

Competitive Professional Development: Everyone Wins!

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Introduction / Need for the Idea / Purpose and Objectives

Agricultural science teachers regularly attend annual professional development conferences in hopes of gleaning useful information and knowledge that improves their instruction about agriculture. Another often cited benefit of these annual conferences is the networking and sharing of ideas that occurs among agriculture teachers (Park, Moore, & Rivera, 2006). Teachers desire the opportunity to network with peers and even “steal” ideas.

Further, practicing agricultural science teachers are among the most knowledgeable professionals about the practice of teaching. As such, they make alterations and improvements to existing ideas and curriculum, as well as create new lessons, approaches, and programs that benefit their local school and community. These ideas are valuable in that they may also assist other teachers in stimulating and implementing new ideas as well.

Teachers in New York, through focus groups conducted in the summer and fall of 2005, indicated that they desired additional opportunities for semi-structured informal sharing of ideas. Thus, during the 2006 New York Association of Agricultural Educators (NYAAE) annual conference, the objective of the conference was to facilitate the sharing of ideas among agriculture teachers. To coincide with the *Survivor* theme based on the popular CBS television show, we developed the idea of the session, “Tribal Council-Let the Council Fires Burn Brightly.”

Methodology / How it Works

Prior to the New York FFA convention, we sent an email to all teachers to alert them to the opportunity to share ideas. Then, during the FFA convention in May, we verbally outlined the process for idea sharing which took on a multifaceted approach. The approach included dividing all teachers participating in the annual conference into six tribes with one of the NYAAE officers serving as “chief” of each tribe. The task for all 77 conference participants was to glean their electronic files of lessons, ideas, templates, programs, publications, activities, etc.

for their best ideas in each of the three aspects of agricultural education: classroom instruction, SAE, and FFA. The task of the NYAAE officers was to solicit three exemplary ideas from each of their tribe members. Tribe members funneled their ideas to their tribal chief, who cajoled, encouraged, emailed, and called members for their ideas. The tribal chief then forwarded the ideas to Dr. Park who tracked each tribe's performance and collated the ideas into electronic folders.

Once all ideas were collected, NYAAE officers facilitated their tribe's determination of the best overall idea in each category for their tribe. Some facilitated this task via email prior to the conference, while others convened tribal councils in the evenings during the conference.

The culminating activity was multifaceted and emceed by Travis Park and Terry Hughes. First, the event was competitive among the tribes. Tribes scored points based upon the overall quantity of ideas generated and upon the ranking of their best idea in each category (classroom instruction, SAE, and FFA). Secondly, during the Tuesday afternoon session, all tribes presented their best idea in each category. Tribes were allowed five minutes for presentation of each idea, followed by a period for discussion and questions. Ten peer judges ranked each set of ideas and points were awarded for this quality ranking. Thirdly, the quality ranking was based upon the National Association of Agricultural Educators (NAAE) *Ideas Unlimited* scoring format. Finally, to encourage idea implementation across high schools, all conference participants received all of the ideas categorized on a 1 GB jump drive.

Results to Date / Implications / Recommendations

Over 207 ideas, lessons, templates, publications, and activities were submitted by 74 of the 77 (96.1%) participants of the conference. While in the past little discussion was generated prior to the conference, tribal leaders (NYAAE officers) sent multiple emails and conducted targeted telephone calls to their fellow NYAAE members. The afternoon of sharing initiated further dialogue about the ideas that were shared. Overall, the *Tribal Council* was evaluated as 4.84 of 5.00 on a Likert-type scale. Participant comments included, "That was totally worth the cost of the conference" and, "Excellent way to network & have fun!"

Future Plans / Advice to Others

Some ideas are better when simplified. One aspect that seemed to hinder this activity was its complexity in scoring and communication. In the future, simplified ideas may be more effective. The competitive and thematic nature of the conference worked well with many participants, although some commented that agriculture teachers are already competitive without further instigation. Still, the competition seemed to drive NYAAE officers and their tribal members to work diligently to glean the best ideas from their programs.

When collecting over 200 electronic files, management of the files becomes a challenge. In the future, instructing teachers about a format for naming their files would be beneficial when categorizing the files into folders and making them useful for other teachers. For example, files could be labeled as such, *teacher's name_category_descriptive title.doc*.

Sharing ideas seems to be a recurrent theme in the format of professional development for agricultural science teachers. In the future, we will continue to explore avenues that create semi-structured idea sharing among teachers. The competition worked well in 2006, but novelty may inspire new dialogues in the future.

Costs / Resources Needed

The only cost, aside from labor, was that of the 1 GB jump drives. With Shari Lighthall's intensive internet search, she found drives for \$29.45 each, for a total of \$ 2,356.00 including shipping, lanyards, and printing. Managing the file collection required approximately two days of time.

References

- Park, Moore, D. M., & Rivera, J. E. (2006). Agricultural science teachers' professional growth: Empowering teachers to improve their practice and the profession. Paper submitted for presentation at the North Central Region-American Association for Agricultural Education Conference, Ames, IA.