

**In Times of COVID: Student Reflections of Working with Clients in an Agricultural
Communications Service Learning Course**

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Introduction/Need for research

In 2020, as traditional face-to-face courses were forced to shift online, some aspects of these classes had to be reconsidered. The change in modality created additional obstacles for those teaching service learning courses (Morton & Rosenfeld, 2021). Service learning is a pedagogy that connects classroom instruction with real-world community partners (Cress et al., 2013). For these courses, more consideration had to be placed on how to provide similar learning opportunities when many community partners were no longer be able to work with students due to COVID-19 safety precautions. In the required move to remote teaching in Spring 2020, Brooks (2020) made the already planned service-learning activity optional, but students in the course were innovative and found digital ways to connect with community partners. Although the integration of service learning in agricultural communications has been researched (Borron et al., 2015; Kelemen et al., 2009; Meyers & Irlbeck, 2014), there exists a need to document how the shift to online or hybrid learning during the COVID-19 pandemic impacted students' experiences when working with community partners, more commonly referred to as clients, in agricultural communications courses.

Theoretical Framework

Kolb's (1984) model of experiential learning served as the theoretical framework for this study. The model details four stages learners move through in experiential learning: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation.

Purpose and Research Objectives

The purpose of this research project was to explore how students perceived working with clients during the Fall 2020 semester in a service learning course. The specific research objectives were to 1) describe the working situation students experienced with their clients and 2) identify the key concepts students learned as a result of this experience.

Methodology

The population for this study was 25 students enrolled in an agricultural communications course at Texas Tech University. During the course, students worked with a self-selected client to complete three writing assignments. At the end of the semester, the students completed individual reflection papers with a series of prompts to encourage detailed feedback. These reflection papers served as the data for qualitative analysis. Using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), each researcher read the reflection papers and compared notes to establish the themes to address the research objectives. Efforts to establish research rigor were completed (Erlandson et al., 1993).

Findings

Three themes emerged from the analysis process to address the first research objective:

- *(Prior) Relationship is Key* – Students were comfortable working with clients, but those who already knew their client before the semester mentioned a positive experience was more possible due to a previous relationship with the client. “I knew the client previously, and so I had their trust.”

- *Location, Location, Location (of Meetings)* – Many students mentioned the challenges with meeting their client in person. However, this was not due to COVID restrictions, (although a few mentioned those) it was more about location of the client in respect to the location of the university. “The most challenging part...was the distance and having to do all of my interviews over the phone.”
- *Scheduling is Hard* – Many students struggled to set up the meetings to gather the needed information from their clients. Several students had to overcome their shyness to meet the deadlines. They also wrote about the difficulty to mesh schedules to move forward with their tasks. “The most challenging part was finding times that work for both parties.”

Four themes emerged from the data analysis process to address the second research objective:

- *Time is Valuable* – Students realized the value of time and how quickly it passes when they have deadlines to meet. They recognized they needed to make the most of the time they had with their client. “[The] major concepts I learned...were to be timely, time management, and to be prepared when I meet with my client.”
- *Strategic Client Selection* – Several students spoke about the need to be selective when picking the client. Others requested the client selection be done by the professor teaching the class or a list of potential (good) clients be shared with the students. “Select someone you already worked for, currently work for, or at least know personally.”
- *Question Preparation* – Students developed their ability to prepare and ask good questions during class and throughout the semester. “I learned the importance of having good and broad questions in order to collect more information.”
- *Writing is Key* – Most mentioned they improved their writing skills because of the required assignments. Several mentioned they were able to stay motivated to improve due to the working relationship they had with their client and the end use of the assignments. “Learning how to write for different aspects of the media was my biggest takeaway.”

Conclusions

Overall, students enjoyed the ability to work with real clients to complete course assignments. They moved through each stage of Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning. They completed concrete experiences through their interactions with their client, reflected on how the meeting went (reflective observation), made adjustments before the next meeting (abstract conceptualization), and created products to meet their client needs (active experimentation). Students learned skills related to client satisfaction, effective meetings, and communication methods. They also improved their writing ability through the purposeful assignments connected to the service learning experience. Notably, students did not fixate on the obstacles COVID-19 may have created; they gained valuable skills despite the challenges.

Implications/Recommendations

Although this course had to be adjusted to meet the COVID-19 safety protocols and hybrid modality, the students' feedback supports the decision to keep the service learning approach. This resulted in students experiencing a more “real” learning environment through their interactions with clients. Based on the student reflections, we recommend continuing this service learning experience, helping students select “good” clients, and adjusting assignments to allow some flexibility with the types of products they produce. Additional research should explore the “workforce ready” skills students gain in a service learning course.

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