

**A Case Study Exploring the Impact of Introductory Agricultural Communications  
Coursework on Non-Majors' Perceptions**

**Joshue Lewis**

Graduate Student

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University

joshuele@ttu.edu

**Kylie Harlan-Smith**

Lecturer

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University

kylie.harlan@ttu.edu

**Clarissa Darby**

Doctoral Candidate

Department of Agricultural Education and Communications

Texas Tech University

cladarby@ttu.edu

## Introduction

Agricultural communications plays a critical role in bridging the gap between the agriculture industry and the public, especially as consumers become increasingly disconnected from the food and fiber production. As the field rapidly evolves, previous literature emphasizes that universities' agricultural communications curricula must adapt just as quickly to remain relevant (Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Irlbeck & Akers, 2009). While prior research has explored the competencies students need to succeed in the industry (Kurtzo et al., 2016; Leal et al., 2019; Leal et al., 2020; Wyss & Cletzer, 2023) as well as incoming agricultural communications students' perceptions of their academic programs (Watson & Robertson, 2011), less attention has been given to how students outside the discipline perceive the field. In particular, little is known about how introductory coursework may shape non-majors' understanding of agricultural communications. Introductory courses aim to familiarize students with foundational concepts, terminology, and can challenge students' stereotypes, increase awareness, and appreciation for the field (Fedesco et al., 2017). Therefore, this study aimed to explore how an introduction to agricultural communications course at Texas Tech University shaped non-agricultural communications majors' perceptions of the field. The following research questions guided this study: (RQ1) What are students' perceptions about agricultural communications before taking an introductory agricultural communications course? (RQ2) What are students' perceptions about agricultural communications after taking an introductory agricultural communications course?

## Conceptual/Theoretical Framework

This study used the Constructivism Theory to explore how students actively construct their understanding of agricultural communications. Traditional views of knowledge are usually static; however, constructivism posits that learners build knowledge through their experiences and cognitive frameworks (Grant & Nanjappa, 2003). According to this epistemological viewpoint, meaning is actively constructed through personal experiences and relationships, while reality is subjectively created. (Oanh & Nhung, 2022). This study highlighted how undergraduate students created their definitions, perceptions, and views of agricultural communications based on their academic and personal experiences. Their prior knowledge, including any exposure to agricultural communication concepts, and interactions with peers and instructors during the introductory course, shaped their understanding of the field.

## Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design using a single case study to explore 25 undergraduate agricultural major students' perceptions of agricultural communications before and after an introductory course (Swanborn, 2010). This case was based on undergraduate students enrolled in an Introduction to Agricultural Communication course who are agricultural majors from disciplines other than agricultural communication at Texas Tech University. Purposive sampling was used to select students in the course (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data was collected through a two-part reflection activity. On the first day of class, students wrote their initial definitions and perceptions of agricultural communications on sticky notes, followed by a class discussion to elaborate and confirm their responses. The same activity was replicated on the last day of class, enabling a direct comparison of pre- and post-course perceptions and illustrating shifts in understanding. All responses from the sticky notes and transcribed discussions were collected for subsequent open coding and thematic analysis to identify key themes and patterns. To ensure rigor, the analysis included an audit trail of coding decisions,

triangulation of data from both sticky notes and class discussions, and peer debriefing to confirm emerging themes. This approach offered rich, contextualized data essential for capturing the nuances of their evolving viewpoints.

## Results

For RQ1, five overarching themes emerged from initial reflections. *Disseminating Information About Agriculture* highlighted the general transfer of agricultural knowledge, often from producers to consumers, and included concepts like sharing factual information. *Building Connections in Agriculture* focused on fostering relationships within the agricultural sector, encompassing professional networking and fostering trust between stakeholders. *Using Communication Skills* touched on practical aspects like marketing, writing, and photography. The fourth theme, *Educating the Public About Agriculture*, emphasized the role of this field in informing those outside the industry. Lastly, *Communicating the Importance of Agriculture* underscored the importance of broader advocacy for the agricultural industry. RQ2 revealed four overarching themes. After the course, students' perceptions of agricultural communications frequently converged on *Using Various Communication Methods*, recognizing the diverse channels and strategic planning involved in effectively conveying messages. The theme *Communicating About Agriculture* became more focused, encompassing the entire process of sharing agricultural information. A clearer understanding of target audiences materialized in the theme *Reaching Different Audiences*, as students articulated the need to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences by tailoring messages for accessibility. Finally, *Educating the Public About Agriculture* persisted as a theme, but with a more nuanced understanding of how various communication methods facilitate this outreach.

## Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

The findings of this study indicated that an introductory agricultural communications course can influence non-majors' perspectives of the field. Initial reflections revealed that most students entered the course with more generalized perceptions of agricultural communications, mostly focusing on the act of sharing information in the form of education and advocacy. After completing the course, however, students demonstrated a more in-depth understanding of agricultural communications and were able to speak specifically about the importance of strategy, communication channels, and audience analysis. These results support the value of offering agricultural communications coursework to non-majors. While previous research has focused on preparing agricultural communications majors for industry roles (Kurtzo et al., 2016; Leal et al., 2019; Leal et al., 2020; Wyss & Cletzer, 2023), this study shows that non-majors may also benefit from exposure to the field. Students' shift from general ideas to more detailed and specific knowledge about the field reinforces the need for introductory courses to challenge assumptions and build greater understanding (Fedesco et al., 2017). As curricula continue to evolve to meet industry needs (Doerfert & Miller, 2006; Irlbeck & Akers, 2009), including non-majors in these efforts may help further bridge communication gaps within agriculture and encourage more informed engagement from non-major students. Future research should explore the long-term impact of introductory agricultural communications courses on non-majors' engagement with and perceptions of the agricultural industry. Additionally, investigations could assess the effectiveness of different pedagogical approaches in these courses to optimize the depth and nuance of understanding gained by non-majors.

## References

- Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Doerfert, D., L. & Miller, R., P. (2006). What are agriculture industry professionals trying to tell us? Implications for university-level agricultural communications curricula. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 90(3). <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1273>
- Fedesco, H.N., Kentner, A., & Natt, J. (2017). The effect of relevance strategies on student perceptions of introductory courses. *Communication Education*, (66)2, 196-209, doi: 10.1080/03634523.2016.1268697
- Irlbeck, E. G., & Akers, C. (2009). Employers' perceptions of recent agricultural communications graduates' workplace habits and communication skills. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 50(4), 63–71. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2009.04063>
- Kurtzo, F., Hansen, M., J., Rucker, J., K. & Edgar, L., D. (2016). Agricultural communications: Perspectives from the experts. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 100(1). <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1019>
- Leal, A., Lawson, K. M., Telg, R.,W., Rumble, J., N., Stedman, N., LaMee, P., & Treise, D. (2019). Exploring beyond the obvious: Social skills needed for agricultural communication baccalaureate graduates. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 103(2). <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2188>
- Leal, A., Lawson, K. M., Telg, R.,W., Rumble, J., N., Stedman, N., LaMee, P., & Treise, D. (2020). Technically speaking: Technical skills needed for agricultural communication baccalaureate graduates. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 104(3). <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2339>
- Nanjappa, A., & Grant, M. M. (2003). Constructing on constructivism: The role of technology. *Electronic Journal for the integration of Technology in Education*, 2(1), 38-56.
- Oanh, P & Nhung, N. (2022). Constructivism learning theory: A paradigm for teaching and learning English in secondary education in Vietnam. *International Journal of Scientific and Research Publications*. <https://doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.12.12.2022.p13211>
- Swanborn, P. (2010). *Case Study Research: What, Why and How*. SAGE Publication, Inc.
- Watson, T. & Robertson, T., J. (2011). Perceptions of agricultural communications freshmen regarding curriculum expectations and career aspirations. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 95(3). <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.1161>
- Wyss, E., & Cletzer, A. (2023). Agricultural communications practitioners' perspectives on skills and competencies graduates need to be career ready: A mixed methods study with implications for undergraduate programs. *Journal of Applied Communications*, 107(2). <https://doi.org/10.4148/1051-0834.2471>