

## *Elements of Mentoring Student Teachers in Agricultural Education*

by Ashley Yopp, Ali Ikner and Barry Croom

The best student teaching experiences are those where novice teachers are provided with significant and high-quality supervision by their mentors (National Research Council, 2010). Yet, for many seasoned teachers, mentoring student teachers can seem like a juggling act between imparting years of content knowledge and providing intensive hands-on training all while teaching students of your own (American Education Research Association, 2005). So, what does mentoring 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 total program of Agricultural

Education. They need experience facilitating instruction in diverse environments of varying class size, even as they transition from formal environments to in-service professional development. Student teachers need experiences understanding students of differing abilities and motivations 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 the process of 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. Of these documents, the student hand-

book is perhaps the most concise source of useful information. Student teachers need to understand and be prepared 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 your student teacher and take them for a drive around the community. Show them where your students live and where their parents work. Familiarize them with the various types of agriculture prevalent in your community and spend time introducing them to key people who support your program. Having a student teacher is a badge of honor and your community supporters need to know your program not only trains young people for careers in agriculture but prepares future teachers, as well. Introducing student teachers to key supporters in your community communicates the expectation that they should also develop the same type of relationships when they begin programs of their own. Student teachers bring their own culture, social circumstances, community mores, and standards to your classroom; helping them comprehend the influential role community plays in Agricultural Education will be exponentially beneficial to their future programs.

Now, it's time to introduce them to how you do things. Sit



down and give the student teacher an overview of the courses you teach and your expectations when they take over the teaching of those courses. Review your class rosters, noting students with special needs and accommodations. Answer questions about the structure and sequence of your curriculum. Devote plenty of time to reviewing the academic calendar, the community calendar, and the FFA program of activities. Explain how you manage 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 teaching, 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 every one of them has a different way of designing and delivering curriculum. Demonstrate how you plan your 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. He/She didn’t have a lesson

plan in front of him/her, 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. Be explicit about how you plan instructional activities. After teaching the same subject 20 times in a row, it’s easy to remember what to do each time. However, sometimes student teachers have a difficult time making that connection.

Show student teachers where teaching materials are located and provide access to the teaching materials you recommend they use. Teach them how to use all equipment and technology including shop and lab equipment, any tractors or vehicles used on the school farm, and anything else more complicated than a manual pencil sharpener.

Student teachers’ level of experience with the equipment used in Agricultural Education is wide and varied. Be absolutely certain they know how to safely operate all equipment in your program. One good way to do this is to have them demonstrate how to safely set up and use shop and lab equipment. Don’t just take their word for it; confirm they know how to use the equipment.

As a mentor teacher, you’ll need to further your student teacher’s hands-on experiences in teaching methods and technical content in agriculture, food, and natural resources. It’s impossible for student teachers to learn everything they need to know 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 out the methods they’ve learned in college. Let them try new things during the teaching phase, even let them fail, but ensure they practice effective teaching methods in your classroom.

### Mentoring

Being a mentor teacher in the field requires you be both teacher and mentor at the same time. A teacher teaches; a mentor provides guidance and advice. The mentoring element of your role as a mentor teacher requires you advise your student





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 you to conduct formal evaluations of your student teacher weekly. This involves observing them teach and sitting down with them to review their teaching practice. This evaluation should include commendations for good teaching methods, as well as recommendations on how to improve. 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, but it is in these weekly evaluations that the mentor teacher has 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 come as a surprise. Conducting informal assessments and formal evaluations on a regular basis provides the best opportunity for you to help

teacher on how to best handle the daily issues they will face in classrooms of their own. For instance, student teachers need solid advice on handling misbehavior and how to structure lessons that really engage students in learning. Student teachers need advice on how to best manage the workflow of a busy Agricultural Education program, and 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 your guidance on

how to structure and manage their career. They will ask for your opinion on which teaching jobs to apply for and advice on preparing for interviews. They will seek your advice on how to work with administrators, parents, and community supporters.

### **Evaluating**

The most successful mentor teachers provide informal assessment and evaluation on a regular basis in between classes, in the hallway, and on the way to and from meetings and competitions. Informal assessment also includes providing practical tips and tricks to student teachers while they're teaching. This is called "coaching in the moment"

student teachers cultivate habits that will successfully carry them into their first year of teaching.

### Communicating Expectations

Another important underlying theme must be addressed by mentor teachers from the very first day. As a mentor teacher, you will need to help student teachers develop a positive and constructive work ethic. Teaching is a demanding responsibility. The sooner student teachers develop a positive work ethic, the better. It is essential for you as a mentor teacher to continue to communicate your expectations to your student teacher every day (Richardson, 1990). Address problems associated with work ethic and the quality of their instruction as soon as possible. It's all about helping student teachers develop good habits. There is considerable variation in how long it takes for a person to develop a habit with somewhere between 18 and 254 days (Lally et al, 2010). Mentor teachers guide student teachers so best practices are repeated intentionally over time.

Your student teacher should have a solid foundation from their teacher preparation program, but it's under your guidance they will first be able to immerse themselves in applying everything they've learned in a real-world setting. Success at any one stage is not enough to ensure your student teacher gets the most out of their time in your program. All four elements are necessary to provide your student teacher with the experiences, tools, and feedback they need to successfully manage their own Agricultural Education program.

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