

Teaching Soft Skills in Agricultural Education: Best Practices

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### **Introduction**

Priority area three of the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education states, “Agricultural education must determine the most effective means for incorporating and assessing soft skills development (National Research Council, 2009) in both formal and nonformal settings” (Stripling & Ricketts, 2016, pp. 30-31). According to the National FFA Organization, The Agricultural Education Mission states “Agricultural education prepares students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices in the global agriculture, food, fiber and natural resources systems” (Agricultural Education, 2019).

There are many classroom settings for Agricultural Education aside from the typical classroom such as mechanics shops, greenhouses, livestock barns and laboratories. “Enhanced understanding of learning and teaching environments could result in the development of present-day best practices and research-based pedagogies and technologies that not only meet the goal of agricultural education but also society’s greatest challenges” (Edgar et al., 2016, p. 39). Teaching soft skills in Agricultural Education demonstrates commitment to the Agricultural Education Mission and Priority area three of the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of this study was based on constructivism, a learning theory that explains how knowledge is constructed by people. In the educational context, Paiget (1967) describes the philosophical meanings of constructivism, Vygotsky (1978) outlined social constructivism, and von Glaserfeld (1995) advocated for radical constructivism (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002). The purpose of this study was to identify the best practices for teaching soft skills. Therefore, Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism has the greatest impact on educational practices and instructional design making it the best option for a theoretical framework for this study (Jones & Brader-Araje, 2002).

### **Methods**

The study aims to describe “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept of a phenomenon” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p.75). A purposeful sampling technique was used (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The sample consisted of experienced Agricultural Educators teaching for more than 3 years. An email was sent to agricultural educators to gauge interest in participating in the qualitative study. Educators who agreed to become participants were sent an email with an attachment to schedule a ZOOM call at the participant’s convenience. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants. Participants were known to the researcher or identified using advisor contact lists on area association websites. As a measure of credibility, programs were chosen at random. The participants represented an inclusive spectrum of experience and student demographics. Those interviewed consisted of two males and five females. Participant data was coded to protect their identity. Interview questions were developed after reviewing the literature and determining the purpose of the study. The interviews were conducted by the lead researcher. During the interviews, the participants were asked ten questions following the institutional review board-approved protocol, using follow-up questions as needed to gain more understanding of what the participants were trying to explain. The constant comparative method was used to search the data for constant or popular themes throughout the interview process (Glazer, 1965). To interpret the

raw data, the approach of social constructivism was applied. Agriculture Education is associated with education disciplines such as Career and Technology, and Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. Recognizing these educators' experience and academic versatility, we listened carefully to what each educator shared, and considered their comments to determine their perceptions of soft skills and their teaching practices for soft skills. Triangulation was performed on the findings by reviewing interview and observation notes, reflexive journal, and historical documents provided by the educators.

### **Findings**

The perceptions of Agricultural Educators on soft skills that emerged from the data were: Soft skills are a combination of critical thinking, leadership, and communication skills. The majority of participants believed that soft skills are a learned skill and most students display how soft skills are taught and practiced in their home environments. This combined with social and peer pressure is the biggest oppressor and obstacle for students when teachers are teaching soft skills. It was frequently mentioned in interviews that students struggle to "find their voice", whether that's confidence or ability to communicate. One last perception that Agricultural Educators had is that students have more opportunities to develop soft skills by participating in programming and activities sponsored by their areas.

### **Conclusions, Recommendations, and Implications**

Application of Humanist Psychologist Abraham Maslow's four stages of learning describes a student's process in learning soft skills. In the first stage, learners are unconsciously incompetent. Learners at this stage are confident and believe in their skills and abilities, unaware there are more skills they could develop (Crosbie 2005). In stage two they are introduced to new skills, becoming consciously incompetent. The third stage places learners in another uncomfortable place of learning. Learners are so focused on practicing and using their new skills efficiently that they are not coming naturally (Crosbie 2005). The fourth stage of Maslow's stages of learning is Unconsciously competent. Here the skills are mastered and become second nature. Crosbie (2005) describes being in this stage of learning like how we drive cars home from work. We have mastered that route that the car seems to drive itself. Until we move to a new house and are forced to learn a new route. This takes us back to the first step in the stages of learning (Crosbie 2005).

To help combat some of the frustrations in the four stages of learning, one must create an effective training program that incorporates active involvement and Kinesthetic learning. (Crosbie 2005). Agricultural Education uses active involvement in the way it asks its learners to work in groups, physically move, and practice skills in competition. To have an effective training program the following elements must be present to ensure behavioral change: expert facilitation; contextual awareness; formal support; informal support; opportunities to use the new skills; self-study and self-analysis; stress; and celebration (Crosbie, 2015).

It is unknown if Agricultural Education teacher preparation programs are preparing future teachers to emphasize soft skills. To follow the Agricultural mission statement of "preparing students for successful careers and a lifetime of informed choices", it is imperative that soft skill practices be taught in teacher preparation programs.

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