

# Professional Development in Agriculture: Opening Doors through Creative Leadership

**Penny Pennington<sup>1</sup>**  
**Oklahoma State University**  
**Stillwater, OK 74073**



## Abstract

Internships and professional development courses are being utilized in colleges of agriculture to prepare students for the workplace. The author believes that the purpose of a professional development class is to encourage students to move from a state of dependence to a state of self-directedness; thus preparing students to move from the confines of the college campus to the openness of the real world. In order to accomplish this purpose, it is the author's opinion that professional development courses must move beyond traditional lectures and guest speaker series, and move towards an environment that develops self-directedness. This may be accomplished through creative leadership. In the spring of 2002, twenty-one non-teaching students within Oklahoma State University's agricultural education department enrolled in the newly revised professional development course to prepare for their summer internships. The course, including types of assignments and evaluation criteria, was designed based on the writings of Knowles (1998), particularly in the area of creative leadership and its impact on learning. The instructor found that, through creative leadership, curriculum can be designed and implemented with the purpose of helping move students from dependence to self-directedness; thus, helping to prepare them for the workplace.

## Introduction

Preparing students for the workplace continues to be a topic of interest in colleges of agriculture (Deiter, 2003; Jones and Larke, 2003; Skelly and Kohlleppe, 2002). Departments of agricultural education have a strong and successful history of preparing students to enter the workplace as secondary teachers. As a result, a standard for traditional agricultural education majors has been set, evaluated and improved upon throughout the years. However, as the number of students in agricultural education seeking "non-teaching" degrees continues to grow (Fritz et al., 2003), so does the concern for developing professional development curriculum for this population.

One of the tools being utilized across the nation to prepare students for the workplace is the internship. In addition to the internship experience, many campuses are requiring students to participate in a pre-internship or professional development class

prior to their field experience. The challenge of the pre-internship class is to actually prepare students to become employees. The question then becomes, beyond teaching topics that might be deemed more appropriately suited for career services, what is the purpose of a pre-internship class and what role can faculty play within the classroom environment?

The author believes that the purpose of a pre-internship class is to encourage students to move from a state of dependence to a state of self-directedness; thus preparing students to move from the confines of the college campus to the openness of the real world. In order to accomplish this purpose, professional development courses must move beyond traditional lectures and guest speaker series, and move towards an environment that develops self-directedness. This may be accomplished through creative leadership, an approach that involves "students in every step of the planning process, assessing needs, formulating goals, designing lines of action, carrying out activities, and evaluating results (Knowles, 1998, p. 205)." Furthermore, towards this purpose, the teacher must consider his/her role as that of the creative leader, not only encouraging students to be self-directing but facilitating the course in a way that releases the creative energy of student participants (Knowles, 1998).

At Oklahoma State University (OSU), the Department of Agricultural Education, Communications, and 4-H Youth Development offers a pre-internship course, AGED 4203: Professional Development in Agriculture, newly revised to meet these objectives. The course may serve as a model, not only for faculty serving "non-teaching" agricultural education majors, but also for faculty throughout colleges of agriculture seeking to prepare students for the workplace through pre-internship coursework. The purpose of this paper is to provide details regarding the design and implementation of a pre-internship course at Oklahoma State University that may be modified to fit the needs of other collegiate-level pre-internship classes.

## Materials and Methods

In the spring of 2002, twenty-one non-teaching students within OSU's agricultural education department enrolled in the newly revised professional development course to prepare for their summer internships. The course, including types of

<sup>1</sup>Assistant Professor, 442 Agriculture Hall, Phone: (405) 744-4748; Fax (405) 744-5176; email: penninp@okstate.edu

## Professional Development

assignments and evaluation criteria, was designed based on the writings of Knowles (1998), particularly in the area of creative leadership and its impact on learning. The course was held over a 16-week period and met three days each week for 50 minutes. Specifically, a team project was designed to facilitate the learning process. The team project determined 60% of each student's grade and required each student to actively participate in the learning process. The third class meeting of each week was dedicated to team meetings. Barkley (2003) found that students actively engaged in the development and implementation of a team-driven project increase their knowledge related to not only teamwork and interpersonal skills, but also career goals and employment preferences.

As an overview, the project involved the formation of four mock organizations. Each team took on the role of recruiters within an organization they selected and researched. Classmates not on their team became mock applicants for jobs designed, recruited, and filled by the mock organizations. During the first half of the semester, students prepared to take on the role of recruiters within each of the selected organizations. During the second half of the semester, students facilitated extensive hiring processes, offering informational sessions, designing job descriptions, conducting mock interviews, hiring candidates, and offering feedback to candidates not selected for positions.

Constructive feedback, from both the students and the instructor, became an integral part of the course, and students were responsible for awarding grades to not only those that "applied" for jobs within their organization but to their team members based upon their contributions to the project. The project consisted of three main phases (Figure 1): research and development, implementation, and evaluation.

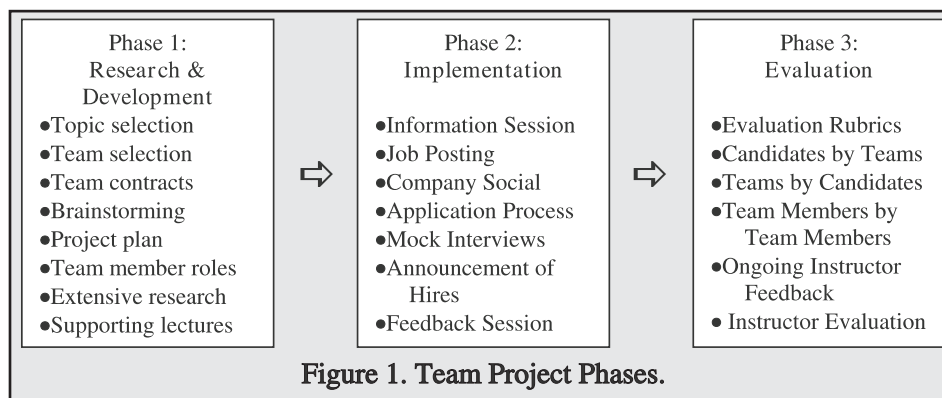


Figure 1. Team Project Phases.

### Research and Development

The idea of a team project was introduced to students during the first week of class and a copy of the assignment sheet (Table 1) was provided to each of the students. Based upon the information given regarding the assignment, the students decided that they would like to choose what organizations to study, as well as how teams would be determined. In

selecting the organizations, the class agreed to choose a range of organizations representative of their possible career paths. Students then decided what topics to explore, and on which one of four teams they would participate.

After the teams formed, the instructor facilitated a discussion regarding expectations of team members by their peers. Each team created a team contract outlining expectations, protocol for communications, and team goals. Additionally, team contracts included grounds for termination from the team, as well as a process for facilitating termination should it become necessary. The contracts were signed by all team members and given to the instructor.

Teams were responsible for holding weekly meetings beginning the first week of class. Meetings were held during class time each week and outside of class time, as needed. Weekly emails were sent to the instructor as an update of the team's progress and as an opportunity to communicate any concerns. During the first few meetings, teams held a brainstorming session, and developed a project plan and a budget. Teams also identified strengths and weaknesses of each team member and then selected appropriate team member roles. Class time was dedicated to topics that supported team activities such as brainstorming techniques, project management tools, team member roles, and team processes.

A few weeks into the course, student teams began a period of extensive research that included both primary and secondary resources. Examples of primary resources included site visits, phone interviews, and shadowing experiences. Class activities included topics such as resume writing, professional dress, interviewing skills, and networking.

### Implementation

After the research was completed, the teams were then responsible for "becoming" the organization. Each team was allotted four class periods to present their project. Students not part of the presenting team took on the role of candidate. The implementation stage of the project required eight weeks of course time, two weeks per team.

#### Day 1: Company Information Session & Announcement of Job Openings

During the first day of each team presentation, student teams hosted a 30-minute information session about their organization followed by questions from the candidates. PowerPoint was used by all of the teams for the presentations. During the presentation, job descriptions created by the teams

**Table 1. Team Project Assignment, Description, and Evaluation Criteria**

ASSIGNMENT	DESCRIPTION	EVALUATION CRITERIA
WEEKLY: Team Meetings and Minutes	Teams should submit minutes on a weekly basis via email. Minutes should always include a list of attendees and a brief description of what occurred during the meeting. Minutes should also include responses to specific assignments as detailed in the syllabus.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full credit will be awarded for timely emails that meet the requirements as discussed in class and/or provided on the course outline.</li> <li>• Points may be deducted for each weekly email not completed as requested.</li> </ul>
DAY 1: Company Information Session and Announcement of Job Openings	Each team will present a 30-minute informational session about their company followed by a Q/A session. (It will be helpful for team members to utilize the resources provided by careers services in preparing for this portion of the project.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism (presentation, dress, timeliness)</li> <li>• Team Synergy (shared workload, smooth transitions, appeared practiced)</li> <li>• Research (knowledge of company, resources cited, handled Q/A session well)</li> <li>• Usefulness to Audience (prepared audience to target resumes and to interview)</li> <li>• Creativity (maintained role, brought new ideas to the project)</li> </ul>
DAY 2: Company Social, Collection of Resumes and Cover Letters, and Interview Sign-ups	Each team will host a 30-minute reception/social for their company followed by interview sign-ups. Resumes and cover letters will also need to be collected during this time period.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism (presentation, dress, timeliness, organization of session)</li> <li>• Team Synergy (shared workload, smooth transitions, appeared practiced)</li> <li>• Sociability ("worked the crowd" equally)</li> <li>• Usefulness to Audience (prepared audience for mock interviews)</li> <li>• Creativity (maintained role, brought new ideas to the project)</li> </ul>
DAY 3: Company Interviews for all Positions	Each team will host mock interviews. Questions should be prepared ahead of time to ensure consistency in interviews. Interviewers will want to utilize the candidate evaluation rubric developed by the team when interviewing the candidate. Teams will also want to use a similar interview format of the company they are portraying.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism (presentation, dress, timeliness)</li> <li>• Team Synergy (shared workload, smooth transitions, appeared practiced)</li> <li>• Interview Consistency (similar questions and interview style)</li> <li>• Usefulness to Audience (interview appears "real")</li> <li>• Creativity (maintained role, brought new ideas to the project)</li> </ul>
DAY 3 SUPPORT MATERIALS: Candidate Evaluation Rubric	Each team will develop a candidate evaluation rubric prior to the informational session. The rubric will provide an objective means for selecting candidates to hire.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism (clarity of writing, presentation)</li> <li>• Breadth of Thought (includes social, interview, cover letter, resume, professional dress, interviewing skills, etc.)</li> <li>• Depth of Thought (includes levels for each category)</li> </ul>
DAY 4: Announcement of Hires and Candidate Feedback Session	On the final day of the project, teams will announce whom they have hired. Multiple hires may be selected. Feedback will be given to the whole group in a discussion format. The discussion should also include "what I've learned" and provide an opportunity for critical evaluation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Professionalism (organization of session, thoughtfulness and appropriateness of feedback)</li> <li>• Team Synergy (shared workload, smooth transitions, appeared practiced)</li> <li>• Logic (decisions supported by candidate evaluation rubric)</li> <li>• Usefulness to Audience (constructiveness of feedback)</li> </ul>

evaluation rubrics developed by each of the teams were utilized during the interview process.

**Day 4: Announcement of Hires & Feedback Session**

On the final day of the project, student teams announced whom they selected for each of the available positions. Bonus points were awarded to those hired. Each team was responsible for hosting a feedback discussion regarding the process and strengths and weaknesses of the candidates.

**Evaluation**

Students were formally involved in three areas of the evaluation process: candidate evaluations, team evaluations, and team member evaluations. To facilitate the hiring process, student teams developed evaluation rubrics for the candidates. Each team used the rubric to help identify which candidate to hire for each position. The teams also used the rubric to award course grades to each student for their interview, as well as their targeted resume and cover letter. The rubrics were shared with each of the candidates

were shared with the candidates and the session concluded with an invitation to the social.

**Day 2: Company Social, Collection of Resumes and Cover Letters, & Interview Sign-ups**

Student teams hosted a company social requiring candidates to practice their networking skills. Each team was responsible for providing food and beverages for the social. More importantly, the host team was responsible for developing strategies to keep the social "going". At each social, candidates were asked to introduce themselves and to sign-up for an interview. Candidates also submitted targeted cover letters and resumes to help the host team prepare for the interviewing process.

**Day 3: Interviews for all Positions**

On the third day of the presentation, the host team interviewed all of the candidates. Teams selected the format of the interviews and decided what questions to ask the candidates. Candidate

to facilitate feedback and self-improvement prior to the next interview.

Additionally, at the conclusion of each team's presentation, the other three teams were responsible for submitting written evaluations of the presenting team, including feedback on the four sections of the project: information session, social, interviews, and feedback/hiring session. Teams were encouraged to provide constructive feedback based upon the evaluation criteria (Table 1) established for the project. Project grades were assigned based upon the evaluation criteria and instructor observation and were supported by peer evaluations.

Finally, members of the presenting team were responsible for submitting written evaluations of their fellow team members. Team members awarded each of their team members a numerical grade along with supporting comments. Team members also evaluated their own performance, awarding themselves a grade. Ten percent of each member's



## Professional Development

course grade was determined based upon team member evaluations.

## Results and Recommendations

Throughout the semester, students were strongly influenced by their peers. The first team to present “set the bar” and each team that followed placed expectations upon themselves to outperform the previous group. Instructor-observation revealed that each team was self-directed, performed at a high-level, showed evidence of critical thinking, and was highly creative. For example, prior to the last presentation, a comment was made that students had enjoyed the interviews, but would have liked to experience a panel interview. Within 48 hours, the fourth team responded by reworking their interview schedule and candidate evaluation rubric to accommodate a panel interview experience for their peers.

Since the spring 2002 offering of the revised pre-internship course, three additional sections of the course have been offered. Based on the results of the spring 2002 class, the course has continued to be student-centered, seeking to prepare students for the workplace through the development of self-directedness.

In addition to the positive environment created within the classroom, the success of the revised course was strongly dependent upon an administrative environment supportive of taking a non-traditional approach to the pre-internship course. Implementing the course as described throughout this paper could not have run so smoothly without the support of faculty and administrators throughout the department. Specifically, outside support was needed in regards to team contracts allowing for the “firing” of students from teams. Since the Spring 2002 semester, 1 student has been “fired” each semester. The intensity and numerical value placed on the project requires a high-level of student dedication to the learning process. Like employees in the real world, team members not meeting expectations are “fired” from the project and, in most cases, fail the course.

Course evaluations revealed that students not only enjoyed the course but that they found it beneficial and relevant. Additional comments included: “the class format and company project were great;” “I thought the whole interview process was a very good idea;” “the mock interviews allowed you to practice for the real world;” and “the class helped me prepare for the internship and for my career.”

Faculty seeking to create a classroom environment that encourages student independence and self-directedness may wish to implement some of the ideas presented throughout this paper. Recommendations include providing opportunities for students to define goals, make decisions, set standards, and evaluate themselves and their peers; devoting class time to both discussion and application of team processes; offering feedback to students and teams on a continuous basis; and, expecting continuous improvement throughout the semester.

## Summary

Curriculum devoted to preparing students to enter the workforce must move from traditional lecture formats to providing opportunities for students to experience “real world” responsibilities. Such responsibilities include full participation in the decision-making process, project management and implementation, managing self-directed teams, and evaluating peers. Instructors, through creative leadership, can help move students from dependence to self-directedness; thus, preparing them for the workplace.

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