

Interpersonal Skill Development Instruction

Galen Dodge and Rick Foster

Introduction

American employers in both the private and public sectors are coming to understand the importance of recruiting and hiring those college graduates who work effectively with people. For example, the Department of Natural Resources for the State of Wisconsin has adopted a new operating philosophy in its hiring practices that includes an emphasis on recruiting "people who work effectively as members of a team," who have "communications as well as technical skills" and who understand that "effective resource management means working with people as well as with the physical resource." (Besandy, 1986).

Naisbitt and Aburdene (1985) stated that "We will not see profits grow if we do not learn how to grow people." According to these two experts on corporate America, "In an information society, the effective management of human resources is any organization's competitive edge."

In a 1988 study conducted by Selection Research, Inc. (SRI) of Lincoln, Nebraska, it was observed that the people of Nebraska recognized the need for interpersonal and communication skill development as prerequisite to sustained employment in agricultural fields. Other research indicates the primary reasons for termination of employment in most fields are related to a lack of interpersonal communication skills rather than technical or occupation specific skills.

The assumption that interpersonal skills are at least as important as technical agriculture skills for students provided the basis for the development of a course in Interpersonal Skills Development (Ag Ed 102) currently being offered to students at the University Nebraska-Lincoln through the Agricultural Education Department in the College of Agriculture. A person's attitudes are feelings that are a reflection of his/her underlying values (Dodge, 1986). Both attitudes and values influence outward behavior on the part of people. If learning is taken to be a change in the learner's behavior, then attitudes toward people and the inherent values we hold for them can be influenced through the learning process (Saylor, Alexander, and Lewis, 1981). This study was conducted to determine if enrollment in such a course can have a significant influence on the attitudes and interpersonal skills of College of Agriculture students.

Course Background

The goal of Ag Ed 102 is to enable students to adopt a more positive and accepting awareness of themselves and others, and to enhance leadership qualities which will be manifested in both an improved society as well as improved performance in their chosen career after graduation. More specifically, the course is designed to make students aware of the potential in all human beings and to "tap" that potential by identifying and encouraging strengths in others through the practice of active listening skills, the development of

Dodge is an associate professor and Foster is a professor in the Department of Ag Education, University of Nebraska, Lincoln, NE 68583-0709

empathy, the appreciation of differences and similarities among all human beings in order to develop basic trust for the building of positive interpersonal relationships.

Experiential in nature, each class of 30 is divided into three small groups, with an undergraduate teaching assistant assigned to each group. The role of the teaching assistant is to reinforce in all students, through practical exercises, the theories and concepts offered during lecture. In addition, students are required to participate in community volunteer projects which are supervised by various cooperating human service agencies in the Lincoln area. In this setting, students are able to practice, on a one-to-one basis with others, the interpersonal and communication skills learned in class. Students are expected to observe and record in a journal the responses of their "client", with particular attention given to the positive growth and development not only of the client, but their own personal growth, self understanding, and development as well. Normally, strong positive relationships develop and become observable during the eighteen week semester.

Ag Education 102 did not always exist in its present form. Initially, in 1978, it was included as a "closet course" and listed as Ag Communications 399 Independent Study. Over a period of time, faculty members of the College of Agriculture who were aware of the course began to appreciate its particular appropriateness, especially for freshman and sophomore students. As a result, in 1984, the course was brought out of the closet, officially approved and subsequently listed as Ag Ed 102 Interpersonal Skills. Because it is considered somewhat nondisciplinary in the traditional sense, a number of faculty members continue to remain somewhat skeptical concerning the value of the course and its place in an applied biological curriculum like that of agriculture. As a result of faculty skepticism and the growing number of students enrolled in the course each semester, it seemed important to design and conduct a research study to determine the impact of the course on students.

Currently, Ag Ed 102 is offered to all students at the University of Nebraska. Five sections with enrollment limited to 30 students each are taught both Fall and Spring semesters. Approximately 75 students are turned away each semester for lack of space.

Design of the Study

The study was conducted as an experimental design to answer the research question about whether a course in interpersonal skill development could significantly impact students attitudes and values. The treatment group consisted on students who had enrolled in Ag Ed 102 during the academic year. The control group consisted of students enrolled in a freshman level agronomy class and a freshman level agricultural economics class, but who had not enrolled in Ag Ed 102 previously.

Selection of the Sample

The population for this study was identified as all students in the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who were enrolled in

Ag Ed 102 during the school year 1987-88. The treatment group was made up of 385 students. For comparison purposes, a control group of 112 students who had never enrolled in Ag Ed 102 was selected to participate by completing the exact pretest and post-test survey which was completed by Ag Ed 102 participants.

Development of the Survey

The pretest and post-test surveys for both the treatment and control groups were identical. Thirty-four statements reflecting interpersonal and self awareness concepts were listed as part of a Personal Attitude Scale (PAS). Students were asked to indicate the extent of agreement or disagreement with each statement.

The survey was reviewed by several University of Nebraska faculty members to establish face validity. A Cronbach Alpha Reliability Coefficient was calculated ($r = .82$), from field test data indicating the survey was reliable.

Collection of the Data

The survey instruments were completed by students in the treatment and control groups during the first week of classes each of the Fall and Spring semesters during 1987-88. The post-test was identical to the pretest, and was administered to both groups during the final week of classes, prior to final examinations.

Analysis of Data

All data were coded and entered into the UNL computing system via IBM personal computers. The following analyses were performed:

1. Means, frequencies and standard deviations were calculated on all demographic as well as survey items.
2. T-test comparisons of mean scores were used to determine if significant differences existed between control and treatment groups, pretest and post-test groups, background of the students by major, and background of the students by gender.

Findings

Control Group Data

To determine if increases in positive attitudes regarding interpersonal skills and self awareness were attributable to participation in the Ag Ed 102 class, a sample of 112 students who had not enrolled in the course served as a control group. Both pretest data and post-test data were collected at the times similar to that of Ag Ed 102 students. There were no significant differences between pretest and post-test attitudinal scores for the control group on any of the 34 items. This would indicate that over the same time frame, those not participating in the course did not gain additional insights into the importance of interpersonal skills and self awareness activities, as reflected by the PAS items.

Difference Between Control and Treatment Groups (Pretest) Comparisons of the treatment group (students enrolled in Ag Ed 102) and the control group are presented for both the pretest and post-test in Table 1. It was observed that students enrolled in Ag Ed 102 had substantially more positive attitudes regarding 12 of the 34 PAS items prior to enrolling in the Ag Ed 102 course. The pretest was administered prior

to coverage of any of the material in the class. Such a difference would indicate that students who preferred to enroll in the class already have an edge on others in the area of effective interpersonal relationships. Indeed, the class attracted those who valued interpersonal skills and self awareness attributes. Since Ag Ed 102 is an elective course, this finding can be easily understood.

Table 1 also shows comparisons of the treatment group and the control group as measured at the end of the semester. The data indicate a significant difference in attitude on 28 of the 34 items ($P < .05$) with Ag Ed 102 participants having more positive attitudes about interpersonal and self awareness skills. This finding clearly indicated the increase in positive attitudes was a result of instruction through the Ag Ed 102 classes.

Attitudinal Differences for Ag Ed 102 Students

The attitudinal scores of students prior to enrollment (pretest) and after completion (post-test) of Ag Ed 102 Interpersonal Skill were examined. Students were asked to indicate their agreement or disagreement with selected statements about personal beliefs and attitudes when working with others in interpersonal situations.

It was observed that students expressed more positive attitudinal scores on 32 of 34 self awareness interpersonal skills statements after completion of the course than at the beginning. Fifteen (44%) of the items were significantly more positive ($P < .05$). Those self awareness and interpersonal skill items showing the greatest improvement in positive attitudes were:

- ability to maintain conversations
- remembering names of others
- being happy for success of others
- being part of group decision making processes
- helping others helps me
- having an objective understanding of myself
- finding time for myself
- having empathy for others
- recognizing good in everybody
- doing the right thing regardless of peer pressure
- being aware of personal strengths and weaknesses
- having several role models
- not willing to compromise personal values
- appreciating experiences in life
- trying not to judge others on hearsay

Attitudinal Differences by Agricultural Background

When students with agricultural majors were compared with students with non agricultural majors, only two self awareness and interpersonal skill statements were observed to have significant differences in attitudinal scores on the pretest, while no differences were observed on the post-test items.

These findings would indicate that, although both groups showed consistent positive attitudinal growth on most statements, there were no statistical differences between students with agriculture and non agriculture majors in their attitudes

either prior to or after completion of Ag Ed 102.

Attitudinal Differences by Gender

Students enrolled in Ag Ed 102 were compared by gender when expressing both pretest and post-test attitudinal scores related to interpersonal and self awareness statements. It was observed that female students expressed more positive attitudes than males on 28 of 34 pretest items (14 significantly different at the .05 level), and on 32 of 34 items on the post-test (10 significantly different at the .05 level).

Conclusions

The following conclusions were made from the findings of this study:

1. Enrollment in an Interpersonal Skills development class significantly increases the positive attitudes of students toward themselves as well as others.
2. There is no difference in the amount of growth in positive attitude as a result of participation in Ag Ed 102 because of a students' enrollment in an agricultural major versus a nonagricultural major.
3. Female students enter the course and leave the course with significantly more and stronger positive attitudes regarding interpersonal and self awareness skills than male students according to PAS items.
4. Students not enrolled in an interpersonal skills course (control group) failed to gain more positive attitudes on any of the items measured.

Based on the conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are made regarding the inclusion of an appropriate interpersonal skills development component for undergraduates in the Colleges of Agriculture.

1. Students in the college of agriculture should be highly encouraged to complete an interpersonal skills course during their academic preparation.
2. Students majoring in agriculture who will be working directly with people in the industry should be required to complete a course in interpersonal skill development.
3. Faculty members should be encouraged to integrate interpersonal skill development into existing courses within the college of agriculture.
4. Faculty members should be encouraged to objectively evaluate their own offerings to determine the actual learning outcomes or behavioral changes attained by students enrolled in their courses.

References

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Table 1: Comparison of Treatment and Control Group Pre-test and Post-test Attitudinal Scores on Selected Interpersonal Skill Concepts Associated with Ag Ed 102

Attitudinal Items		Control (N=112)		Treatment (N= 385)		T-Value	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
I find it easy to get to know people	M SD	2.46 .92	2.46 .90	2.19 .93	1.89 .73	2.74**	6.38**
I am able to maintain a conversation with someone new	M SD	3.02 1.11	3.01 1.07	3.10 1.04	3.14 1.12	-.76	-1.00
I have difficulty remembering names	M SD	3.35 1.22	3.38 1.17	3.31 1.17	2.75 1.09	.29	4.81**
I make an effort to meet new people	M SD	1.77 .81	1.71 .85	1.62 .75	1.51 .68	1.77	2.34
I maintain good eye contact with others	M SD	2.26 .94	2.00 1.01	2.02 .96	1.70 .85	2.35*	2.95**
I am careful not to interrupt others when talking	M SD	3.57 1.03	3.40 1.08	3.06 1.14	3.12 1.14	4.30**	2.09*
I try to tune in to what others say	M SD	2.33 .89	2.30 .91	2.14 .86	2.01 .85	2.01*	2.85**
I am genuinely happy for others' success	M SD	2.29 .84	2.12 .81	1.89 .77	1.65 .64	4.74**	5.97**
I do what is right regardless of peer pressure	M SD	2.35 .85	2.16 .82	2.36 .92	2.03 .76	-.16	1.46
I defend others from "behind the back" comments	M SD	2.35 .80	2.39 .78	2.18 .81	2.02 .67	1.89	4.50**
I am aware of both my my qualities and strengths	M SD	2.23 .78	2.26 .86	2.25 .84	1.83 .69	-.16	4.98**

Attitudinal Items		Control (N=112)		Treatment (N= 385)		T-Value	
		Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
I have several role models in my life	M SD	1.72 .71	1.68 .65	1.45 .68	1.28 .55	3.76**	5.87**
I am confident in being a success	M SD	1.93 .85	1.83 .88	1.85 .79	1.63 .69	.92	2.44*
I don't rely on luck for success	M SD	2.43 .92	2.53 1.02	2.56 .92	2.28 .88	-1.37	2.36*
I always finish what I set out to do	M SD	2.59 .81	2.51 .88	2.53 .84	2.23 .80	.66	2.93**
I am a good listener	M SD	2.25 .82	2.04 .81	2.07 .82	1.95 .73	2.01*	1.08
There is good in everybody	M SD	1.78 .82	1.64 .81	1.42 .65	1.37 .68	4.77**	3.75**
I am confident in carrying out a plan	M SD	2.49 .75	2.33 .81	2.34 .80	2.13 .77	1.77	2.26*
I have empathy for others	M SD	2.75 .90	2.69 .82	2.65 .87	2.24 .79	1.05	4.84**
I am not willing to compromise my values	M SD	2.82 1.08	2.98 1.21	2.90 1.16	2.57 1.18	-.61	2.97**
There is some good in ever person	M SD	2.48 1.10	2.39 1.15	2.13 1.04	1.78 .89	3.14**	5.49**
Experiences in life determine personality	M SD	2.46 1.06	2.49 1.09	2.15 .95	1.81 .82	3.05**	6.58**
My procrastination leads to poor performance	M SD	3.40 1.05	3.40 1.19	3.23 1.11	3.01 1.12	1.49	2.94**
There are advantages to group problem solving	M SD	2.07 .93	1.94 .94	1.95 .88	1.66 .78	1.32	2.96**
I sometimes judge others on physical traits or hearsay	M SD	3.44 .92	3.30 .99	3.10 .93	2.59 .99	3.43**	6.15**
I look for positive before negative traits in others	M SD	2.60 1.03	2.53 .94	2.27 .97	2.01 .85	3.10**	5.12**
I have confidence in handling unexpected situations	M SD	2.72 1.05	2.56 1.05	2.71 1.02	2.41 .94	.10	1.28
I find helping others also helps me	M SD	2.33 .78	2.23 .84	2.21 .78	1.80 .77	1.40	4.75**
Luck has little to do with being a good leader	M SD	2.05 .99	2.20 .99	1.99 .86	1.89 .93	.64	2.76
I am willing to admit my mistakes	M SD	2.15 .86	2.10 .81	2.06 .76	1.83 .63	1.03	3.40**
I don't have enough control over my life	M SD	3.31 1.12	3.32 1.06	3.10 1.10	2.72 1.12	1.81	4.62**
Good leaders will clarify everyone's job description	M SD	2.02 .86	1.82 .73	1.94 .79	1.82 .91	.90	-.13
I have an objective understanding of myself	M SD	2.21 1.02	2.26 .89	2.20 .83	1.70 .62	.10	6.97**
Even with current demands, I find time for myself	M SD	1.97 .96	2.10 .82	1.99 .88	1.60 .74	-.14	5.60**

Note: Control group = 112 students who had never enrolled in Ag Ed 102

Treatment group = 385 students who completed Ag Ed 102 during 1987-88 Scale: 1 = Strongly agree, 2 = Agree, 3 = No Opinion, 4 = Disagree, and 5 = Strongly disagree.

* = Significantly different mean scores (P<.05) ** = Highly significantly different mean scores (P<.05)