

Agricultural Communications Students Describe a Short-term Field Experience

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Abstract

Student-run publications, including newsrooms and similar agency-style work achieve the curricular goal of experiential learning (Roberts, 2006) for university agricultural communication students. Gaining a journalistic skillset in the classroom is richly supplemented with experiencing real-world and authentic agency immersion to reveal to students the genuine characteristics of a workplace. The purpose of this study was to use Q methodology to evaluate a real-world, out-of-class-but-supervised newsroom producing publications for the State FFA Convention. Fifteen undergraduate students who were immersed in this three-day program in which students publish original work to disseminate information to FFA participants and the public participated in the study at the end of the newsroom experience. With a concourse sampled along four dimensions of growth and development (Author, 2014), a Q set of 36 statements was sorted. In addition to the Q sorts, comments gathered from the students at the last session assisted in the interpretation of data. Post-sort interviews were conducted with exemplar sorters. Data were analyzed using principal components and varimax rotation and interpreted to show three ways the newsroom was experienced by the university students. The *Supervisors* honed managerial skills while working as colleagues with faculty supervisors. The *Contented Staff* valued the education gained from the experience and recognized the practical application of the communications-based skill-set. The *Stressed Staff* had insecurities and physical discomfort during the work and living in the city. Implications for program development, classroom instruction, and field experience assessment will be discussed.

Keywords

Q Methodology, Short-term Field Experience, Student Newsroom

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Agricultural Communication Students Describe a Short-term Field Experience

Journalism educators have grappled with how to provide authentic experience alongside well-rounded coursework for more than 100 years. As journalism schools began to develop an identity as a discipline, Vincent (1905) called for universities to consider the “practical problems of newspaper work” (p. 309). Vincent lamented that while a liberal university education provided a reasonable foundation for newspaper work, schools could do more by providing students a publication with which they could hone their skills. Indeed, Vincent noted that universities then provided the future newspaper writer with a general education, but coursework left specific journalism training to newspaper offices where students learned the craft of daily journalism “by a painful process” (p. 298) and conformed writing styles to that of the paper. However, Vincent’s concept of an educational focus on journalistic writing and technique came with some criticism. Ironically, perhaps, those critics included editors who believed news writing was best learned on the job.

In the century-plus time since Vincent’s (1905) newspaper experiment, journalistic education programs have sought creative ways to encourage students to apply course concepts, ranging from student newspapers to full-service public relations agencies working with real-world clients taking students from raw material to polished publication. Madison (2014), in an essay about the shifting role of increasingly student-produced content in today’s converged media, noted that many journalism programs have established “digital era practicums” that provide “hyperlocal” news coverage (p. 315). While many of the programs Madison considered were faculty-supervised but affiliated with news organizations that publish the students’ content, the practices he discussed are comparable to student-run news and public relations agencies. Such programs offer students the opportunity to work professionally through short-term, specific and authentic experiences under the direction of faculty members.

In an analysis of student-run public relations agencies, Bush (2009) noted that some types of these programs provide students a broad professional experience. Additionally, Bush believed that short-term experiences better prepared students for the seriousness of the internship. Students perceive internships as valuable experiences, according to Cook, Parker and Pettijohn’s (2004) assessment of student perceptions of an internship program during a 10-year period. They recommended that students recognize that “the major contribution of an internship experience will be primarily social in nature” and that the result may be “greater understanding about working with others and maturing as individuals” (Cook, Parker, & Pettijohn, 2004, p. 185). Nearly 20 years ago, Beard and Morton (1999) advocated for internships as an important and necessary transition from studying in college and working in the field as a career.

However, Riggsby, Addy, Herring, and Polledo (2013), in their study of how internships impact accounting students’ job offers, wrote that few studies have considered the impact of internship experiences on students’ job opportunities, although some have considered the impact of the internship on students’ in-class performance and professional development. Additionally, workshop classes, also known as laboratory or practicum courses, have received little research attention (Bergland, Rosenauer, & Thorne, 2013). Indeed, in their analysis of how grades are assigned to students in journalism workshop courses, Bergland et al. (2013) wrote that “virtually nothing has been written about workshop courses” related to any type of media except newspaper publication (p. 14). Additionally, Bush (2009) found that there is little research regarding student-run publication relations agencies, while Maben and Whitson (2014) noted the lack of research on how these agencies impact students and student learning. Therefore, the purpose of this study was

to describe the perceptions of authentic work in the Oklahoma State FFA Convention newsroom. This study aimed to provide various perceptions of how agricultural communications students experience a three-day, professional media newsroom by asking them to respond via Q methodology to the question “What are your thoughts about your experience working in the State FFA Convention Newsroom?”

Program Description

Student-run publications, including newsrooms and similar agency-style work, provide real-world and authentic workplace immersion coupled with the application of a journalistic skillset, supplementing classroom material through experiential learning. In his synthesis of experiential learning within the agricultural education discipline, Roberts (2006) developed models to better describe the process and context of learning activities. According to Roberts’ Model of Experiential Learning Contexts, experiential learning activities are best described along four continuums: level, duration, intended outcome, and setting. In applying the Roberts model to the FFA Newsroom experience, the activity can be described as a three-day program in which students disseminate concrete information within a non-formal setting. In other words, for three days the students work together to publish original work in a real-world, out-of-class-but-supervised newsroom.

Agricultural communication students have assisted with the operation of the Oklahoma State FFA Convention newsroom in various capacities since at least 1985, when it began as an internship for the writing and distribution of photos and press releases of FFA contest winners (S. Sitton, personal communication, June 28, 2016). The newsroom results in the publication of at least 250 press releases and about 150 photos that highlight the achievements of state FFA award winners, including newly elected state officers, local chapter awards and individual rankings in the organization’s statewide contests. Photos taken by newsroom students are used by the organization in promotional materials. Currently, agricultural communications faculty oversee a staff of roughly 20 students during the newsroom’s three-day operation as part of the State FFA Convention.

Student Participants

Agricultural communications faculty chose and placed newsroom staff as writers/editors, photographers or website assistants. Newsroom photographers quickly arranged several students, agricultural education instructors, industry and college representatives, and award sponsors in front of a backdrop, took several photos and recorded correct spellings of names, titles, and placement to write a photo caption. They then moved on to the next group, repeating the process dozens of times throughout the day. Other photographers were assigned to take candid photos of FFA members throughout the convention, including the career show and sessions. These students were required to interact with the public while taking photos.

Writers generally worked in the newsroom both writing press releases and editing pre-written press releases for consistency, content, inverted pyramid structure, and Associated Press style. Some writers began writing press releases in the days before the convention began. Additionally, some press releases were written by agricultural communications students to earn extra credit in a writing class. The writers were responsible for fact-checking all copy, often delegating a fair amount of work to other students who had time to physically track-down and verify information, including name spellings, titles, quotes, and other related tasks. Writers and editors checked each photo to ensure everyone pictured was listed correctly in the photo caption. Writers were at times responsible for high-level editing, sometimes serving as the only intermediary between the raw material and publication. These students were responsible for all finished documents, including

any mistakes, such as copy editing, name spelling, titles, or file data names. The position is high-stakes, as these students are the last line of defense for factual accuracy in a fast-paced environment. Students assigned to assist with the website production were responsible for site maintenance and the coordinated uploading of individual press releases, photos and photo captions. During slow periods students often assisted in other roles.

Theoretical Framework

Holistic education has as its aim to advocate for teaching and learning in all areas of human development (Flake, 1993; Forbes, 2003; Miller, J. P., 1988; Miller, R., 1991). Mayes, Cutri, Rogers, and Montero (2007) established developmental areas as physical, psychosocial, cognitive, ethical, and spiritual being. Carl Jung (1959) had a classical approach to personality development to include two continua, one of judgment and one of perception. Making judgments or decision in life experiences includes the continuum of thinking (cognitive) and feeling (psychosocial); whereas, perception is defined by the continuum of sensing (concrete, physical or psychomotor sensation) to intuition (abstract, creative possibilities). Cognitive development or the thinking area might mean the knowledge learned in an experience; whereas, the feeling area includes the reactions to the experience in terms of emotions and social interactions. Sensing as a psychomotor domain is the acts of doing the work or bodily exhaustion or stress. Intuition is thought to include the areas that are less amiable to measure, such as creative thought, working out a problem, or getting the feeling for a better solution. Montgomery and her colleagues (Montgomery, Strunk, Steele, & Bridges, 2012) adapted these theories to apply to college students and was the theoretical framework used in this study to capture the holistic impressions of the student participants (Figure 1). Cognitive development or the content learned; social and emotional development includes the human interactions in the work; psychomotor development is inclusive of the physical stress or comfort of working and staying in the city; and creative development allows for the areas of work that provided autonomy and self-expression. This holistic educational theory was particularly helpful in constructing the instrument for sorting in the study.

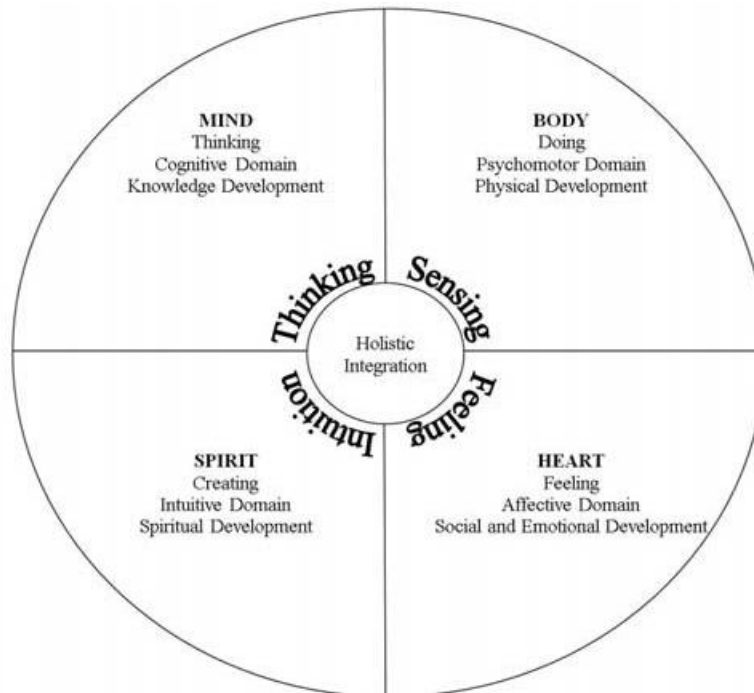


Figure 1. Holistic Integration: The Four Quadrants by (Montgomery et al., 2012). All Rights Reserved by Diane Montgomery.

Method

We chose Q methodology as a strategy to explore the holistic responses from university students because of its ability to capture subjective viewpoints within a group of individuals. For its philosophical appeal and specific procedural instruction, readers are encouraged to consult classic texts (Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Watts & Stenner, 2012). This research strategy was suggested as a means to provide a different understanding of issues in agricultural communications by Leggette and Redwine (2016). Q methodology offers in-depth understanding of perspectives, which is especially relevant within agricultural and applied communications (Leggette & Redwine, 2016). In encouraging the use of Q methodology within agricultural communications, Leggette and Redwine (2016) recognized the opportunity to “enrich understanding of humanistic elements of the discipline by focusing on and capturing holistic perspectives” (p. 64).

There are three components to Q methodology. First, the *technique* of sorting items is the strategy for data collection. Participants sort 35-60 statements in a predetermined arrangement along a continuum of 9, 11, or 13 columns. Second, the statistical portion of Q methodology is considered the *method* and includes correlation of all sorts to each other, factor analysis of the correlation matrix, and standard score calculations of items or the statements within each factor. Third, the uniqueness and rigor of the *methodology* is the process of interpretation of the findings. Typically, the interpretation goes beyond using the descending order of the standard scores for each statement for each factor to include using statement comparisons across factors, field notes taken during the sorting interview, and post-sort interviews of the individuals whose sorts provide the best representation of the factor (exemplar sorters).

Instrument Development

In Q methodology, the first step to a better understanding of the topic of study is to generate a concourse of all possible responses. In our study, we were seeking the various responses that students would have toward an intensive three-day experience replicating an authentic newsroom. To sample the concourse to result in sortable statements, we needed to think more broadly, and we wanted a framework that would structure the responses in ways that would be beyond what they learned about the content and process of reporters, photographers, and interviewers to include the social and emotional aspects of the work. Therefore, chose a four-quadrant theoretic model (Montgomery, 2014; Montgomery et al., 2012) to provide areas over four domains of human development: cognitive (thinking and learning experience), social and emotional (feeling and relating experience), psychomotor (stress and physical experience), and creative (inspirational and insightful experience). The model was used as a framework for the development of 36 statements, called a Q-set. Seven to 10 statements were sampled from the concourse of potential responses a range of likely experiences in each quadrant. The Q-set was designed to allow students to consider both the application of classroom concepts and professional development skills. For example, Statement 15, “After working in the newsroom, I get why we have rules for consistency,” directly ties to students’ coursework involving Associated Press rules for style and consistency in journalistic writing. Similarly, Statement 16, “The newsroom experience made me better at considering the audience’s perspective,” relates to students’ journalistic abilities. The development of some statements stems from instructor-observed experiences, both in the classroom and in previous newsroom experiences. These statements can be found in all quadrants. For example, Statement 19, “My relationship with my professors evolved to ‘colleague’ rather than ‘student,’” and Statement 25, “I called/texted my parents because they would be impressed with what I was doing or I needed help from them,” each stemmed from instructor experiences.

The statements were printed on small cards. Additionally, a form board made of 36 blank squares organized in a pyramid of nine columns (2, 4, 4, 5, 6, 5, 4, 4, and 2 statements to each column) and labeled from -4 to +4 was created. A demographics sheet was printed on the back of the form board. Participants in this study each received a set of Q statements and a form board. They were asked to sort the statements on the form board according to those “most like” and “most unlike” their perceptions in response to the question “What are your thoughts about your experience working in the State FFA Convention Newsroom?”

Participants

The participants for this study included the 15 agricultural communications students who applied and were selected by university faculty for key student staff positions at the 2016 State FFA Convention newsroom. IRB approval was obtained from the university, and students were invited to complete the sorts at the end of their work experience in the newsroom. All 15 students agreed to participate and their sorts were included in this research. Of the 15 participants, 13 were female. Additionally, the participants included two graduate students, three seniors, nine juniors, and one sophomore. All were between the ages of 19 and 23. All but two students participated in the FFA organization as children.

Data Analysis

Data collected from the 15 participants’ sorts were entered into PQ Method, free data analysis software program, which allows for researchers to determine distinct opinions, called factors. The 15 sorts were correlated to each other and the resultant correlation matrix was submitted to principal components factor analysis with a significance level of 0.46. After attempting hand

rotations, varimax was used to rotate three factors. Eleven of the 15 sorts achieved significance on only one of three factors, or perspectives, while the other four achieved significance on more than one factor. Factor scores are calculated (z -scores) for each statement within each of the three factors. A three-factor solution was determined to best capture the varied perspectives as the correlation between factor scores ranged from -0.05 to 0.37. The structure of sorts related to each factor, combined with demographic information and post-sort interviews, was used to interpret the three perspectives. Six participants with sorts exemplar on one of the three factors were contacted for post-sort interviews, resulting in four interviews.

Findings

Statements within each factor are arranged by z -score calculation (Brown, 1980; McKeown & Thomas, 2013; Watts & Stenner, 2012). Of the 15 sorts, 11 achieved a significant factor loading on only one factor or response to the experience. Of these 11 sorts, four sorters defined the first response, four defined the second, and three defined the third way that students responded to the newsroom experience. The most positively and negatively z -scored statements are included within our interpretation of the meaning of the data sources for each response group. The three types of responses, named *The Supervisors*, *The Stressed Staff*, and *The Contented Staff*, are described below.

The Supervisors

This factor was named *The Supervisors* because the respondents showed a strong tendency toward viewing themselves as actual professionals in charge. Followers of this perspective have an unmistakable professional element, both real and imagined (statement 32, array position 4, z -score 1.93; statement 30, array position 3, z -score 1.26). Working in a professional setting was energizing to these students, who viewed themselves as colleagues with, rather than students of, their professors (statement 2, array position 4, z -score 1.88; statement 19, array position 3, z -score 1.57). For example, Sorter 14, a 21-year-old female senior who worked as a writer in the newsroom, said in a follow-up interview that she valued the “open line of communication” with professors and “getting to play on the same playing field as you all and work together.”

In demographic questioning, students in this group indicated they had participated in 14 internships, collectively. As a comparison, the next highest collective number of internships among students included in a single perspective in this study was five. This perspective included two graduate students, a junior and senior, who were assigned among photography or writing and editing positions. *The Supervisors* highest positively and negatively z -scored statements are listed in Table 1. In fact, these students were so enthused about working in a professional atmosphere that they imaginatively took themselves out of the “student” role to act like they were working professionals (statement 30, array position 3, z -score 1.26). For example, Sorter 3, a 21-year-old male junior who worked as a photographer in the newsroom, described the experience in a follow-up interview as “...really eye-opening to just be basically thrown in a situation and expected to perform like an adult.” He seemed to intuitively appreciate the professional practice of the experience while recognizing students were working with a safety net. “It’s really nice that you (faculty) throw us in there, and you’ll catch us before we drown, but you’ll let us sink there for a minute,” he said. “That’s the way I learn.”

Table 1

Most Like and Most Unlike Statements for The Supervisors with Theory Source

| No. | Statement | z-score | AP | Quadrant |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----|----------------------|
| <u>Most Like Statements</u> | | | | |
| 32* | What I really need is for someone to give me a laptop and some authority. I can see myself running the newsroom. | 1.93 | 4 | Creative |
| 2* | I was in my element. Working in a professional setting is energizing. | 1.88 | 4 | Psychomotor |
| 5 | Working around the high school students for days made me realize how “adult” I’ve become. | 1.58 | 3 | Psychomotor |
| 19* | My relationship with my professors evolved to “colleague” rather than “student.” | 1.57 | 3 | Social Emotional |
| 30* | While working in the newsroom, sometimes I imagined I wasn’t student but working professionally. | 1.26 | 3 | Creative |
| 20* | Seeing my professors interact with each other made me see them as people with their own lives outside of school. | 1.23 | 3 | Social- Emotional |
| <u>Most Unlike Statements</u> | | | | |
| 6 | The city is really big and I don’t know it very well, which left me feeling panicked. | -1.04 | -3 | Psychomotor |
| 8 | I was physically uncomfortable wearing professional dress clothes. | -1.29 | -3 | Psychomotor |
| 17 | Working in the newsroom made me homesick for my high school experiences. | -1.44 | -3 | Social- Emotional |
| 24* | I was furious about being sent to track down information because another student didn’t do their job. | -1.48 | -3 | Social- Emotional |
| 18 | Everyone else seemed to know exactly what to do, but I felt lost and unsure of my role. | -1.49 | -4 | Social- Emotional |
| 4* | I was bored sometimes when there was a long stretch with nothing to do. | -1.77 | -4 | Psychomotor |

NOTE. Statements achieving a significant difference from the other factor arrays (distinguishing) at $p < .01$ level noted by asterisks (*). AP represents array position.

Sorter 3 mentioned the value of reinforcing classroom skills through application. “We kind of know where our strengths are,” he said, adding that the experience helped hone those skills. “You learn more of the finite skills, I guess, that you maybe don’t think about until you’re in a situation like that.” Additionally, these students’ confidence with their existing skillset may allow them to value the experience for experience’s sake. As Sorter 14 said, “I’ve tried to diversify my experiences; I’ve tried to learn from every single experience and soak everything in.”

The Stressed Staff

The newsroom experience was uncomfortable and overwhelming for some students – on multiple levels. This perspective was named *The Stressed Staff* because of followers’ flustered reaction to the experience. It includes two seniors, a junior and a sophomore. Two were assigned to photography roles, while one indicated working in both writing and photography positions. All were members of FFA as children. Students in this perspective indicated they completed five internships, collectively. Followers of this perspective were physically and emotionally uncomfortable. They did not like wearing professional dress clothing (statement 8, array position 4, z-score 1.60). They felt sick (statement 7, array position 2, z-score 1.21). They felt insecure about their communications skills (statement 22, array position 2, z-score 0.94). Followers of this perspective were likely not strong in delegating work (statement 28, array position 1, z-score 0.07). So, even if they felt overwhelmed, they would take on more work rather than ask for help, compounding the stress. To top it off, they did not seem to recognize any gain in academic experience (statement 12, array position 3, z-score 1.27; statement 13, array position -3, z-score -0.73; statement 11, array position -4, z-score -2.41). *The Stressed Staff’s* highest positively and negatively z-scored statements are listed in Table 2.

“It was a little overwhelming, but it was a good introduction to the actual work-life environment,” Sorter 21, a 21-year-old female senior assigned to a photography role, said in a follow-up interview. A telling assertion for this group was Statement 22 (array position 2, z-score 0.94): “I was scared people would find out how little I really know about communications.” Comparing their abilities to others’ while learning to work with colleagues and the public likely overwhelmed followers of this perspective. “Because I was a photographer, I think I had a lot of confidence at first,” Sorter 21 said. “But seeing how well other people’s pictures were coming out, I think I had my confidence dwindled out.” While this sorter seemed to view the comparison of work as a blow to her confidence, the stress of the environment may have caused her to miss the educational opportunity in recognizing and striving for good photography. Admittedly, “I was stressed out,” she said.

Contributing to the stress of followers of this group is that they may tend to be more introverted than other students. For example, a distinguishing statement for this perspective was Statement 28 (array position 1, z-score 0.07): “Even though I was very busy, I was too shy to ask someone to do something for me. So, I just did it myself.” These students were likely not just overwhelmed by working with and comparing themselves to other students, but also by getting past shyness to record names, spellings, titles, and placement of photo subjects. In essence, not only were they handling issues of confidence related to skills, they were also navigating their own emotional shyness.

Two of the “most like” statements for this group stemmed from the psychomotor quadrant of the Holistic (Montgomery, 2014; Montgomery et al., 2012) model, suggesting these students felt physically stressed. Four “most like” statements stemmed from the cognitive quadrant, while two stemmed from the social-emotional quadrant. Of the statements “most unlike” this group, all

stemmed from the cognitive and creative quadrants except for one, which stemmed from the social-emotional quadrant.

Table 2

Most Like and Most Unlike Statements for The Stressed Staff with Theory Source

| No. | Statement | z-score | AP | Quadrant |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----|------------------|
| <u>Most Like Statements</u> | | | | |
| 5 | Working around the high school students for days made me realize how “adult” I’ve become. | 2.21 | 4 | Psychomotor |
| 8* | I was physically uncomfortable wearing professional dress clothes. | 1.60 | 4 | Psychomotor |
| 26 | I laughed a lot during this experience. | 1.47 | 3 | Social-Emotional |
| 3 | At the end of the day, I was so tired I wanted to collapse into bed. | 1.29 | 3 | Psychomotor |
| 16 | The newsroom experience made me better at considering the audience’s perspective. | 1.29 | 3 | Cognitive |
| 12 | I learned more about working in a professional environment than applying my communications skills. | 1.27 | 3 | Cognitive |
| 7* | I ate a lot of junk food and snacks provided in the newsroom, which made me feel sick. | 1.21 | 2 | Psychomotor |
| 22* | I was scared people would find out how little I really know about communications. | 0.94 | 2 | Social-Emotional |
| <u>Most Unlike Statements</u> | | | | |
| 13* | I have a better understanding of what my professors want from me in the classroom. | -0.73 | -3 | Cognitive |
| 18 | Everyone else seemed to know exactly what to do, but I felt lost and unsure of my role. | -1.00 | -3 | Social-Emotional |
| 33* | Working in the newsroom helped me learn more about who I am. | -1.16 | -3 | Creative |
| 9* | I used communications skills I didn’t know I had. | -1.26 | -3 | Cognitive |
| 32* | What I really need is for someone to give me a laptop and some authority. I can see myself running the newsroom. | -1.67 | -4 | Creative |
| 11* | I definitely know now what I want to do for a career. | -2.41 | -4 | Cognitive |

NOTE. Statements achieving a significant difference from the other factor arrays (distinguishing) at $p < .01$ level noted by asterisks (*). AP represents array position.

When asked what she took from this experience overall, Sorter 21 said: “Patience, patience, patience.” She said she learned “how to deal with people better ... You feel like you’re an adult, and you just learn to deal with it.” Quickly aligning multiple people for photos against a backdrop before shuffling in the next group can get hairy, especially for students who aren’t inclined to take charge of a situation. But working with the public is part of the education of the newsroom experience. “People weren’t always willing to cooperate,” Sorter 21 said. “You learn to be patient because your boss isn’t always there to tell you what to do.”

Indeed, although the experience was stressful, followers of this perspective may have coped by finding humor the work (statement 26, array position 3, z-score 1.47). Additionally, while this experience did not seem to help followers of this perspective develop their communications skillset, it may have resulted in a maturity of perspective. For example, Statement 16 (array position 3, z-score 1.29): “The newsroom experience made me better at considering the audience’s perspective.” However, the gain in perspective may be more related to professionalism and less academic (statement 13, array position -3, z-score -0.73). The experience, Sorter 21 said, “kind of gave you the feeling that professors do want you to have a professional atmosphere in the classroom, even if you're wearing sweatpants, they want you to be more adult.”

The Contented Staff

Students included in this perspective learned about communications and had a good time doing it, even if it is not what they plan to do long term. For that reason, it was named *The Contented Staff*. This perspective includes three juniors who were assigned to writing or writing and editing roles. Each student indicated they completed one internship prior to their position in the newsroom. This experience for these students was likely a tremendous academic asset. It helped them both better understand their coursework and what their professors expect of them (statement 13, array position 4, z-score 1.97). It highlighted the relevancy of skills and personal strengths while resulting in a feeling of accomplishment (statement 9, array position 4, z-score 1.73). Followers of this perspective were likely the workhorses of the group. That said, while followers of this perspective gained experience and clarification related to their academic skills, it did not seem to give them perspective on what they want to do for a career (statement 10, array position 3, z-score 1.49; statement 11, array position -3, z-score -1.10). They tended not to imagine themselves as professionals and were rather indifferent to taking charge of the operation, but they saw the value of the work (statement 32, array position 0, z-score -0.05; statement 12, array position -1, z-score -0.53). *The Contented Staff’s* highest positively and negatively z-scored statements are listed in Table 3.

Sorters of this perspective certainly learned more about how to apply their communications skillset through working in the newsroom. For example, Sorter 12, a 21-year-old female who was assigned to writing and editing roles in the newsroom, said in a follow-up interview, “I think the major thing for me was writing the press releases ... I didn’t realize how much hard work was put into all of that and making sure they were all right.” However, the work may also have led to eye-opening moments for members of this group. For example, Sorter 12 highlighted how the experience helped these students learn more about themselves. The work gave her an unexpected chance to “give back,” she said. “I was in FFA, and I read my press releases,” she said. “But, I didn’t realize how much work went into them. It made me appreciate what everyone did for me in high school.”

Additionally, she added, having her professors in the room was helpful not only for questions but also for consistency. “We weren’t having to switch to a new way of learning,” she said. “We were applying what we learned in our classes at the convention.” Interestingly, this statement is in

contrast with the opinion of Sorter 3 from *The Supervisors*, who said he felt that the professors took a more hands-off, safety net approach. While *The Supervisors* viewed the professors' role as a partnership, *The Contented Staff* did not breach the student-professor line.

Table 3

Most Like and Most Unlike Statements for The Contented Staff with Theory Source

| No. | Statement | z-score | AP | Quadrant |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------|----|------------------|
| <u>Most Like Statements</u> | | | | |
| 13* | I have a better understanding of what my professors want from me in the classroom. | 1.97 | 4 | Cognitive |
| 9* | I used communications skills I didn't know I had. | 1.73 | 4 | Cognitive |
| 10* | I have a better understanding of my coursework because I was able to apply it. | 1.49 | 3 | Cognitive |
| 5 | Working around the high school students for days made me realize how "adult" I've become. | 1.40 | 3 | Psychomotor |
| 33* | Working in the newsroom helped me learn more about who I am. | 1.35 | 3 | Creative |
| <u>Most Unlike Statements</u> | | | | |
| 32* | What I really need is for someone to give me a laptop and some authority. I can see myself running the newsroom. | -0.05 | 0 | Creative |
| 12* | I learned more about working in a professional environment than applying my communications skills. | -0.53 | -1 | Cognitive |
| 11* | I definitely know now what I want to do for a career. | -1.10 | -3 | Cognitive |
| 18 | Everyone else seemed to know exactly what to do, but I felt lost and unsure of my role. | -1.15 | -3 | Social-Emotional |
| 7 | I ate a lot of junk food and snacks provided in the newsroom, which made me feel sick. | -1.16 | -3 | Psychomotor |
| 22 | I was scared people would find out how little I really know about communications. | -1.50 | -3 | Social-Emotional |
| 35* | As we walked outside, I often wondered what people in the downtown office buildings were doing. | -1.54 | -4 | Creative |
| 17 | Working in the newsroom made me homesick for my high school experiences. | -2.02 | -4 | Social-Emotional |

NOTE. Statements achieving a significant difference from the other factor arrays (distinguishing) at $p < .01$ level noted by asterisks (*). AP represents array position.

Perhaps because they felt confident in their student role and with the security of having a professor nearby, these students somehow kept from getting overwhelmed. In fact, while *The Stressed Staff* found themselves drained, *The Contented Staff* was strengthened by the workload. For example, Sorter 12 reiterated a feeling of accomplishment. "There was downtime, but there was a lot to do and get done," she said. "At the end, it just felt good, because I knew I could do it in my future career. I guess it just proved to me that it's possible."

Discussion

Students valued and experienced the FFA Newsroom in three diverse productive and beneficial ways, although they may not have realized it. *The Supervisors* honed transferable managerial skills. However, in this instance, as opposed to some other real-world work experiences, these students were thrust into managerial roles, rather than working their way up through the ranks. This means that they might not have fully understood the jobs of other students working in the newsroom. Additionally, perhaps they considered themselves as colleagues with faculty members during the experience, but their peers might not have viewed them in the same way. Students included in this perspective are the essence of young millennial professionals who are known for their expectations of responsibility and empowerment (Gallicano, Curtin, & Matthews, 2012). Faculty would do well to focus less on enhancing the skill set of this group and more on encouraging positive workplace management skills. However, a challenge may be in finding a balance between empowering these intuitively professional students while supporting the others.

The Supervisors were secure in their subject-specific knowledge, which allowed them to observe the entire newsroom operation while understanding how their transferable, managerial skills fit into the experience. In fact, their highest positively and negatively *z*-scored statements fell nearly evenly across the social-emotional, psychomotor, and creative sources of development of the Holistic (Montgomery, 2014; Montgomery et al., 2012) model. Interestingly, none of those statements stemmed from the cognitive quadrant, which dealt mostly with application and understanding of course content. Nevertheless, *The Supervisors* did not find themselves bored, nor were they upset at the prospect of having to pick up the slack for another student (statement 4, array position -4, *z*-score 1.77; statement 24, array position -3, *z*-score 1.48). That is likely less a reflection of their personalities and more of the nature of their position. They did not express any frustration about being sent to do someone else's job because they were the ones doing the sending.

The Contented Staff learned to apply classroom skills in a real-world setting. They valued the education gained from the experience. As these students respected the line between students and professors, certainly much more so than *The Supervisors*, they would likely appreciate and benefit from feedback and reinforcement of course concepts. For *The Contented Staff*, the newsroom experience may have helped them better recognize the practical application of the communications-based skill-set. Indeed, three of the five "most like" statements for this group were skills-based and stemmed from the developmental area of learning and cognition of the theoretical model. The experience was a valuable educational asset, yet *The Contented Staff* likely did not find their calling. The gain from this work for these students was likely more akin to the successful completion of an intense class assignment rather than professional experience.

While *The Contented Staff* may have counted out newsroom-style work for their future careers, the experience was still valuable in that they learned their communications skillset is transferable. In their predictive assessment of successful field experiences related to advertising and public relations, Beard and Morton (1999) wrote that even if an internship does not clarify career goals, the experience does help students as they consider potential careers. So, while students may not

discover exactly what they want to do, the experience may help them decide what they do not want to for a career.

Helping *The Stressed Staff* navigate the student newsroom experience takes a bit more professional finesse. Ensuring *The Supervisors* have an awareness of some students' insecurities and physical discomfort may help. Additionally, providing constructive feedback would likely provide context as *The Stressed Staff* seemed to constantly compare their work with that of other students. *The Stressed Staff* would also gain from the reinforcement of course concepts, although that should probably be expanded to include concepts of professionalism in the workplace and with the public. *The Stressed Staff* likely would benefit from an increased understanding of how the experience could impact their professional and personal growth. Some students may need encouragement to look beyond the role of skill set development in the internship experience to appreciate the social contribution, as described by Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn (2004).

Careful attention should be paid to how much work these students pile on, as they were unlikely to ask for help. Tasks that may seem to take a long time to complete may be less a reflection of dedication or skill and more of an inability to ask for help. However, learning to delegate and ask questions is part of the newsroom education. Pairing these students with those who have more experience or a stronger skill set in a type of mentoring role for even a brief period may prove beneficial. Ensuring *The Supervisors* understand the perspective and struggle of *The Stressed Staff* likely would provide an opportunity to demonstrate compassion in their managerial role. Rather than simply honing skills of efficiency in task management, *The Supervisors* might be encouraged to consider constructive feedback, work balance and personal strengths among those they supervise.

In their assessment of an interdisciplinary team-oriented undergraduate marketing agency course, Shadinger and Toomey (2014) wrote that the experience provided students with an in-depth understanding of the interplay of various positions within a professional setting. Additionally, they found that the authentic experience provides a less “academically segregated view of the marketplace” (Shadinger & Toomey, 2014, p. 60). Similarly, the FFA Convention Newsroom allows students a glimpse of how to coordinate various communications-related skills to produce a professional publication.

Although the newsroom is an out-of-classroom experience, professors in this type of experiential learning environment would do well not to neglect their role as an educator. An orientation meeting and occasional debriefing sessions would provide focus on the educational aspects of the experience, from the application of course concepts to professional interaction with the public. Additionally, the newsroom environment allows professors to teach beyond the communications skillset by incorporating a professional development curriculum. Highlighting real-world professional development aspects, in addition to course concepts, would benefit students included in all perspectives in this research, albeit in different ways. Further research is needed on the outcomes of such experiences as students enter the workplace, including how well these types of experiences prepared them for professional employment. Additionally, constant assessment is needed to ensure these types of experiences are authentic. Perhaps an audit by industry professionals would help ensure the experience is as real-world as faculty think it is.

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Appendix

Q Statements with z-score and array position per factor array

| Number | Statement | Factor 1 | | Factor 2 | | Factor 3 | |
|--------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------|----|----------|----|----------|----|
| | | z-score | AP | z-score | AP | z-score | AP |
| 1 | I was so busy I didn't realize it was time for lunch | 0.56 | 1 | -0.54 | -1 | 1.02 | 2 |
| 2 | I was in my element. Working in a professional setting is energizing. | 1.88 | 4 | -0.40 | 0 | -0.48 | -1 |
| 3 | At the end of the day, I was so tired I wanted to collapse into bed. | -0.07 | 0 | 1.29 | 3 | 0.96 | 2 |
| 4 | I was bored sometimes when there was a long stretch with nothing to do. | -1.77 | -4 | -0.33 | 0 | -0.01 | 0 |
| 5 | Working around the high school students for days made me realize how "adult" I've become. | 1.58 | 3 | 2.21 | 4 | 1.40 | 3 |
| 6 | The city is really big, and I don't know it very well, which left me feeling panicked. | -1.04 | -3 | -0.54 | -2 | -0.91 | -2 |
| 7 | I ate a lot of junk food and snacks provided in the newsroom, which made me feel sick. | -0.89 | -2 | 1.21 | 2 | -1.16 | -3 |
| 8 | I was physically uncomfortable wearing professional dress clothes. | -1.29 | -3 | 1.60 | 4 | -0.86 | -2 |
| 9 | I used communications skills I didn't know I had. | 0.26 | 1 | -1.26 | -3 | 1.73 | 4 |
| 10 | I have a better understanding of my coursework because I was able to apply it. | 0.34 | 1 | -0.44 | -1 | 1.48 | 3 |
| 11 | I definitely know now what I want to do for a career. | 0.66 | 2 | -2.41 | -4 | -1.10 | -3 |
| 12 | I learned more about working in a professional environment than applying my communications skills. | 0.64 | 2 | 1.27 | 3 | -0.53 | -1 |
| 13 | I have a better understanding of what my professors want from me in the classroom. | 0.17 | 0 | -0.73 | -3 | 1.97 | 4 |
| 14 | The newsroom experience made me realize I have a lot to learn. | -0.18 | 0 | 0.66 | 2 | 0.88 | 2 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|
| 15 | After working in the newsroom, I get why we have rules for consistency. | 0.62 | 2 | 1.25 | 2 | 1.29 | 3 |
| 16 | The newsroom experience made me better at considering the audience's perspective. | 0.45 | 1 | 1.29 | 3 | 0.00 | 0 |
| 17 | Working in the newsroom made me homesick for my high school experiences. | -1.44 | -3 | -0.28 | 0 | -2.02 | -4 |
| 18 | Everyone else seemed to know exactly what to do, but I felt lost and unsure of my role. | -1.49 | -4 | -1.00 | -3 | -1.15 | -3 |
| 19 | My relationship with my professors evolved to "colleague" rather than "student." | 1.56 | 3 | 0.07 | 1 | 0.19 | 1 |
| 20 | Seeing my professors interact with each other made me see them as people with their own lives outside of school. | 1.23 | 3 | -0.42 | -1 | -0.10 | 0 |
| 21 | I realized I have a lot in common with classmates I don't know very well. | 0.27 | 1 | -0.44 | -1 | 0.20 | 1 |
| 22 | I was scared people would find out how little I really know about communications. | -0.80 | -2 | 0.94 | 2 | -1.49 | -3 |
| 23 | Accuracy is important, but at times it seemed nitpicky and was frustrating. | 0.18 | 0 | -0.67 | -2 | -0.39 | -1 |
| 24 | I was furious about being sent to track down information because another student didn't do their job. | -1.48 | -3 | 0.20 | 1 | 0.30 | 1 |
| 25 | I called/texted my parents because they would be impressed with what I was doing or I needed help from them. | -0.76 | -1 | -0.65 | -2 | -0.15 | 0 |
| 26 | I laughed a lot during this experience. | 0.97 | 2 | 1.47 | 3 | 0.19 | 1 |
| 27 | I accomplished more than I ever thought possible during these three days. | -0.26 | 0 | -0.02 | 0 | 1.19 | 2 |
| 28 | Even though I was very busy, I was too shy to ask someone to do | -0.85 | -2 | 0.07 | 1 | -0.86 | -2 |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|----|-------|----|-------|----|
| | something for me. So, I just did it myself. | | | | | | |
| 29 | Working in the city is inspiring. | -0.52 | -1 | -0.42 | -1 | 0.01 | 1 |
| 30 | While working in the newsroom, sometimes I imagined I wasn't a student but working professionally. | 1.26 | 3 | -0.57 | -2 | -0.29 | -1 |
| 31 | I loved the downtown lights at night. | -0.42 | -1 | 0.19 | 1 | -0.58 | -2 |
| 32 | What I really need is for someone to give me a laptop and some authority. I can see myself running the newsroom. | 1.93 | 4 | -1.66 | -4 | -0.05 | 0 |
| 33 | Working in the newsroom helped me learn more about who I am. | 0.26 | 0 | -1.16 | -3 | 1.35 | 3 |
| 34 | I learned how to develop my own style while still using the rules taught in class. | -0.33 | -1 | 0.35 | 1 | -0.08 | 0 |
| 35 | As we walked outside, I often wondered what people in the downtown office buildings were doing. | -0.46 | -1 | 0.02 | 0 | -1.54 | -4 |
| 36 | Walking outside was noisy, busy and constricting. | -0.81 | -2 | -0.13 | 0 | -0.40 | -1 |

NOTE. AP represents array position.