

**Strategic Creativity Abroad: An Ideation Journal Framework for Agricultural
Communication Study Abroad Programs**

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Introduction & Need for Innovation

When it comes to agricultural communications, strategy plays a critical role; however, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to the strategic communication process (Proctor, 2008). Additionally, students may not always have structured opportunities to intentionally connect their observations to inform communications within the agricultural communications industry. Developing strategic communication skills requires more than exposure to new environments; instead, it requires purposeful reflection, observation, brainstorming ideas, and application. The study abroad experience may provide students with the opportunity to engage, observe, and reflect with diverse cultures, perspectives, and communication practices and apply brainstorming techniques to real-world settings (Salisbury et al., 2013). Creative work begins with the generation of ideas that are both original and useful, making brainstorming and ideation critical components of the creative process (Runco & Jaeger, 2012).

To address this need, an Ideation Journal was developed for a faculty-led study abroad agricultural communications course in Italy. The journal was designed to guide students in collecting visual, cultural, and communication-based inspiration while encouraging strategic thinking throughout their international experience. Journaling can stimulate creativity by providing space for reflection, exploration, and the generation of new ideas (Miller, 1979; Moon, 2000). The purpose of this innovative poster was to explore student perspectives of the Ideation Journal and its impact on strategic thinking.

How It Works

Eighteen students within a two-week study abroad course were exposed to 11 agricultural organizations in Italy and then tasked with developing a communications plan for one organization due three weeks after the conclusion of the study abroad. Throughout the experience, students were asked to complete a brainstorming activity in a paper book with structured prompts, titled the Ideation Journal, to document inspiration and ideas for their communications plan. Rather than serving as a travel diary, the journal functioned as a strategic thinking and idea-generation tool where students placed images, sketches, artifacts/memorabilia, notes, and context from their journey. During the trip, students were encouraged to move beyond documenting experiences and instead connect their observations in Italy to possible communication campaigns, marketing concepts, and communication practices.

Prior to departure, students participated in a training session introducing the purpose of the journal, instructions and expectations for their participation, and examples of entries. This training ensured all students had a shared understanding of the journal's purpose and expectations. Throughout the trip, students collected photographs, artifacts, quotes, sketches, and observations related to branding, communication, culture, and agriculture at agricultural organizations and during cultural visits. Guided journal prompts at three locations in Italy encouraged students to analyze what they observed, consider target audiences and messaging strategies, and identify elements that inspire creative thinking and strategic insight. Upon completion, students shared their journal spreads with the teaching team to describe the collected artifacts and why they were included in their Ideation Journal.

Results to Date & Implications

Observations from journal entries suggested students were beginning to connect marketing concepts with real-world agricultural communication practices through direct experience through several themes: *learning through experience*; *branding approaches*; *storytelling*; *people, relationships, and community*. We analyzed verbal reflections and overall observations of the ideation journals for preliminary findings. Students frequently reflected on *learning through experience*, particularly the opportunity to observe agricultural production and consumer interaction within the same setting. Students also noted the use of modern and simplified *branding approaches*, emphasizing clean logo design and visual consistency. *Storytelling* emerged as a recurring concept, with students identifying stories centered on family, tradition, and organization history. Additionally, students recognized the role of *people, relationships, and community* connections when communicating agricultural stories and sharing concrete experiences. These findings suggested international experiences may encourage students to think more critically about strategic communications and storytelling within agricultural communications contexts.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Reflecting on high impact experiences has been proven to enhance student learning (Miller, 1979); however, minimal experiences have been focused on using reflection in the agricultural communications brainstorming process. Brainstorming is a unique process to the individual, and the flexibility with instructions forced students to interpret experiences themselves rather than simply complete a prescribed assignment. This encouraged students to move beyond memorization and construct their own understanding (Kolb, 1984). Providing a practice opportunity prior to the experience would allow for a stronger understanding of expectations while helping students balance creative freedom with assignment objectives.

When completing this activity, we recommend instructors provide a ‘test run,’ where students have the opportunity to practice gathering similar materials with a specific intention, such as building ideas for communication and marketing. Throughout high impact experiences, which may be time consuming, instructors must provide ample time for students to journal and reflect. Additionally, instructors should consider implementing a check in or monitoring process to help guide the students’ strategic thinking and idea development. Further, we encourage students to also verbally reflect on their materials, which encourage students to connect ideas and content to their projects. Finally, this approach could be adapted for use in a traditional agricultural communications classroom setting, where students could collect artifacts to brainstorm collateral. This reflection process could strengthen critical thinking, strategic communication skills, and creative ideation development.

Costs & Resources Needed

The implementation of the Ideation Journal can be adapted to fit a variety of budgets. The materials used for this specific project included printed journals made in Canva, instant portable photo printers (\$80), photo paper, adhesive supplies, stickers, washi tape, and other creative materials. Students were asked to bring their own stationery supplies, such as markers, pens, and other desired supplies for personalizing their journals.

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