

#2020: The Making of a Virtually Excellent Experience!

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Introduction

The year 2020 brought about unforeseen changes in education including how we approached teaching and learning. Many organizations found themselves having to cancel many events and activities. But, as our country and world began to embrace and overcome, the ability to adjust and be resilient became evident. The 4th Annual Agriscience Teacher Education Symposium in the Department of Agricultural Education at the University of Florida was slated for October of 2020, with the program focused on agriscience program visits in the Central Florida region. The need to create learning opportunities that fit into a virtual platform came to the forefront as the face-to-face learning environment was reduced to a minimum. Synchronous e-learning platforms were found to be potentially effective tools in preparing preservice teachers (Woodcock et al., 2015). Online learning brought keen advantages that helped to meet the needs of preservice teachers to gain valuable early field experiences. Online learning was cost-effective because of the lack of travel needed and also allowed learners to engage in the experience, regardless of their physical location (Fedynich, 2014; Kim, 2020; Yilmaz 2019).

Agriscience educators were more than willing to help meet the needs of pre-service agricultural educators to gain early classroom experiences, even in a virtual setting. With the help of agricultural education stakeholders, the symposium was held via Zoom™, and allowed over 30 pre-service teachers the ability to visit two programs and learn about how these teachers managed their total agricultural education program. This initiative supports AAAE Research Priority Two: New Technologies, Practices, and Products Adoption Decisions, as well as Priority Four: Meaningful, Engaged Learning in All Environments (Roberts et al., 2016).

Steps

The first step in setting up a virtual program visit was to identify programs that fit what we hoped to share with our pre-service teachers. For the 2020 symposium, there was a unique ability to visit two {insert state name} programs that were finalists in the National FFA Models of Excellence Program. Next, each program was contacted and asked if they would be willing to participate in a pre-service teacher early experience via virtual program visits. Each program enthusiastically agreed, and a date was set. The Zoom™ link was set-up and shared with the presenters, teacher education faculty, graduate students, and undergraduate students in the program. The agenda was designed to allow students the ability to see the program via photos, drone video, and live touring, as well as ample time for questions and answer sessions about the teachers' philosophy on instruction, supervised agricultural experiences, and FFA Advising. Over 35 students, faculty, and presenters participated in the program visits.

Results to Date

The Agriscience Teacher Education Symposium was held three times prior to 2020. All previous sessions included in-person school-based agricultural education (SBAE) program visits. This was the first time that the symposium was hosted completely virtual. Students visited with each program for approximately 90 minutes. Upon completion of the virtual program, 18

students completed a Qualtrics™ survey, with 100% of respondents who indicated the visits were informative and worth their time. Although there was positive feedback, several students noted that they would have preferred in-person visits to the programs. One student who attended in 2020 had also participated in the 2019 Symposium, and was asked to describe the symposium format that they preferred. The student commented, “I preferred the in-person tour much more. This tour was easier to follow and listen and much easier to ask questions. I also felt like we weren't on as much of a time crunch and that the teachers were more comfortable.” Although this student preferred in-person, they thought that the tour was easy to follow and allowed for ease in asking questions.

Future Plans

If COVID-19 continues to have lasting effects in education, we may need to continue virtual program visits with our pre-service teachers. If and when the opportunity is available, preference would be given to in-person visits to programs. The main focus for universities and colleges for fall was to make virtual experiences the best they could possibly be under the given circumstances (Lederman, 2020). As we reflect on education and what makes up our lived experiences through purposeful learning during COVID-19, both virtual and in-person, can add great value (Dewey, 1938).

Resources Needed

The resources needed for virtual program visits were not monetary. We focused on human capital, and the willingness of high-quality programs and agricultural educators to share their space and their philosophies. As practitioners, there are numerous opportunities to develop strong relationships with stakeholders in agricultural education. Maintaining strong relationships with agricultural educators in your state/region can help in identifying candidates for both in-person and virtual program tours, and makes the “ask” more productive. Outside of the willingness of presenters, we also needed to ensure presenters were skilled enough in Zoom™ technology to utilize share screen, video, audio, and any other capabilities they planned on utilizing during the virtual program visits. We also had to utilize a Zoom™ Pro account, given the length of the virtual symposium.

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