Based on the research literature and our own experiences, a new introductory course was developed with specific teaching and learning strategies.

Results

Department faculty leaders across three majors of AgriScience Education, Agricultural Communication, and Community Leaderships (two specializations: Community & Extension Education; Leadership) met extensively to examine effective strategies for teaching our introductory undergraduate courses. From the research literature and best practices for teaching and learning the following key components were implemented for an innovative and comprehensive approach:

- 1) Offer one undergraduate course for all three majors
- 2) Team-teach with faculty leaders for each of the majors/specializations
- 3) Focus on common aspects of each major rather than differences
- 4) Equal faculty involvement
- 5) About one quarter of class meetings for each major were held separately
- 6) Promote benefits for students to have an understanding across majors
- 7) Encourage unity among students as part of one department
- 8) Involve students who are minoring in the department as equals with our student majors
- 9) Class viewed as a gateway course for students having a positive relationship with the department.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

The team teaching approach by four faculty has been successful based on evidence from student evaluation reports, recruitment of new students, and overall unity within the department. The faculty instructors met regularly before, during, and after the course for continuous quality improvement since first offered in 2012. As the course evolved, guest speakers were included with leaders from the department, college, and university. Panel presentations were added with graduates of all three majors to share their experiences beginning as undergraduate students to gaining successful employment. The innovative teaching and learning strategies utilized in this course have resulted in positive outcomes for students which we believe can also benefit students in similar departments in the U.S. and beyond.

Costs/Resources

The greatest cost is of time and funds with the involvement of four experienced faculty members, however that is offset by the benefits of team teaching and others highlighted in the results section. The course utilizes the university's online learning management system for exchange of readings, visuals, presentation notes, and assignment submissions. All course resources including syllabus, readings, and assignments will be shared during the poster presentation along with active dialogue between presenters and conference participants.

References

- Hanusch, F., Obijiofor, L., & Volcic, Z. (2009). Theoretical and practical issues in team-teaching a large undergraduate class. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 21(1), 66-74.
- Yanamandram, V. K., & Noble, G. I. (2005). Team teaching: Student reflections of its strengths and weaknesses. In R. Atkinson & J. Hobson (Eds.), *Teaching and Learning Forum: The Reflective Practitioner* (pp. 1 – 10). Australia: Murdoch University.