

Using a Choice Board Approach to Incorporate Personalized Professional Development within an Undergraduate Teaching Methods Course

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Introduction & Need for Strategy

During the 2020-2021 school year, it was necessary to revisit course design and expectations to ensure equity and accessibility in the context of a Hy-Flex instructional environment. In this approach, students had the choice to attend class face-to-face or virtually, so course assignments and instruction needed to be accessible from a distance and on campus. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, racial justice protests and a hotly contested Presidential election set the stage for an environment of uncertainty and change. In response to instructional design needs, and conversations about racial justice, a Personal Professional Development Plan assignment was integrated into Methods of Teaching Agricultural Education course at Purdue University.

As part of demonstrating how participation in a student organization like FFA can be integrated into instruction, pre-COVID course assignments included participation in various Agricultural Education club events. Since many of these club events were cancelled or limited in scope during the Fall 2020 semester, the course instructor revised this assignment to become the Personal Professional Development Plan. Through this new assignment, students explored elements of their own professional growth that they felt they needed to focus on as a future educator, selecting four different activities from an instructor-created choice board. The four different activities aligned with the Model for Agricultural Education at Purdue, which guides the implementation of the undergraduate Agricultural Education major. Within each of these four areas, the instructor suggested activities which specifically addressed issues of injustice, intercultural communication, or inequity to immerse students in contextualized learning in addition to classroom experiences.

Connection to Literature

Given that the Teaching Methods course is the final course that Agricultural Education majors take prior to their student teaching internship, the course instructor set out to help students practice the professional behaviors expected of educators. Building upon Self-Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1985) and Self-Directed Learning Theory (Knowles, 1975), the design of the Personal Professional Development Plan assignment sought to increase student agency over their own learning. Agency is one of the three innate needs posited by Deci et al. (1991) as necessary to develop motivation, and contributes to self-directed learning. Agency is a clear component of Self-Directed Learning Theory. When adults feel a sense of agency, they feel more empowered and respected to make decisions that are meaningful for themselves. Shifting the balance of decision-making power from a primarily teacher-centered approach to a more learner-centered approach can increase student autonomy and help support their development as independent learners (Weimer, 2013). Thus, preservice teachers with a sense of agency may be more likely to willingly make decisions to purposively engage in professional development activities not just for the sake of the course assignment, but to meaningfully advance their own knowledge, skills, or attitudes.

How it Works & Implementation Strategy

The Personal Professional Development Plan Assignment was introduced to students at the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester and was described as a semester-long project that consisted of three major components: 1) Professional Development Plan Proposal, 2) Completion of each of the four activities, and 3) Creation of a final project in which students reflected upon their experiences and how they would influence their work as an educator. Students were provided an assignment prompt which included a choice board of options organized into the four areas present in the Model for Agricultural Education at Purdue University: General Education, Professional Education, Technical Agriculture, and Agricultural Education. Within each of these categories,

students were provided four sample activities to choose from, but were also given the option to design their own activity (with instructor approval) within the category. Students selected one activity from each of the four categories and submitted a Professional Development Plan Proposal by the end of September. Activities included on the choice board included virtual and face-to-face options, in both on and off-campus locations to allow for flexibility and equitable access.

In the proposal, students identified their overall professional development goal, an explanation of why they selected that goal, identified which four events they intended on participating in and described how involvement in those activities would help more them toward their overall goal. They also included a description of how they planned on presenting the final results of their professional development experiences (i.e. paper, PowerPoint, video, podcast, etc.) and developed an assessment plan for the course instructor to use when grading their final assignment. As students completed their activities, they uploaded some sort of evidence of their participation in the activity to the course LMS to document their progress. The final project was due shortly after Thanksgiving. In this final project, students needed to at minimum, address the following questions: 1) How has my involvement in this event affected my knowledge, skills, or attitudes? 2) How else do I need to continue to grow in these areas? 3) How has my experience in these events influenced my future endeavors as an educator?

Results to Date/ Implications/ Impact/ Future Plans

The final projects submitted by students varied in format, but all featured reflections that indicated students felt they experienced growth through their experiences. Final projects included narrated PowerPoints (n = 6), PowerPoint slides, (n = 4), YouTube videos (n = 4), written essays (n = 3), websites/blogs (n = 3), and narrated infographic (n = 1). One student did not submit a final project. Many students focused on development of skills related to creating inclusive classrooms that embrace the diverse lived experiences of their future students. One option on the choice board included listening to educational podcasts, which became a very popular selection. Students who selected listening to the suggested podcasts as one of their four activities enthusiastically recommended their experience to others, and some added the podcast to their regular rotation of podcasts. Some students experienced difficulty initially identifying a professional development goal; in the future, the instructor plans to integrate a tool such as the Globally Competent Learning Continuum (ASCD, 2021) into the course or overall curriculum to provide students a starting point from which to focus their professional growth. The depth of learning achieved by students in this assignment appeared to be much greater than the previously existing assignment, so the instructor plans on continuing to use this assignment in the Teaching Methods course beyond COVID.

Advice to Others

Provide students feedback on their proposal early in the semester to help ensure clarity and final projects that are of appropriate depth. Ensure that the options students have available to them are accessible in a variety of formats and times to allow for flexibility. Clearly connect the purpose of a project like this to tangible, long-term outcomes to illustrate the value of these learning activities, so that they are not viewed as an “add-on” assignment. While we ran out of time to conduct in-class presentations of the final projects, it would be powerful to include opportunities for students to share their learning with their peers as another reflection to reinforce their experiential learning.

References

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