

Making Success Visible: Using Metaphoric Modeling to Support Preservice Agriculture Teachers' First-Year Success

Introduction/Need for Innovation or Idea

Success in school-based agricultural education (SBAE) is complex, contested, and often defined through externally imposed performance indicators such as FFA participation, awards, and student achievement outcomes (Leader & Pazey, 2023; Traini et al., 2019). While these measures are visible and measurable, they frequently conflict with teachers' personal values related to relationships, balance, and student growth, contributing to stress and early-career attrition (Johnson & Birkeland, 2003; Clemons & Lindner, 2019).

Preservice teachers enter preparation programs with pre-existing beliefs about what teaching success should look like, and these anticipatory definitions influence professional identity development, instructional decision-making, and persistence in the profession (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009; Hammerness, 2003; Pajares, 1992). Despite this, teacher preparation programs rarely provide structured opportunities for preservice SBAE teachers to explicitly articulate, examine, and legitimize their own definitions of success before entering the classroom. This innovation addresses this gap by using metaphoric modeling as a reflective, experiential learning strategy that helps preservice agriculture teachers externalize tacit beliefs about success, align expectations with the realities of SBAE, and develop sustainable, personally meaningful success frameworks before their first year of teaching.

How it Works/Methodology/Program Phases/ Steps

The workshop is grounded in Kolb's (2014) Experiential Learning Theory, which positions learning as a cyclical process of concrete experience, reflection, conceptualization, and active experimentation. The workshop can be implemented within a capstone seminar, methods course, induction program, or professional development setting and requires 60 to 90 minutes across four phases.

Phase 1: Framing Success as a System

Participants engage in a facilitated discussion reviewing the interconnected nature of SBAE, including classroom instruction, supervised agricultural experience (SAE), FFA, and broader community and stakeholder relationships (Eck et al., 2019; Traini et al., 2021). This framing establishes success as multidimensional rather than outcome-driven.

Phase 2: Metaphoric Model Construction

Participants construct a three-dimensional model using LEGO® bricks or similar manipulatives to represent what success will look like during their first year of teaching. Metaphoric modeling functions as a constructive elicitation technique supporting the expression of implicit beliefs not easily captured through traditional reflection or discussion (Prosser & Loxley, 2008; Rose, 2022).

Phase 3: Reflection and Meaning-Making

Participants complete brief written reflections explaining the symbolic meaning of their models and engage in small-group or whole-group dialogue. This reflective observation phase supports sensemaking and professional meaning construction (Kolb, 2014; Schön, 1983).

Phase 4: Collective Sensemaking

Facilitated discussion highlights shared themes across models, reinforcing community-building and normalizing diverse but legitimate definitions of success. This process aligns with research emphasizing the importance of relational support and reflection in early-career teacher development (Flores & Day, 2006; Johnson & Birkeland, 2003).

Results to Date/Implications

This workshop has been implemented once with a cohort of preservice SBAE teacher candidates ($N = 13$) during a capstone seminar following student teaching experience. The activity was well received and prompted rich reflection and discussion among participants regarding how they envisioned success during their first year of teaching.

Anecdotally, teacher candidates described success less in terms of specific outcomes or performance metrics and more as an ongoing, developmental process. Many models emphasized connection, including building relationships with students, colleagues, administrators, and community members. Others highlighted the importance of integration and balance, particularly across classroom instruction, FFA, SAE, and community expectations. Several participants represented success as something that grows over time, using metaphors that reflected movement, life, or progress rather than fixed end points. Model examples and reflective content from this workshop will be shared with the final poster.

Group discussion following the activity revealed that candidates found value in making their definitions of success visible and in seeing how peers held both shared and differing perspectives. The workshop appeared to normalize multiple pathways to success and encouraged realistic, sustainable expectations for the first year of teaching. For teacher educators, the activity provided insight into candidates' implicit assumptions about success and created a foundation for future conversations related to mentoring, induction, and professional well-being.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Plans for this innovative practice include intentionally revisiting the metaphoric models with participants during and after their first year of teaching. We plan to follow up with teacher candidates and invite them to reflect on how their initial models of success align with, diverge from, or have evolved based on their first-year teaching experiences. This reflective return to the models is intended to support sensemaking, recalibration of expectations, and professional growth during the early career transition, rather than to evaluate performance.

For others interested in implementing this workshop, facilitators are encouraged to prioritize psychological safety and emphasize that there are no "right" or "wrong" representations of success. The value of the activity lies in participant-driven meaning-making and reflection, not in comparison or assessment. Facilitators should resist imposing dominant or outcome-oriented success narratives and instead use the activity as a starting point for ongoing conversations about sustainability, balance, and growth within the complexity of SBAE.

Costs/Resources Needed

This workshop requires minimal financial investment. LEGO® bricks or similar manipulatives are reusable across cohorts, and facilitation requires no specialized training beyond familiarity with reflective practice. The low-cost, high-impact design makes this innovation adaptable across teacher preparation programs, induction settings, and professional development contexts.

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