

Elements of Mentoring Student Teachers in Agricultural Education

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The best student teaching experiences are those where novice teachers are provided significant and high-quality supervision by their mentors (National Research Council, 2010). However, for many seasoned teachers, mentoring future teachers can seem like a juggling act between imparting years of content knowledge and providing intensive hands-on training in the classroom (American Education Research Association, 2005). So, what does the supervision of a student teacher include? How should a mentor teacher facilitate the continued improvement of a student teacher? Student teachers need exposure to almost every aspect of the school system and the total program of Agricultural Education. They need experience facilitating instruction in diverse environments of varying class sizes, even as they transition from formal environments to in-service professional development. Student teachers need to understand the educational needs of students of differing abilities and how these factors may be influenced by family, peers, and by the community. In short, they need to know it all, and they need to know it quickly. So, how might a mentor teacher best structure their student teacher's learning experiences? Here are four major elements to consider when mentoring student teachers:

Onboarding

Onboarding is orienting the student teacher to school policies, procedures, and routines by introducing them to the school and surrounding community. Mentor teachers should devote a substantial portion of the student teacher's first days at school describing school policies and procedures, including a review of the school's policy guides, the teacher handbook, and the student handbook. The student handbook is perhaps the most concise source of helpful information. Student teachers need to understand and prepare to follow policies related to student absences, disciplinary procedures, field trips, daily schedules, handling school funds, inclement weather plans, fire and tornado drills, and emergency lock-down procedures.

After a thorough orientation to school policies and procedures, load up the student teacher and take them for a drive around the community. Show them where their students live and where their parents work. Familiarize them with the various types of agriculture prevalent in the community and introduce them to key people who support the program. Having a student teacher is a badge of honor, and community supporters need to know that the program trains young people for careers in agriculture and prepares future teachers. Introducing student teachers to crucial supporters in the community communicates the expectation that they should also develop the same type of relationships when they begin their programs. Student teachers bring their culture, social circumstances, community mores, and standards to the classroom. Helping

them comprehend a community's influential role in Agricultural Education will exponentially benefit their future programs.

This is now the time to introduce them to how to do things. The mentor teacher gives the student teacher an overview of the courses they teach and their expectations when they take over the teaching of those courses. Review the class rosters, noting students with special needs and accommodations. Answer questions about the structure and sequence of the curriculum. Devote plenty of time to reviewing the academic calendar, the community calendar, and the FFA program of activities. Mentor teachers need to explain how to keep up with the dates associated with school activities, community events, and FFA programs. Help them conceptualize the characteristics of the yearly calendar and the need for event planning. Student teachers need to experience the intensity of the teaching experience but in a manner that prevents disorientation, confusion, and demoralization. Good mentor teachers can structure the student teaching experience for maximum benefit (National Research Council, 2010).

Teaching

The next element of preparing student teachers is in the practice of teaching. There are over 11,000 agriculture teachers in the United States, and everyone has a different way of designing and delivering the curriculum. The mentor teacher should demonstrate how to plan lessons and prepare for each class. Student teachers commonly report, "My mentor teacher just walked into class, carrying nothing more than a pencil, and started teaching, without a written lesson plan document but kept students busy and productive the whole period. How does he/she do it? " Experienced agriculture teachers may not teach from a paper lesson plan, but they do have one in their heads. Mentor teachers should be explicit about how to plan instructional activities. After teaching the same subject 20 times in a row, it is easy to remember what to do each time. However, sometimes student teachers have a difficult time making that connection.

The mentor teacher should show student teachers where teaching materials are located and provide access to the recommended teaching materials. Teach them to use all equipment and technology, including shop and lab equipment, any tractors or vehicles used on the school farm, and anything more complicated than a manual pencil sharpener. Student teachers' experience level with the equipment used in Agricultural Education is wide and varied. Be sure they know how to operate all equipment in the program safely. One good way to do this is to have them demonstrate how to set up and use shop and lab equipment safely. Do not just take their word for it; confirm they know how to use the equipment.

Mentor teachers will need to further the student teacher's hands-on experiences in teaching methods and technical content in agriculture, food, and natural resources. Student teachers cannot learn everything they need about being an agriculture teacher in four short years of teacher education. Be prepared to provide some technical content instruction. Student teaching is an opportunity to test some of the methods they have learned in college. Let them try new things during the teaching phase, even let them fail, but ensure they practice effective teaching methods in the classroom.

Mentoring

Being a mentor teacher in the field requires being both teacher and mentor simultaneously. A teacher teaches; a mentor provides guidance and advice. The mentoring element of a mentor teacher's role requires advising the student teacher on how to handle best the daily issues they will face in classrooms of their own. For instance, student teachers need solid advice on handling misbehavior and structuring lessons that engage students in learning and how best to manage the workflow of a busy Agricultural Education program. They especially need advice on how to manage stress. Teaching agriculture is a rewarding occupation, but it does come with its share of stressful situations. Counseling student teachers on managing the stress of the job is essential to their happiness and longevity in the profession. Student teachers may also need their mentor teacher's guidance on structuring and managing their careers. They will ask mentors for opinions on which teaching jobs to apply for and advice on preparing for interviews. They will seek their mentor's advice on how to work with administrators, parents, and community supporters.

Evaluating

The most successful mentor teachers regularly provide informal assessment and evaluation between classes, in the hallway, and on the way to and from meetings and competitions. The informal assessment also includes providing practical tips and tricks to student teachers while they are teaching. This method is called "coaching at the moment" and occurs when you signal, note, or somehow cue your student teacher to things they ought to do or consider during a lesson without alerting the class that you are doing so.

University faculty will need the cooperating teacher to conduct formal student-teacher evaluations weekly. This process involves observing them teach and sitting down with them to review their teaching practice. This evaluation should include commendations for suitable teaching methods and recommendations for improvement. For mentor teachers, sitting in the back of the room completing a formal observation of a student teacher seems like as much fun as watching paint dry. However, these weekly evaluations give the mentor teacher the best chance to help a novice teacher survive and thrive in the classroom. Some teacher education programs may require a summative teaching performance evaluation along with the recommended grade for their student teacher. Every student teacher should receive the grade earned for their performance, but this grade should never be a surprise. Conducting regular informal and formal evaluations provides the best opportunity for mentor teachers to help student teachers cultivate habits that will successfully carry them into their first year of teaching.

Communicating Expectations

Another essential underlying theme must be addressed by mentor teachers from the very first day. Mentor teachers help student teachers develop a positive and constructive work ethic because teaching is a demanding responsibility. The sooner student teachers develop a positive work ethic, the better. A mentor teacher needs to continue communicating expectations to the student teacher daily (Richardson, 1990). Address problems associated with work ethic and the quality of their instruction as soon as possible. It is all about helping student teachers develop

good habits. There is considerable variation in how long a person develops a habit - between 18 and 254 days (Lally et al., 2010). Mentor teachers guide student teachers so that best practices are repeated intentionally over time.

The student teacher should have a solid foundation from their teacher preparation program. However, under the mentor teacher's guidance, they will first be able to immerse themselves in applying everything they have learned in a real-world setting. Success at any stage is insufficient to ensure that a student-teacher gets the most out of their time at their student-teaching site. All four elements are necessary to provide the student teacher with the experiences, tools, and feedback they need to manage their Agricultural Education program successfully.

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