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**STORIES ABOUT TEACHING AND LEARNING**

# *Failing to Communicate in an Ocean of Communication Technologies*

by Harry N. Boone, Jr.

There was a time when story telling was a major method of passing down information/wisdom from one generation to another. Even though we have had major advances in communication technologies over the last fifty years, the sharing of experiences (story telling) has diminished. We have become a world that limits its communication to email, phone text messages, and 140 character tweets. Even with all of the advances in technologies, we are quickly losing the ability to communicate.

A second factor in the failure to communicate is a lack of respect for our elders. Today's younger generations are so wrapped up in their personal situations they fail to see the contributions of the individuals on whose shoulders they are standing. Because they fail to recognize the contributions of their elders, they miss out on the knowledge these individuals have accumulated from their personal experiences.

When I entered the teaching profession, I remember the "old timers" talking about sitting on the front porches of the cottages at the Jackson's Mill 4-H Camp and sharing stories about their teaching experiences. There was a tremendous amount of wisdom passed on to the younger generation through this information sharing. The younger generation learned instructional techniques, ways to deal with problem students, the latest in farming technologies, ways to deal with problem administrators, and many other techniques that could prove useful in their teach-

ing career. Changes in locations, ways of conducting teaching conferences, and communication technologies have all but eliminated this form of sharing information.

Today's fast paced society revolves around "smart" phones, the Internet, and instant communication. Even with the advances in technologies, one can be alone in today's communication based society. A year ago I had the idea of trying to resurrect the idea of sharing teaching experiences. While we may not have the opportunity to sit on the front porch of a cottage, we still have the opportunity to share experiences. I decided to use one issue of *The Agricultural Education Magazine* to accomplish this task. Dr. Ann De Lay has done an outstanding job of arranging a series of articles that allows the authors to share their teaching experiences with others. Also I would like to thank the individuals who agreed to share their experiences with our readers.

My challenge to the profession is to find ways that allow members to share knowledge/experiences with each other. The National Association for Agricultural Educators' (NAAE) Communities of Practice is one example of using technology to accomplish this goal. The leaders of the NAAE are to be applauded for their efforts. While Communities of Practice is making a major contribution to the profession, there is nothing like a face-to-face exchange of ideas. Over my professional career as a teacher and a teacher educator, the most popular sessions at teachers conferences have been ones where teachers share ideas/experiences with their peers.

## Cover Photo

There are many great teachers who have dedicated their lives to the profession. I have the opportunity to recognize one of these individuals by placing his photo on the cover of *The Agricultural Education Magazine*. Virgil Wilkins just completed fifty-one years as an agricultural education teacher at Hundred High School in West Virginia. It would be impossible to accurately measure his influence on the profession in West Virginia and the nation. In addition to the students he taught and the state and national FFA competitors he coached, he has served as a supervisor for numerous student teachers. Let me close with an example of his influence.

While Dr. Ann De Lay, the July-August Theme Editor, was reviewing the final layout of this issue (minus my editorial), she saw the cover photo and Virgil's name. Dr. De Lay commented that the cover featured her friend's (Anna Warner) cooperating teacher. It's a measure of the impact an individual has had when a teacher educator in California recognizes you through a mutual friend she met at the University of Florida.



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**Cover Photo:** Talk about stories to tell!!! Virgil Wilkins just completed his 51<sup>st</sup> year as a high school agriculture education teacher at Hundred High School, Hundred, WV. (Photo courtesy of Stacy A. Gartin)

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### Article Submission

Articles and photographs should be submitted to the Editor or Theme Editor. Items to be considered for publication should be submitted at least 90 days prior to the publication date of the intended issue. All submissions will be acknowledged by the Theme Editor and/or the Editor. No items are returned unless accompanied by a written request. Articles should be approximately four double spaced pages in length (1500 words). Information about the author(s) should be included at the end of the article. Photos and/or drawings appropriate for the "theme issue" are welcomed. Photos/drawings should be submitted in an electronic format (jpg or tiff format preferred - minimum 300 dpi). Do not imbed photos/drawings in the Word document. A recent photograph (jpg or tiff format preferred- minimum 300 dpi) of all authors should accompany the article unless photographs are on file with the Editor. Articles in the *Magazine* may be reproduced without permission but should be acknowledged.

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## Tell Me a Story

by Ann M. De Lay

As a child, I relished the evening ritual of snuggling up with my mother and hearing her give voice to the words written upon the pages of old favorites like E. B. White's *Charlotte's Web*. Oh, how I agonized over Wilbur's predicament until news of each glistening, descriptive web eased my suffering. *Some Pig, Terrific, Radiant, and Humble...* Charlotte used her talent to help a friend. These stories drew me in, commanded my attention and ignited my imagination.

As I grew, my love of stories did too. I soon learned the potential for personal stories to share knowledge and teach life lessons. My grandma was always good for a personal story related to the importance of family. My father had a million stories about the need to be self-sufficient so as to avoid becoming a victim. Stories assumed a new level of importance as I began my agriculture teacher education program. I was captivated by the stories my instructors told of their time in the secondary classroom. From classroom management challenges and booster club snafus, to supervising experiential learning and coaching competitive teams, I soaked in each one. I listened for the details and internalized the grand messages. I was confident they would help me prepare for my own debut as an agriculture teacher.

During student teaching, I listened intently to the stories shared by my cohort. Tales of communicating with parents and prepping for fair held me spellbound as I considered each plot. I often formed my own courses of action with the outcomes I expected. I just knew I too would

encounter these situations in my own professional life! By learning from these narratives, I felt a sense of satisfaction for being proactive in my preparation.

As a secondary agriculture teacher the opportunity to meet informally with colleagues was my favorite form of professional development. The open space literally uncorked the rich experience everyone had bottled up and needed to pour out. I often postponed sleep, home time, and other responsibilities to be present for the telling of each incredible tale. I ravenously digested the wisdom gained from early and late career teachers alike... as if they were my last meal.

As a teacher educator my responsibilities include assisting with the planning and delivery of professional development programming at the secondary level. I am always struck by the significant increase in teachers' motivation and involvement when they are offered opportunities to hear from their peers and share their own experiences. In fact, some of the deepest, most impactful understandings rise from these activities.

Stories are important to our growth and development. They are invitations to the lived experiences of others following the scrutiny of personal reflection. They evoke attention, foster caring, and promote respect. They decrease stress while increasing engagement. They are entertaining, rich with detail and laden with meaning. However, failing to tell our stories to those who share our passions, robs our stories of their value.

When we refine our understanding of our experiences, our stories become accessible; suitable for appli-

cation in the lives of others. Brandi Carlile's song, *The Story*, offers the lyric, "So many stories of where I've been and how I got to where I am. But these stories don't mean anything when you've got no one to tell them to." This issue offers the opportunity for our profession to lend value to the lived experiences of our colleagues, to learn from them and grow ourselves. As you take in each account, you will find yourself on a storied journey from the initial realization of a teacher candidate, to the breakthrough understandings of early career teachers. You will hear the wise counsel of mid and late career professionals as they cut to the heart of what they believe matters most. You will also hear from agricultural educators pursuing new opportunities to enhance their own learning and have a global impact.

Grab something cold to drink, get comfortable, and enjoy the contributions of your colleagues. Who knows? You might even feel compelled to share a story or two of your own!



Dr. Ann M. De Lay, the July-August Theme Editor, is an Assistant Professor at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

## Skittles

by Julie Laughton

Recently, I went through a series of interviews for my first position as a credentialed secondary agriculture teacher. In preparation for the process, I reflected on my teacher education program. Much of the content dealt with the delivery of different teaching methods, how to support the reading and writing development of learners, managing classroom behavior, working with students with special needs, and understanding a variety of educational laws to name just a few topics. A glaring hole in my preparation, at least to my way of thinking, was how to view one's personality as an asset in the classroom.

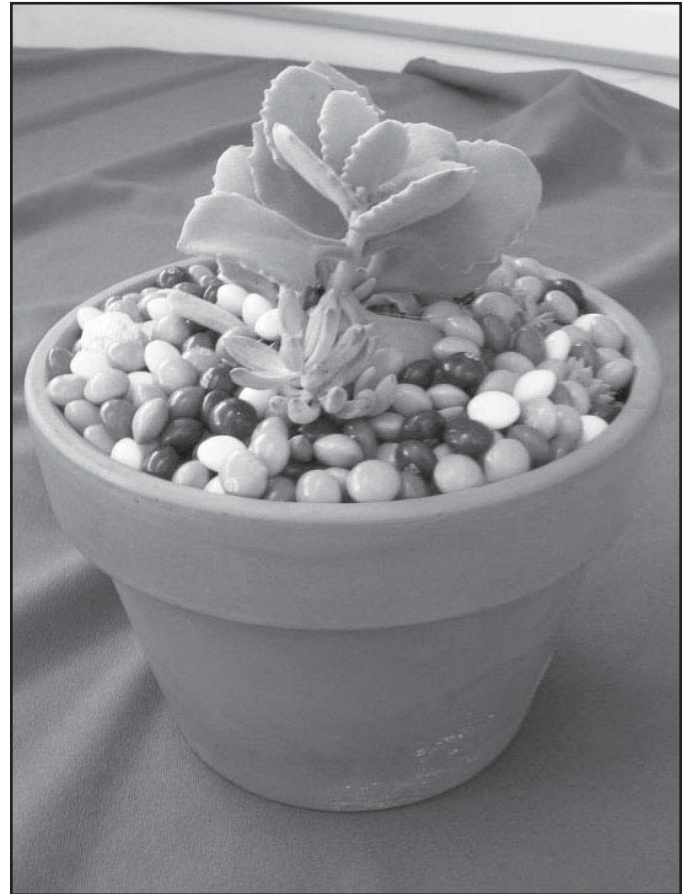
The best way to describe my teacher identity would be to say I believe I am the teacher I tended to gravitate toward as a learner. I always appreciated teachers who invited their students to get to know them as people. I appreciated teachers who used novelty to motivate and focus students on their learning. I appreciated teachers who did not take themselves or the classroom too seriously and ensured the learning experience was as important as the presentation of content. Above all, I appreciated teachers who made their learners feel safe by meeting their needs and celebrating their growth. During my student teaching experience, identifying and maximizing my teacher identity became critically important to my success and the success of my learners.

*Cooper* was one of three special education students in the horticulture class I taught during my student teaching. Of the three, *Cooper* was my lowest functioning student. To look at him, one would see a tall,

healthy young man. However, upon further inspection, he carried a diagnosis of Autism, as well as a condition prompting the slow decline of his fine motor skills. Although he was mainstreamed into a variety of classes at this busy California high school, his aloof nature, academic and physical challenges, and fiery temper distanced him from those around him.

On the first day of school, I was a bit nervous and anxious to know my learners. I planned a short mixer for the beginning of class. I asked the students to capture some information (name, grade and what they did over the summer) on a piece of paper and, once complete, crumple their papers and throw them toward the center of the room. Soon, paper balls flew through the air with gusto, forming a large pile. I then directed each student to select a ball which was not their own, read it, then find the owner. Once the owners were located, the students needed to introduce themselves and prepare an introduction for the person they just met. These introductions were to be delivered before the entire class. I imagined this would let the students get to know each other and give me an opportunity to see how they worked.

Right away, I could identify those who were going to be the class clowns, the quiet ones, the drama



queens, and of course the ones who would rather be anywhere but in the classroom. While making my observations, my eyes were drawn to the student who was physically unable to open his paper ball – *Cooper*. I quickly approached him and asked if I could offer a little assistance. His temper flared as he raised his voice and shouted, “I CAN’T DO THIS! I CAN’T DO THIS!” While I knew little about this student, I knew he was going to present me with some unique challenges. For the moment, I decided to step away to give him space to calm down. Immediately, the activities I planned for the semester flashed through my mind. How was I supposed to teach *Cooper* how to dissect a flower when he was unable to open a crumpled piece of paper?

The first few weeks of school continued exactly as my university’s

instructors predicted. I had a presentation software glitch during class. I met with a few upset parents. I even took away my first cell phone. Regardless of how major these set backs might seem to some, I was unfazed. I used Plan B, devised communication plans, and tried new strategies. Despite the sum total of my teaching experience consisting of three weeks, I believed I was unstoppable. I had this teaching thing down! Little did I know, *Cooper* would continue to test my thinking about what it means to be an effective teacher.

The following week I began a unit on the life cycles of plants. After a brief discussion, I directed the students to create mini-posters about the content. Back-to-School Night was coming and I thought the posters would spice up the drab classroom walls perfectly. As I walked around to check on the progress, I noticed *Cooper* sat with a blank paper. I asked him why he had yet to begin. He responded saying, "I can't draw Ms. Laughton." Channeling my cheery teacher self, I offered, "Of course you can, *Cooper*. Just try your best!" Feeling justified, I continued to cruise the room.

After a few minutes, I returned to *Cooper's* desk. He was still staring at a blank page. When I asked him about his lack of progress, he angrily retorted, "I TOLD YOU, I CAN'T DRAW!" I immediately recalled the warning I had received from *Cooper's* caseworker about his temper. I calmly backed away, opened the classroom curtains, then asked *Cooper* to describe the things he saw outside. He mentioned the fence, the wheelbarrow, a few birds and a big tree. I gently encouraged him to draw what he saw and emphasized it did not need to be perfect. With a stern face, he glared at me and proceeded to draw a stump and tree limbs with

his brown marker. Feeling like I had made a major breakthrough, I naively continued. "*Cooper*, what do plants grow in?"

Looking at me with his *I-am-going-to-lose-it* face, *Cooper* sharply offered, "I don't KNOW, Ms. Laughton." I probed, "*Cooper*, come on. You know this! What do plants grow in?" *Cooper* turned an uncomfortable shade of red and abruptly shouted, "MS. LAUGHTON, I TOLD YOU! I DON'T KNOW!!!" Knowing how much I valued teachers who would do anything to propel their students' learning, I could tell I needed a different tactic. I still do not know from where the words to follow came but I shared, "I know! Plants grow in Skittles. That's right, isn't it *Cooper*? Plants grow in Skittles!"

To say the look on his face was priceless would be an understatement. *Cooper's* expression was similar to the reaction one gets from biting into a lemon. Shocked by the silliness of what I had uttered, and committed to having *Cooper* respond with the answer, I knew I needed to roll with it and see where this conversation would lead. The sour look on *Cooper's* face softened and was replaced with confusion revealing his significant doubt about my qualifications to be his teacher. He then blurted out the answer for which I had painfully been waiting. "Ms. Laughton. Plants don't grow in Skittles! Plants grow in soil. Pshh... Everyone knows that!"

I wanted to jump up and down, click my heels, and do a little fist pumping. Rather, I channeled my inner silver screen actress and acted as if I had just learned something new. "They do? Well, I guess you know what to draw on your poster then." For the rest of the period, *Cooper* joyfully completed the assignment, drawing what he saw beyond the glass; a tree with leaves, branches,

and a trunk emerging from soil – not Skittles. He even felt compelled to turn to those peers seated around him to tattle about my misunderstanding.

My relationship with *Cooper* began to blossom following our Skittles exchange. Our encounters were far from smooth but they did result in a rich classroom experience for the both of us, and for the other students involved.

Each time I reflect on my student teaching, I am struck by the amount of effort students are willing to expend when they have a teacher who can have a little fun, take a risk, and show she cares. A solid command of a variety of student-centered teaching methods, mastery of content, and a clear classroom management policy are critical to the success of both teacher and student. However, a willingness to do things out of the ordinary, like perform silly dances to illustrate digestive processes or telling a student you believe plants grow in Skittles, can be the difference-maker between a functional classroom and a vibrant learning environment. Risk sparks excitement, excitement welcomes curiosity, and curiosity becomes a stepping stone for learning. Thanks, *Cooper* for filling the gap my teacher preparation left behind by showing me how much leveraging my teaching identity matters.



*Julie Laughton is an agricultural education teacher at Salinas High School, Salinas, CA.*

# *Agriscience: A Catalyst for Change*

by *Brittany Whyler*

Waiting outside in the hotel hallway of the FFA National Agriscience fair, I hear the click of the door and it slowly swings open. Out walk three members of our Agriscience team: Nick, Katie, and Melissa. All three students are proudly grinning from ear to ear. They quickly walk to where myself and the other Agriscience coach are standing and, in unison, we ask, “How did it go?” With the small prompt, they begin to recount every step of the interview process; from their powerful and confident handshakes, to the questions they were asked, and finally, the judges’ parting compliments to complete the interview process.

If someone had told me these three students would be National Agriscience Finalists the first day they walked through my classroom door, I would have called them crazy. My doubt would not be based on their potential to achieve success in this Career Development Event (CDE), but rather on Nick’s low self-esteem, Katie’s indifference to FFA, and Melissa’s source of motivation. I would soon come to learn my first teaching experiences would be far different than my final coaching experiences with all three of these students.

“We have to write a twelve page paper and conduct an experiment at home for two months?” Unfortunately, this is a fairly standard response to Agriscience when it is first introduced in my class. To students this assignment not only seems like a daunting task but also seems uninteresting. While the students are encouraged to select topics they specifically find interesting, it is rare to

find a student who is jumping at the chance to begin this assignment. As high school students, they are unable to see Agriscience as project-based learning at its finest. The assignment not only incorporates critical thinking and writing skills, mastery of the scientific and empirical methods, and proper formatting according to APA guidelines, it also gives agriculture teachers the opportunity to introduce current issues in agriculture and research.

Teaching Agriscience in the classroom can be challenging. The steps of the writing process are difficult, as most students have little or no experience completing background research and literature reviews, designing experiments, organizing and collecting data, and then analyzing and drawing conclusions on a large amount of data. However, if the assignment is broken into smaller pieces, the anxiety begins to diminish and they dive in. There are some students who simply go through the motions, completing the project begrudgingly, yet, there are many instances where students suddenly decide Agriscience is their passion.

For Nick, the spark was lit during the initial phases of the research process. Nick was a student who always knew the answer when called upon, however, would never volunteer to participate in dialogues. During one-on-one conversations, he rarely made eye contact, fidgeted nervously as he talked, and always responded quietly. As each section of the paper was turned in, I became more aware of his talent and ability. His introduction section was relevant and properly formatted with in-text citations while his review of literature was an in-depth analysis of how the current

research was applicable to his own. The methodology was succinctly outlined and his conclusions incorporated explanations for the results, as well as comparisons to results of other researchers, demonstrating the use of higher order thinking skills.

Katie’s passion for Agriscience began much later than Nick’s. It was not until after the California State Agriscience Fair that Katie truly began to like Agriscience. While her project was complex, well written, and had extraordinary amounts of data collected on a topic unique and advanced for her division, she always indifferently shrugged her shoulders when encouraged to compete. She often explained the process as “boring.” On the day of the competition, her parents drove her down and she went home immediately following the interview, even though she was encouraged to stay with the other students for the leadership conference.

Melissa’s love for Agriscience stemmed from her competitive nature. She was a student highly involved in sports and other CDEs. To her, Agriscience was another chance to compete with not only her peers, but with students from around the state. Her ultimate goal of winning nationals was set right after learning Agriscience was more than just a classroom assignment. Her motivation stayed strong throughout the progression of her Agriscience project because of other Agriscience students around her. She constantly compared her paper, scores, and feedback to others.

While the paper portion of Agriscience is the most important component of the CDE, there are many opportunities for students to develop public speaking and career-related

skills. In preparation for the interview process, these students met with the Agriscience coaches each and every day to perform a short presentation they had prepared summarizing the important components and results of their research. When these students learned of the interview process, they all responded in different ways. Nick had an endless number of questions. "What are they going to ask me? How many judges will there be? How long does the interview last? What color socks should I wear?" Katie once again had to be convinced participating in the interview would not be boring and would be worth her time. Conversely, Melissa responded that she was "pumped and ready."

The students were also placed in several mock interview and practice situations outside of the Agriscience coaches, whom had quickly become their comfort zone. Administration, members of the school board, advisory committee members, other agriculture teachers, and parents were brought in to interview the students. Throughout this process, feedback was provided to the students individually. Nick received much praise for knowing his project inside and out. He, however, was forced to master the art of a confident handshake, told to speak louder and to stop fidgeting. Katie was constantly told she needed to act more interested and while she always knew the answer to the questions asked, she needed to answer with more enthusiasm. Melissa was complimented on her confidence and polished speaking ability, however, needed to conduct more research so she would be able to answer the questions completely and succinctly.

A few short weeks later, we were at the California State Agriscience Fair. The students' hard work had paid off, with each of them winning

their category. After once again spending endless amounts of time preparing, we were on a plane to Indianapolis to compete at the National Agriscience Fair. The competition day came and, with one last confident handshake and a good luck from the coaches, all three students walked through the doors for their interviews. At the awards luncheon the following day, the results were announced. Katie and Melissa were in the top three, however, did not win. Nick was fifth in his category. While there was a slight amount of disappointment in not winning, each of the three students left with their heads held high. They realized they acquired more skills, confidence, and knowledge than they had at the start of their journey.

Upon returning home, I saw a great change in these students. Nick, while still reserved and quiet in class, is no longer a wallflower. He has become the "smart guy" everyone in class turns to when they need an answer. His confidence has increased exponentially and he has decided to start a new Agriscience project as a senior, even though it is not a requirement in his agriculture class. Katie will also be completing another Agriscience project and has decided to become a member of the Agriculture Sales team for our chapter, as well as attending the California State FFA Conference. As a senior, Melissa will go on to do great things at a prominent university in California. She has chosen an agricultural major and would like to pursue a career in research related to animal genetics or nutrition.

While I do not believe the changes in these students are completely a result of their involvement in Agriscience, I do believe Agriscience was the catalyst that jump-started their transformations. This CDE provided

these students the opportunity to not only learn countless California State Standards in the classroom, but also develop many career, life, and communication skills to be used in the future. Nick was given a place on the social map of high school. Katie found a passion to pursue and increase involvement in school. Melissa was guided in a career direction by simply following her competitive spirit.

I am a proud supporter of agricultural education for many reasons. The greatest reason for this support is it provides every student the chance to find a niche based on strengths they already possess. In many cases, it highlights these hidden skills to the students, allowing them the opportunity to develop further. With twenty-four CDEs offered, as well as public speaking events and volunteer opportunities, every student has the chance to be involved. Whatever the students decide to pursue in the future, they will leave the high school agriculture program having learned countless skills and valuable lessons. Most importantly, they will leave with the confidence of knowing they are good at something. The power of this confidence lies in taking them places far greater than the walls of any high school.



*Brittany Whyler is an agricultural education teacher at Elk Grove High School, Elk Grove, CA.*



## Pirate Blood

by Carlos Diaz

When individuals are asked to reflect on a moment of tribulation or emergency, it is common for professionals to say, “I fell back on my training.” Under further scrutiny, most unfortunate situations can be traced back to a definite point, a mistake, a missed connection, or a question unasked. In an ideal world, the freshmen we teach have come from a middle school where they were taught what they needed to know before entering high school. In an ideal world, those students requiring IEP’s or 504’s are identified. Each teacher is notified about the changes, developments, and incidents concerning those students they are charged with keeping safe and educating to the best of their ability. The ideal world is as intangible to us as the emerald city of OZ, or the long fabled times of yesteryear, also known as the “good old days.” In times of uncertainty or emergency we fall back on two things: our professionalism and our training.

One bright morning, my third period Introductory Agriculture Mechanics class gathered just outside my classroom door. Opening and stepping through the door, I watched my class scramble into a somewhat orderly single file line from what was a chaotic mob. As was custom each filed past, stopping to shake my hand and greet each other good morning. Welcoming each face, I took notice of one particular student’s absence. For the sake of anonymity, we shall call him *Timmy*.

My students eagerly grabbed their class binders, took their seats and prepared to answer the daily prompt on the board. While they

were settling in for another session of Agriculture Mechanics, I took role. Timmy walked through the door in a huff and loudly took his seat at the front of the class, closest to the door. He sat hunched over his desk and firmly gripped the edges in an almost furious manner. The students around him were aware of some of Timmy’s peculiarities and made no reaction to his demeanor, save to be completely silent. I looked up at

told their horror stories in excruciating detail. One story involved Timmy grabbing another student by the throat and holding him high against the classroom wall while yelling, “I will gut you with my knife!” Another teacher explained he had been working with Timmy’s mother and the administration to keep Timmy from acquiring weapons from other students on campus. Timmy’s fascination with knives had prompted his family to

If there is a question which begs asking, trust your instincts and ask.

my class, to Timmy, and back to the role sheet. I then performed a textbook *double take* toward Timmy as he was wearing an eye patch! He did not have issues with his eyes or his vision. The eye patch was ratted and old and the string holding the patch to his face was worn to individual strings in some places. At the moment, all was well. He was quiet and I could address the eye patch situation once I had the class underway. Suddenly, Timmy spun around in his seat and growled at the classmates nearest him. He blurted expletive after expletive punctuated over and over with the phrase, “Back off! I have pirate blood in me!”

The week prior, I was invited to a meeting regarding Timmy. Those in attendance included his teachers; all of which were special education instructors, the district psychologist, and the lone Ag Shop teacher, me. During the meeting, the district psychologist asked about any incidents the teachers may have had with him in class. Instructor after instructor

padlock the kitchen knives at home. This action caused Timmy to seek knives in other ways. He often took items from home to trade with students for knives they offered to exchange. The psychologist explained he had been declared *emotionally disturbed* by a specialist and part of his condition included an inherent propensity toward violence and a fascination with weaponry, in this case, knives.

Eventually, it was my turn to tell my story. At the time, I did not have one. His only “regular class” in his school day was Agriculture Mechanics; a class with full access to a shop wherein several ways to harm, kill or severely maim one’s self or others lay in every direction. My only additions to the dialogue of this meeting included: “Am I his only regular education class during his entire day?” and “So far, he’s been good in my class.” Being a first year teacher, and unsure of my footing in this situation, I refrained from asking the obvious question, “Whose idea was it to put

an emotionally disturbed individual with a tendency toward edged weapons and violence toward others, in a shop class?"

With the situation in my classroom escalating, and having a general idea of what this young man could be capable of, I calmly went over to his desk to diffuse the situation. "Ok Timbo, how are we doing today?" His attention was now on me. "Alright Tim, can I ask what happened to your eye?" No reply. I concentrated on my voice, trying to soothe and not provoke. "Tim, I'm a little worried about you. Can I get a quick peek under your patch just so I know you're okay?" His only response to my prompts was an oddly determined look with his un-patched eye. Eventually, he growled, "Back off! I have pirate blood in me!" I replied, "Cool deal but can I have a quick look, just to make sure you're okay?" Timmy sprang from his desk and away from me and the other students. He again growled, "Back off! I have pirate blood!" His hands turned to fists and his un-patched eye nervously darted from me to the door, and back again.

Having extensive livestock experience, I remembered what the professionals call "point of balance." If one stands forward of an animal's shoulder, the animal will balk and retreat. Standing behind the shoulder will cause it to move forward. If one corners an already agitated animal, bad things can be expected. I knew I needed to get him away from the class so I could focus on keeping him safe and calming him down. I pivoted to offer an open avenue toward the door, which I imagined looked more appealing than facing off with a 5 foot 11 inch, 300 pound shop teacher from Bakersfield. He took the invitation and bolted for the door. Unbeknownst to any of us (the agitated young *pirate*, the stunned class, or

myself), the vice-principal was making his way to my class to speak with me on an unrelated topic. Timmy threw the door open, nearly taking the vice-principal's nose off! Timmy whirled around and found himself in a standoff with the vice principal and me.

The vice-principal looked at me quizzically but before he could find the words, his head spun around to Timmy and his eye patch. Finally he asked, "What's going on here Diaz?" The door quietly shut behind me, the vice-principal stood to my right and Timmy ten feet in front of us, shoulders hunched, knees bent, fists at the ready, and his harsh un-patched eye carefully watching for our next move. I tried to explain the situation but all I managed to say before Timmy interrupted was, "Well, you see Timmy here..." Timmy interrupted with, "Back off! I'm a pirate! I have pirate blood in me!" He suddenly had the full attention of the vice-principal who asked, "Why are you wearing that eye patch?" I watched in disbelief as the vice-principal stepped right up to Timmy, inches from his face, stared right into his un-patched eye and asked, "Are you on drugs?" Timmy cocked an arm back as if to take a swing at the administrator. Without flinching, the vice-principal took out his tablet and asked, "What is your parent's phone number?"

Timmy's eye grew wide and his stance straightened, "Why?" His voice was meek and oddly high pitched. "They are coming to pick you up," the vice-principal responded. Timmy's posture softened. His hands rose to lift the eye patch from his face and he looked as though he was going to break into tears. He offered, "Why are they coming to pick me up?" I let out a loud sigh and asked the vice-principal, "So, you got this from here?" He was talking

into his walkie-talkie by then and just nodded affirmative. "Okay, Tim. Do what he needs you to. Okay, Buddy?" "Okay, Diaz," he whimpered.

I stepped back into the class where my dumbfounded students stared at me with wide eyes. I did not spend any time discussing the situation but rather continued on with, "Everybody okay? Alright then. Who can tell me what each digit represents in E6011?" Later in the year, Timmy found a new home for third period. Unfortunately, bizarre incidents continued to plague him.

While in the credentialing program, we are fully aware our instructors are working to set us up for success by providing scenarios we may face once we enter the classroom. These discussions and assignments carry the charge for us to use our best professional judgment in the best interest of our students and we are expected to assure their safety at all times. A simple yet profound teaching method, to be sure. While currently there is no training scenario dealing specifically with students who have pirate blood, or for those whom can claim pirate lineage, my advice is to fall back on your training, trust your decisions, and keep your students safe. Furthermore, if there is a question which begs asking for the sake of all involved; such as, "Is it appropriate for this student to be enrolled in this class?" trust your instincts and ask.



*Carlos Diaz is an agricultural education teacher at Foothill High School, Palo Cedro, CA.*

## How Students Truly Measure Up

by Joey M. Silva

I love teaching shop classes, especially Introduction to Ag Mechanics. Why? Because I get all the *newbies!* The greenest of the green. The freshest of the fresh. Those who may have never touched a tool in their entire lives. Watching my students learn and grow is visible with every new project because they are experiencing things they've never done before.

I start off my class the same way every year. After spending a week getting to know the students, developing class culture, and setting goals and expectations, we focus first on shop safety. We introduce the tools, touch on fire safety and procedures, and after students pass their safety tests, we're ready to get started in the shop. The kids are excited to get started as quickly as possible. Their enthusiasm is instantly curbed when they learn the first "real" unit is the measuring unit, as it is all about numbers.

My students view numbers as four-letter words. For whatever reason, math is scary and evil, and they want to avoid it like the plague. Unfortunately for them, math is critical in shop. They must learn to measure accurately. Given the importance, I place great emphasis on measuring items. We measure tools. We measure furniture. We measure each other. We measure things outside. We measure everything. Students learn to count their pace and we measure buildings and sports fields. We break down the inch. We explode the inch. We draw the inch. We review multiplication tables. We review multiplication tables and study fractions. We practice, practice, practice, and then practice measuring some more.

I do everything I can to impress upon my students, the serious nature of measuring and its significance to shop success. However, even after all of the activities, group work, pair work, individual work, and one-on-one time with me, inevitably there are students who will struggle with numbers and, in particular, with measuring. Being a third-year teacher, it is reasonable to think I would come to understand this pattern. And yet, it frustrates me every year that some students just do not grasp the concept of measuring and breaking apart the inch.

This year in particular, one student stuck out. Cam was in my fourth-period class and I was excited to welcome him. I thought we were going to connect well in class. I learned he raced dirt bikes, which impressed me because dirt bike riding is one of my favorite hobbies. Cam was a good student for the safety unit: excited to be in class, excited to be in shop, seemed excited to learn from me. This behavior continued until we got to measuring.

Cam and the tape measure were like oil and water but from the get-go I knew this was not going to be easy for him. Cam was diagnosed with a learning disability and his 504 plan indicated his struggles with math and testing and his need for extra support. No matter the approach I tried, the technique I used, or the activity I had him perform, he simply could not understand the concept that there are sixteen equal parts dividing an inch. I felt so bad because following each activity, Cam had nothing to celebrate. He felt unsuccessful and deemed himself a failure throughout the measuring unit. It was frustrating for me too because I could not under-

stand why a concept so simple for me was so hard for him.

In an effort to make Cam feel somewhat successful, I made sure he knew how to physically set up and use instruments like the tape measure, speed square, and combination square. We made a deal that, when it came to measuring, he would do his best independently and then call me over to check his work. Despite the new plan, I did not have high hopes for his year in the shop.

Although Cam struggled through the measuring unit, it finally came to an end and we were able to turn to our first building project – and my *favorite* project – boomerangs. I love this project for a number of reasons. (1) Students get exposed to five hand tools, most of which they have never used. (2) The project revolves around finesse, detail, and fine-tuning. (3) The students get to personalize the boomerangs with the final painting and sealing of their blade. (4) The process and final product related to this project give me a good idea about the kind of worker each student happens to be, as their effort and focus indicate their success. (5) Finally, when everyone is finished, we set aside a class period to throw our boomerangs. (Just in case any of you were wondering: they *do* work!)

*continued on page 24*



Joey M. Silva is an agricultural education teacher at Minarets High School, O'Neals, CA.

# Operation: Home Visit

by Anna Bates

The Dog Park is a place where people come to release their canine companions to blow off steam and frolic with other panting friends. It is also a place where pet parents can drink coffee and visit. For me, the dog park is the place where I oddly realized one of my first major educational goals, other than survival, had come full circle.

On this particular Saturday, with my husband off tossing a ball to our rather large energetic dog, I sat clutching a steaming venti latte and enjoying the morning. A woman began talking to me as she stared off into the field where her daughter was practicing with the high school's cross-country team. I mentioned I was a teacher at the high school and of course that always leads to the question, "What do you teach?" I informed her I was the Ag teacher and I basically taught a lot of different subjects. She sat still, not really looking at me... more focused on her daughter. Then, as if a light bulb went on in her head, she stared right at me and said, "Are you the teacher that visits kids' houses? I've heard of *you!*"

## The Home Visit

I was first introduced to the crazy idea of home visits as a student teacher at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. Conceptually, each freshman receives a visit from an agriculture teacher for the purpose of explaining the total program and making a connection with the student and his/her family. This does not mean the teacher visits a fair project at the student's home in the spring. Home visits occur at the beginning of the academic year when teachers, for the most part, are

still trying to learn the names of their students. Parents truly appreciate this rare and golden moment to connect with a teacher during this new phase in their children's lives.

I failed to grasp the power of this amazing tool until I made it a goal during my third year of teaching to actually conduct them, for *REAL*. I decided to implement home visits in my program for three major reasons. First, I was tired of people having the misconception Agriculture Science was not 'real' science and our classes did not count for the same academic credit. Second, more and more of our students were coming into the program with non-agricultural backgrounds and had absolutely no idea what FFA was. I figured if someone like me who, later in life, came to realize what an amazing program FFA is and how vital agricultural education is; so could all the families I was connected to. Lastly, my partner teachers and I were in the process of growing our program. The phrase "recruitment and retention" is critical to an agriculture program's viability. This was a natural step to better connect to the kids we wanted to keep as program completers.

Before making a visit, I got organized. My first step was to draft a letter to the parents of my students. In it I explained the rationale for the visit and what mutual objectives would be met. I also made a sign-up sheet with appointment options. These documents went home with the students as homework to be returned for credit. The most important sheet I developed was the form I could complete at the visit. On it I captured information related to the student's academic, leadership, experiential, and career goals, and helped students devise a

plan through the program to achieve each one. A copy of the completed form was left with the parents while the original went into the student's department file for reference.

Over the years, I have taught many teachers how to conduct home visits. When I started doing them, I was newly married and did not yet have children of my own. As a result, I had the freedom to make several home visits each night. I started with those students who were brand new to our program and even doubled up with some who lived near one another. It was not unusual for me to complete my school day around 3:00 then head off to home visits at 4:00, 5:00, and 6:00 in the evening. One detail I was not prepared for was the trend to invite me to dinner. This was not a problem until families heard through the grapevine they were 'supposed' to feed the ag teacher. My visits began to take up more of my evenings, something my husband did not appreciate. I politely implemented a "No Dinner" policy, to take the pressure off of families and myself. However, when offered something by a parent, I always graciously accepted.

## The Process

With time and reflection, I created a series of tips to more effectively and efficiently complete home visits.

- 1. Carry a bottle of water with you.** After doing a lot of talking on one particular visit, my throat was dry. The itch in the back of my throat signaled I was headed for a full-blown cough attack; the messy kind with wheezing and tears. Most people would offer water. Not in this case. The family simply stared at me as I died a little in my chair. It has also been

my experience some people have extremely warm houses. A cold bottle of water can be a lifesaver.

2. **Do your homework.** Look up the parents' names and write them down on the data sheet prior to the visit. This small detail can save you when the student has parents who do not share their last name, or should they have some other arrangement in the home. It is also nice to reference them by name during the discussion.
3. **Compliment them!** Take the time to compliment the family on their house, pictures, pets... whatever. Rarely, if ever, does a child's teacher come to the home. Families are nervous and a compliment, no matter how small, can set them at ease.
4. **Make your expectations clear.** Let the family know, in a fun way, you do not need to inspect the student's room. I had a mom insist I check her freshman football player's room because she forced him to clean it. An extremely awkward moment for both of us but rewarding for me since I used the large elephant poster he got at his third grade book fair as ammunition to blackmail him in class.
5. **Be prepared to deal with pets.** I have been licked on the neck by a tiny couch dwelling dog, bit by a barking thing described as "friendly," and forced to ride bareback on a gaited horse that was supposedly easy to ride.
6. **Take notes.** Capture information from the discussion. Much like my data sheet, have a template for taking notes about student goals and devise a plan to reach them together. Also have space for little things like hobbies, siblings, family scenarios, parents' occupations, etc. The little details matter to developing lasting relationships.

7. **Take special note of the family dynamic.** I invited my new principal to go on a visit with me to the home of twin girls in our program. Upon arriving, deer were mating in their front yard while their father sprayed them with the garden hose. What do you say? I am pretty sure we both acted as if we saw nothing. During the discussion, we discovered the girls had lost their mother to cancer just four months prior. We left that day greatly impacted by the strength of the connection we made with the family.
8. **Prepare for cultural differences.** Many of students may come from families who speak a language other than English. In those instances, either a sibling or the student interprets the discussion. I also had a visit with an Indian family who prepared an entire traditional meal for me, which I was not planning. They invited extended members of the family to dine as well. I sat at what looked like a holiday feast and each time I ate everything off my plate, they refilled it.
9. **Be gracious and treat everyone the same.** Whether the visit takes place in an apartment, a mansion, a trailer park, a ranch, or the classroom, treat each student and family the same. If offered snacks, eat at least one or take it for the road!
10. **Don't just expect the unexpected; expect the BEST.** I got really brave at one point and invited our Superintendent on a visit. I did not tell the family he would be joining me because the student was vocal about being lukewarm about FFA and being involved. To this day, she has been on a National Parliamentary Procedure team, served as both a Chapter and a Sectional Officer, has raised a pig for the fair, and has competed in

numerous CDE field days. Not a bad outcome for spending an hour drinking lemonade on her back porch while discussing her future! Oh, and the Superintendent was very impressed.

Home visits are time consuming, exhausting, and nerve wracking but *completely* worth it. Being busy is not an excuse. I now have two children under the age of five and still manage to do home visits, although at a different pace. Over the past eleven years, I have visited the homes of over 600 students. Almost half of my incoming class has either had a sibling who received a home visit or knows about the program through one of their own. If there is one thing I believe ag teachers can do to positively impact recruitment and retention, it is to visit the homes of their students. Knowing more about your students' lives not only helps you mold their futures, it helps tremendously with classroom management and student accountability. Make it a goal to do five, ten, or more each quarter. You will stand amazed at how quickly students and parents commit to the program. You will also be impressed by your new celebrity status as the teacher who visits kids' homes. Break out the stunner shades and be prepared for the paparazzi... you will create a community following!!!



*Anna Bates is an agricultural education teacher at San Luis Obispo High School, San Luis Obispo, CA.*

# *Agricultural Education: A Value-Added Approach*

by Hugh Mooney

As I write this article, I am sitting in my special cubicle at the state office. I am reminded how old I have become. I have just returned from Fresno for the State FFA Convention and other related activities. Reflecting on the five nights spent there, I realized I slept a total of twenty-four hours. This level of sleep deprivation is nothing new. I have gone without much sleep many times before. The only factor setting this most recent trip apart from those prior, and the reason I know I am getting old, is how long it takes me to recover. However, with age comes wisdom.

As a profession, agricultural educators pride themselves on having an educational model that is viewed by many, to be the best in the education field. Classroom instruction combined with supervised agriculture experience and leadership development through the FFA organization, have become a model other disciplines claim is not possible for them. They are correct. To implement the agricultural education model requires the desire for teachers to engage students in learning beyond the classroom. There may be individual educators willing to explore but as a group, teachers historically have not been expected to maintain that level of involvement. Many have no desire to ever do so in the future. We are lucky in agricultural education to have had leaders who saw value in the model and developed a support mechanism for the profession. Where would we be today without that leadership?

Though I have not seen any of the articles submitted for this issue, I expect there are several focusing on classroom instruction. Others will

address the many opportunities for students to develop as leaders or use their SAE to move toward their desired career. Though the three-circle model is used in varying degrees in programs throughout the country, one key ingredient makes the difference in the model's success: the relationship a quality agricultural educator develops with their students.

“People do not care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” John C. Maxwell

With most teachers, education occurs within the walls of the classroom. When the bell rings, class is over. In agricultural education, when class ends the opportunity to learn has just begun. An agriculture teacher travels with their students, eats meals with them, shares stories, shops in the same stores, and attends the same events. When one of our students has a problem, we help them solve it. When our students have success, we celebrate with them. We are invited to their graduation parties, their weddings; we become part of their lives. One of my favorite authors is John C. Maxwell. He is known for the following quote, “People do not care how much you know, until they know how much you care.” The fact we truly care for our students, beyond the walls of a classroom, makes a difference we may not discover until many years after our students leave our programs.

After twenty-three years as a classroom teacher, I made the diffi-

cult decision to join the state agricultural education staff. I am often asked why I made the shift, especially since I was on fire for the local program. In 2005, I had an experience that changed my entire perspective. I was selected to participate in the National FFA Delta Conference. The program was designed to accomplish two things: (1) help teachers better engage their students in instruction

and (2) develop teachers as people of influence. I thought I was a good teacher but quickly learned I could become much better.

The week long professional development program changed me. I was one of the few at the conference with more than twenty years of teaching experience. I quickly learned the conference was full of vibrant young teachers who were incredible in the classroom. I became refocused and determined to be better for those I served. I understood I needed to be willing to use my influence with the profession, to help remind teachers we need not focus solely on how well teachers teach but draw more value from how well students learn. What impacted me most was the realization of how important an agriculture teacher's relationship with their students is to student success.

When I was asked to join the state staff, I reflected for some time. Leaving the classroom was not something

I took lightly but my decision was prompted by the promise of greater opportunity to help other teachers better engage their students. I wanted them to have what I was trying to provide my own students. I often wonder if I made the right decision given how much I miss teaching in the local program. With time, I have come to accept my new role and its rewards.

Part of my role on the state staff is to serve as the North Coast Region Supervisor. In addition to working with teachers to improve their programs, I have the pleasure to serve as the advisor to the North Coast Region FFA officer team. Each year, a team is elected by the membership and it is my duty to help them prepare to fulfill their new responsibilities. As a chapter advisor, teachers have their officers in a close proximity because they attend the same school. With regional officers, sometimes from the northern most and southern most areas of the region, they might live four hundred miles apart. This creates the additional challenge of having limited opportunities to meet and work on these events. This challenge has required me to become better at engaging students and ensuring our limited time is used effectively.

In my experience, the first step is building a relationship to help the team understand I trust them to do the right thing and, if there is a challenge, they can overcome it. We begin with a retreat, which allows us get to know one another. It is in this environment, I begin to access their prior experience as leaders in their local chapters. Some come from chapters which develop and carry out the program of activities based on members making decisions, developing action plans and producing results. Others come from chapters where the advisor tells them what they will do with little member

involvement in decision-making. The rest of them fall somewhere between a member-driven environment and an advisor dictatorship.

A good example of this difference in leadership development can be witnessed during my second year as a regional supervisor. I had encountered many challenges my first year with finding days the team could meet to plan activities and develop the team dynamic necessary for success. The officer application soon became a contract as it listed the actual dates of required activities, including the retreat. Three weeks prior to this particular retreat, I received an e-mail from the president informing me the dates for his Spanish club trip to Mexico had changed and he would not be able to attend our event. I reminded him of the contract he, his parent, and his advisor signed which stated missing one of the required activities would result in his immediate removal from office. To be clear, I informed him if he did not attend the retreat I would consider it his resignation and another member of the team would become President. He attended the retreat.

Through further dialogue, I discovered his experience with chapter retreats followed a more advisor-centered approach. His chapter advisor usually told them what they would do over the course of the year. Having no prior experience working with me, he assumed this method of leadership would apply to the regional structure. He soon encountered a different style of leadership. When he discovered it was his responsibility to make decisions that best serve the membership, he experienced a paradigm shift. This new understanding compelled him to thank me for helping him do the right thing.

After six years in my current position, I now have a reputation. The

new officer team has an idea about what I expect based on the relationships I have built with former officers. Though we only spend ten or twelve days together during the year, we make the most of our time. If I am travelling through the area, I always stop in to see their SAEs. If they are working on an application, often they will send it to me for review. When they are struggling with something, I help them identify what is most important to them so they can make their own decisions.

When you serve students as an agriculture teacher, you do not have to spend extra time helping a student make a decision on their own when you think the decision is obvious. You do not need to allow the members to make all the decisions when it would be faster if you just told them what to do. You do not need to make the extra stop to view another student's SAE on the weekend. You do not need care about the answer when you ask, "How are things are going?" However, as Blake Shelton sings, "it would sure be cool if you did."



*Hugh Mooney is the North Coast Regional Supervisor for the California Department of Education.*

# Ask Not What Your Principal Can Do For You: Unlocking the Potential of Administration

by Aaron J. McKim, Misty D. Lambert, Tyson J. Sorensen & Kristopher M. Elliott

I was a first year teacher struggling to develop the “complete program” I knew was so pivotal to me being a great teacher and advisor. I couldn’t figure it out. I had gone through all the classes in college, had no problems during student teaching, and got the first job I applied for. Now that I was in my first year of teaching, I felt like I was failing.

In the classroom, I struggled to teach because of a few disruptive students. I thought I knew what to do and sent these students to the principal’s office. That didn’t work; they were right back in class the next day with no change in their behavior. Being the FFA advisor wasn’t going much better. Every time I tried to take students on a field trip or to a contest, the administration would deny my request. It was either, “we can’t sacrifice another day out of class for these kids,” or “you should use your own funding for the bus driver and substitute.” As for SAE, well, I just knew my principal was going to cut my summer contract.

Just when I thought things couldn’t get any worse, I realized I had an advisory committee meeting in two days. I wasn’t prepared and I had only met these people once before. This was going to be a disaster!

I went into the advisory meeting without any positive expectations. At the beginning of the meeting, I tried to highlight some of the small successes I had experienced. However, once I started talking about how little

administrative support I was getting, I couldn’t stop. I talked about how the principal doesn’t handle discipline problems right, how the administration won’t let the FFA take any trips to contests or leadership camps, and how I just knew my summer contract was going to be the next thing to go. I wrapped up the meeting by saying, “If only my principal supported what I was trying to do, I would have a great program!”

After the meeting, one of the advisory board members came to me and thanked me for allowing him to help with the agriculture program. Then he looked at me and asked, “Have you ever thought about what the agriculture program can do to help the principal?” His question caught me off guard but I politely replied, “Yeah, I’ve thought about that a lot.” To be honest, I hadn’t really thought about it at all.

As the next few months wore on, I couldn’t help but think back to what the advisory board member had said. At first I was mad. My advisory board was supposed to support me, not tell me to help somebody else! I then realized what he was really trying to say, “You can’t expect someone to help you until you have shown you can help them.”

As the next advisory board meeting rolled around, I knew what I had to do. I walked into the meeting and told the members about my reflections over the past few months. I told them I had come to the conclusion if we were to have a successful agriculture program we needed administrative support. That night, the advisory board and I brainstormed a list of ways we could get my administrator

to buy in to what we were doing in the program. Our list included:

- Publish good news about the program in the newspaper
- Invite them to the banquet
- Invite them to the classroom, shop, greenhouse and learning lab; sometimes all you have to do is ask.
- Invite them to judge an FFA contest or event. They will truly SEE what it is you do.
- Solve some of my own discipline problems without sending them to the office
- Relay ‘good kid moments’ upon seeing the principal to make sure not all of our interactions involved discipline problems or requests
- Give administrators and school secretaries the first and best poinsettias out of the greenhouse at Christmas
- Use ferns from the greenhouse to decorate the auditorium stage for special events
- Invite the administration to attend advisory board meetings and, if they cannot attend, share the minutes so they feel informed
- Take the principal along to State or National FFA Convention
- Be more visible and involved in school-wide activities and committees
- Share specific examples with the administration how *their* decision to help the agriculture program benefits the students, the school, and the community



We decided, as an advisory board, the most effective way to get the principal on board was through the FFA banquet. The advisory board decided to invite supporters and agricultural leaders from across the community to attend the FFA banquet. It was my job to get the FFA members committed to making the event something special. The advisory board and I put a plan together to use the banquet as a way to show the principal what great things the FFA could do for the school.

Finally, the night of the banquet had come. The advisory board had drawn in a plethora of community members. The Principal, CTE Director, and Superintendent were all in attendance. Half way through the banquet, we recognized each administrator by name for their leadership in the school and their support of the agriculture program. The event was a huge success thanks to my wonderful students and advisory board.

The next day, the principal stopped me in the hallway after school and started talking about the banquet. He thanked me for putting on the event and for inviting him to the program. He went on and on about all the great things the agriculture program was doing for students and the community. Finally he said, "You know, if there is anything I can ever do for you or the agriculture program just let me know."

I knew I was on to something so I didn't stop with the banquet. Along with the advisory board, I have systematically implemented all of the items on the list and my principal is even planning to make the trip to Louisville with us this fall for National Convention. It all started with the banquet. From that day on, I have had full support from my administration. I try to be realistic with my requests but I have never had an issue with get-

ting field trips, contests or leadership camp approvals through since that banquet. My administration sees the value of my program to the students, to the school, and to the community because I made it a priority to show them. My summer contract has never been threatened and I always know I can count on my administration if I have problems in the classroom.

To sum up this experience, I paraphrase John F. Kennedy, "It's not about what your principal can do for you; it's first about what you can do for your principal." Recognizing our administration during that well-prepared banquet gave the community a chance to applaud the work they had done, rather than critique it. The event also gave the administration a chance to see how the success of the FFA was a potential benefit to them. That banquet was the catapult to my success as an agriculture teacher. None of this would have been possible if I hadn't changed my perspective. I needed to learn to be a team player, one who could make the job of the administration a little easier and one who could be trusted to put them and the school in a positive light with parents, community members, and my students. I needed to learn to communicate as a team player rather than a teacher with constant requests or demands. I would encourage all teachers to develop a plan with their advisory board guided by these two questions: (1) What can the agriculture program do for the administration and (2) How can I show the administration the agriculture program is willing to work as a team to help them accomplish their goals? Maybe Zig Ziglar said it best when he stated, "You can get anything in life that you want, if you just help enough other people get what they want."



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# Successful Learning for a Diverse Classroom

## A Short Story from Afghanistan

by Carmen Benson

It was my first training event while serving as an agribusiness specialist with the Georgia Agribusiness Development Team in Afghanistan. I found myself in a drafty building constructed of loose mortar bricks staring into the white-bearded faces of about twenty elders from the conservative Eastern Afghanistan province of Wardak. I was prepared with detailed handouts, months of research, and unfortunately, an ever-waning confidence. The purpose of my visit was to conduct seed quality, storage, and germination training at the request of a group of farmers and extension agents from various villages in the district. However, looking out at the sea of foreign faces looking back at me with curious scrutiny, I realized my learners and I were worlds apart. They whispered in a language I did not understand. Looking at their traditional Afghan dress, rough hands, and worn smiles, I knew their life experiences as farmers in a war-torn Afghanistan were a far cry from my suburban American upbringing. Most perplexing was the fact that as a young female professional, I was there to teach male learners in a society that traditionally holds elder males to the highest esteem. So in this particular conundrum, feeling utterly overwhelmed, where would I even start? How can I share a learning experience with this audience when we have so little in common?

### *Similarities from Home: Diversity in our Classrooms*

It was not until after the successful completion of the class that, during private reflection, I recognized

how this situation was surprisingly similar to that of many of my teaching and mentoring experiences in the U.S. In fact, I can remember my first day as a high school agriscience teacher.

The skeptical looks of the teenagers staring back at me were not too different from those of the Afghan people. While Afghanistan and America are “worlds” apart, the anxiety of needing to reach a diverse group of learners is universal among educators. Today, agricultural education programs and FFA chapters in America are seeing an increase in the rate of inclusion of students with special learning needs, gifted and advanced students, ESOL students, and recently emigrated learners from other countries. Most importantly, all classrooms and learning venues represent an exciting cornucopia of variation in ethnicity, socio-economic status, experience levels, and abilities among learners. Agricultural educators are responsible for ensuring their programs equitably meet the needs of all learners.

This is the brief account of three key, yet simple, principles that helped



*Agricultural Extension Agents from the Department of Agriculture, Irrigation, and Livestock in Wardak Province, Afghanistan observe a demonstration on germination test procedures prior to beginning similar tests in small groups.* Photo retrieved from Defense Video and Imagery Distribution Center (<http://www.dvidshub.net/image/460559/mayden-shar-seed-quality-training>).

me provide effective learning during my first teaching opportunity in Afghanistan:

### *Take Time to Learn*

Prior to training, I conducted weeks of research, not only regarding the curriculum itself, but also regarding agriculture in the region, Afghan culture and customs, and lessons learned from previous initiatives in the district and province. One thing I learned was Afghan’s fondness for using traditional proverbs to make a point. I began the lesson with the Dari proverb that translates “drop by drop a river is formed,” meaning that many small efforts eventually lead to amazing differences. Beginning the lesson with a familiar saying really seemed to bring an air of comfort and trust. Throughout the lesson, I stopped frequently to elicit informa-

tion and responses from the group. I would say, "In the United States and other parts of the world I have seen it done this way....how do farmers in your area do this?" Honestly, the bulk of the value from the class came from the discussions I shared with the class members. Within minutes, they were sharing stories and examples with me and the others in the class. It seemed that by acknowledging the farmers as local experts and showing I valued their opinion and experiences, they in turn demonstrated a higher degree of interest and reverence for the advice and techniques I shared with them.

Take the time to learn about the background of your students. Actively browse education and extension journals; join local, regional and national professional organizations; and seek out the experts in the fields of ESOL, special education, and culture so you are always aware of the latest research and methods to serve all of your students. Most importantly, take time to learn from your learners. Integrate opportunities for students to share their family history, culture, and personal interests with you and other learners throughout the year. Ask questions. Listen.

### ***Show Rather Than Tell***

My audience that day included extension agents, who generally have at least a high school education, and farmers, who may have little formal education. Additionally, the primary languages among the group were Dari and Pashto. Of course, my two week course in Pashto had not prepared me to lead a Dari discussion on seed biology and germination. Therefore, I relied on my linguist to translate my words and the responses of the Afghan learners.

Knowing the language barrier between me and my learners would be one of the most significant chal-

lenges, I ensured the lesson included an abundance of visual aids and spent more time demonstrating with pictures and hands on activities rather than lecture.

Language barriers are not foreign to agricultural educators in the classroom or field. Differences in primary language, dialects, and education level can affect the way our learners hear and comprehend what we share with them. However, demonstration is a universal language. Evaluate your current lesson plans and critically evaluate the time you spend in front of the classroom lecturing compared to the time you spend demonstrating and allowing your learners to demonstrate their progress. Can you do more to show rather than tell?

### ***Ensure Lessons are Relevant to Learners***

The training curriculum was designed to meet the expressed need of farmers and extension agents in the area. Farmers were preparing to plant their winter wheat crop, an essential sustainment food source for their families and community, and were concerned about the quality of seed available. I paid particular attention to ensure the timing of the training, crops discussed, and methods introduced made sense for the area we were in and the audience I was addressing.

Always relate learning experiences to the life, interests, and goals of the learners. To do this, teachers must take a sincere interest in the lives of their students. Agricultural educators have the advantage of also serving as FFA advisors, 4H advisors, and leaders in the community which allows us a closer look into the lives of our students. Use this information and the relationship you foster to tailor instruction to the interests and needs of your learners.

### ***An Apple for the Teacher***

At the end of the class, the group enthusiastically thanked me for my time. One of the participants, an elderly farmer from the rural area of the district, approached me at the front of the room and presented me with a shiny red apple grown in his own orchards. The sentimental gesture was one of the most heart-felt experiences in my two years in Afghanistan. When I explained how an apple for the teacher was a well-known tradition in America, the group shared a good laugh and hearty good byes. Mission accomplished.

Let's be honest, working with students whose experiences, culture, abilities, interests, and languages differ from that of our own can be intimidating. However, I encourage educators to remember those fundamental methods we have learned through study, research, and experience to provide learning opportunities that recognize and embrace the diversity of your classroom. Fortunately for agricultural educators, it does not take a trip around the world to find fascinating diversity....it is right there in front of you!



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# Science, Technology, Engineering and Math: It all STEMs from Agriculture

by Samuel Evans

**A**s an agriculture teacher and an FFA advisor, one's day is rarely the same as the next. Agriculture teachers chauffeur students to and from competitions on majestic public-school buses, draft and implement schematics for landscapes around the school and community, help develop agriscience projects for students to test their hypothesis, sabotage engines at 5:30 AM so small engines classes can troubleshoot them, manage the business that is the greenhouse, organize fairs for elementary children to learn more about agriculture and where their food comes from, create boutonnieres and corsages for prom, oversee drafting and constructing of a storage building for Habitat for Humanity, help students calculate how many cubic yards of concrete it took to build the sidewalk outside your classroom, form enthusiastic freshmen into polished public speakers or even counsel students on personal problems, future goals and life ambitions. Of all these things, the most important thing we do on a daily basis is teaching students how to be successful in a world where an educated mind is a prerequisite to success.

In agricultural education we teach our students that agriculture can be related to everything from the cell phones they are using to the products on their plate and the shirt on their backs. In all honesty, this is a first-day of school activity with my freshmen. I challenge them to name anything and see if someone cannot relate it back to agriculture. From the get-go the students know my se-

cret, I can teach them to apply everything to agriculture: English, science, math, reading, technology, engineering, economics or even social studies. So when we are challenged as agricultural teachers to implement STEM in our classroom, we should take on the challenge with unflinching confidence because there is an excellent chance we are already doing so. Our students learn in our classes at a faster rate so that they can utilize those skills in a practical application within the lab or real-world setting. A student who is knowledgeable of the practical application is more apt to conquer the various forms of Ohm's Law if they are able to create a single-pole switch after the worksheets are through. The main thing to always remember is that learning can be fun! Feel free to utilize the following scenarios the next time you are struggling to apply STEM in your classroom:

- Team-teach your small engine class with the physics teacher to discuss the four-cycle theory of an engine and how the laws of physics can be applied within the function of an engine.
- Prior to the construction of any project; whether it be a wood, metal or floral design; have a schematic and price list for materials. Have the student judge how much the project will cost to produce and how much they would sell it for in order to make a profit.
- Utilize any of the hand-held (and reasonably affordable) Vernier devices to plot, average and analyze temperature, moisture, or pH of soil or water. Create charts,

create graphs, and have students CREATE an ACT-like question from this information.

- Implement agriscience fair projects in tandem with your freshman science teachers so projects will have increased rigor and accountability.
- Have students type a brochure offering embryo transfer services and have the students sell the idea to their peers-with the potential buyers holding rubrics in hand.

Being an agriculture teacher is an extraordinary job if you have a real interest in the content, the well-being of the students, and devotion to serve those needs in and out of the classroom. In my mind, agricultural education is the perfect mix of biology, physics, geometry, and engineering with practical application for students to apply their knowledge. Our students have a chance to meet benchmarks in ACT, state mandated assessments, and industry certificates because we open students' minds to what they learned the first day of class in agriculture: everything stems from agriculture.



*Samuel Evans is an agricultural education teacher at Franklin-Simpson High School, KY.*

# *Agriculture Science Teachers Are Committed to Decreasing the Drop-Out Rate*

by Leigh A. Carter-Gigliotti

According to the National Prevention Dropout Center (2002), one effective strategy for prevention of at-risk students from dropping out of school is to provide students with a mentoring program. When students who have dropped out of school are asked, why they dropped out of high school, the typical answer is no one cared (Smink,1999). Some at-risk students lack a healthy support system from caring parents, trusted adults, or friends. These students usually do not take the opportunity to become involved in other community-related activities designed as safety nets. Many adolescents of today need guidance and support (Effective Practices, n.d.).

Mentoring is an effective approach for working with at-risk adolescence in need of a positive role model. Mentoring has been a part of our culture and other cultures for centuries. Mentoring, if conducted properly, has monumental value to the mentee and mentor involved in a mentoring program. Mentoring is based on a trusted relationship between a mentor and mentee. Furthermore, a mentor primarily develops the mentee's goals for school and post-high school experiences. Mentors generally conduct meetings with their mentee on the school site. However, some mentors may conduct meetings off-site.

In the United States it is rare to find a group of mentors, let alone educators, that visit students off the school site outside of more formalized extracurricular programs. However, one group of educators, agricul-

tural science teachers, conducts house calls on a regular basis. In Missouri, as in many states, home visits are an essential component of an agriculture science program. The purpose for conducting the home visit is for the agricultural science teacher to monitor and observe the student's progress with their Supervised Agricultural Experience (SAE) program and to increase communications between teachers, students and their parents.

The purpose of this article is to determine the perceptions of agricultural science teachers in Missouri who conduct home visits with at-risk students regarding the effectiveness of those visits. Furthermore, the success of home visits in retaining at-risk students in high school, as perceived by the teachers, is also discussed. Home visits with students and their parents, especially at-risk students, is a possible strategy to retain pupils in school until graduation. Documented in educational literature, home visitation is a means to help teachers to understand the needs of their students, promote an educational process where individual student needs are met, and instill a sense of belonging in the students (Carter, 2005).

Almost 60% of the teachers participating in the study agreed that communication with at-risk students outside of the classroom contributed to student academic success. About 84% strongly agreed that parents participating in home visits with the agricultural science teacher were more likely to be actively involved in other curricular areas. Almost three-quarters of the teachers agreed that at-risk students participating in home visits were more likely to graduate from high school.

The most important characteristics of successful home visitation programs includes: (1) meeting with the parents; (2) spending time with the student; (3) observing the SAE project; (4) showing interest in a student's home life; and (5) building trust within the academic triad (agricultural science teacher, student, and parent or guardian).

From farmers to supermarkets to consumers, agriculture supports us all. Agriculture is not only the number one industry in Missouri, but an avenue to reduce the drop-out rate in our country. By offering Agricultural Science Education Programs, local school districts have an opportunity to retain students through graduation.

Mentoring has been practiced for decades in many cultures. However, Agricultural Science Education Programs offer a different, but successful approach to mentoring. Agricultural science teachers, as mentors, provide one-on-one caring and supportive relationships that at-risk students desperately need. By conducting meetings off school site, agricultural science teachers develop their students' fullest potential and decrease the drop-out rate among at-risk students.

*continued on page 24*



*Dr. Leigh A. Carter-Gigliotti is an Assistant Superintendent in the Mountain Home Public Schools, Mountain Home, AR.*

## 2 – 4 – 6 – 8 ..... *HOW do You Appreciate?*

by Kimberley A Miller

**R**emember Friday night high school football games? Teams of players, rows of cheerleaders, bleachers filled with adoring student body members ready to kick off the weekend with a team victory? I have attended many a high school football game in my time, both as a high school student supporting friends and as a high school teacher supporting students. At most games, the cheerleaders inevitably break out in song at some point with “2 – 4 – 6 – 8, who do we appreciate? [Insert team name three times], goooooo [Insert team name]!” This chant, albeit fun and rhythmic, has never really made sense to me. If the football team is the group that has everyone’s attention with the cheerleaders and crowd being the support system that keeps the team motivated to strive for success, shouldn’t the football team appreciate the cheerleaders and crowd? Of course, one does not expect that a football team would break out in cheer for its supporters, but this scenario has made me think often about mutual appreciation of groups working together for the success of any agriculture program. What motivates community members, parents, students and district employees to contribute their time, energy and resources to an agriculture program? There are a myriad of responsibilities that are synonymous with teaching high school agriculture, and being sure that all contributors feel appreciated for their efforts, no matter the size or type of contributions they make to the “team” is simply another aspect of success in an agriculture program. While end of the year awards banquets tend to be the most popular method of recognizing the contribution “team,” the list of ways to appreciate on a daily basis is end-

less, and, perhaps surprising, the less public practices mean so much more.

I had the honor of teaching high school agriculture for 14 years before deciding to move on to university agricultural education. During my time in the high school classroom, I had the privilege of working with a number of generous program contributors, all of whom I did my best to show my appreciation to as often as possible. The original outline of this article included a long list of ideas from my book of tricks to help inspire new methods of appreciation. During the initial draft development, I decided to add a little something richer and chat with some of the players who did or continue to contribute to my former program and find out what my teaching partner and I did to show our appreciation that they enjoyed the most. Their answers were surprising as they were not really what I expected.

In lieu of simply listing recommendations and methods for recognizing the “team” who supports a program, what follows are five answers to the question “What made (or makes, depending on the situation) you feel appreciated while participating in our agriculture program activities or contributing to our school farm laboratory?” My hope is that readers will be able to identify methods of recognition that may not be the norm or that one had not really considered a method of appreciation prior to reading.

### **Community Volunteer – Appreciated the Unusual Way**

“What made me feel appreciated. Well, the extra ‘thank you’ was always nice and of course, I always liked being acknowledged at banquets. I also always feel good when the kids say thank you without a prompt from a teacher or a parent. What touched me

the most and made me feel the most proud and appreciated, however, was when I overheard one of the teachers tell a group of visiting future teachers that the success of the program and the beauty of the farm was only possible through team work and the contributions of so many like our best friend... and she pointed to ME. She said ‘It is OUR goal to provide the highest quality education for OUR students.’ That statement included me, and I felt truly appreciated.”

### **District Employee – Appreciated through Actions**

“What I like most about work at the school farm is how well the agriculture teachers maintain the facility. When I arrive for work that needs to be completed, the department chair always requested that I arrive when she had the time to come out and review the problem they were having, therefore I was able to complete my job more efficiently. What made me feel most appreciated, however, was when she took the time to ask me how I was doing, how my day was going and that she took the time to say thank you in person. One time she even brought out some water bottles for me and my crew when we were completing a big irrigation job. Just maintaining the facility as perfectly as they did, and still do, tells me that the agriculture teachers appreciate all of the facilities employees at our district. Invitations to the annual awards BBQ banquet is a nice touch, too.”

### **Parent Volunteer – Appreciated through a Labor of Love**

“When my daughter said she was going to take an agriculture class her freshman year of high school, I had no idea what to expect. At our first Back to School night, I realized that the teachers in the agriculture program

were proud of their program and all of their students. I also fell in love with the livestock that live on the farm year round, namely different types of sheep and two dairy cows. I asked if I could be a part of the weekly feeding crew, and I was so glad when they agreed. I shadowed them a few times for my “shift” for feeding and then I was on my way. Just the fact that they trusted me to help out and, on a light-hearted note, believed that I was not one of those over-bearing parent volunteers, made me feel appreciated. However, that wasn’t enough for them. Each year, I was recognized at the annual awards banquet as a farm crew member and one year I was awarded the chapter Honorary Member award. I was teary-eyed through the whole ceremony. Talk about feeling appreciated!”

### **Graduated Student/FFA Member – Appreciated with Responsibility**

“I liked how my agriculture teachers made me feel welcome the first day of school. I always felt like they liked what they do and that all students were important. Of course I felt appreciated and special at award banquets when they introduced groups of students who had earned certificates and awards. I worked hard for that handful of recognition paperwork.”

“There are two times that I remember really feeling like I was super important and appreciated. I showed market pigs for three years and I felt really appreciated when my teachers asked me to be in charge of anything having to do with the pigs, like showing new members how to feed or care for their pigs, being in charge of lining up for weigh-in or being asked to demonstrate how to show a pig ‘correctly.’ The other time I really felt appreciated, more than all the other days I was in the program, was one year at our annual banquet. All of us students thought we were done with awards and recognition until one of my advi-

sors started talking about how the success of a program is not just because of one person, but a team of people. She started talking about different students and parents and then called six students, all of us seniors, to the main presentation area. I got this cool plaque that had a personalized message engraved on it from my teachers. Each plaque said something different. I know because we compared our plaques at the end of the banquet. Mine started with ‘Thank you for being one of the most dependable student livestock owners we know.’ Of all the awards I have ever earned, to this day, I still have that plaque hanging on my wall.

### **Graduated Student/FFA Member – Appreciated through “The Little Things”**

“Did I feel appreciated by my agriculture teachers? Absolutely. How? Trying to identify just one or two examples of when I felt most appreciated is tough because I always felt appreciated. My teachers always called me by my name, had a personal discussion with me about my projects and were always happy to see everyone at work days, after school, and weekend events. Even at 5 in the morning, they never seemed like they were tired or sleepy or in a bad mood. I also liked that both of my ag teachers stood outside and greeted all of their students as students arrived for class. It might seem kind of minor, but it was huge for me. I guess the one time that I felt the most appreciated, besides every day, was during my first year when I participated in Opening/Closing ceremonies contest. It was just our school contest to decide which teams would compete at the section contest, but it was really fun because before they announced the teams advancing, each and every person was called by name and team and awarded an FFA medallion for participation. It was cool, because even those teams that did not advance got recognized for their par-

ticipation. Plus, it was fun to see how many medallions I had earned by the time I graduated.”

### **Bring out the Best in Everyone**

Charles Schwab once said “The way to develop the best that is in a [person] is by appreciation and encouragement.” As I reflect on the answers above, the truth of Mr. Schwab’s statement and its relationship to agriculture education becomes clear. I experienced the best of so many through simple gestures that were simply second nature to me and my former teaching partner. They continue to bring out the best in people and I strive to teach some of these valuable gestures to my students who may someday be in the same position as an agriculture teacher.

The moral of these shared reflections is simple. If you have a great plan for appreciating your community, parent, district and student contributors, keep up the great work. If you need to fine tune your appreciation skills and methods, don’t start slow. Dive right in and build a mountain of methods on a foundation of thank yous, smiles, and bringing out the best in everyone.

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# How Students Truly Measure Up *(continued from page 11)*

With every project, I do a demonstration for the class. I pretty much build the project in front of them so they can see every step and technique involved with the project. With twenty kids standing around a shop table watching me perform, they can only retain so much. Getting the tools in their hands and trying it for themselves is a completely different ball game. A considerable amount of one-on-one interaction is needed throughout each project.

Following my demonstration, the first order of business was to have the class stabilize the wood with hand-screw clamps to make it possible to cut out their boomerangs with coping saws. As the students struggled with the clamps, something caught my attention. I noticed Cam moving around to other classmates, helping them attach their hand-screw clamps properly to the work tables. Toward the end of the period, I noticed Cam was quite a bit farther along than the rest of the class in terms of what he had accomplished during the period. On his way out of class, I complimented Cam on the progress he had made. He said he was “super stoked about the project.” I felt good because there was finally a little something for him to be excited about and for us to celebrate.

The next class period, the same students struggled clamping their wood to the table. I went around helping them and, without being asked, Cam did the same. Cam was the first to start shaping his blade by cutting in the angles with the wood rasp and hand file. Like most shop projects on day two, I experienced a bottleneck. Toward the end of the period, a number of students were finished cutting and shaping, and were ready to begin carving the angles in their boomerangs. With such a large group needing individual instruction, I had to jump from student to student to share proper use of the wood rasp, at the appropriate angle to ensure the boomerangs would function properly.

In the midst of hearing my name called several times, Cam approached me and another student as I was poised to provide instruction. He smiled and said, “Hey Silva. I got this. I’ll help. You can go and help *so-and-so*.” I can’t tell you how excited and proud I was of Cam in that moment. Not only was he excelling at skills learned in the shop, he demonstrated the initiative and willingness to help and teach those around him at the sacrifice of working on his own project. Before stepping away, I asked, “Are you sure you’ve got this?” He replied with a confident, “Yes!” I thanked

him heartily and proceeded to assist the next student in line.

Cam is now my go-to guy. Having Cam on my course roster is like having a teaching assistant in my class. If I think students will struggle with a new skill or if someone needs extra attention with a new tool, I don’t hesitate to ask Cam to step in and assist. I even trust him with the finishing work on projects in my more advanced construction and design classes when we are in a time crunch. His attention to detail and the refined skill he brings, make him an indispensable utility player.

Looking back, one of my best students is the kid I wanted to give up on just because he could not measure things to my expectations. As it turns out, I was the one who failed to measure up. Who am I to pass judgment so quickly and make assumptions about a student’s abilities based on one unit, one activity, or one task? I am grateful Cam humbled me because it made me realize all of my students have talents and abilities I may not see upon first glance. However, with a little time, a little encouragement, and a little understanding, they all have the potential to blow me away.



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## ***Theme Ideas*** *for the 2014 Edition of* ***The Agricultural Education Magazine***

*Please send all ideas to:*

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