

Improvisation for Agricultural Communicators: Using Reflections to Investigate the Effect of Role-Play On Students' Empathy Development

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Introduction

Empathy is one of the most essential skills agricultural communicators need to engage in civil discourse about contentious public issues (Leskes, 2013; Qu et al., 2018). Goldstein and Winner (2012) found that empathy can, in fact, be developed through acting exercises, especially improvisational role-play, because students practice communicating, empathizing, and adopting the perspectives of others (Koblar et al., 2018; Latiff et al., 2018; Walther et al., 2019). As future professionals, it is important that students studying agricultural communications have the opportunity to develop empathy during their degree program (Harsh et al., 2018). We conducted an action research project that is the first of its kind to investigate the effect of role-play on agricultural communications students' empathy development. Our study supports priority three of the American Association for Agricultural Education's 2016–2020 national research agenda, which seeks to prepare a sufficient scientific and professional workforce that addresses 21st century agricultural challenges.

Theoretical Framework

We used Kolb and Kolb's (2012) experiential learning theory to guide the study, which posits that students gain knowledge through a recursive process of abstract conceptualization (e.g., thinking), active experimentation (e.g., doing), concrete experience (e.g., feeling), and reflective observation (e.g., reflecting). In our study, students in the control group reviewed readings (abstract conceptualization), engaged in a class discussion (concrete experience), and responded to reflection questions (reflective observation). Thus, they did not engage in active experimentation. Students in the treatment group, however, did complete Kolb's learning cycle by reviewing readings (abstract conceptualization), participating in role-play (active experimentation), engaging in a class discussion (concrete experience), and responding to reflection questions (reflective observation).

Methods

We used a quasi-experimental research design (Mertler, 2020) with a sample consisting of agricultural communications students enrolled in sophomore and senior seminar courses ($N = 66$). During four classes throughout the Fall 2021 semester, we delivered a lecture to the control group pertaining to relevant science communications skills needed to meet industry demands (i.e., brand assimilation, consumer engagement, public relations, content marketing). We facilitated a class discussion after students in the control group read publications supporting opposing perspectives of real-world agricultural case studies demonstrating lecture topics. We delivered the same lectures to students in the treatment group. Then, students in the treatment group found a partner, and each partner read publications supporting one perspective of the same case studies, as opposed to reading about both perspectives. Before engaging in role-play by adopting the perspective they read about, we briefly shared communication strategies they could use to engage in civil discourse with their partner. For example, a Bayer account executive who supports glyphosate-based weedkiller would help a new employee, who is skeptical of the product, assimilate to the brand. Then, we facilitated a class discussion.

We created four reflection questions that students in both groups answered at the completion of each discussion (i.e., *What do you think was the purpose of this lecture/discussion?*; *What did you learn from this lecture/discussion?*; *How do you think the knowledge/skills you gained from class today will benefit you in your future career?*; *Is there anything else you would like to share*

with us about your experience in class today?). Based on student attendance, we received 60 completed reflections from the control group and 69 from the treatment group after all four classes. We conducted a qualitative content analysis of student reflections to compare the similarities and differences between responses from the control and treatment groups (see Table 1; Krippendorff, 2004). We selected key words and phrases from student reflections that appeared at least four times and generated word clouds to display the nature of students' learning in each group.

Results

The breadth of learning that occurred between students in the control and treatment groups varied (see Figure 1). Students in the control group noted, through their reflections, that they gained content-specific knowledge related to the role of science communication in agricultural brand assimilation, consumer engagement, public relations, content marketing. Although some students in the control group did note the importance of understanding different perspectives, communicating shared values, and having empathy, these words/phrases did not appear consistently. Students in the treatment groups, however, indicated a blend of content-specific learning empathy-related learning took place as they consistently reflected on lecture topics and the need to understand different perspectives, communicate shared values, demonstrate empathy, and avoid emotional responses during conversations about contentious agricultural issues.

Figure 1

Word Clouds Generated from Student Reflections in the Control Group (Left) and Treatment Group (Right)



Conclusions and Recommendations

Students in the treatment group, who actively experimented by engaging in a role-play exercise, experienced empathy-related learning more than students in the control group who only engaged in a class discussion, as indicated through their reflections (Kolb & Kolb, 2012). We believe role-play is a valuable instructional strategy and recommend instructors creatively implement role-play exercises with agricultural communications students to help them complete the experiential learning cycle and, as a result, develop empathy skills. In the future, scholars should investigate if students experience a sustainable change in empathy after engaging in similar activities over the course of their degree program.

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