

Building Comradery Between Preservice and In-Service Teachers

Emily O. Manuel
Oklahoma State University
458 Agriculture Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078
(337) 526-8234
emily.manuel@okstate.edu

Kathryn L. Teixeira
University of California, Davis
2139 Meyer Hall, One Shields Ave
Davis, CA 95616
(530) 754-2352
kteixeira@ucdavis.edu

Emily A. Sewell
Oklahoma State University
458 Agriculture Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078
(918) 606-4310
easewel@okstate.edu

Kristopher R. L. Rankin III
Oklahoma State University
458 Agriculture Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078
(573) 808-1855
kris.rankin@okstate.edu

Robert Terry Jr.
Oklahoma State University
448 Agriculture Hall
Stillwater, OK 74078
(405) 744-8036
rob.terry@okstate.edu

Introduction/Theoretical Framework

Connectivity and sense of community among SBAE teachers impacts self-efficacy and longevity in the career (Moser & McKim, 2020). Many times, school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers are isolated as the only SBAE teacher at their school. Furthermore, during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were further isolated due to distance learning and physical distance requirements. It is crucial for SBAE teachers to connect because research shows isolation and the lack of professional network in early career teachers can lead to teacher turnover, while collaboration empowers teachers to stay (DeLay & Washburn, 2013).

Connectivity among school-based agricultural education (SBAE) teachers is a significant predictor of career commitment and lack of connectivity for some teachers may be a cause of the nationwide shortage of SBAE teachers (Moser & McKim, 2020). With the continual need for highly qualified teachers (Kantrovich, 2010), it is essential for SBAE teachers to connect and build relationships with others in the profession. Further, gratitude serves an important role in increasing a person's emotional and social wellbeing (Howells & Cumming, 2012).

At the beginning of the Fall 2020 semester, faculty and teaching assistants for the Foundations and Philosophies of Agricultural Education, AGED 3103, in the Department of Agricultural Education, Communication and Leadership at Oklahoma State University realized an opportunity to connect with in-service teachers in Oklahoma by writing thank you notes after hearing unsettling stories from teachers throughout the state. Many teachers felt lost and overwhelmed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, feeding a sense of low morale throughout the Oklahoma Agricultural Education Teacher Association.

How it Works

The thank you note writing activity served two purposes; to increase communication between preservice and in-service agricultural education teachers, and to increase morale amongst SBAE teachers. Preservice teachers enrolled in the AGED 3103 course authored handwritten thank you cards to in-service teachers to recognize their commitment to SBAE through the COVID-19 pandemic and to thank them for their dedication to the profession. The preservice teachers also expressed their interest in joining them in the profession in the coming years.

Each week, the preservice teachers wrote thank you cards to two or three SBAE teachers during the first part of their assigned lab section. We used the Oklahoma SBAE teacher directory for in-service teachers' contact information and to ensure students wrote a thank you card to every SBAE teacher in the state. The Student Success Center in the Ferguson College of Agriculture was gracious in donating the stationary (cards and envelopes) with the Ferguson logo. The activity afforded preservice teachers the opportunity to learn the names and school location of various SBAE teachers they did not previously know as they wrote their notes. The notes were sent out using the departmental mailing service.

Results to Date

The thank you notes achieved the goal of creating ties between preservice and in-service teachers while also increasing morale among both groups. After notes were sent to teachers, faculty received follow-up emails, phone calls, and thank you cards expressing their appreciation for the notes. One in-service teacher wrote:

Thank you for the letter. It's nice to know that the future has thoughtful young people like yourself. That will serve you well in the future I hope that this letter shows that your small act of kindness made this ag teachers day and was just the thing he needed. If you ever need help or advice in the profession feel free to contact me anytime.

The positive response from in-service teachers made preservice teachers feel included in the network of SBAE teachers which encouraged them to continue their degree program to become SBAE teachers. In-service teachers were inspired by the gesture and some shared a renewed sense of excitement in their role. Many offered to assist the preservice teachers in their future endeavors in the agricultural education field.

At the end of the semester, we reached out to in-service teachers to submit video messages of encouragement and advice to be shared with the preservice teachers during their final class of the course. This full circle activity provided a form of two-way communication and served as an opportunity to increase morale and connectivity between preservice and in-service teachers.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Our advice to others is to just do it! It is a simple project that can essentially be done as students wait for class to start. Faculty and teaching assistants at [University] plan to continue using this model to create relationships and encourage in-service teachers. In the future, preservice teachers could choose to include their own contact information to allow for more direct communication between the preservice and in-service teachers after the initial notes are sent.

An unanticipated benefit was this activity demonstrated the importance of sending properly written thank you notes to stakeholders. It also served as an opportunity to teach students how to properly address an envelope.

Costs/Resources Needed

Preservice teachers were a key resource to this project as they wrote the thank you notes. Additional resources included stationary provided by the Student Success Center (approximate value of \$180), the agricultural educator teacher list provided by State Department of Career and Technical Education, and postage which was approximately \$186.

References

- DeLay, A., & Washburn, S. (2013). The Role of collaboration in secondary agriculture teacher career satisfaction and career retention. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 104–120. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2013.04104>
- Howells, K., & Cumming, J. (2012). Exploring the role of gratitude in the professional experience of pre-service teachers. *Teaching Education*, 23(1), 71–88. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10476210.2011.638370>
- Moser, E. M., & McKim, A. J. (2020). Teacher retention: A relational perspective. *Journal of Agricultural Education*, 61(2), 263–275. <https://doi.org/10.5032/jae.2020.02263>