

Pre-Service Agriculture Teachers' Experiences in a Reading in the Content Area Course

Laura Hasselquist, University of Missouri
Meredith Naughton, University of Missouri
Tracy Kitchel, The Ohio State University

121 Gentry Hall
Columbia, MO 65211
573-882-7451
LauraHasselquist@mizzou.edu

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Introduction & Framework

Content area teachers who integrate literacy into their classroom face many challenges. They must have an attitude that literacy, and the skills, tools, and knowledge necessary to effectively implement it. Agriculture teachers specifically believe literacy skills instruction is only supplemental to the content area (Park et al., 2010) and pre-service agriculture teachers viewed literacy skills instruction as counter to the “ideal” hands-on approach of agricultural education (O'Brien & Steward, 1990). Research has shown teacher attitudes and beliefs toward literacy are grounded in personal experience and disciplinary identity (Fang, 1996). Teacher attitudes also impact the likelihood of implementing reading strategies (Baker et al., 2008; O'Brien & Steward, 1990). Student attitudes towards literacy are actively influenced by teacher attitudes regarding literacy (Adams & Pegg, 2012; Moje, 1996; Park & Osborne, 2007; Phelps, 2005). Historically, content area teachers often view literacy skills instruction as something that should occur outside their classroom (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Lesley (2014) found pre-service teachers were opposed to literacy skills instruction in the content area, and held the belief reading instruction was not needed at the secondary level (Hall, 2005).

Purpose, Objectives, and Methods

Learning how to incorporate literacy will take high quality pre-service training for new teachers and will likely entail a comprehensive redesign of the typical one course literacy requirement (Snow & Moje, 2010). Focusing on current student experiences is important to understanding the current process and identifying any potential changes to be made. The central question asked what are the experiences of pre-service agriculture teachers in a required Reading in the Content Area (RICA) course? This case study focused on pre-service agriculture teachers who were nearing completion of the RICA course. A focus group invitation was extended to all eight individuals enrolled in RICA at the University of Missouri, with seven agreeing to participate. The focus group was recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify themes. To help ensure trustworthiness triangulation, member checking, and peer debrief were utilized (Stake, 1995).

Findings

Theme 1: Literacy is More Than Just Literature – The participants discussed having misconceptions about what the course would cover. Katie said, “I was thought [the class] was about [reading] literature.” Mary echoed that sentiment, “I thought it was geared more towards English teachers and reading instructors.” However, after the class they noted how off base those misconceptions had been. “Its way more than just reading and writing. . . [it's] getting [students] to comprehend the procedures and what's going on,” said Katie. The participants felt they could find and incorporate “smaller bits of reading and writing in a lesson to its not so overwhelming,” according to Mary. All felt the class was a worthy investment of their time. Micah said, “We're taught a lot of neat ways to . . . improve our class and improve our teaching.”

Theme 2: Fighting Students' Expectations Regarding Literacy Sometimes Means Being “Sneaky” – Students who sign up for agriculture courses have expectations the participants were keenly aware of. Jon stated his concern as, “A lot of kids take Ag as a fun elective and they don't want to be reading and writing in your class. That could be something they fight you on.” Participants discussed how important it was to be “sneaky” when using literacy the classroom.

They noted how students are drawn to the “hands on” nature of the course but still needed to read. Lynn noted, “I thought it was fun to find sneaky ways to incorporate it like ‘haha you didn’t even realize you’re reading’”. They recognized there are a wide variety of ways literacy already fits on within agriculture content and the importance of being able to capitalize on it.

Theme 3: Overcoming the “Black Sheep” Mentality is Important - Participants felt the content area of agriculture would make them outliers in the class but were pleasantly surprised. “I did not expect for [class] to go well at first because we are the usually the black sheep in the College of Education. . . but for the most part people enjoyed what we taught about and were engaged,” said Beth. It was through microteaching experiences they were able to build connections to their classmates and instructors. “I feel like we can closely related to the science group and what they do . . . it’s been a positive experience,” offered Beth. The participants reciprocated buy-in from their peers and valued being exposed to a wide variety of teaching techniques.

Theme 4: Still Reluctant to Include Literacy – Even though they all found value in the class and concepts taught, they still expressed reluctance to incorporate literacy into their classrooms. Katie said, “We never did this my Ag program, we were too hands on.” They were very concerned about the perceived juxtaposition between hands on learning and literacy. Several stated they had to have a specific purpose otherwise they would not include literacy activities. Beth stated, “just because a principal wants to you do something is not a good enough reason to do it.” While others reflected on their experiences with failed literacy attempts. Pete said, “Our Ag teacher wanted us to read old books or something . . . it was very boring.”

Discussion

The participants started the RICA course with misconceptions about content and its application to their lives. This were easily overcome and the participants came to value literacy’s importance and role in the classroom. They also developed a positive attitude towards literacy skills which may be helpful in the future (Adams & Pegg, 2012; Moje, 1996; Park & Osborne, 2007; Phelps, 2005). Participants noted literacy opportunities currently exist within the content area, but they also need to be strategic at how to incorporate and capitalize on it. Perceived student resistance could be one reason the participants placed an importance on finding ways to be “sneaky” about literacy integration. Buy-in from their peers helped them feel accepted and increased the value of the course. Finally, the reluctance to incorporate literacy skills is not new, especially since they felt it does not align with the hands on nature of the content (O’Brien & Steward, 1990). Overcoming the misconceptions regarding what the RICA course and literacy practices are an important first step. Teacher educators should work to increase pre-service teachers’ literacy awareness. Pre-service teachers should continue to be made aware of all the various ways literacy currently exists within the content area. Teacher educators should encourage literacy integration into microteaching experiences. Finally, special focus should be given to helping pre-service agriculture teachers overcome perceived barriers into literacy instruction. Further research should be done on resiliency in relation to literacy skills adoption among early career teachers. Additional research should be conducted with high literacy implementer to determine how they overcame barriers and if any of those skills are transferable to pre-service or early career teachers. Finally, studies should be conducted with other content areas to determine if these themes are unique to agricultural education or are common all pre-service teachers.

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