

**Leadership Skill Development in a Student-directed Agricultural Communications  
Publications Production Course**

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### **Introduction**

Student-directed magazine production courses are designed to foster a hands-on learning opportunity for students in agricultural communications degree programs. Experiential learning courses like these simulate a ‘real-world’ work environment, where students are assigned roles and tasked with designing a magazine from conception to publication as a team (Hall, Rhodes, & Agunga, 2009). While technical journalistic elements such as writing and design are emphasized, the experiential component of these courses consequently allow students to develop strong soft skills such as leadership and collaboration (Morgan, 2010). Although there is overwhelming support for the introduction and integration of experiential education practices into undergraduate courses, minimal research has been done regarding the outcomes of those efforts on student’s success (Hall, Rhodes, & Agunga, 2009). Studies on student-directed publications courses are even more underrepresented. Of the studies that exist, few seek to understand the development of soft skills such as leadership. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to describe and understand the self-identified leadership skills of agricultural communication students serving as editors-in-chief in a capstone-level, magazine production course.

### **Conceptual Framework**

This abstract is part of a larger study which conceptually drew upon Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Kolb’s (1984) theory posits that learning is a cyclical process, where students practice concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. An abundance of research has been devoted to examining journalism courses within the context of Kolb’s cycle. However, the stage most often underemphasized in theory and practice in the classroom is reflection (Boud, Keough, & Walker, 2005). We found the same to be true regarding the course under investigation. As such, this study specifically focused on the reflective observation stage, collecting retrospective details on skill development from former editors’ points of view. This allowed us to gain insight into how that experience contributed to students’ leadership development both during their time as editors and into their professional careers.

### **Methodology**

Our target population for this study was current and former undergraduate students who served as editors-in-chief in an agricultural publications production course. Editors were students in charge of overseeing the development of the magazine and managing the student staff. We used department records to obtain a census of names and contact information of persons meeting this criteria. Thirty-two persons were identified as meeting this criteria. Using the contact information from department records, we sent recruitment emails to the prospective participants. If willing to participate, they were asked to share their availability. A basic qualitative research design was used for this study. We conducted one-on-one semi-structured interviews with twenty-six participants. We asked participants various questions related to skills needed to be a successful editor, high impact experiences, and competencies needed in their current careers. Due to the various geographic locations of the participants, they were given the option to interview in person, via the phone, or via web-conference. Each member of the research team transcribed their interviews. We then used open and axial-coding to analyze the transcripts.

### **Results/Findings**

The former student editors had a technical interpretation of leadership skill and readiness. The students believed they were adequately prepared to be an editor because they had the necessary hard skills such as writing, editing, designing, and photography. However, many shared they struggled with interpersonal skills such as the ability to motivate a team, empathy, balancing responsibilities, and being good listeners. Additionally, intrapersonal skills such as self-confidence (needed to lead others), decision making, and the ability to communicate a vision were some of the personal struggles they faced. Overall, students realized they did not possess the necessary soft and relational skills needed at the beginning of their editor journey. However, they improved in their soft skills with time. We observed that a lack of prior leadership experience was a commonality for those who struggled with soft and relational skills. For many of the interviewees, the editor role was their first formal leadership position. Furthermore, many had not taken any leadership development courses prior to their experience.

### **Discussion/Recommendations**

Students in agricultural communications capstone courses, especially those that are student-directed, have the unique opportunity to apply their skills in an environment that simulates the 'real world'. Although these capstone courses are primarily situated within the communications discipline, the opportunity to integrate leadership training should be recognized. Many of the interviewees believed they were qualified to serve as editors or leaders because they had the necessary hard skills to be successful. However, they did not account for the soft skills that were perhaps more necessary for leading and motivating a team. This perception may be a product of how students are selected for these editor roles. Many of the former editors believed they were selected because they had excellent writing, photography, and/or design skills. No one listed any soft or relational skills as a reason for gaining the position.

Although students enrolled in this agricultural communications course engaged in personal reflection/assessment of their abilities while acting as editors-in-chief, there was no time for formal reflective observation built into the course. As a result, some of the former editors expressed that the interviews were their first formal reflection about their time as an editor. According to Kolb (2015), this retrospective reflection is less ideal because it may hinder students' ability to fully assess the implications of their actions while engaged in an experience. Therefore, it is imperative to ensure that reflection activities are built into these project-based communications courses to ensure students fully complete Kolb's cycle by the conclusion of the course.

Future publications-focused capstone courses should use a criteria comprising of both hard and soft skills when selecting editors. It may also be beneficial to have student editors enroll in a personal leadership development/education course. These courses are typically designed to help students gain a better understanding of themselves and the more relational aspects of leading people. If a full course is not possible, a short-term leadership training program prior to beginning the editor role might help students to be more aware of what to expect when leading a team. This study also holds potential for informing curriculum development for other project-based or team-oriented communications courses. Educators teaching these courses should consider the benefits of emphasizing soft skill application, including leadership, into their classes.

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