

Encouraging Media Literacy in an Agricultural Communications Course

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Introduction

Literacy is the basic function of gaining skills and knowledge to read, write, interpret and produce content or information (Kellner & Share, 2005). More specifically, media literacy is the ability to access, analyze, evaluate and create messages in a variety of forms (Aufderheide, 1993). The amount of media, advertisements, news, and other forms of communication increase every day, so it is important students learn how to process, evaluate and critically think about the overwhelming amount of media (Grigoryan & King, 2008). As media continue to grow, consumers of information still struggle to equip themselves with the proper skills to function in society regarding media literacy (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2011).

Media literacy is a powerful concept as it gives individuals the control to interpret information and make decisions for themselves in terms of culture, moral, values, and more (Kellner & Share, 2005). In society, the advantages to media literacy are overwhelming, but, in the classroom, many educators are realizing the value in teaching students how to access and evaluate content (Grigoryan & King, 2008; Van Deursen, 2017). With these factors in mind, a specific assignment was implemented in an agricultural communications course to teach students the basic principles of media literacy and encourage them to critique how media outlets were presenting agricultural issues.

How it Works

Students in an upper-level agricultural communications writing intensive course completed an “Ag in the Media” assignment to learn more about a current event or issue related to agriculture through a review of media coverage and additional background research. Students first completed an issue identification activity to address four questions that included: 1) What issue do you want to research more for this assignment? 2) Why did you select this issue? 3) What do you already know about the topic? 4) What do you hope to learn about the topic through this assignment?

After receiving instructor approval for the identified issue or topic, students created outlines that highlighted the key elements of the issue with suggested headings including background information, key stakeholders, points of controversy, and potential solutions. These outlines were then evaluated before students completed the next step.

The final aspect of this project was to complete an online search for media content about the topic and select at least 10 relevant articles published within the past three years. Students participated in an in-class activity to help them identify relevant content written using Associated Press style and journalistic principles. For the final report, students were required to review and synthesize media coverage about the issue in a brief report (approximately three pages, double-spaced). Students were provided with a detailed rubric prior to beginning the assignment.

Results to Date

The “Ag in the Media” assignment was implemented in a writing-intensive course in the Fall 2019 semester with 30 students completing the assignment. This was the first time this assignment was implemented, and many of the skills students were intended to develop through this assignment were not evident in the completed assignments. The average score was a 78.6% (59 points out of 75 possible) with scores ranging from 50.6% to 100%. While

grading the assignments, evidence suggested students did not fully grasp several key concepts.

In terms of content, students tended to choose very large, non-specific issues within the agriculture industry instead of honing in on a particular event or one aspect of the issue. With this challenge, many final papers were often vague when synthesizing and evaluating the media coverage. Students also struggled to identify key stakeholders involved in the issue. This could be due to a lack of comprehension involving the term stakeholders.

It was also surprising that many students included examples from non-media sources. Many of the materials summarized for the final paper were peer-reviewed research articles, which was not the intended focus of this assignment. However, college students are often required to find these types of sources when writing a research report and perhaps did not fully understand the nuance between peer-reviewed articles and popular press articles. Finally, students were required to cite their sources using footnotes or APA style. The course taught AP (Associated Press) style and it was clear students were confused about how to best cite the articles they used for their report.

Despite the challenges students faced, a few students did write excellent final papers demonstrating their ability to select an issue in the agriculture industry, research the topic, summarize the findings, and provide a thoughtful critique of related media coverage.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

This assignment will be implemented again because students have the potential to develop valuable media literacy skills through completing the specific tasks within the project. However, the challenges students encountered that resulted in poor grades suggests there is room for improvement. To ensure this assignment meets its intended purpose, instructors should more fully describe the concept of media literacy. A better understanding of this concept would help students recognize its relevance in many aspects of their lives now and in the future. Data should be collected to determine students' levels of media literacy before and after the course to further identify the assignment's role to encourage media literacy.

Planned changes to the assignment include providing an example of prior student work that meets or exceeds criteria set forth in the grading rubric and assignment description. Additionally, more time should be dedicated in class to identifying and critiquing media coverage of agricultural issues to help students understand where to find appropriate sources and how to synthesize that information. Students will also be encouraged to submit an initial version of the assignment to receive feedback and ensure they are taking the steps to ensure successful completion of the assignment. Specific areas students struggled with would benefit from more description. These items include: Identifying popular press articles, summarizing the issue, and attributing the information. Lastly, students should be given more direction on how to find news articles and utilize news-finding tools such as Google Alerts.

Costs/Resources Needed

No financial costs are associated with this assignment. However, a review of the submitted assignments demonstrates more time should be spent teaching this information in class and providing helpful resources.

References

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