

The Traitors — Ag Comm Edition:
An Experiential Approach to Teaching Audience Adaptation and Strategic Communication

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Introduction

Agricultural communicators must convey complex agricultural concepts to diverse audiences with varying levels of agricultural knowledge, experience, and interest (Kurtzo et al., 2016). As the public becomes increasingly disconnected from production agriculture, effective communication promoting understanding requires communicators to recognize audience knowledge, adapt messages, and select language accordingly (Clemons et al., 2018; Frick et al., 1991). Developing these competencies requires learning experiences moving beyond lecture and allowing students to actively practice audience adaptation (Wurdinger & Carlson, 2009). Experiential learning is a cyclical process in which students engage in an experience, reflect, form conceptualizations, and apply learning in future contexts (Coleman et al., 2024; Kolb, 1984; Roberts, 2006). Game-based activities can facilitate this process by engaging students in authentic problem solving and communication (Plass et al., 2015).

We developed *The Traitors: Ag Comm Edition* to address this instructional need by adapting the social deduction format popularized by contemporary games and television series such as *The Traitors*. In social deduction games, participants communicate under conditions of incomplete information, interpret others' messages, and adapt their communication strategies as new information becomes available (Brandizzi et al., 2022). Drawing on social deduction games' incomplete information and need to interpret and adapt messages, this activity intentionally created unequal access to information, requiring students to explain agricultural concepts to peers with different levels of knowledge while reflecting on audience assumptions, language choice, and message framing. Thus, the purpose of this activity was to provide an experiential learning opportunity for students to practice audience adaptation, strategic communication, and intentional language selection while communicating agricultural concepts under conditions of unequal information.

How It Works

The Traitors: Ag Comm Edition used social deduction to reinforce audience adaptation and strategic communication. The activity required approximately 30-to-45 minutes to complete and can be adapted for groups of various sizes. Prior to implementation, instructors selected several agricultural concepts (e.g., sustainability, food security, biosecurity, animal welfare, traceability, and agricultural advocacy) and prepared one role card for each participant. Most participants received the same agricultural concept role card each round, while one or more participants received a "traitor" role card identifying their role without revealing the assigned concept. Participants privately reviewed their role cards before taking turns providing a one-sentence clue describing the concept over several rounds. Clues could not include the assigned term, its definition, spelling, or obvious derivatives. Instead, we asked participants to communicate the concept through examples, descriptions, experiences, or related ideas. Because "traitors" did not know the assigned concept, they had to rely on contextual clues from others to infer the topic and contribute a believable response. After all clues were shared, the group discussed and voted to identify the "traitor" before the instructor revealed both the "traitor(s)" and the concept.

The activity concluded with individual reflection and a facilitated class debrief. Reflection prompts guided participants to analyze how they selected clues, examine how assumptions about audience knowledge and agricultural jargon influenced communication, and consider how they would adapt explanations for audiences without agricultural backgrounds

(Ingles & Retallick, 2025). The debrief provides an opportunity for students to interpret gameplay, identify broader implications for audience adaptation and message framing, and consider applications in future agricultural communication contexts (Schürmann et al., 2025).

Results to Date

We first implemented *The Traitors: Ag Comm Edition* with 49 undergraduate agricultural communications students in a sophomore seminar-style course. Following the activity, students completed an individual reflection and participated in a guided class debrief. Thematic analysis of student reflections indicated increased awareness of audience adaptation and intentional language selection. Many participants recognized they would modify their explanations for individuals without agricultural backgrounds by reducing jargon, providing additional context, and using more familiar language. One participant wrote, "I would say terms that aren't 'jargon' to others. Words that can be easily interpreted." These responses suggest students moved beyond identifying communication barriers to intentionally considering audience-centered communication strategies. Reflections also revealed increased awareness of how agricultural terminology can both connect with and exclude audiences. One participant noted, "There is a bit of a lingo that some may not understand," and another reflected, "For biosecurity, someone said plastic boots. If you didn't raise pigs growing up, you wouldn't know what they were used for." Students recognized effective communication depends not only on content knowledge, but also on understanding the audience's experiences, prior knowledge, and frame of reference.

Additionally, an unexpected outcome emerged during the class debrief. Students observed the "traitors" often became the most attentive listeners because they depended on contextual clues, audience expectations, and communication patterns to blend into the conversation. As one participant reflected, "Some people might know what they're talking about while others might copy what they heard from someone else in order to fit in and still sound like they know what they're talking about." This discussion extended beyond gameplay and prompted students to examine credibility, active listening, and the importance of critically evaluating messages rather than assuming expertise based solely on participation in a conversation.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

Following its initial implementation, this activity was adapted for additional undergraduate courses and the USDA-funded Science Influencers professional development program for graduate students and early-career scientists, demonstrating its flexibility across communication-focused educational settings. Future iterations will use participant feedback to refine concepts and facilitation across varying audiences and course contexts. Furthermore, faculty and instructors interested in implementing the activity should focus significant attention on the debrief process. While gameplay serves as the engagement mechanism, the debrief discussion provides the opportunity for participants to connect their experiences to broader communication principles (Schürmann et al., 2025). To adapt the activity for virtual instruction, instructors can distribute role cards digitally and use polling tools for voting. Because agricultural audiences vary in prior knowledge, concepts familiar to agricultural audiences but less recognizable to general audiences can help participants examine the importance of audience adaptation (Clemons et al., 2018; Frick et al., 1991).

Costs/Resources Needed

Implementation costs are minimal, but should include creating role cards, identifying selected agricultural concepts, accommodating classroom space, and reserving 30–45 minutes. Preparation takes 20–25 minutes; reusable paper cards cost less than \$5, and reflections may be collected on paper or digitally.

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