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# Issues Facing Professionals in Agriculture: A Communications-Intensive Course

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## Abstract

The course, "Issues Facing Professionals in Agriculture" (Horticulture 289), was designed to promote the professional development of students in the College of Agriculture at the University of Illinois and to satisfy the University's composition II requirement. Students were placed in teams, completed a team-building exercise, and prepared a written and oral report on a timely agriculture issue. Each team member was required to write a portion of the report and participate in the oral presentation. The oral presentations were given in the evening and were open to the public. Students were also required to complete several short writing assignments, keep a journal, and participate in class discussions on topics such as ethics, leadership, and government regulations. Student participants, representing eight different majors, gave the course high ratings. Students outside the College also pre-registered for the course.

## Introduction

Students entering careers in agriculture face many challenges. They must possess not only the technical knowledge associated with their chosen field of study, but also good communication skills and the ability to work with people. In a recent survey (Radhakrishna and Bruening 1994), employees and students ranked interpersonal and communication skills as the most important abilities needed for pursuing careers in agribusiness. Many universities have placed a priority on the communication skills, particularly writing, of students. Over the last few years, the University of Illinois has established a Center for Writing Studies and Writer's Workshop in addition to implementing a composition II requirement. Composition II courses require substantial writing and are oriented toward the student's major unlike the general rhetoric course completed in the first year. Writing assignments and techniques to incorporate writing into courses have been presented in the literature (Bean et al., 1982; Berghage and Lownds, 1991; Wehner, 1993; Zimmerman, 1991; 1992).

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It is sometimes difficult for students to hone their interpersonal skills. Many courses are geared toward the success or failure of the individual student. Many agriculture students have become interested in their majors through direct production or plant maintenance experience. However, most students will not be directly involved in agricultural production after graduation, but will be supervising production or maintenance workers. As students enter careers, they will work with groups of people toward a common goal that relates to the success of the enterprise. Thus, it is important that educators utilize every opportunity to help students learn how to work with others. The importance of teamwork in business situations has been described by Katzenbach and Smith (1993).

In addition to improving communication and interpersonal skills, agriculture students also must be prepared to explain and/or defend production practices to a public that may be trying to regulate these practices to the detriment of agriculture. Although many aspects of agricultural production require application of standard "textbook" information, there are also situations that require managers to synthesize solutions using a broad range of knowledge. Students need experience in handling complex situations and exposure to issues where there may not be a simple right or wrong answer. Students will gain a better understanding of these issues if they take an active role in presenting information to a general audience rather than passively listening to an outside expert.

The objective of the course entitled "Issues Facing Professionals in Agriculture" was to expose students to some of the challenges facing agriculture while helping them refine their communication and interpersonal skills. The course required participants to write and speak about agriculture issues and to work in teams to develop their responses.

## Team Selection and Team-Building Exercises

On the first day of class, a discussion was held to elicit the students' opinions as to the most important challenges facing agriculture. Many responses were offered ranging from food safety to animal welfare. The students were then asked to pick the four most important issues. This resulted in selection of the issues of biotechnology, the environment, government regulations, and food safety. Each student was asked to rank their interest in these topics. Students were encouraged to select issues outside their major. Teams were devel-

oped based on the students' first or second choice for topics. The team selecting the environment as their topic narrowed their subject to water quality, and the team selecting government regulations chose the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as the focus of their report. Except for an agriculture economics student being on the NAFTA team, most students selected something that they were not very familiar with for their first choice. The students were encouraged to start meeting as teams after the instructor gave a presentation on the importance of team work and completion of a team-building exercise.

The students were scheduled to participate in both indoor and outdoor team-building exercises. Because of inclement weather in the beginning of the semester, it was impossible to conduct the outdoor team-building exercise and maintain the integrity of the course schedule. The outdoor team-building exercise was intended to help the members of the team acquaint themselves and to start developing trust in each other. The planned exercises involved physical activities such as having team members rely on each other to navigate obstacles where some members of the team are blindfolded and to participate in a trust-fall exercise where the individual team members fall backwards into the arms of the other team members.

The indoor team-building exercise consisted of completion of the Project Planning Simulation by Human Synergistics International (39819 Plymouth Road, Plymouth, MI 48170). In this simulation, the students individually ordered the steps to research, staff, and implement a business project. Then, the students worked in teams to discuss and rank the same steps in the project. In all situations, the team score was lower than the average of the individual scores indicating the improvement due to cooperation. The students were asked questions about the nature of the discussions that took place.

The team-building exercise was valuable because it helped the students understand some of the personality dynamics that would influence the success of their team. No attempt was made to influence the operation of the teams by suggesting that a team leader be chosen. It was apparent by the end of the semester that some team leaders, as well as individuals whose role it was to accommodate the operation of the team, had emerged.

The teams developed the direction of their report after meeting with the instructor to discuss potential approaches to the issue. Each student was required to write a portion of the written report and present a portion of the oral report. Rough drafts of the reports were reviewed by the instructor and revised by the students. Each team presented an oral report to the class as a practice session for the final presentation. Students were encouraged to give and accept feedback from classmates concerning their oral reports. The presentations were improved based on the feedback received. The final oral reports were scheduled for an evening session so that parents, advisors, faculty, and friends could attend. The teams were successful in conveying information about the issues in a professional manner. Three faculty members served as evalu-

ators (see Figure 1) of the final oral presentation. The faculty evaluations had relatively good agreement with the evaluations done earlier by the students.

The main difficulty students faced was scheduling team meetings because of class and work schedules. Students were asked at the end of the semester to evaluate (See Figure 2) their own and their teammates participation in the team activities. Most students' ratings fell within a three to four point range. There were no situations where a team member was clearly not participating or contributing to the success of the team.

**Figure 1. Evaluation sheet for students to rate team members participation in team activities.**

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**Hort 289 Team Evaluation Sheet**

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Project Title: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Date: \_\_\_\_\_ Your name: \_\_\_\_\_  
 What letter grade would you give your team's oral report: \_\_\_\_\_  
 (Score each team member including yourself)

	Team Members		
	Name:	Name:	Yourself
<b>Cooperation:</b> (10 points) Able to work within team. Willingly performed tasks.			
<b>Punctuality:</b> (5 points) On time for team meetings.			
<b>Reliability/Dependability:</b> (10 points) Performed tasks within established times.			
<b>Evaluative:</b> (10 points) Offer constructive criticism and helpful evaluation of work.			
<b>Creativity:</b> (10 points) Provide meaningful insight to project team.			
<b>Overall effort:</b> (15 points) Measure of overall effort.			
<b>Comments:</b>			
	Total:	Total:	Total:
	_____	_____	_____
<b>Which team member/s demonstrated leadership in the project and what did they do?</b>			

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**Figure 2. Evaluation sheet for oral presentations by teams.**

Hort 289 Evaluation of Team Presentation	
Project Title: _____	
Score each category up to the maximum points indicated	
Points:	Comments
<b>Introduction:</b> (10 points) How well was the issue introduced?	
<b>Organization:</b> (20 points) Did the presentation have a logical flow?	
<b>Subject matter content:</b> (20 points) Was there adequate depth of information?	
<b>Presentation style:</b> (20 points) Did the team give a professional, polished presentation?	
<b>Conclusion:</b> (20 points) Did the team provide an appropriate evaluation of the impact of the issue on agriculture?	
<b>Ability to answer questions:</b> (10 points) Did the team adequately answer questions?	
Total:	
<b>Strengths:</b>	
<b>Weaknesses:</b>	

### Additional Writing Assignments

The University of Illinois requires that composition II courses have the students do a substantial amount of writing. The written report on the issues that students developed as the basis for their oral presentation was essentially a term paper. In order to provide opportunities to do other types of writing, the students were required to keep a journal of their thoughts related to the discussions that took place in class, develop a project proposal, and write a book review. The journal provided the means for students to share their personal opinions about the class in a format that was not critically

graded. Journals were judged acceptable or unacceptable based on the effort that went into the entries. The project proposal (Wehner, 1993) helped students understand the need to thoroughly justify their ideas when seeking resources from others. Students were free to review any book relating to professional development. The review consisted of a multiple page written review for the instructor, a one-page executive summary for distribution to the other students, and a brief oral presentation about the book.

### Outside Speakers

Although a major focus in this class was the involvement of students in the presentation of the issues, outside speakers covered additional topics that were beneficial to the students. A list of the topics is contained in Figure 3. Most major universities have resource people that can be called upon to discuss topics, such as personnel supervision, that students do not have many opportunities to hear about. Individuals from industry and the local newspaper were brought in to discuss how corporations react to issues and how reporters develop information for dissemination to the general public. The Dean of the College of Agriculture visited with the students about his perception of the important agriculture issues.

Students were often split into discussion groups as part of the seminar presentations. Students were rotated into different groups so that by the end of the semester, most students knew each other, and each student had an opportunity to report the groups' discussions to the class.

**Figure 3. List of topics covered in Horticulture 289, Issues Facing Professionals in Agriculture and potential sources for speakers.**

Topic	Potential speakers
Teamwork and team-building exercises	Faculty member
Ethics	Faculty member
Leadership	Faculty member
Industry and the Environment	Pesticide manufacturer representative
Presenting information to the public	Local journalist
Systems thinking	Faculty member
Issues facing state agriculture	Dean of College of Agriculture
Using different media in presentations	Agriculture Education faculty
Worker-right-to-know laws	Extension specialist
Immigration laws	Faculty member
Personnel management	University personnel officer
Entrepreneurship	Successful alumni
Cultural diversity	Faculty member

## Student Response and Future Refinements

The 16 students, representing eight majors in the College of Agriculture, who completed the course gave it high ratings (4.5 on a 5.0 scale for the question "Rate the overall quality of the course."). The strong points of the course were that it allowed students opportunities to give oral presentations similar to the type that they might have to make in their careers, and it allowed them to work in teams where each member was required to contribute to the effort. There was less hesitancy for students to speak up in class because there were no right or wrong answers to many of topics that were discussed. Because the instructor was free to concentrate on students' professional development rather than being concerned with conveying a specific body of information, it was possible to develop a good instructor:student rapport. The direction of the course can be easily altered to reflect current issues and student interests. The students can suggest the topic for discussion for one or more of the class periods.

One major change will be instituted the next time the course is offered. Students will be video taped during oral presentations in practice sessions. The instructor and student will meet to discuss speaking style, content, etc. Although all of the students had completed a speech course prior to

registering for this course, there was a wide range in the amount of experience that students had in public speaking. Also, some students needed more assistance in developing and using visual aids for their presentations.

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