An Approach to Experiential Learning: A Model that Merits Consideration for the 21st Century

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Experiential learning has been an integral part of agricultural education since agriculture became a part of the school system. We often equate the idea of supervised practice only with 1917 and the Smith-Hughes movement. In Minnesota, agricultural education was an integral part of the school system at the turn of the century. Minnesota founded an agricultural high school in 1888.

The idea rapidly expanded, as a system of special agriculture departments in public schools spread across the state. In the early 1900s, the Minnesota state legislature began to provide funds at the rate of $2,500. One of the stipulations in the legislation was to provide land for trials and plots so that students could apply their learning to real situations. Consequently, the concept of application to real life was present at the start of agricultural education programs.

Knobloch (1999) addressed the issue as to whether or not Supervised Agricultural Experiences were merely becoming fond memories. He pointed out that this experience has a proven record of helping students apply knowledge, clarify career choices, develop responsibility and solve problems. He indicated that, in recent conversations across various states, the idea of implementing new SAE options was a popular topic. He also stated the need to shift the focus of SAEs from production to projects that reflect the community and career needs of students.

In many agricultural education programs today, the reality is that SAE is an option for students. Teachers no longer support the idea of SAE being an integral and required component of the program.

The idea of redesigning SAE programs is being debated across the country. It is evident that most are not willing to abandon the idea of an experiential education phase in agricultural education. However, current practice seems to reveal that a substantial portion of the teacher practitioners has abandoned this phase of the program.

Today, at Forest Lake Senior High School in Forest Lake, Minnesota, which is a metropolitan-area, four-teacher agricultural education program, the SAE component is a requirement of all students and serves to distinguish this program. With more than 360 students enrolled per term (over 1,200 per year), it would be easy for the teachers to drop this component. The teachers could easily say this is too much work and that the time demand is too great. This is not the philosophy at Forest Lake! All students who enroll in agricultural education courses are required to have a SAE.

Students receive a copy of the SAE Project Outline and a SAE Project Plan. The Project Plan provides a series of questions that are designed to guide the students through steps in planning. In class sessions, the term "SAE" is described by the teacher. The teachers emphasize the word "project" which seems to resonate with most students.

Students are expected to seek an area of interest in agriculture. The teachers do not use the traditional adjectives formerly applied to projects, such as calling them Entrepreneurship, Exploratory, Placement, Research or Home/Community Projects. They also do not provide a list of possible projects. They want students to think about their interests and develop a project that may complement their classroom experience or build from their interest.

Although the traditional SAE terms are not used, the projects selected do fit into the traditional categories. However, it is important to note that they start with an open agenda. At the beginning of the term, students are introduced to the idea of a project after the first couple of days into a course. They are given instruction on "What does a SAE/Project mean?" and "What does the SAE/Project provide to you as a student?"

Once students are introduced to the SAE/Project concept, they are given a couple of weeks to submit the SAE Project Plan. Once the Plan is submitted and approved, students begin work on their projects. All students are encouraged to select an agriculturally related project. Students are expected to discuss the project

SAE Projects, traditional or non-traditional, are an important part of the total student learning package in agricultural education. Here, students apply classroom skills into a laboratory setting. (Photo courtesy of Iowa State Univerity College of Agriculture.)

with their teacher. Students are given liberty to select a project that is of interest to them even if it does not directly relate to the content in a course.

For example, a student in a floral design course may be conducting an experiment on fertilizer materials. Once a project is underway, students are expected to complete a project plan. The project plan is a record of activities that occur as the project is being completed. The plan contains reasons why they chose the topic, the records and goals they hope to accomplish, and the costs, the benefits and the resources needed to complete the project, as well as a plan for evaluating and reporting the project.

The plan is a part of the classroom activities for the course. As a result, teachers frequently use one class period each week to allow students to maintain the documentation and/or appropriate records. At the close of the term, each student is expected to give an oral report of his or her project. The report may range from two to five minutes. The presentation may be in a form the student chooses but must include a visual presentation such as a PowerPoint presentation or a display.

The project requires a minimum of 10 hours of work outside the classroom and will constitute 15 percent of the student's grade in the course. Knight and Elliot (1999) shared a historical perspective of experiential learning in which they pointed out that the Dewey connection between learning and doing, and Stemson's notion of supervised practice, were foundational in formulating the idea of the SAE.

It is clear that as enrollments have increased in agricultural education courses in many programs, teachers have simply discarded the notion that an experiential learning opportunity is an essential, foundational principle. It is not uncommon to find programs with 70 to 80 percent of the students not having any type of practical experience outside the classroom. The teachers at Forest Lake have made a commitment to have the SAE/Project component as an integral part of their program.

Despite the fact that each teacher will likely have 90 to 120 students per day, they have developed a philosophy that each student will complete a SAE project for each class. In the event a student takes more than one agricultural education class in a term, they are allowed to enhance and develop one project.

In summary, the SAE/Project can be an integral part of agricultural education if the teachers believe it is an essential component. The unique feature of the Forest Lake approach is that students are allowed a great deal of freedom to select and design a project. There is no classification or list requiring students to fit into a preconceived model. Clearly, one could identify the projects chosen as fitting into the traditional categories of entrepreneurship, exploratory, research, experimental, home or community project categories. Students must design the experience and take ownership in the effort.

Knobloch (1999) suggested agricultural educators need to think "outside the box" regarding the issue of SAE/Experiential Learning Projects. The concept of learning by doing is a key component of agricultural education. It will happen in programs if teachers believe and value the importance of getting students involved.

The Forest Lake approach appears to be an outside-the-box approach. This approach may not generate more proficiency award winners in the FFA, but will provide active learners engaged in an aspect of the broad field of agriculture, agribusiness and natural resources.

The experiential learning component is essential if agricultural education programs are to develop the whole student. Merely taking a course certainly adds a literacy component to a student's education; however, the addition of an experiential element makes a difference in bringing reality to the experience.

References

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