

The Art of Teaching

If I knew 10 years ago that “professor” would be part of my career journey, I would have laughed heartily and said, “Not likely!” But to date, it has been one of the most rewarding experiences of my developing career. My daytime job saw me as the trials coordinator at a 16-acre facility in Michigan, but two nights a week each spring semester I would try to engage young minds on all things greenhouse management at a college in Ohio — and hopefully inspire them to pursue a career in an agricultural discipline.

Teaching was never a goal of mine, but when the opportunity presented itself, especially on a topic I am passionate about, I knew I needed to tackle the exciting new challenge head on. I had never formally taught a college course, so there was a learning curve for me that first semester — how to engage students 15 years my junior and some already working in the ag industry in some form or fashion.



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THE BENEFIT OF HANDS-ON EDUCATION

We were fortunate to have a teaching greenhouse, and I found that hands-on learning while giving examples of my real-world greenhouse experience is what the students found most exciting and interesting. They propagated new vegetative cuttings while simultaneously learning about how automated greenhouse environmental controls were maintained.

From there, examples were shown for proper planting techniques, proper watering and learning crop fertilizer needs. Another very important greenhouse topic covered was potential insect pests — how to scout for them and implementing management methods to control the pests. I wanted to ensure the course was well rounded, and for the students to understand the big picture of owning and running a greenhouse operation.

HARD WORK PAYS OFF

Besides putting in to practice the concepts learned in the classroom, the greenhouse was also used as a fundraising opportunity for the students. Each semester, the students would be responsible for maintaining the plants in the greenhouse and growing finished product for a semi-annual plant sale. The proceeds from the sale covered annual conference travel expenses for students within the Landscape and Turfgrass Management student run organization.

My employer at the time was very supportive of this professional development I was pursuing and donated finished plug trays to the students for their plant sale. The final teaching moment came when we would finalize our profit statement, which was usually \$4,000 to \$5,000 a year. To see their excitement and true engagement at the fruition of all their hard work was very rewarding for me.

PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER

And speaking of traveling, who didn't love field trips when they were kids? No formalized school for the day and hanging out with your friends — yes, please. So, a top priority for me was to make sure they were able to visit a greenhouse production facility and see product go from inception to shipping. The field trip was planned about two-thirds of the way through the course so that the students had already learned a great deal of basic greenhouse principles.

“The art of teaching is the art of assisting discovery.”
— Mark Van Doren

The real eye opener for them was seeing how many people were needed to make all the pieces seam together effortlessly, from the crew sticking the freshly arrived cuttings to the growers scouting for insects, and finally seeing the product being loaded onto carts by the shipping department. Growing plants was so much bigger than one person. What was meant to be a tour of just over an hour turned into a two-hour success story. So many questions were asked, and being able to actively talk about my passion with examples was again very rewarding for me.

At the end of the semester, my final take-home message is that I hope they learned something, had fun while learning that something, and that they are passionate about whatever career path they choose. Unbeknownst to me at the time, my final message resonated with some and those previous students reached out to me letting me know how they were succeeding with their careers and goals. Some were pursuing their own businesses — a landscape company and a cannabis greenhouse operation. Another was pursuing her goals of being a plant grower. Making those personal connections with my students, and hopefully inspiring them to see how awesome the floriculture industry can be, I knew after that first semester of teaching I was hooked. And I'd continue to teach to those who wanted to learn. [gpn](#)