

Using Reflection to Gain Insight into the Student Teaching Experience

Jacklyn A. Bruce¹
North Carolina State University
Raleigh, NC



John C. Ewing¹
The Pennsylvania State University
University Park, PA

Abstract

This study examined student teacher' perceptions related to the student teaching experience. Using a focus group process, the student teachers were asked to reflect on their expectations of the experience, how they applied previous learning from university coursework to the experience, and what could be done to improve the preparation of students for the experience. Because of the importance of instruction, FFA, and Supervised Agricultural Experience in teaching agricultural education, the three components of a complete agricultural education program were used as the context for the reflective session. A semi-structured set of questions were used in the focus group to gather participant responses. The session was audiotaped and transcribed. The transcription served as the primary data source. Secondary data consisted of field notes written by one member of the research team. Content analysis was used to interpret the data. The results indicated that the student teaching experience was not what the participants thought it would be in many ways, especially the time commitment involved in preparing for the teaching and learning process. The participants provided insights for improving the preparation of future student teachers and recommendations are included.

Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Teacher education programs have an important role in preparing quality teachers to enter the teaching profession. In 2002 The National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) stated that teacher candidates must know the subject matter they plan to teach and be able to explain important concepts related to the subject matter. While content knowledge is important to good instruction, others researchers (Ball, 2000; Cruickshank et al., 1996, Schwartz, 1996, Smylie et al., 1999) echoed NCATE's

belief that teachers must understand their respective content area, but they also added that the teacher candidates must also be able to teach the content well. Thus, the teacher preparation program must build both content and pedagogical knowledge of the students.

Roberts and Dyer (2004) identified characteristics of an effective agriculture teacher that went beyond content and pedagogy. Specific characteristics for agricultural educators included; having a sound knowledge of the FFA, actively advises the FFA chapter, effectively prepares students for Career Development Events and other FFA activities, and has a sound knowledge, actively supervises, and encourages Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) projects. They concluded that effective characteristics of teachers in these areas must either exist prior to being admitted to the teacher education program, or they must be taught during the program. One way to do this, according to the authors, was through providing experience-based learning opportunities. Student teaching is often the culminating experience-based learning opportunity provided to teacher education students.

Dewey (1938) believed that the basic element required for learning was experience. However, Dewey also believed that reflection was a key component in making an experience worthwhile. While student teaching provides this experience, many researchers of experiential learning agree with Dewey in that for the learner to get the most benefit from an experience, more must occur than just the experience. Models of experiential learning entail more than just the actual experience (Dewey, 1938; Juch, 1983; Kolb, 1984; Enfield et al., 2007). Experiential learning literature indicated that experiential learning is a process, not just an activity. Thus, many experiential learning models are depicted as a cycle in which the learner is involved. Kolb (1984) put forward a model of experiential learning that included four steps; Enfield

¹Assistant Professor

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et al. (2007) cited a five-step model as being used in much of the current 4-H curriculum.

While each of the models varies, there are also commonalities between each; most notably that each includes some form of experience, reflection, and application. The student teaching experience can be seen as both experience and application, depending on the view which one takes at any point in time during the student teaching process. Student teaching could be the application of what was learned in the pre-service coursework. It could also be viewed as another actual experience that should be reflected upon, and learning from that experience, and subsequent reflection, should be applied to future teaching situations. For the cycle of experiential learning to be unbroken, between experience and future application, there needs to be some context in which to reflect upon what has happened in the experience.

Reflection on the learning goals of a particular class session is a point of assessment for teacher effectiveness. Reflection allows the teacher, or student teacher, to determine what worked and what should be changed in a lesson. The same can be said for reflection on the total agricultural education program. A teacher that reflects on the entire program demonstrates professional commitment in determining how the agricultural education program, as a whole, can be improved. Within agricultural teacher education programs, one frame from which to reflect upon the student teaching experience is through that of the complete agricultural education model (classroom/laboratory instruction, FFA, Supervised Agricultural Experience) as outlined in Talbert et al. (2007). A complete agricultural education program is one that encompasses classroom/laboratory instruction, Supervised Agricultural Experience, and FFA (Talbert et al., 2007).

Roberts and Dyer (2004) and Ewing and Foster (2010) researched characteristics of effective agriculture teachers. Roberts and Dyer found, using a Delphi study that more characteristics of effective teachers were identified and agreed upon in the category of classroom instruction when compared to

the other seven categories. Supervised agricultural experience and FFA were two other categories that surfaced through the study. Ewing and Foster asked administrators with new and beginning agriculture instructors to rate the importance of teacher effectiveness in the areas of classroom/laboratory instruction, FFA, and SAE. Administrators ranked characteristics of effective teaching for the classroom/laboratory instruction higher in importance compared to both FFA and SAE characteristics. However, these three areas work together to provide secondary agricultural education students the opportunity to experience hands-on application of learning in very different contexts, while accomplishing the learning goals within the content area. An agricultural education teacher preparation program that focuses on these three aspects of agricultural education has a foundation on which to prepare teachers in agricultural education.

By building reflection into the teacher preparation coursework, early field experiences, and the student teaching experience, evaluation opportunities are provided to students. The process of experiential learning can be utilized to explore the teacher candidates' experiences related to their preparation and the actual student teaching experience (Figure 1). This model, developed through the current research, highlights the three components most often referenced

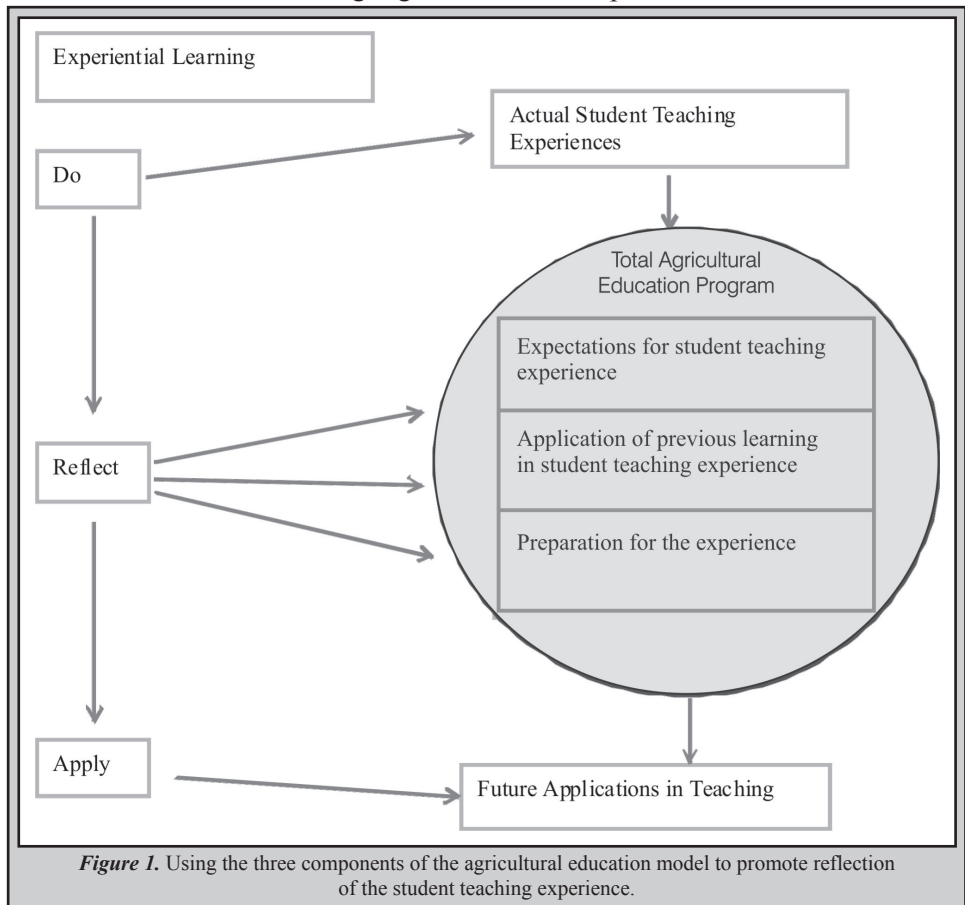


Figure 1. Using the three components of the agricultural education model to promote reflection of the student teaching experience.

in experiential learning models; an actual experience (do), reflect (reflection), and apply (future application). Roberts and Dyer (2004) and Ewing and Foster (2010) evidence the importance of being skilled in the three areas of the total agricultural education program. A teacher candidate's ability to reflect on these components allow for growth for future applications within the experiential learning cycle.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to gain insight into the student teaching experience through group reflection. The study sought to answer the questions:

1. What were the participants' expectations for the student teaching experience?
2. How did the student teachers apply what they learned through coursework during the student teaching experience?
3. Based on the student teachers' experience at the cooperating schools, what can be improved in the preparation program to more adequately prepare student teachers for the experience?

Methods

Pure objectivity is an illusion (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). To take human interaction out of research may very well keep researchers from rich information (Erlandson et al., 1993). A naturalistic researcher recognizes that one cannot insulate the results from researcher "contamination," and instead trusts in the confirmability of the findings (Erlandson et al., 1993). It is important to note that, in this case, the researchers have intimate knowledge of the context under study, as university faculty members (and former student teacher), which most certainly informs the inductive reasoning and data analysis of this study.

The researchers used purposive sampling, a technique that intentionally seeks out participants because of certain qualities. In this case, the research targeted young people who had completed pre-service teaching assignments. The participants were identified because of their enrollment in the pre-service course at The Pennsylvania State University. This study focused on twelve individuals who had completed the student teaching experience just days prior to the focus group session.

When a group of people is brought together and asked the same questions at the same time in order to collect data it is called a focus group. The purpose of focus groups is multi-fold. Focus groups can serve to introduce concepts that may be foreign to a research team; they can serve to help group members remember events, and they can be used as a method of

triangulation (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). In the case of this study, the focus group was held during the wrap-up session following the student teacher experience. Members of the group were seniors in the Agricultural Education curriculum at The Pennsylvania State University, made up of both genders, and a median age of 22 years. The focus group took approximately 1 hour and 30 minutes to complete, during which time participants were asked questions regarding their student teaching experience using a semi-structured set of questions. The focus group was audio taped and transcribed, serving as the primary data source. Secondary data consisted of field notes written by one member of the research team.

The basic idea of the study was to understand how student teachers in agriculture made sense of their experience. Latent content analysis was used to interpret the data, meaning that the analysis was extended to interpretations of the symbolism underlying the data (Berg, 2001). An open coding methodology was used by the team to begin to make meaning of the data (Berg, 2001). Open coding allows researchers to: "ask the data a specific and consistent set of questions, analyze the data minutely, frequently interrupt the coding to write theoretical notes, and never assume the relevance of traditional variables like age, race, gender, etc." (Berg, 2001 p. 251). It is important to note at this time, that it was for this reason that the population under study is not more richly described, demographically. .

Trustworthiness of the study was an important part of the research team's methodology. The research team established credibility via peer debriefing and member checking. Peer debriefing, in the case of this study, took the form of a number of reviews of all content analysis by an outside member of the Agricultural Education profession throughout the research period. Member checks occurred throughout the focus group as the research team verified data and initial interpretations with the persons under study. Additionally, typed transcripts were compared with the audiotapes for accuracy. To establish transferability the researchers used thick description and purposive sampling. Purposive sampling, as discussed above allows the researcher to study individuals or contexts that will provide rich and pertinent detail. Thick description is often misunderstood. Berg (2001, p.33) describes this description as "sufficiently detailed descriptions of data in context and reports the data with sufficient detail and precision." To establish dependability, an audit trail of codes to transcriptions of the focus group and methodological and reflective journaling were used to establish dependability and confirmability.

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Categories were developed and discussed to ensure consistency.

Results

Using the three contextual areas that demonstrate a complete agricultural education program as espoused by Talbert et al. (2007) to provide a referent frame, and guided focus group reflections as a vehicle, the researchers have sought to answer three guiding research questions. The results of the study will be presented in order of research question.

The researchers asked the participants to reflect back on their expectations for the student teaching experience. Expectations may have included those they held for themselves as student teachers, their cooperating teachers, cooperating sites, and work expectations. Several individuals shared expectations that they held for themselves.

I looked at it [the student teaching experience], as being a time to prove yourself.

I also think to me it was important to do a good job because if you screwed up it's not like no one will ever know. ...the extra pressure drove me to strive to do better.

A few students shared their expectations of their cooperating teachers or their cooperating sites.

I know that the cooperating teachers are busy but they need to have a class on what they need to do, because I walked in not knowing what to do and expected them to be more helpful in helping me get things straight.

I'm not saying my experience was horrible, but I think I learned more of the things not to do and how to prepare for bad situations when I expected that I would learn new ways that I should run my classroom [from my cooperating teacher].

I guess I knew it, but not every Ag Department is the same. I still sort of expected everywhere to have at least some things in common, but that's not the case.

Many students had expectations of what it would be like to be "on the job."

I expected my days to start earlier.

I remember as a high school student constantly being at the high school for FFA stuff or whatever, but for some reason I didn't expect that this time around as a student teacher. That wasn't the case, I was always there right at 7 and I left anywhere between 6 and 7 every night.

One thing I expected was that I would do my work at home more. I definitely found that going home to work didn't work because there were always other things going on and other distractions.

Research question two was designed to get the student teachers to reflect on their university coursework and how they might have applied it, positively or negatively, during their student teacher experience. Only a few students articulated perspectives from both sides when asked to reflect on their application of prior coursework.

I kind of floundered at first, but then she [cooperating teacher] said to me, do what you want to do, and maybe run ideas by me first, but it's yours. I got to apply what I learned to, I guess to teaching.

I started trying to hand out lesson plans I'd done [during coursework] left and right when I first started. It didn't apply. I made them, and then they didn't fit with the students, it didn't fit with what I got through in class. I had to completely change.

I tried different forms of different things, different materials we'd done in [course number], tried to do really active and moving around just to see how students interacted with me.

Research question three asked the students to reflect, on the preparation that they received for their student teaching experience, and how that preparation might be improved. Several students discussed the preparation that they received for their classroom/laboratory instruction and how they might improve that instruction for future students.

I would suggest that they [future students] start writing lesson plans now. During all of these [course name] classes that prepared us, we could have probably had more curriculum development. It doesn't have to be just lesson plans either [that are prepared prior to the experience], I mean unit plans, anything like that. I mean the more practice the better.

They need to teach you record keeping at [name of pre-service site]. Also, we don't spend enough time on our own. You take three weeks to prepare lesson plans for three days...and you don't understand how long until it takes to do until you have to do it on one night.

Other students discussed the preparation needed prior to arriving at the pre-service site.

It's a good idea to require a certain number of hours [observing] in that school prior to student teaching. So by the time that you go student teach you've already been there hours and hours and hours.

While we tried to do some of that [getting to know the community] in the course, there's no way sitting here at Penn State University and even with going to do the visits that I could really get to know the area like my cooperating teacher.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The participants' expectations of the student teaching experience were both personal and programmatic in nature. Participants highlighted the importance of this experience in regards to preparation for future interactions within the Agricultural Education profession (Roberts and Dyer, 2004; Ewing and Foster, 2010). They also stressed the importance of preparation for the student teaching experience. However, there seemed to be some disconnect in the understanding of what really occurs in at typical school day and the amount of time a teacher needs to spend preparing to teach a topic that is unfamiliar.

To alleviate some of these concerns:

- Pre-service candidates should be encouraged to seek out opportunities to visit multiple agricultural education programs prior to, and in conjunction with, their early field experience opportunities.

- Increased opportunities that challenge students' planning abilities should be provided prior to the student teaching experience.

- Continued emphasis should be placed on the importance of the student teaching experience to the development of high quality teachers.

- Clear guidelines and expectations need to be communicated to all student teachers and their cooperating teachers in regards to the experience and a detailed plan of work should be provided to keep all involved in the field experience "on the same page."

Participants struggled to describe how they applied what they learned in their coursework to the student teaching experience beyond a few connections to lesson planning and teaching methods. In fact, only one student commented on changing their strategies following a "failure." Why did the student teachers have difficulty connecting their previous coursework with the experience of student teaching? Was this because participants had problems with either content knowledge or pedagogy during the student teaching experience? Were they afraid to share what they might have seen as a professional shortcoming? Did they not recognize the "failures" and need for changing tactics? Or did they change based on previous knowledge and not realize that change had occurred?

- Pre-service candidates should be encouraged to reflect both on content and pedagogy (Ball, 2000; Cruickshank, et al., 1996; Schwartz, 1996; Smylie et al., 1999) and the ways in which their previous understanding was applied on a daily basis in the classroom or laboratory and during the Supervised Agriculture Experience and FFA contexts.

- Assignments should be developed for student teaching that specifically focus on enhancing teaching

based on previous content and pedagogical knowledge and how it was applied in a particular situation and then extend this assignment to a future application of teaching.

The student teacher recommendations for the preparation of future groups were focused on curriculum and logistical issues. Participants, in recognizing that the time commitment required for good teaching was considerably different than their expectations commented on several perceived deficiencies in the current preparatory program. To address some of these concerns a more "real world" problem approach should be adopted during the preparation leading up to the student teaching experience

- Pre-service candidates should be provided with more opportunity to prepare lesson plans within a real time context. For example instead of the three week preparation to do a three day plan, students should be provided with a more realistic model, perhaps one week or less to develop a three day plan.

- Teacher educators should assign team lesson planning to encourage student teachers to learn to lean on the agricultural education family network that is available to them.

Throughout the reflection with the student teacher participants, there was no discussion about their role as potential FFA advisor or supervisor of SAE projects (Roberts and Dyer, 2004; Ewing and Foster, 2010). Is the preparation provided for these roles adequate, whereas for the classroom it is less so and thusly the focus is on classroom preparation? Were there no opportunities for the student teacher candidates to take on these roles during the field experience, and so there truly was nothing to report during the reflection?

Preparation curricula should be reviewed such that each component of the complete Agricultural Education program (Talbert et al., 2007) is adequately addressed in theory and in practice, thusly reasonably preparing pre-service candidates for all of their potential roles while in the field.

The researchers also realize that this is the tip of the iceberg in terms of research discovery. The team recommends that further research be done along this line of inquiry:

- A second round of reflection should be done with the individuals from this group that are actively teaching to discover what they have now implemented in their permanent positions that they might have learned while student teaching.

- Guided reflection as a method of debriefing student teachers should be studied to glean further what helpful information might be discovered to improve teacher preparatory programs.

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