



THE GOLDEN SLATE

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Agricultural Teachers' Association

Something Old, Something New, Something Borrowed...

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I vividly remember, as a student teacher, collecting as many classroom resources as I possibly could. Folders, binders, labs, worksheets—whatever I could get my hands on. The subject didn't matter because I didn't know what the future would hold. Given that this was 2011, and Google Drive for curriculum sharing had not yet become a thing, you can bet these proudly collected resources were housed on a 500GB external hard drive. We would sit in our student teaching cohort and swap and trade as much as we could using flash drives, CDs, and email as a vessel. We spent countless hours digging through files and folders exploring what had been graciously shared in our direction.

Fast forward a few years, and I began building my classes in Google Drive. Folders were easier to navigate, devices didn't make a difference, and you could access files anywhere. But even then, the sharing of entire folders of curriculum through Drive hadn't quite emerged. We would simply share files, labs, or activities that piqued our interest through conversation but also talked through the file with the sharer. We built relationships off of sharing what we had and asking for what we needed. We had conversations at conferences that led us to say, "My kids would love that, can you send it to me?" I could quickly rattle off teachers who were excelling in certain subjects and knew I had a bank of support to pull from if I ever needed help or fresh ideas.

COVID absolutely shifted curriculum sharing. As soon as learning went digital, teachers graciously offered up entire folders of what they were working on to make it possible and survivable for others. We saved each other. We asked for help and offered what we could to make it through. But it wasn't just curriculum sharing. Teachers hosted Zooms and other online meetups to walk other teachers through it. It wasn't just a folder of resources, a Google slideshow, a digital notebook, or a choice board assignment; there was help and support that came along with it. This made our Ag family extremely unique compared to other subject areas. We truly rallied behind each other with the goal of continuing to build up our students and our programs.

Today, if you scroll through the California Ag Ed Discussion Lab Facebook group, you will encounter a string of similarities between posts. Nestled between job openings, you will find that nearly every post goes something like this: "I just got my schedule and I'll be

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teaching X, Y, Z. Show me what you got!” or “Looking for resources in X, thanks in advance!” The comment section will then be a dumping ground of links to teachers’ Google Drive folders. No explanation, just a link to click and explore. Worse is if a teacher comments, “What’s your email? I’ll send some stuff to you.” It will be followed up with a string of “Me Too’s” and additional email addresses. First, please understand that I am absolutely not bashing curriculum sharing. Historically, as many of you know, I am one of the first to raise my hand and offer what I have. So please don’t take this as an older teacher venting. I’m far from angry, but in our quickly advancing digital age, I’d like to offer a word of caution and follow it up with some advice from a mid-career teacher.

First, the caution. That teacher whose link you just received—do you know them? Do you know where they teach or how many students they have? How about what their students are capable of or where this course fits into their pathway? Do you know what book they use or what subscriptions their department or school has paid for? Do they teach the course for one semester or a full year? What facilities do they have? Odds are, you probably can’t answer any of these questions by just one click. These questions require a relationship; they require a personal conversation or connection. You may be thinking, “I don’t want to have that conversation, just send me what you have and allow me to explore.” That’s fine, but realize there is a reason younger teachers feel so overwhelmed, and we absolutely must get to the root of it to keep them in this profession. Mentorship, whether it be through curriculum, work-life balance, or simply someone to talk to who has been there, could possibly be the key. One piece that echoed through Hall of Fame and Retiring Teachers at CATA is they had people who were there for them, who supported them, and who could answer all their questions. How many of us, whether in the mid-career group or the younger teacher group, can easily say that we have that resource?

Second, the advice. Rather than asking directly for resources or curriculum, consider this: You get assigned a class and have no idea where to start. You go on the CalAgEd Discussion Lab page and ask, “I just got assigned an X class and don’t know where to begin. Can someone point me in the direction of a few rockstar teachers to reach out to? You can message it to me if you prefer.” You might receive two names, but maybe you’ll get ten. Now what? Open AET on your phone and find the teacher directory. Email those teachers and see if they wouldn’t mind helping and ask if they’re up for a phone call (GASP!) or a meetup. Yes, this super techy Ag teacher just suggested physically calling someone. Other options could be to meet up at a field day, summer conference, fairs, or regional meetings. Guess what will probably happen with the phone call or meetup? They will probably share resources with you! But it will also provide you the opportunity to build a relationship with a teacher who teaches similar courses as you, is willing to answer your questions, and be there when you need it. It will provide you with a direct line, a mentor if you will, who is wholeheartedly willing to pour themselves into you.



Here are my current mid-career teacher observations:

- Veteran teachers are mad because new teachers just want it handed to them.
- New teachers are mad because veteran teachers don't want to help.

Both of these are so far from the truth. But these two thought processes are a continuous cycle of negativity that is doing absolutely nothing to benefit our career as a whole.

At the end of the day, you cannot adopt someone's curriculum as your own without knowing the entire story. Curriculum building is a process that is NOT one-size-fits-all.

I commented on one of those curriculum-seeking posts a few months back. I totally did the "I'm happy to help, what's your email?" I instantly got 15+ other comments with other emails. In the spirit of transparency, I'm going to be honest, I deleted my original comment. I emailed the original poster directly and threw in the towel. My reason? I was in the middle of something chaotic and instantly became overwhelmed by the number of emails I was expected to type into Google Drive from teachers who I had no idea who they were. It absolutely did not mean I wasn't willing to help; far from it. I just had too much going on, and honestly, Facebook notifications overwhelm me. So this last week, I tried something different. I commented on one and just said, "I'm happy to help, feel free to reach out." Guess what happened? The teacher messaged me! We had a back-and-forth conversation for a bit that can hopefully continue as they start their year.

We have heard over and over again that we are in the relationship business. This is 100% accurate. We build relationships with students, relationships with our communities, and relationships with each other. Get out of your comfort zone and make an effort to build a relationship with someone who will continue to help you time and time again. It doesn't matter where you are in your career; we can all learn from each other. I'll leave you with this thought: If you were seeking a donation of something specific from an industry person for your program, would you go on their industry Facebook page and throw your request out there? Would you be frustrated if ten other people commented with a "Hey, I'd like that too"? Or would you take the time to reach out to someone directly and build a relationship? We don't shortchange relationships anywhere else in ag education, so why do we do it with each other?

That external hard drive still exists. I actually recently found it again buried in my desk. It has a plethora of Ag Bio, Mech, Food Science, and Small Engines materials, among others. I have never taught a single period of any of the classes I just listed. I also haven't plugged the hard drive into a computer in roughly ten years. You may think the materials you are gathering are important, but I promise you they aren't even remotely helpful until you know what will work for your kids and your program. I challenge you this year to build a relationship with someone who is teaching the same course as you. By the end of the year, get on a text message level with them and don't ever be afraid to ask them for help or advice. Meet up next year at summer conference for a coffee or an adult beverage, and of course, share responsibly.