

**Using interactive silent discussion to uncover work-life balance tensions and contradictions
of early career agricultural teachers**

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

In recent decades, conversations regarding work-life balance have come to the forefront as scholars continue to explore the issue of teacher attrition in school-based agricultural education (Edwards & Briers; 1999; Mundt & Connors, 1999; Murray et al., 2011; Myers et al., 2005; Torres et al., 2009). While studying the work-life balance of agriculture teachers has become a popular thread in research (Sorensen & McKim, 2014; Sorensen, McKim, & Velez, 2016), agriculture teachers themselves have also identified a need to discuss work-life balance in relation to their own careers. In 2017, early career agricultural teachers in Oregon requested the topic of work-life balance to be a focus of the annual conference for early career agricultural teachers. To address this need, we developed an interactive silent discussion (ISD) as a means to best facilitate a conversation about work-life balance. We designed the ISD utilizing tenets of the adult learning theory, which emphasize the need to recognize adult learners' own experiences as central to solving problems (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Our aim was to create a platform in which agricultural teachers could utilize their own unique experiences to safely and candidly discuss possible tensions and contradictions of work-life balance.

How it Works

An interactive silent discussion (ISD) was designed and implemented as a group exercise to elicit individual responses to public discussion prompts via writing. ISD allows participants to respond to personal and often edgy questions in a way that is thought-provoking, empowering, and stimulating. The concept is simple, engage in a collaborative discussion that gives equal voice to all participants in a comfortable environment. We utilized an ISD to explore tensions and contradictions regarding work-life balance during a conference hosted for Oregon agriculture teachers in their first through fifth year of teaching. Prior to the ISD, it was important for us to create an environment that would encourage candid conversation regarding work-life balance; a topic that, for many, requires courage and vulnerability. The workshop presenter accomplished this by beginning the workshop with a story about her struggle to achieve balance during her tenure as a high school agriculture teacher. This allowed them to connect with participants while seamlessly transitioning into the instructions for the ISD. To conduct the ISD, eight questions written on poster paper shaped like callout bubbles were taped on a large 8' x 24' whiteboard. Approximately 50 participants walked to the front of the room and were given their own black whiteboard marker. Participants were given 15 minutes to respond to the eight questions. They were encouraged to record independent thoughts, build off of other responses, make connections between responses, and pose new questions. This was performed silently; participants were encouraged to resist engaging in oral dialogue, but rather put what would be an oral conversation in writing under the respective question. After the 15 minutes of silence, participants were encouraged to spend the next 8-10 minutes in small groups to further the conversation on the whiteboard. Specifically, they were asked to select one question or section on the whiteboard that they thought needed further unpacking. This was followed by an unstructured, 10-minute whole-group discussion. To conclude the workshop, participants were asked to anonymously respond to two reflection questions using the online platform Padlet.

Results to Date

Observational field notes indicated that nearly all 50 participants were engaged in the interactive silent discussion. Participants were eager to begin writing on the whiteboard; so much that the workshop facilitator had to regain their attention to finish giving instructions for the activity. Interestingly, the five men that were in attendance at the conference largely took an observational role during the ISD. All but one stood towards the back of the group, read the responses that were being written on the whiteboard, and did not add to it. They did, however, engage in the oral discussions after the silent fifteen minutes. Additionally, results from the post-conference questionnaire indicated participants found the workshop to be “Very Good” to “Excellent” with a mean rating of 5.5. Forty-four participants completed the questionnaire and items were measured on a 6-point scale where 1-very poor, 2-poor, 3-fair, 4-good, 5-very good, and 6-excellent. Further, several written comments noted the importance and timeliness of the ISD on work-life balance. For example, one participant indicated it was “refreshing,” that she “wanted to spend more time talking about the balancing act” and that “there is so much more we need to cover in this area”.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

The ISD technique allowed participants to discuss a controversial topic in an engaging and empowering manner. We found this workshop to be very impactful for participants and received several affirming emails and comments about the need for more opportunities like this to unpack issues regarding work-life balance. In addition to the workshop questionnaires and real-time feedback, we documented the ISD via observational field notes, digital pictures, and video recording. This data will be analyzed for overarching themes as a part of a qualitative investigation. This will serve two purposes. First, it will help guide Oregon State University’s teacher educators to better support agricultural teachers within the state. Second, it will be used to share insights and findings with the discipline via refereed publications so as to continue the conversation about overarching issues facing agricultural education.

For those wishing to utilize this innovation, be sure to have ample space for participants to walk around as well as sufficient writing space. While we had a wall-size whiteboard, participants struggled to weave through the crowd and reach empty whiteboard space.

Resources Needed

The resources needed to complete the ISD were minimal. While the large whiteboard was ideal for a large group, a similar activity could be done with smaller groups using smaller whiteboards or a long roll of butcher paper taped on the wall or laid on the ground. Other supplies included whiteboard markers (we purchased a package of 72 markers for \$24.00 on Amazon.com) and a set of 10 thick poster boards for \$14.00.

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