

## Communities of Practice as a Means for Agriscience Teacher Retention

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### Introduction

An “experienced teacher” ranks just behind “reading achievement” in a series of factors identified as critical to a student’s academic success (Joerger & Bremer, 2001). The number of new individuals entering the teaching profession is not keeping up with the attrition and retirement rates, with nearly thirty percent leaving at the end of their first year (Smith & Ingersoll, 2004). In their synthesis of literature, Guarino, Santibanez, and Daley (2006) found schools providing opportunities for collaboration and collegiality had lower rates of teacher attrition than those schools lacking such support. Communities of Practice (CoP) have the potential to increase collaboration among induction teachers thereby impacting teacher retention.

CoP “are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, p. 4, 2002). As individuals discover the gaps between obvious and subtle aspects of their work, they seek to make sense of how to best fill the voids. They do this by aligning with others to learn from, and share information with, one another regarding how they deal with such challenges and expectations.

According to Wenger (2002), participation in CoP helps members build avenues for accessing the support they need to resolve their professional challenges and build professional efficacy. For the profession, teachers in active collaboration build unity and construct knowledge deemed valuable from a socially-accepted perspective. This knowledge can be seen as critical to keeping the profession moving forward in its development. The benefits yielded by CoP are also cited within the literature on mentoring providing hope they may positively impact the rate of teacher retention.

### How it Works

Wenger (2002) offers a general plan for beginning a CoP, beginning with the context within which members will interact. The following are potential contexts in Agricultural Education, their goals, and several strategies for building CoP within each.

- Preservice: Change the culture of Agricultural Education by building camaraderie among members prior to their entry into the profession. Strategies to consider are...
  - Program focus on CoP– regular class reflection on benefits of collaboration
  - Cooperative work– interactive assignments as part of coursework
  - Electronic network– blogs to encourage continuous interaction
  - Connection beyond classroom– incentive to continue CoP through internship
- Induction: As members navigate their new tasks, they collectively devise resources and activities to support one another and their work. Strategies to consider are...
  - Workshops– time devoted for teachers to exchange ideas for successful practice
  - Social activities– social time at professional development events

- Central hub– teacher educators/state staff can collect products generated by individual CoP and distribute them to others, facilitating wide spread interaction.

### Implications

CoP have the potential to impact novice and inservice teaching populations by helping them engage in purposeful work, develop professional confidence, and gain the realization they are not alone behind the classroom door. Preservice teachers are introduced to the concept during their teacher education program as they are directed to look to one another while discovering what it means to be an AgriScience teacher. Teachers with alternative certification interact with CoP while gaining their first exposure to the new professional responsibilities they have accepted. Traditionally certified teachers are supported by their membership in CoP as they learn to join theory and practice. This helps them form connections between the different program components and how to best meet those obligations.

### Future Plans

The authors plan to examine the impact of these support and learning networks on the professional longevity of teachers at various points in their careers. As an alternative to mentoring, CoP must be integrated early within the regular school year, and within a teacher's professional experience. Efforts are being pursued to infuse research based practice on CoP into the Florida Agriscience Teacher Induction Program with ongoing support offered as part of the current inservice professional development series.

### Resources Needed

Since members in CoP seek to find their own meanings of their work and how they fit into it, major responsibility for facilitating these interactions lies with them. However, teacher education and state Agricultural Education leaders are in prime positions to encourage engagement, celebrate work and offer resources and direction as prompted. Teacher willingness to participate is also essential and must be inspired from the bottom-up. In order to enhance the level of commitment state-wide, it is necessary to gain administrative support for teacher attendance at professional development events.

### References

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