

Teaching Methods

Designing Success: Teaching Floral Design Through an Industry Partnership

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Summary. Universities continue to cut budgets and reduce faculty. Such cuts occurred at the Univ. of Nebraska in 1986-87. To ensure that floral design courses would continue to be taught, despite reduction in teaching appointments, an industry-university teaching partnership was proposed. While the teaching relationship started out as a team approach, it successfully evolved into a strong partnership that permitted growth on the part of the industry instructor, and movement into a strictly supervisory role for the faculty partner. Thus, the overall goal of keeping floral design courses as an integral part of the floriculture curriculum was met without using extensive amounts of faculty time.

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In 1986 and 1987, the Univ. of Nebraska-Lincoln (UNL) endured a series of budget cuts that struck deeply into the teaching commitments of faculty in all departments, including horticulture. Emphasis on research productivity increased and faculty looked to reduce teaching commitments. Curricula in each department were re-evaluated and courses such as floral design became suspect as being necessary for the horticulture curriculum. Floral design is an easy target for elimination due to course costs; time commitment in labs, and variable course content (horticulture's basket weaving course). The axiom "the best defense is a good offense" was adopted and a variation on the team-teaching approach, i.e., splitting class times with an industry partner, was proposed.

As pointed out in Johnson and Hunt's book (1968), a good rationale for this team approach was needed, and it had to include opportunities for coordination and control. Goals for the course, as well as specifics on content and organization, were identified. They were: Justify the course's place in the curriculum, have it offered at least once per year, keep its content at a high level, and find and keep the right instructor.

One of the keys for success would be finding that right person to teach the course. This person needed to be active in the floral industry, want to teach, understand business concepts, and know what is required of university-level courses. These qualities were potentially available in graduates of UNL's horticulture program. Graduates who were still in Lincoln then were contacted.

The individual that was selected believed that a class that relied on

good educational information intermixed with actual industry practices would be ideal. His aim, which was in keeping with the departmental philosophy, was for students to have extensive hands-on experience, with a minimal goal of making them better-informed consumers, and an ultimate goal of training future owners and managers. After many discussions, it was obvious that his personality combined a caring attitude for students and enthusiasm for the subject. He reflected that this attitude was not always present in the courses that he had taken, and he wanted to do better.

Once selected, the industry partner was given class notes, syllabi, design projects, and tests. An emphasis was placed on grading the design portion as objectively as possible. We agreed that grades for the average student should reflect knowledge of good principles and elements of design—not purely skill. An agreement was reached on how the class meetings would be divided. The next step was preparing the written documentation needed for administrative approval and, of course, funding.

Course content and justification statements were prepared. Written statements demonstrated that, in order to offer a strong floriculture curriculum, a floral design course was needed, as it was the only course that could address the handling, use, and marketing of cut flowers. Additionally, business skills so often requested by employers could be taught easily in a floral design class, as both wholesale and retail floristry abound with practical examples that make masses of numbers and profit-and-loss statements meaningful. Labs spent working creatively with flowers balance dry lectures filled with computations and rules.

Other topics covered in this documentation included: 1) Past enrollment numbers and positive student evaluations; 2) importance of service courses with day and evening offerings in a university setting; 3) successful existing course notes, exams, and projects; 4) the value to students of meeting and being mentored by an industry professional; 5) improved university-industry relations/credibility with the industry; 6) industry support dollars in terms of donations and flex time given by the instructor's employer; and 7) qualifications of the

instructor. The team method was proposed and discussed with administration. A decision was made to offer the course on a semester-by-semester basis, depending on enrollment.

The team approach, which is a key to working with an industry partner, allows mutual respect to develop. However, it requires as much or more work and coordination on the university instructor's part when compared to having a teaching assistant. Teaching assistants have extensive in-time class experience, attend teaching workshops, and usually are not balancing a full-time job outside the university with a part-time job at the university.

During and after the first semester the class was taught, there was constant re-evaluating and re-arranging of methods, topics, etc., but it was time well-spent. After the course was taught twice and the industry partner proved (through student and department head evaluations) to be very effective, the university instructor was able to move into a review and supervisory role rather than that of an active teaching partner. If sufficient opportunity for course and industry instructor growth and reward occur, this partnership can exist indefinitely-not for just a couple of semesters. It is up to the university partner to stimulate and facilitate this growth.

Since the inception of this partnership, course content has changed annually to reflect current and future industry trends. This state-of-the-art basic course now is coupled with an

advanced design course that serves as a futuristic design forum and contains advanced business management trends such as Deming's total quality management (Walton, 1990). Both classes are now attended by area floral designers and future shop managers/owners. The courses have grown, and so has the industry partner. Recently, our industry partner earned a Master Florist Certification by successfully completing exams that tested his designing skills as well as his understanding of management principles. The university instructor's role as supervisor and facilitator now consists only of receiving the current syllabus, class observation time, and a few meetings and phone calls each semester to discuss industry trends and future course directions.

The floral design courses, as well as others in the floriculture curriculum, are among those receiving the highest evaluations in the department. As a result, students are offered the opportunity for a strong, in-depth education in floriculture-this outcome is the most important of all. After all, students are what universities are all about.

Literature Cited

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