

Developing Future Educators through an Educationally Purposeful High Impact Experience:
A Phenomenological Examination

Authors:

Gavin Voelckers
875 Perimeter Drive, MS 2040
Moscow, ID 83844
208-885-6358
Voel8172@vandals.uidaho.edu

Audie Cherry
audiec@g.clemson.edu

Kasee Smith
klsmith@uidaho.edu

Jeremy Falk
jfalk@uidaho.edu

Daniel Foster
Ddf12@psu.edu

Melanie Miller Foster
Mjm727@psu.edu

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Introduction

Post-secondary schools embrace learning opportunities outside of the classroom intended to extend knowledge, expand opportunity, and curate skills in students beyond content comprehension (Kuh, 2008). High Impact Experiences (HIE)s, a category of experiential learning opportunities involving practical skills application, give undergraduate students these opportunities. HIE curriculum requires extensive planning and funding to offer above-average instruction to a relatively small student population. Information on HIE return-on-investment is limited as perceived HIE esteem and efficacy grow. Participating in HIEs has noted benefits. Participation can help students become “effective agents for their own lifelong learning and personal development” (Chickering, 1994, p 50). Students who participate in HIEs can develop higher levels of social literacy than their classmates who do not participate in HIEs. (Riehle & Weiner, 2013).

This study allowed us to explore how participation in a Spring 2022 high-impact teaching immersion increased professional accountability and accelerated professional maturity in a cohort of undergraduate pre-service teachers. This study addresses AAAE research priority 5 by inspecting how agricultural leadership, education, and communication teachers can collaborate to deliver cost-effective educational programs. Results will inform the continuing design of high-impact immersion curriculum, budget prioritization, and cross-institutional collaboration.

Framework

This study was founded on a theoretical model for HIE involvement as proposed by Buck (2020). Buck proposed that components of HIEs have the ability to impact student satisfaction, engagement, and persistence which can contribute to student acquisition of the essential skills as outlined by the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U). Building purposeful educational activities allows students to grow and develop through HIEs. Wolf-Wendel et al. (2009) noted that many post-secondary institutions state they are following Kuh’s (2008) HIE recommendations, even when claiming to implement HIEs.

Methodology

This study was conducted as a qualitative phenomenology, using reflections of students who participated in a one-week immersive study-away program. The population of this study ($n = 12$) were pre-service agricultural educators at University of Idaho and Penn State who participated in the 2021-2022 [Program]. Students participated in a three-credit course with a one week immersive experience in Fall semester 2021 and a three credit Spring 2022 course which included a one week immersive teaching experience. The Fall 2021 course and experience prepared students with usable content, lesson planning, and instructional feedback so that they could effectively deliver agricultural lessons in secondary agricultural classrooms. Students were responsible for managing travel funds, planning lessons, teaching, and collaborating with peers to handle all immersion logistics and responsibilities. The data for this study were collected during the spring immersion; students traveled in pairs and reflected on their experiences.

Flip (formerly Flipgrid) was used to collect data with daily video reflection prompts. Prompts were designed to stimulate participant reflection on their experiences in an open format. Each prompt read: *Please share what you learned today about: 1. Content Area, 2. Students, 3. Yourself as a teacher.* Students completed assignments prior to the Spring immersion to orient them to the video recording platform. Students spent six to eight days in their locations and completed N = 82 video reflections. Video reflections were transcribed verbatim using both the onboard Flip transcription tool and individual cross-checking for completeness.

Creswell and Creswell's (2017) suggested phenomenological analysis should take place in five steps: 1) describing personal experiences of the researchers with the phenomenon, 2) developing a list of significant statements, 3) condensing significant statements into "meaning units" or themes, 4) writing descriptions of what and how the phenomenon was experienced, 5) and developing a composite description of the phenomenon. Reflexivity statements were developed by the members of the data analysis team (three members of the research team) who had no previous interaction with the 2021-2022 [Program] in order to ensure trustworthiness (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results/Findings

Through the examination, it was determined that there were 4 main concepts participants universally experienced. The emergent themes (ET) included: ET1: Recognizing personal growth through adversity, ET2: Importance of being exposed to unfamiliar environments, ET3: Merit of flexibility in mindset and action ET4: Benefit of supportive and caring mentors and professional community.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explain how high-impact teaching immersions increase professional accountability and accelerate professional maturity. As a result, we concluded that the experience offered growth and solidified students' futures as life-long learners and reflective educators. Based on the emerging themes we can conclude that both internal and external professional growth occurred. Emerging themes 1, 2, and 3 all support the conclusion that internal self-efficacy and resilience were gained through the HIE. Emerging theme 4 highlighted the growth of awareness of the usefulness of the professional education community as a resource. Therefore, we conclude that the students developed skills and dispositions during their HIE that are desired in teacher preparation programs.

Implications/Recommendations/Impact

Students who participated in the [Program] showed personal growth and self-efficacy in several areas. The HIE provided to students has shown to align with the research (Chickering, 1994; Buck, 2020; Wolf-Wendel et al., 2009; Kuh, 2008). Therefore, it is recommended that institutions of higher education seek to provide more access to opportunities for students to participate in HIEs that can help develop them personally and professionally. We also recommend that a longitudinal study be conducted to determine if the growth experienced in this HIE transfers into these students' future careers.

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