

Innovative Idea: A Teacher Educator Returns to the High School Agriculture Classroom

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Introduction/ Need for Innovation

The purpose of this semester-long experience in Troy, Idaho was to document my return to the high school classroom both as a teacher and an observer. The experience was intended as an ethnographic case study where I chronicled my personal and professional experiences returning to the public-school system after 15 years in academia. I leaned heavily on the experiences of Dr. John Loughran, a teacher educator who returned to the classroom and wrote the text *Opening the Classroom Door: Teacher, Researcher, Learner*. Loughran (1996) stated of his return to the classroom, “If we [teacher educators] are concerned with educating teachers and understanding teaching and learning we must have first-hand contact with schools and classrooms in a sustained way” (p. 5). As stated in Selkirk & Tichenor (2009), “Not only do education faculty have to understand and convey their content, and know and use effective teaching methods, they also have to be able to explicitly explain and reflect on their own teaching so that teacher candidates are able to see the instructional decisions and productive reflection that must continually take place” (p. 86). This experience caused me to be very reflective of both my practice and the future of agricultural education.

In my previous high school teaching experience, I taught the “Millennial Generation,” while I am now preparing teacher candidates to teach Generation “Z,” a technologically driven generation. This sabbatical experience immersed me in the classroom environment for which I train teacher candidates. I attempted to “walk the walk” that I expect from them. As a teacher educator, my professional development is usually in the environment of academia, this opportunity allowed access to the authenticity of the public-school classroom and system.

How it works

This experience was my first sabbatical. It was requested 18 months prior via the University of Idaho Sabbatical committee. I conducted the experience in a single teacher program where the agriculture teacher, Sam Hoffman was a graduate of my program. I taught 1-2 class periods a day rotating among different content and age ranges. In classes where I was not teaching, I was a participant observer. I was in the program for the entire spring semester. The initial objectives that were in my sabbatical application were:

- Chronicle my personal and professional experiences returning to the public-school system through videotaping classroom events and personal journaling.
- Write about and reflect on impacts of the “lived experience” on my professional practice as a teacher educator.
- Refresh and invigorate knowledge, philosophy, and practices in the high school classroom environment.
- Engage in a comprehensive reflective process related to the full range of duties of a high school Agricultural and Natural Resources teacher.
- Critically examine the curricula and incorporation of the Common Core State Standards and the Next Generation Science Standards as they relate to Agricultural Education.

Results to Date/Implications

Few, if any, publications about a similar experience exists for Agriculture Education. I know of no other teacher educator in agriculture who has returned to the high school classroom in this manner or documented such an experience. The completion and documentation of a successful project can encourage other teacher educators to engage in this sort of professional development. Darling- Hammond and Bransford (2005) stated, “. . .many teacher education programs have been criticized for being overly theoretical, having little connecting to practice” (p. 391). This experience reconnected me to that practice in an authentic environment.

I journaled via GoogleKeep at least once a week. Initially I journaled every day, then after rereading many of the journals, I stopped using GoogleKeep. I did not reference my early journals until after the school year ended. The teacher and I compared journals after the end of the school year and discussed how to move forward with publications. We did have very different viewpoints on some events and students, which led to a robust discussion about the benefits of the experience. I plan on publishing these results in the future.

The experiences I gained over the course of a semester of high school teaching and observing both students and their teacher was informative both for my teaching practice and my part in the continual improvement of our teacher preparation program. I tried to model best practices of both teaching and mentorship for the agriculture teacher at the high school. The opportunity to accurately model all the expectations I set for teacher candidates was challenging, but extremely rewarding.

This experience refreshed and invigorated my knowledge of the public-school environment and the High School Student of 2021. At the time of my application, COVID-19 was not a concern. Completing the sabbatical in an environment where both teachers and students were trying to recover from a global pandemic was enlightening and helpful to my practice as a teacher educator.

Future Plans/Advice to others

The original intent of this experience was to put myself in the shoes of student teachers. This was an unrealistic expectation due to the context and parties involved. I would suggest to others that you clearly define the goals of the experience and therefore the roles that a faculty member would take in a similar experience. The temporary nature of both this experience and the experiences of a student teacher does not allow for the full-fledged development of relationships and rapport with students. Loughran (1996) was the teacher of record, while I was not. I think to engage fully in the immersive experience the individual would benefit the most from being the teacher of record and having full control of the classroom environment. The partner teacher, Mr. Hoffman said of the experience “In the following weeks we will discuss this experience at length, and I am interested to hear more about Kattlyn’s observations. Until then I will reflect on our many discussions during our prep time. Kattlyn challenged me as an educator and I know that I will have to improve. I wonder if I had a similar effect on her. I would suggest that any teacher educator would benefit from an extended period of teaching and observing at the high school level.”

Costs/Resources Needed

The University of Idaho allows for faculty to take a single semester sabbatical at full salary, and a full year at 50% salary. The costs to the department was the loss of FTE time for the faculty on sabbatical. There was no cost to the participating school.

References

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