

Elevating Ag Education: A Professional Development Program in Ecuador for Teachers

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Introduction and Need for Idea

The National Association of Agricultural Educators has communicated the need to deepen pedagogical and technical skills among teachers (NAAE, 2016). Furthermore, the national research agenda of the American Association for Agricultural Education (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016) addresses the question “what methods, models, and programs are effective in preparing people to work in a global agriculture and natural resource workforce?” (p. 31). One innovative method and program that we have developed to address these needs is to provide in-service teachers with a short-term high-impact international experience called *Elevate Ag Education*. Traditionally, study abroad programs are designed for college students as part of their degree programs. Teachers rarely get an opportunity for professional development involving study abroad that is discipline specific. In addition, teachers, particularly those in the mid-career phase, tend to settle in comfortable and predictable patterns of teaching and sometimes burn out if not invigorated with motivating experiences (White, Bloomfield, & Cornu 2010). The *Elevate Ag Education* program can rejuvenate in-service agriculture teachers’ careers by providing them with challenging, immersive, and discipline specific professional development abroad that few have ever had a chance to do in their lifetime (Dwyer, 2004). Today’s world is becoming increasingly interconnected (Lamm & Harder, 2010) and one of the purposes of this unique study abroad experience was to give teachers a cultural experience that connected to global agricultural concepts and issues. Ecuador was chosen as the study abroad site to give teachers an experience that enhanced their knowledge of global agriculture and the complex issues associated with it. It also provided the opportunity for teachers to experience what it is like to be a learner with a language barrier, to enhance the cultural and linguistic features of a teacher’s tool box, and to develop intercultural and global awareness (Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004).

How it Works

Teachers from Utah, California, and Oregon were invited to participate in the 10-day *Elevate Ag Education* program in Ecuador. Teacher educators from California and Utah (program directors) worked with a third party called Experience International to develop the program and the itinerary. Experience International focusses on agricultural tours and exchange programs abroad and has extensive agricultural and natural resources education experience and connections in Ecuador (Experience International, 2019). The program directors worked collaboratively to recruit teachers nine months before the experience. During the months leading up to the experience, the program directors worked with the teachers for pre-trip training, dissemination of information, and to establish university or continuing education credit for participants. Program directors also work closely with Experience International to purposefully develop an itinerary that met the needs of teachers, exposed them to new cultural and agricultural opportunities, and provided them an opportunity to travel across Ecuador, visiting and exploring issues and a large breadth of agricultural enterprises from high in the Andes Mountains to the Amazon Basin. Experience International worked closely with in-country contacts to arrange all in-country accommodations (e.g., lodging, transportation, meals, etc.). Some of the tours included a dairy and milk processing plant, organic farm high in the mountains, flower farm and processing facility, sugar cane farm and processor, and a cacao farm and processing plant in the Amazon Basin. On each tour, participants learned about technical agriculture and natural resources management but also analyzed topics of sustainability, social justice, foreign aid and economics,

food safety, and food security. For one night, teachers lodged at a host family's house. Teachers completed reflection journals, engaged in frequent discussions, and developed lesson plans. To improve the trip for the future, program directors collected data and feedback from participants. The timetable for planning and executing this program was as follows: a) commitment from teachers with initial deposit by Dec 15; b) full amount due by Mar 1 for the program fee paid to Experience International to cover all in-country accommodations; c) teachers book and pay for flights by April 1; and d) *Elevate Ag Education* experience, July 7-17, 2018.

Results to Date and Implications

In total, 20 people engaged in the experience in some capacity: 14 in-service teachers, one graduate student, one undergraduate student, two teacher educators (program directors), and two in-country hosts (local guide and Experience International). Every teacher involved in the study abroad experience found the trip to be beneficial, felt that they gained an awareness of other cultures and empathy for underrepresented learners, experienced a change in comfort in a new culture, experienced a change in their knowledge of topics related to social and cultural justice, natural resources, food safety, foreign aid, and sustainability, and gained technical content knowledge of agriculture and agricultural issues. For example, from an exit survey, on a 5-point scale, teachers averaged between 4.21 and 4.36 regarding their agreement of gains in each of the above areas. Teachers involved in the trip have since continued communication with the schools in Ecuador to develop an exchange of information. Overall feedback and results of this global experience indicate it was very impactful. Furthermore, participating in-service teachers stated that undergraduates and graduate students who participated added to the overall experience.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

Future plans include expanding the program to occur every other year, seeking out study abroad opportunities in other countries, and recruiting more in-service and pre-service teachers. An additional observation that may increase enrollment numbers is to seek out funding opportunities to lower the overall cost of the trip. Additionally, it is recommended that those using this innovative approach to professional development partner with a third party, such as Experience International. Having the third party resource was crucial in the success of the trip because they were familiar with the country, they had the ability to connect with farmers and families, and they knew, based on past experiences, areas of the country the teachers should experience. Additionally, it is recommended that graduate and continuing education credits be offered to further advance teachers through promotion and tenure opportunities.

Resources Needed and Costs

To successfully plan and execute a study abroad opportunity for teachers many resources were needed, but most important was the third-party contact (Experience International). The program cost for each participant was \$2,200. The program fee covered all in-country accommodations (e.g., lodging, food, transportation, etc.). In addition to the flat rate program cost, participants purchased round-trip plane tickets (~ \$1,000), and some in-country miscellaneous items (e.g., souvenirs, optional meals/snacks, etc.). Some participants paid for and earned graduate school credit (3 credits) while others opted to pay for and receive Continuing Education credits from the respective state universities involved in this program. The optimal number of participants for cost and logistical purposes is about 25 as it keeps the charter bus comfortable (but filled) and allows feasibility in moving through facilities at four locations.

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