

Teaching and Learning Through the FFA

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Two students are actively involved in the FFA, both are in the same grade, both are dedicated students, and both value learning. One has been on four state winning CDE teams in one calendar year, and the other, well, has not. Has one learned more than the other? Has either one learned how to learn or have they just learned the event?

These are the questions that teachers and students need to answer when assessing the value of the FFA program to the school, teachers, and most importantly to the students involved. Although the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917 established vocational education and incorporated the three areas of agricultural education (SAE, FFA, and classroom education) and

Public Law 740 granted the FFA a national charter (National FFA Organization, 2000), these facts do not inherently mean that students learn. The students and the teachers alike must work to develop curriculum and invest the time and energy needed to prepare for the FFA activities as well as CDE events.

The question then remains, what is the role of the FFA in learning how to learn? Whether a student comes in first or last, they can develop solid learning habits through preparation for career development events. Objectives, procedures, and assessment are the three commonly used aspects of curriculum design and learning procedures.

Objectives

FFA Career Development Events have well-established rules, explanations and rubrics that outline the

objectives and purposes of the event. These objectives set out what is expected of the FFA members to learn. So the next question is, how do they learn what is expected?

Procedure

The learning and preparation process needs to be tailored to meet the needs of the individual students while still reaching the expectations or objectives of the event. As a department, we start with the objectives of the event, which serve as a foundation for the learning processes involved in preparing for the event. Students are provided with a variety of learning situations to succeed in the event: objectives, study materials relating to the event, team practices, time and work with teachers and other experts related to the area of the event. However, the main ingredient in this stage of the learning process is still student desire. Without the passion to succeed in a given activity, students will likely never succeed in their chosen area.

The FFA provides extrinsic motivation in the form of awards and recognition at the local, state, and national levels. Once students become involved in the FFA, they can begin to develop more intrinsic motivation such as the satisfaction of learning, personal goal setting and achievement, and preparing for future careers. Agriculture teachers can also foster this desire and motivation through encouragement, assistance, and interest in the students themselves who are working to achieve success in the CDE's. Without the active involvement of advisors, few, if any students would take advantage of the opportunities presented through the FFA.

Through practices and individual study, students discover areas where their expertise is limited, and then



Skills learned in the classroom and applied through FFA Career Development Events have helped students prepare for SAE programs and future employment. FFA Advisor Joe Blackstock is shown with students proudly displaying awards earned through the FFA. (Photo courtesy of the Kuna Agriculture Department, Kuna, Idaho).

through work with their resources, teachers, and team members, they can discover and fill in the holes in their knowledge. This practice and discovery method allows students to better comprehend the information with which they are concerned.

Assessment

Assessment is the third aspect of learning situations. If this step in the overall learning process is neglected, the students have learned very little. One prime example of formative assessment is Joe Beavers of the Kuna FFA Chapter. During his sophomore year, he was a member of the state soils team. Joe made a mistake in the state competition that cost the team a trip to the national event in Oklahoma City. Through personal evaluation and dedication, Joe adapted his preparation and performance during events and has been a member of four national qualifying teams in the last 12 months.

Opportunity to Fail

One of the greatest opportunities provided students in CDE's and the FFA is the opportunity to fail. Although that statement may sound harsh, students need to learn how to deal with both success and failure and in the context of the FFA program, not winning can be a great teacher for the individual and the team.

Students often ask themselves questions like: Did I know the plant samples or meat cuts as well as I thought? How did the judge evaluate that animal differently than I did? What can I improve on for the next CDE? These opportunities for personal assessment are valuable to student learning as an overall process. Students also have the opportunity to develop and enhance their sense of personal responsibility. The performance of students in the FFA

officer interviews, career development events, and activities is the sole responsibility of the students themselves. This sense of being responsible for their personal performance and the performance of the team as a whole is a valuable skills that can easily be transferred to other school and FFA activities as well as being a vital component for career success.

Individual learning styles

Throughout the agriculture and FFA program, students are allowed to develop and test their learning styles in the safe learning context of the FFA program. Working with teachers and other students in preparing for FFA events teaches students the value of teamwork in the classroom and the workplace. "People don't realize how much mental focus it takes to concentrate through an entire CDE," says Joe Beavers. "This was my biggest obstacle to overcome when I first competed in an event."

As a result of this personal evaluation, Joe has developed his own process for event competition: "I call it 'logical opinion'. It doesn't matter what the judge says as long as your placing was logical and you have reason to back it up." This personal confidence and understanding was learned directly through participation in the FFA. Joe, and students like him, has developed a maturity and professionalism that will carry through to any situation they will encounter in life. Honest personal and team evaluation such as this allows students to learn from their mistakes and identify weaknesses in preparation that need to be rectified prior to future competition.

Teachers play an integral role in assessment as well as instruction. We provide students with an overview of their performance, point out strengths and areas in which improvement is needed. Without

assessment activities, students would not be afforded the diverse learning opportunities that are readily provided through the FFA.

The question we began with is still unanswered; does a student on four national qualifying teams or a student who has never been on one learn more? The answer is neither one. They learn different lessons about themselves, their knowledge base, and their procedures for competition. The lessons are just as valuable to both students and their lessons can be directly transferred into other aspects of their education and their chosen career. The FFA serves as a vital training ground for student career success.

References

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