Teaching Tips/Notes NACTA Journal

# Leveraging Social Media to Demonstrate Aptitude and Promote Real-World Relevance of Course

## Introduction

Undergraduate students in agriculture often struggle to connect theoretical course concepts with real-world agricultural practices. Additionally, with expanding digitalization of professional markets, building a professional online presence is becoming increasingly important for students entering a competitive job market. We sought to address this challenge by incorporating social media as a tool for teaching and engagement. Students were tasked with creating multiple social media posts throughout the semester, displaying their understanding of key course concepts while engaging a real-world audience. The goals of this assignment were to demonstrate real-world application of course content, develop professional confidence and communication skills across multiple modalities, and assist students in building professional digital profiles that showcase their aptitude and connect them with industry professionals. This social media assignment engaged students in scientific communication while enhancing professional readiness.

## Procedure

This assignment was implemented across several undergraduate agriculture courses, including a lower-division Introduction to Plant Science course, upper-division Turfgrass Management and Soil and Water Conservation courses, and an undergraduate/graduate cross-listed Environmental Chemistry course.

Students were tasked with creating eight social media posts throughout the semester, with each post connecting a course topic to relevant agricultural topics or simply sharing pertinent information from the course with the public. Students were encouraged (but not required) to post to either Instagram or LinkedIn, with LinkedIn being the preferred platform. Sharing these posts encouraged students to network with agricultural professionals, increasing their visibility in the industry.

## Guidelines and Rubrics

Students were given a template, a rubric, and examples from prior classes when developing their posts. In creating their posts, students were encouraged to use a professional tone and accurate and accessible language to appeal to both an expert and lay-audience. They were also encouraged to incorporate trending discipline-specific hashtags and eye-catching visuals. Students then provided brief reflections on the engagement their posts received and their takeaways from the assignments.

## Assessment

### Example Outcomes

The project generated significant professional interaction and visibility for both students and the university. One student's LinkedIn post on precision agriculture reached over 40,000 impressions, earning 512 reactions and 50 reposts. Another post discussing animal science topics reached 9,000+ impressions and was reshared multiple times. Another student received an internship and job offer as a result of networking from one of his posts. Students reported receiving connection requests, comments, and encouragement from agricultural professionals

and company representatives.
As reported by several students:
*“My favorite experience with this assignment was with my social media post 4, and I ended up getting comments from owners of huge agricultural companies!”*
*“These assignments helped me learn more in depth about some specific topics in class which helped me excel and helped put my name out there!”*

**Benefits for Students**

Students practiced both professional and scientific communication skills through constructing their posts to ensure accurate and engaging communication of technical topics to diverse audiences. Creating these posts also helped students to build their professional network, initiating contact with potential employers, and showcasing their aptitude to industry professionals. In addition, engagement with real-world audiences helped to demonstrate the practical application of course material, helping students to connect theory with practice and establish the relevance of course content. Finally, by demonstrating their digital literacy in professional online communication and interacting with agricultural professionals, students’ confidence and belonging within the agricultural and scientific communities of practice were promoted.

**Benefits for Educators and Programs**

From an educator or program perspective, leveraging social media as a pedagogical tool increased student engagement and interest, and amplified the visibility of our program. Tagging the School of Agriculture expanded our reach with industry professionals and opened new recruitment pipelines as prospective employers gained insight into a part of our program outcomes and student abilities.

**Discussion and Recommendations**

Integrating social media into agricultural education can effectively bridge the gap between theory and practice. Students noted that social media platforms helped them connect with real agricultural professionals, which made the course material feel more relevant and increased excitement over course concepts that may otherwise have been deemed “dull”.
Faculty observed that the activity improved classroom energy and professionalism in written communication. Additionally, the visibility of student work online positively impacted the program’s reputation. This demonstrates the value in incorporating a digital tool, like social media, that most of our students are already familiar with, to enhance the learning experience. Overall, we found that clear rubrics are necessary to prevent the assignments from feeling like busy work. We also observed that public-facing assignments created accountability and pride in the quality of work. And in-built digital metrics (e.g. “likes”, “impressions”, comments) can serve as meaningful formative feedback, in some cases, more meaningful than that of the instructor.

**Conclusion**

By connecting agricultural learning outcomes with digital communication and industry engagement, this assignment empowered students to see themselves as active participants in, and contributors to, the agricultural profession. Social media, when used intentionally, can serve as a bridge between academic learning and real-world agricultural practices. This learning activity helped students communicate effectively, expand professional networks, and recognize the relevance of their coursework. By leveraging social media to integrate professional digital communication into our agriculture curricula, instructors can help students become more capable, confident, and competitive in the job market, and showcase the innovation happening in our programs to the broader agricultural community.

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