Integrating FaceTime into Student Supervised Agricultural Experience Visitation and Observation Practices

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Introduction

The implementation and oversight of Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) programs is, philosophically, a significant duty of agricultural education teachers (Phipps, Osborne, Dyer, & Ball, 2008; Rank & Retallick, 2016). As SAE programs grant students occasions to apply content from school-based agricultural education (SBAE) coursework into real-world situations and projects, such educational opportunities provide for stimulating personal and professional growth in numerous settings (Phipps et al., 2008; Rank & Retallick, 2016). Moreover, the diversity of SAE program types offered can positively contribute to the educational development of individual students, particularly in the realms of soft and technical skill development, recordkeeping, and enhancing academic concept understanding (National FFA Organization, 2017). However, a core element to the success of SAE programs is a competent teacher who is active in the entire SAE process (Phipps et al., 2008; Rubenstein & Thoron, 2015; Rubenstein, Thoron, Colclasure, & Gordon, 2016).

Rubenstein et al. (2016) described that the process of adequate and appropriate supervision was "a foundation for successful SAE development and implementation" (p. 229). Interestingly, while Rubenstein and Thoron (2015) described that teachers play a pivotal role in SAE program success, many programs devote the least effort and time to SAE programming (Shoulders & Toland, 2017). Significant issues within this area of SBAE, particularly with teacher supervision of SAE programs, have been documented for several decades, as Osborne (1988) detailed several problems within the supervisory process, including travel funding, planning and prioritization of activities, as well as other issues. However, as SAE program supervision often involves considerable time and effort on the part of teachers (Phipps et al., 2008), perhaps the use of technology could help to play a role in reducing this time commitment, as well as providing enhanced flexibility on the parts of both teachers and students.

How it Works

The agricultural education teacher at [HIGH SCHOOL] began conducting a majority of his SAE visits virtually via Apple Inc.'s FaceTime application five years ago. This idea was developed and implemented after travel funds for SAE visits were eliminated due to budgetary issues. While a strong need still existed to conduct appropriate on-site visits, the teacher sought out various alternatives to keep this essential component of the SAE program viable. While meeting with the FFA chapter officer team, it was suggested to try the FaceTime application for conducting SAE visits at a distance. The teacher tested the application with the current year's FFA chapter officer team and, based upon student feedback, found it to be an effective and suitable alternative for replacing most traditional on-site visits. Currently, almost all SAE visits conducted at [HIGH SCHOOL] are done via FaceTime or a similar type of application.

Since all students at [HIGH SCHOOL] are required to conduct and maintain an SAE project and are required to have a minimum of one supervised visit each semester, the teacher was cautious when executing this idea, as there have consistently been in excess of 80 students

enrolled in the SBAE program each year. The SBAE program purchased two Apple Inc. iPads to utilize for SAE visits (the FaceTime application is factory installed). One iPad would be at the school for the teacher's use, while the other would be loaned to the student to take to his or her project site on the day of the visit. Students would sign up for their SAE visit day at the beginning of each semester and would then be responsible to checking out and returning the iPad before and after the visit. All visits took place after school hours, typically between 3:30 and 5:00 P.M., but while the teacher was still at the school. The visits would last for approximately 10 to 15 minutes, giving students enough time to showcase their projects, answer any questions from the teacher, and receive any other pertinent information. If possible, the teacher would speak with parents/guardians or employers regarding the student's project and progress. Because most students already had access to a FaceTime-compatible device (e.g., a smart phone) to utilize for their visit and didn't require the use of the SBAE program's iPad, multiple student visits could be conducted each day. The primary limitations that were sometimes present were a lack of reliable Internet service or availability of smart phone technology.

Implications

By conducting SAE visits via FaceTime, virtually all travel costs associated with supervisory visits have been eliminated, resulting in an annual savings of approximately $1,000.00. Some on-site SAE visits are still conducted, either due to the nature of the project or by special request from either the student, parent, or employer; however, these visits are not frequent occurrences. Anecdotally, both the students and the teacher enjoy the flexibility and time savings these FaceTime visits have afforded, all the while still providing supervision and guidance for students' SAE projects.

Future Plans & Advice to Others

This method of supervisory visits will likely continue into the foreseeable future. As additional technologies and applications continue to become available and more widespread, other opportunities may be explored. Currently, the use of this type of technology isn't limited to the FaceTime application or Apple Inc. devices. Additional applications, such as Skype™ or Zoom, present similar opportunities to users who may not have access to an iPad or iPhone. These additional applications are free and web-based, as a prospective user would only need to have access to a web-enabled device and Internet access to conduct a similar process. If Internet access is an issue, data plans may be need to be purchased for the device to be used.

Costs

The SBAE program at [HIGH SCHOOL] purchased two 128-gigabyte (GB) iPads at $430.00 each in order implement the activities described previously. In addition to each iPad, screen protectors and heavy-duty hard-shelled cases were purchased to protect the hardware, which added $200.00 to cost. The final costs for all hardware was approximately $1,060.00. Data packages could be purchased through a selected cell phone carrier at an additional cost, which range in cost from $20.00 per month for two GB of data to $100.00 per month for 18 GBs. Because many students at [HIGH SCHOOL] already had smartphones as well as an adequate data plan, the teacher chose to not purchase a cell phone carrier-based data package for the iPads.

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