Moving Forward: Use of Experiential Learning Opportunities to Promote Learning in an Introduction to Agricultural Communications Course – Meeting Future Needs of Industry

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Introduction

It can be accurately stated that most businesses fail due to poor business planning, lack of strong management, and the inability to bring a product or service to market and meet consumer demand levels (Horton, 2021). The same can be said in education. Research indicates that students "miss the mark" in university expectations (Cook & Leckey, 1999; Fraser & Killen, 2003; Hassel & Ridout, 2018), but rarely is it conjectured how educational institutions may fail to meet students' expectations (Rosenbaum et al., 2016).

The Gen-Z generation have experienced life through the access of available resources found on the internet through the use of the computer, tablet, or smartphone (Nandhakumar, R., 2019), and are skeptical of theoretically framed information and concepts, eschewing them for real-life content that can be verified instantly. Research indicated that "The current generation is technologically dependent and relies on audio, visual, [and] digital contents . . . and they want to be taught creatively and innovatively (Nandhakumar, R., 2019, p. 627). Unless the distance is closed between how today's students learn and common pedagogical practices, the educational system will become irrelevant (Tucker, 2014).

Technology is ever-changing the way we communicate in the field of agriculture, indicating a definite need for continuing updates to agricultural communication instruction (Kurtzo et al., 2016). A changing communications industry fraught with advancing technology indicates that flexibility of instruction is both a specified skill that is needed as well as a priority. As such, faculty are charged with meeting the needs of industry, and allowing students to enter the workforce with the ability to be versatile and incorporate elements of communications successfully (Morgan, 2013).

How it Works

In an effort to curate more flexible and versatile students a new course style will be implemented to an Introduction to Agricultural Communications Class. This progressive course style allows students autonomy in the way they complete class assignments. Experiential learning, first brought forth by John Dewey (1938) put an emphasis on this progressive learning style by explaining the importance of learning by doing or experience. In experiential learning, learners are involved, active, engaged, participants in the learning process. Learner participation is central, where "learning by doing" is a founding concept (Munge et al., 2018).

Students in an introduction to agricultural communications class will be presented with an assignment with limited parameters. Students will be asked to present a given topic using any means of communications to simulate an experience which they would be challenged with as an industry worker. The goal was for students to become more versatile, self-reliant, and understanding of their preferred modality of learning during the duration of this project. Giving the students the option of which outlet, they choose, brings forth an innovative and more specific curriculum to each student. Students were each given a list of agricultural communications

outlets (podcasting, social media, journalism, videography, photography, etc.) during class. Students were then asked to create a presentation using the software or outlet of their choosing that coincides with a topic. The parameters were limited and students were allowed creative freedom as to the form of communication (outlet) they chose for the assignment.
After completion of the project the students provided feedback to the instructor on how the project was executed and whether they perceived the use of industry software and outlets as engaging and beneficial to the instruction and retention of information.

Results to Date

This experiential assignment implementation provided students with the opportunity to utilize available resources to independently become more versatile within the aspect of agricultural communications. Following the implementation, students were pleased with the instruction and assignment. Comments included "I really like the idea for this . . . I [enjoyed] this because of the lack of parameters [allowing us] to use our own creativity and express our skills and ideas." Constructive comments by Lucy indicated that "I think this is a great idea, however, I think the class would need more guidance to be able to present information to the class. Some of us know very little about these platforms, I think if there was a section taught in class about the platforms and information on how to use each one would need to be provided."
It was noted that students appreciated the creative freedom and the introduction of software and outlets which would be used throughout their curriculum and career, as well as students requested instruction on the software/ outlets prior to the assignment.

Future Plans / Advice to Others

Students exposed to the introductory course in agricultural communications were afforded the opportunity to complete assignments in a format that aligned with the posits of Nandhakumar (2019), who indicated that today's GEN-Z population relies heavily on creative and innovative instruction. As such, future efforts for this class will involve the use of additional assignments targeting the experiential mode of instruction, applying more real-life practices (ie., podcasting, social media, videography, etc.) prevalent in agricultural communications. Additional research targeting the implementation of this innovation through use of an experimental design should be considered. What is more, student responses as to value of the instructional modality should be collected in future classes for confirmation of the value of the innovation.

Costs / Resources Needed

There is not an excessive cost associated with experiential learning in agricultural communications projects. Software and outlets utilized during this experiment were either of no cost or provided to students from the university. The students utilized social media platforms (Instagram, Facebook, etc.), the Adobe Creative Suite, Microsoft Word, video production and photography equipment all of which was provided by the school or free to access.

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