

**Transforming a Course Assignment into Peer-Refereed Journal Articles: Developing
Historical Researchers and Scholarly Writers for Agricultural and
Extension Education**

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

This three-credit-hour, semester-long course seeks to inform and strengthen graduate students' understandings of the philosophical and historical underpinnings of Agricultural and Extension Education (AEE) in the United States. The works of philosophers, prominent individuals, and thought leaders who impacted the development of AEE are featured, e.g., John Dewey, Seaman Knapp, Rufus Stimson, and Alfred C. True, among others. Seminal historical events in the development and growth of AEE are explored, such as federal legislation grounding the tripartite mission of land-grant institutions. The course emphasizes the role of students' philosophical orientations and knowledge of history in their professional lives. Many of the Doctor of Philosophy degree-seeking students in the authors' academic departments take the course as a core requirement, as do some master's degree-seeking students as an elective. Although some students may be generally "good writers" overall, few have experienced, practiced, or produced the level of scholarly writing required of high-quality theses and dissertations, research conference abstracts and papers, or peer-refereed journal articles.

How it Works/Steps

Writing historical research narratives (HRNs), with the complementary aim of fostering a community of scholars, researchers, and writers, accounts for 40% of students' overall grades in the course. Students learn by reading and writing extensively about the subject. The HRNs involve multiple drafts, copious feedback and editing, and extensive rewrites. Students receive critiques and suggestions for improvement from their classmates and the instructors. More than only a course grade, the larger aim is to write a manuscript appropriate for peer review. As such, students' grades do not hinge on acceptance for presentation or publication but rather on whether their manuscripts are worthy of submission to undergo peer review and consideration for future sharing within their disciplines. This aim often requires additional work extending past the semester of students' enrollment. In these cases, students receive an "Incomplete" grade, which does not extend beyond one year. Manuscript specifications include: 20 to 25 pages in length, double-spaced, excluding references; 30 to 40 citations, including primary and secondary sources; and subjecting sources to external and internal criticism (Johnson & Christensen, 2012; McDowell, 2002). Other principles of conducting historical research, such as the avoidance of presentism, i.e., not applying contemporary meanings or contexts to interpret and portray historical events and actors, as well as the corroboration of findings to arrive at interpretations and conclusions (Johnson & Christensen, 2012) are followed. The students are also expected to apply the style set forth in the most current edition of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (2020) when preparing their manuscripts. This assignment emphasizes product AND process with an eye toward students' future careers as academicians, scholars, and researchers and their need to write in scholarly, rigorous, and compelling ways.

Results to Date/Implications

To date, 14 of 36 HRNs, or 39% of one co-author's students, have been published in four different peer-refereed journals, including the *Journal of Agricultural Education*, the *Journal of Applied Communications*, the *Journal of International Agricultural and Extension Education*, and the *Journal of Research in Technical Careers*. Their topics have ranged from service-learning as a method of instruction in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) to agricultural extension in Sub-Saharan Africa during and after its Colonial Era to decentralization of Mexico's agricultural extension services and rural poverty alleviation to teaching students with special needs in SBAE. One manuscript was named the *Journal Article of the Year* for its publication forum, and another was identified by its platform as one of the 10 "most popular" papers; a position it held for more than four years. Of 15 students, the other co-author has had five HRNs achieve publication (~33%). Students' research topics ranged from use of the problem solving method in SBAE to outdoor youth education in a southern state to the admittance of females by the National FFA Organization. One of the articles was recognized as *Article of the Year* for the journal in which it was published. In addition, posters and conference presentations have emanated from the assignment, as presented at regional and national venues featuring AEE research. Two manuscripts were reviewed for presentation at the 2026 national AAEE meeting.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Whether Jean Piaget said *one does not learn to swim by sitting on the shore* is questionable. Nonetheless, the point stands: we learn to swim by getting into the water and attempting to swim. The same principle applies to scholarly writing. The instructors intend to continue with the HRN assignment and encourage others to consider something similar in their courses. For instance, manuscripts examining a variety of philosophical stances, in concert with course content, whether agricultural communications, education, Extension, or leadership, could be structured as assignments intended to augment student learning while also yielding drafts that, with additional work, lead to scholarly presentations and publications. Such a collaboration might be a first for the student authors while complementing the professional development and publication needs of their instructors as co-researchers and co-authors. The learning exercise, above all, is a *continuous improvement undertaking*, requiring multiple readings, copious editing, and extensive rewriting in the pursuit of clarity and resonance. Students and instructors, therefore, must be prepared for such, which may require some *selling* on the latter's part. Not all students may be up to the task, but without being challenged by such an opportunity neither they nor their instructors will ever know. Other than the students' growing competence as scholarly writers, the confidence associated with achieving a scholarly publication may be equally or even more significant in presaging their future careers, especially if intending to join the academy.

Cost/Resources Needed

No additional costs are incurred other than the usual associated with enrolling in a three-credit-hour graduate course at the authors' respective institutions. Some students have opted to enroll in one-credit hour of independent study in accord with the additional effort they anticipated to complete their HRNs after the course ends. This is encouraged but not required. Depending on the research topic, purchasing or renting books might be necessary. Travel to a specific archive or library has not arisen, but that could be an additional cost, as determined by what students choose to research. In addition, journal publication fees may apply.

References

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