

What'll Be? Using an Assignment Menu in an ACOM Publications Course

Dr. Lindsay Kennedy

Box 42131, 2810 15th St.

Lubbock, TX 79409-2131

806-834-8240

lindsay.kennedy@ttu.edu

Nellie Hill

Box 42131, 2810 15th St.

Lubbock, TX 79409-2131

806-742-2816

nellie.hill@ttu.edu

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Introduction/Need for Idea

Magazine production is a popular experiential capstone-level course taught in 11 agricultural programs nationwide (Cannon, Buck, & Specht, 2016) and is often viewed by students as essential for rounding out their educational experiences (Sitton, 2001) and preparing them for their careers (Rhoades, Miller, & Edgar, 2012). These courses focus on writing, layout and design, and photography, while encouraging students to apply the skills discovered through experiences in their degree program and, ultimately, publish and circulate a magazine (Rushing, Miller, Edgar, & Cox, 2014). A southern university teaches a senior-level publication course as part of its capstone ACOM block course structure. Students in the course produce a magazine from start to finish, including writing the stories, photographing subjects, proofing and editing content, and selling advertising. During the spring 2019 semester, 51 students were enrolled in the publication development course. This larger-than-normal class presented logistical challenges when considering how the normal assignment structure would be implemented. All previous issues of the magazine required each student to meet with their beat contact, develop story ideas and a list of sources, interview the sources, write a two-page feature, provide supplemental photographs and graphics, and sell a minimum of one page of advertising. The large class size outnumbered the available beat contacts on campus and in local industry, creating the need to rethink the assignment structure for the course. This innovative idea was the development and use of a unique assignment structure to provide diverse content in the publication, while providing students with a valuable learning experience.

How it Works

A new assignment structure was developed that allowed students to specialize in a specific skills area – writing, photography, or advertising – when completing the major assignments in the magazine course. This new structure, referred to as the “Assignment Menu” by the course instructor, had four options: (1) the Writer’s Special, which focused heavily on writing with a photography component and no advertising sales responsibilities; (2) the Jack/Jane of All Trades, which had balanced writing, photography, and advertising sales responsibilities; (3) Picture Perfect, which required visual storytelling through photography, a small writing piece, and one-page of advertising sales; and (4) Salesmen’s Delight, which focused heavily on advertising sales (two pages required) with a small writing and photography requirement. A predetermined number of positions were allotted for each of the assignment options based on the number of enrolled students. Although each assignment had a unique focus, all assignments were worth the same amount of points with writing, photography, and advertising sales weighted proportionately to the assignment’s purpose. While not every assignment had an advertising sales component, each required students to work with a beat contact to develop story ideas from which they would produce written and photographic work. Rubrics for each of the assignment formats were provided to students at the beginning of the semester. During the first week of class, students completed an application template for the assignment segment area of their choice. The application template required students to provide reasoning for why they were best qualified for the position, while identifying experience with that skill. Students had the option of providing supplemental materials to support their qualifications. The course instructor made the final decision on how assignments were awarded among the students. Once positions were assigned, students began working with beat contacts to develop story ideas and identify sources. Because the number of students outnumbered the regular beat contacts, groups of two to three

students representing different assignment options were divided among the beats. This ensured content diversity in how each beat/topic was covered. Students then completed their assignments according to each menu option's guidelines. The student-led editorial team selected the best articles from each of the menu options to be featured in the magazine's print edition. At the end of the course, students provided feedback regarding the new assignment process during a class discussion.

Results to Date/Implications

Overall, students in the course had positive feedback regarding the assignment structure. Students appreciated the opportunity to specialize in the communications areas they were strongest in while having some ownership in how they would contribute to the magazine. A student who completed the Picture Perfect assignment said, "I am not the best writer, nor am I the best salesman; however, I love taking pictures. I loved having the opportunity to choose." Students said the structure allowed them to focus on the elements they were most passionate about while getting experience in other areas. A student who served on the magazine's editorial staff suggested the menu options improved the quality of the magazine: "The menu produced artful stories and images the entire staff was proud of instead of just assignments everyone was required to turn in." Despite not requiring all students to sell advertising, there were still 51 pages of ads sold, which allowed for a 124-page issue – the largest yet. A few students said the menu options provided new content variety in the magazine, which had followed the same story structure for many years. One student said the menu "enabled each student to contribute their very best efforts and talents to the magazine's construction, which allowed for much-needed diversity" in the publication. The increased class size and larger sales expectations for the Salesman's Delight assignment did place pressure on existing advertising clients. Some students admitted the two-page sales requirement was harder than they expected, while others were grateful for the lighter writing responsibilities.

Future Plans/Advice for Others

This new assignment structure will continue to be used going forward in the magazine production course. The positive student feedback played an important role in this decision, but feedback will also be sought from the readership regarding the new diversity in article format, i.e., visual storytelling, college profiles, long features, etc. A clear rubric system for each segment was important to the success of the new structure. Because each assignment option weighted the three specific elements (writing, photography, and advertising) differently, giving students a clear understanding of how points would be awarded was a critical component of the new structure. Going forward, class enrollment should be considered when determining the number of positions for each "menu" option.

Costs/Resources Needed

All writing assignments were submitted using Microsoft Word, which is provided free to students through their university account. The magazine course utilizes Adobe Creative Cloud software for its production. Students submitted image contact sheets using Lightroom, and layout designs were produced using InDesign, Photoshop, and Illustrator. Students have access to monthly Adobe CC subscriptions for \$19.95. *The Agriculturist* is printed and mailed using funds from advertising sales. Based on ad sales and printing costs from previous issues, the new structure likely did not provide a cost savings for producing the magazine.

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