Cultivating Creativity:
Fostering a Creative Environment in Agricultural Communications Courses

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

In the 21st century, new ideas and technology continue to shape and change our society. To keep up in this fast-paced environment, agricultural communicators must have the necessary skills and creative readiness in order to stay on the cutting-edge of their field (Irani & Doerfert, 2013). Priority Area 4 of the National Research Agenda (Edgar, Retallick, & Jones, 2016) emphasizes the importance of meaningful and engaged learning in all environments to meet the growing need for qualified individuals who can tackle major societal challenges and develop innovations that will drive economic growth today and in the future. Design thinking and learning is a holistic concept that enables students to work successfully in teams, facilitates creative thinking and problem solving, and prepares students to contribute creative innovations as adults (Zwirn & Vande Zande, 2015). Globally, businesses and corporations are increasingly seeking employees with creative thinking capabilities. In 2000, the U.S. Department of Labor implemented the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) to identify skills young professionals need in order to succeed in the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). Their report outlined a three-part foundation the commission believed was necessary in order to perform in the working environment. This included an emphasis on thinking skills, and more specifically creative thinking capabilities, as well as personal qualities and basic skills (U.S. Department of Labor, 2000). However, the United States is ranked 42nd out of 44 countries in the world in terms of innovative competitiveness (Atkinson & Ezell, 2012) indicating a crucial need to explore different pathways of encouraging creative thinking and problem solving to better equip today's students with the skills necessary to drive innovativeness in the future (UNESCO, 2013).

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

Undergraduate agricultural communications students at Texas Tech University are required to enroll in courses that examine the use of the Adobe Creative Cloud software for graphic design, photo manipulation, and print layout production and creation. To encourage creativity in students' work, the instructor of these courses sought ways to promote creative thinking capacities of students through environmental factors within the classroom. According to Glaveanu (2010), the ecological nature of creativity is directly linked to the environmental setting and social domain of the creator. McGregor (2007) identified several pedagogical tactics that encourage creative thinking and problem solving in the classroom which includes promoting collaboration with peers, utilizing music or lyrics during the creative process, and allowing time to plan or explore original ideas.

The instructor has implemented several of these methods into the curriculum to foster the creative environment and the creative process. To promote students using time to plan and explore original ideas, students are asked to map out their designs for each assignment by completing a rough sketch prior to beginning their design in the programs. Students are encouraged to use their sketches to break their designs down into the rough elements they need to create the overall art as a means of thinking more deeply about the steps and processes they will take to create their design. Once their designs are created, students are required to write a narrative illustrating the processes they used to complete the overall design and reflecting on

their design choices and how they fit the purpose and audience of their work. Additionally, during class workdays, the instructor plays music as the students work on and create their designs and sketches to help encourage creative thought. Finally, to promote collaboration with peers, students team up with their classmates to provide feedback and suggestions on their work near the end of the design process. During these peer reviews, they are encouraged to collaborate and engage in a dialogue with each other regarding their designs rather than simply critiquing them. Students were asked to evaluate the use of these means of encouraging creativity and the impact they had on their own creative development.

Results to Date/Implications

Several students did not self-identify themselves as creative thinkers; however, 31 out of 33 students said the overall classroom environment contributed positively to their creative process. The rough sketch was particularly useful for those students who were unclear about the direction of their projects. One student noted, “I changed my design twice since [the first] rough sketch, but I still made a new sketch each time I changed my mind.” Several students suggested that the rough sketch helped them to expand their abilities in the software programs. A majority of the students also agreed that listening to music in the classroom increased their ability to create original ideas and added to their overall environment. Students reflected on the process of playing music in the classroom stating, “It lets me focus on the task at hand and allows my creativity to flow,” and “I feel inspired by the music, and I am not constantly lost in my own thoughts.” Additionally, a majority of the participants indicated that although their environment affected the creative process, some of their inspiration for their designs originated from other students. One student said, “The best part was being able to explain my ideas to a classmate and having them help me figure out the best way to accomplish my goal.” However, although students enjoyed receiving a different perspective on their work, they found it challenging to receive criticism from peers as well as critiquing others’ work.

Future Plans/ Advice to Others

Since the feedback was overwhelmingly positive, the teaching methods will be continued in these courses in the future and will be expanded to other courses in the department. The instructor also plans to integrate different creative teaching styles into the curriculum in order to further promote a creative thinking environment.

In order to encourage learners to think creatively and engage in the assigned task, instructors must be open-minded and supportive as students explore their original ideas and ‘play’ with the software programs. Students often struggle with the brainstorming process of design because there is no “wrong” answer. Also, additional time to fully explain the expectations and process of peer-reviewing and collaborating with others are beneficial to helping overcome challenges with providing and receiving suggestions and criticism from peers.

Costs/Resources Needed

These teaching methods were very simple and free to implement. The instructor dedicated time in the course schedules for in-class workdays where sketches were completed, music was played, and peer reviews were conducted. Students enrolled in these specific courses were required to have access to Adobe Creative Cloud software; however, these teaching methods can be implemented into any classroom or subject matter.

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