

Read All About It: Book Circles as Professional Development for Topics in Diversity

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Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

At the 101st summer conference of the California Agricultural Teachers' Association (CATA), topics in diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) were identified as areas of pressing need in the development of agriculture teachers in California (Matt Patton, personal communication, June 23, 2020). Further, the American Association of Agricultural Education (AAAE) (2017) strategic plan called for the strengthening of an inclusive culture within the organization. Perceptions of topics in DEI are of varying benefit in the eyes of school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers (Lavergne et al., 2012), however understanding DEI is critical to creating equity and access in learning spaces (Howard, 2010).

A seldom explored form of professional development, book circles are more efficacious than other forms of professional development allowing for active engagement with peers (Blanton et al., 2019). The final goal of professional development is to change teachers' beliefs and attitudes (Guskey, 2002) and, to transform, educators need to "evaluate others' points of view constructively and respectfully" (Hale & Fisher, 2013, p. 11). To address DEI as a topic of importance with California SBAE teachers, and create professional development ripe for SBAE teacher interaction, the CATA implemented a summer book circle focused on a title in DEI.

How It Works/Methodology/Program Phases/Steps

The Summer book circle was initiated with a three-phase approach to implementation: selection, scheduling, and implementation. During the selection stage, a volunteer book circle facilitator, a faculty member at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (Cal Poly), worked with state agricultural education leadership for suggestions of book titles. The facilitator decided the chosen work for the first session; *Blindspot: Hidden Biases of Good People* (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013). The facilitator established four portions of the book to be read and addressed at each meeting, as well as identified questions concerning the reading.

During the scheduling phase, the facilitator worked with the CATA office to access the email listserv to distribute a poll to all CATA members to identify those interested and establish a day of the week and time of day during the month of July for optimal book circle meetings. In this process, Mondays from 9:30AM to 11AM were identified as meeting times for four consecutive weeks in July. A calendar invitation for the dates, which included a Zoom link, was sent to all who had participated in the scheduling poll. Reminder emails were sent the Friday before each circle. These reminder emails included a list of proposed questions for that week.

During implementation, the facilitator ran the Zoom session. Participants joined the main room where the facilitator gave an overview of procedures and expectations, including what to consider when having conversations concerning sensitive topics. A comprehensive list of procedures for book circle sessions will be included with the final poster. The participants were then grouped into breakout rooms of approximately eight persons per room. The facilitator also participated in one of the rooms as a participant and was able to monitor the main room where participants would enter when they had questions. When there were approximately 15 minutes left in the session, all participants would reconvene in the main room. The facilitator would lead a concluding activity which included a share-out of summarizing thoughts from each breakout room, and a preview of the next week's reading material.

Results to Date/Implications

The initial book circle concluded in July of 2020. While initially 75 teachers signed up to participate, between 20 and 30 showed up at each of the 4 sessions. Leadership within the CATA asked for continued implementation of book circles as an approach to help teachers develop professionally but also as a way for them to connect while most districts have not allowed travel during the 2020-2021 academic year (Matt Patton, personal communication, January 15, 2021). Since then, the book circles have continued featuring additional titles brought forward by CATA members, led by the same facilitator. Titles have included *Whistling Vivaldi: And Other Clues to How Stereotypes Affect Us* (Steele, 2010), *Teach Bold: Using Edtech for Social Good* (Williams, 2019), and *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting up a Generation for Failure* (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Participation in live sessions has varied from four to eight participants. Many teachers emailed the facilitator to express thanks in suggesting the titles although they were unable to attend the sessions.

As additional books are advertised, emails are sent out via the CATA listserv to solicit participants. The facilitator keeps a revolving email list for all book circle participants and tracks additions. As of now, no participants have asked to be removed from the email list. Participants, while not always able to attend the scheduled meetings, have expressed their desire to remain on the contact list so they can continue to read new books. Those who have participated in the circles have vocalized their appreciation for having the space to openly talk about topics that might be uncomfortable to discuss in a larger group setting similar to that of typical CATA professional development events.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans include continuing to offer a new book every month or two, depending on book length and school schedules. The CATA book circle group did take a break during the months of November and December of 2020, before picking back up again in 2021, to accommodate the holidays. It is a goal of CATA leadership to advertise these circles at local meetings where there are SBAE teachers present. The next book circle, for the month of April, will focus on the title *We Got This: Equity, Access, and the Quest to Be Who Our Students Need Us to Be* (Minor & Alexander, 2019). This upcoming book circle has also been extended to several teacher candidates currently completing their student teaching assignments.

It is recommended, for others wishing to start their own book circles, to assign the book and establish a single meeting date for the book circle. After the first book circle in California, which consisted of four weekly check-ins, it was decided having one meeting after completing a book was easier to accommodate more individual schedules. As some teachers felt pressure to finish the book or not participate, it is necessary to remind participants that it is acceptable to participate without finishing the book. Additionally, the facilitator sent links to resources to help foster strategies for including more reading in one's daily schedule. When implementing circles on DEI topics, framing the conversation is also important. Strategies for framing conversations will be included with the final poster.

Costs/Resources Needed

There are no start-up or overhead costs associated with facilitating this project. The facilitator is a member of, and state leader in, the CATA and sees this as an opportunity for collaboration. To facilitate, one must have access to a web-based meeting application, such as Zoom, to host meetings. Participants must be willing to purchase their own books.

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