Creating Awareness and Cultivating Interest: Using Non-traditional Projects to Promote Agricultural Mechanics Courses

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Agricultural education provides a variety of contexts in which experiential learning can be applied (Baker et al., 2012). Those experiences presented through the three-circle model of agricultural education (National FFA, 2021), specifically the FFA and Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) circles, are often utilized by agricultural education teachers to promote their agricultural education programs. This method of promotion is effective in highlighting those aspects of the program, but how can agricultural education instructors utilize rich learning experiences within the Classroom/Laboratory to promote their programs?

Agricultural mechanics is multi-faceted, and the skills developed through agricultural mechanics can be applied within all agricultural disciplines. Yet, preservice agricultural education teachers are entering agricultural mechanics courses at Oklahoma State University with limited experience in agricultural mechanics content and skill development (Wells et al., 2013). Due to the lack of prior exposure, preservice agricultural education teachers are reluctant to view agricultural mechanics as an area in which they could provide students with learning experiences to promote their programs beyond large scale project development (i.e., agricultural mechanics show). For this reason, teacher educator faculty at Oklahoma State University strive to model effective methods of highlighting classroom learning experiences to promote their courses. To increase the observability and trialability (Rogers, 2003) of effective strategies preservice agricultural education teachers have available to promote their programs, the innovative idea of a *pumpkin patch* to promote the AST 3011: Agricultural Structures course utilizing a non-traditional agricultural mechanics project was implemented.

How it Works

Understanding location, timing and visibility are key for a successful promotion, it was determined the ideal location for the *pumpkin patch* would be in the main lobby of Agriculture Hall at Oklahoma State University during homecoming week to go along with other activities sponsored by the college. Coincidentally, the week of Homecoming 2020 fell during the last week of October which enhanced the ambiance of a pumpkin patch. The first logistical step was to follow university policy regarding promotion and advertising on campus. We contacted the Executive Associate to the V.P. and Dean for the Ferguson College of Ag to obtain proper permits and reservations for the event. Next, we secured a university A-frame to display the informational poster which accompanied the pumpkin patch. The Executive Associate was gracious enough to donate the use of a university A-frame for the pumpkin patch poster free of charge.

The jack-o-lanterns displayed in the pumpkin patch were created by students in the AST 3011 course as part a unit on concrete preparation. Students learned how to accurately measure and mix concrete ingredients to obtain the ideal consistency for different projects. Students were graded on the completion of their jack-o-lanterns as part of the AST 3011 course. After completing their class project, students were encouraged to decorate their jack-o-lanterns for the promotional pumpkin patch. Although the contest was not a course requirement, students entered their jack-o-lanterns for the *People's Choice* award where the top three entrants based on popular vote earned prizes donated by the Agricultural Education, Communications and Leadership

department. The pumpkin patch poster included a QR Code for voters to access the *People's Choice* ballot. We created numbered leaves using a Cricut cutting machine and assigned each jack-o-lantern a number to anonymize the voting process. The jack-o-lanterns and A-frame with poster were placed in the main lobby from Monday, October 26, 2020, through Monday, November 2, 2020.

Results to Date

The Fall 2020 semester was the first time this innovative idea was implemented into the AST 3011 curriculum. Of the twenty students in the class, ten submitted their finished jack-o-lanterns for display in the pumpkin patch. The location for the pumpkin patch to promote the AST 3011 course proved to be ideal. Throughout the week the pumpkin patch was on display, 997 votes were cast. Students who chose not to participate expressed their disappointment for not participating after the weeklong promotion was complete. The course promotion was successful in creating interest in the course. Enrollment requests for the Spring 2021 and Fall 2021 semesters increased to the point additional seats were added to the course along with a waiting list. There has also been an increase in non-agricultural education majors requesting to enroll in the course.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The addition of the pumpkin patch innovation to the AST 3011 course was well received by students and Oklahoma State University administration and will continue in future semesters. Participation in the pumpkin patch will be built into the course syllabus as a graded assignment. Plans also include exploring additional locations for the pumpkin patch. A potential site is outside in front of Agricultural Hall to increase the exposure of the course and capture more potential voters. The outdoor location is contingent upon weather. Advice to others would be to limit the number of votes an individual is allowed to cast.

Cost/Resources Needed

Materials required for the pumpkin patch include a 2' x 3' poster mounted in an Oklahoma State University approved A-frame and a Cricut to create the numbered leaves to identify each jack-o-lantern. The jack-o-lanterns cost approximately $8.00 to make and students provided all their own materials to decorate the pumpkins (paint, glue, glitter, etc.). The cost of the A-frame was donated, and the materials for the leaves were already owned by the department (Value: $15). The only incurred cost was $30 to print the poster. The incentive prizes for *People's Choice* winners were donated by the department and included credit to the Oklahoma State University AGED Swag store (Value: $100).

References

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