



Alexander Haus
Wartburg College, IA

REFLECT

When I began this summer at ISU, I had just finished my first year of college and knew very little about agriculture. I'd taken one agriculture class in high school, but I hadn't fully grasped what I was learning. I came into this program excited to grow as a future teacher and to better prepare myself to support students. Once I arrived, my curiosity only grew. Even though I'm still early in my college journey, I now have access to experiences and resources that will shape me as an educator in meaningful ways.

One of the biggest things this program taught me was how to be okay with being uncomfortable. At the start, I didn't feel ready to jump in—and honestly, I didn't know what to expect. My first week hit me hard. My lab focused on Perennial Ground Cover (PGC), and I worked outside in the sun every day from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. Some people might say, "That's not so bad," but when you're the one doing the work—facing the heat, adjusting to a new routine, and absorbing loads of unfamiliar information—it's a different story.

Working with my project team also added meaning. We didn't just share responsibilities—we supported each other through uncertainty, long field days, and problem-solving moments. Whether we were making sense of data, troubleshooting tools, or just keeping each other going, those shared efforts helped me see the value of

collaboration. It felt like we were building something together, and that sense of teamwork is something I'll aim to replicate in my own classroom.

A major turning point came when I realized I wasn't asking enough questions. My group and I would complete our tasks and head home without really digging into why we were doing what we were doing. We understood the basic goals, but we weren't connecting them to the larger picture. That changed after a conversation with Eric and Maureen. They reminded us that curiosity and questioning were at the heart of this experience. Their encouragement gave us a reason to slow down, reflect, and engage more deeply. We decided to focus on the experiment that intrigued us most, and from then on, things started to click.



REFLECT (Continued)

After that, I made it a habit to ask more questions—even the ones that felt basic. I took daily notes in my lab notebook, researched topics I didn't understand, and found myself growing more confident. These small changes made a big difference. Being in the learner's seat reminded me that students need the same freedom to be curious, make mistakes, and explore at their own pace. That's something I'll carry with me into my teaching.

Before this program, I didn't think deeply about STEM. I knew what it stood for, but I hadn't seen how it played out in the real world, especially in ways outside traditional science or math classes. That changed through hands-on fieldwork, exposure to diverse educators, and conversations with graduate students. I began to see how math and science connect in exciting, real-world ways. Exploring the Atlas also opened my eyes to how STEM concepts develop from kindergarten through high school. It made me realize how crucial elementary and middle school teachers are in building that foundation—and how often their role in STEM education is overlooked. That realization deepened my commitment to supporting early STEM learning.

One of the most meaningful parts of this experience was the people. From the start, I could tell our REU team was open, supportive, and genuinely invested in our growth. One of my biggest supporters was Cameron, a former REU student now in grad school. Whether we were headed to the field or talking about life, teaching, or music, Cameron always made me feel heard. He was more than a mentor—he was someone I trusted. His presence reminded me how impactful just one consistent, supportive person can be.

FIGURE SOMETHING OUT

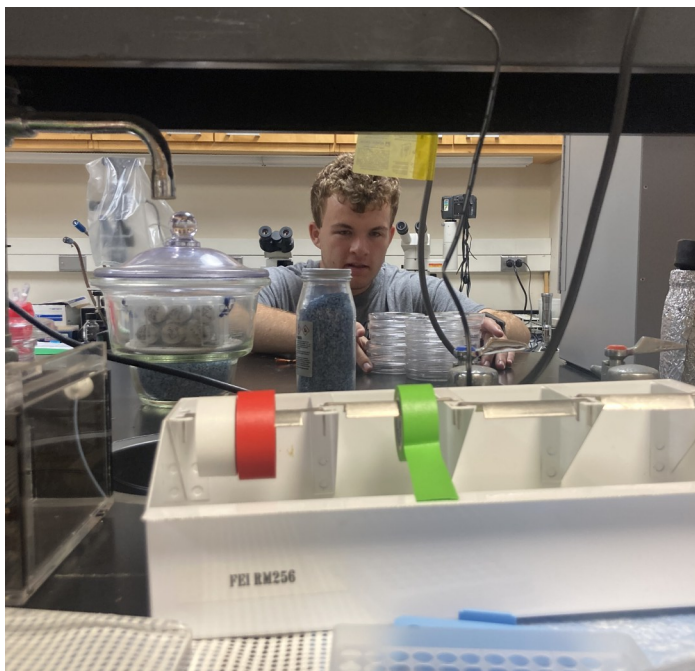
At first, I struggled. The heat drained me, the long hours challenged me, and I had no experience with the tools we used. Everything moved fast, and I felt stuck in third gear. The professional development days were also a lot to take in—overwhelming in their own way, with dense content and a packed schedule I wasn't used to. But things shifted after our first full group meeting. Seeing the entire cohort in one space reminded me I wasn't alone, and that reset my mindset. I chose to lean into discomfort. That, to me, is one of the most valuable lessons anyone can learn.

What surprised me most was how much I learned beyond my own research. We weren't isolated—instead, we were constantly exposed to different areas of science and education, which added a whole new layer to the experience. Visiting McNay and helping cut alfalfa, for example, gave us a hands-on look at fieldwork in a completely different context. Even the root beer tasting—something that seemed silly at first—led to so much new information and sparked an interest in areas I can't wait to explore more. All of these moments sparked my curiosity and pushed me to explore areas of science I hadn't considered before—or even realized existed. They showed me that science can be unexpected, engaging, and full of opportunities to learn in new and creative ways.

Thanks to the professional development sessions, I also gained a better understanding of what a supportive classroom looks like, one where students feel comfortable taking risks. Reflecting on my own learning helped me see how important it is to build that kind of space. This summer taught me that curiosity isn't always natural—it grows when you're open to new experiences and when you keep asking “why.”

I also saw curiosity in action every day—through the grad students explaining their research, the questions we asked in the field, and the ways we collaborated as a team. It showed me how powerful curiosity can be when it's encouraged. I want to create that same kind of classroom environment: one where students feel safe, supported, and excited to ask “why.” Because when curiosity is alive, deeper learning follows.





MAKE CONNECTIONS

Beyond mentorship, our REU group developed a real sense of community. Weekly “family dinners” became a highlight for me. They gave us space to unwind, bond, and remember we weren’t in this alone. That balance between structure and support made the long days more manageable—and the program more meaningful overall.

As I think about my future classroom, I want to design lessons that spark the same curiosity and critical thinking this program sparked in me. I know not every student will engage in the same way, but I want to create an environment where students feel empowered to ask questions, explore real-world problems, and take ownership of their learning. I’ll share my own stories—not just about science, but about the challenges and discoveries that made this summer so memorable. I want students to see that learning is messy, exciting, and full of surprises.

More importantly, I want to build a classroom where it’s okay not to have all the answers. I want students to feel safe taking risks, asking questions, and exploring unfamiliar ideas. Just as I learned to embrace the discomfort of not knowing, I want them to see that growth often comes from leaning into uncertainty.

This summer reinforced a powerful truth: the most effective learning starts with curiosity. I’ll carry that energy into my teaching by designing inquiry-based lessons rooted in real

questions. Whether through quick observations or long-term projects, I want students to feel their ideas matter—and that their questions can lead to meaningful exploration. I’ll remind them, through my own journey, that asking questions is a strength, not a weakness.

PREPARE FOR WHAT’S NEXT

Looking ahead, I’m committed to staying connected with the people who made this summer so impactful—the grad students, lab PIs, mentors, and fellow REUs. These relationships matter to me. I want to keep learning from their stories and perspectives—not just about science, but about how to grow as a teacher and a person. Whether through collaboration, new opportunities, or simply staying in touch, I want to keep building on everything I’ve learned.

To keep my momentum during the school year, I’ll revisit the resources we explored this summer and hold onto the habits I developed—asking more questions, embracing challenges, and staying curious. I’ll seek out ways to collaborate with others and build classrooms where inquiry and creativity thrive.

Ultimately, this summer reminded me that curiosity isn’t just a learning tool—it’s the heart of how we grow. I’ll carry that lesson with me into every classroom I teach, every student I support, and every challenge I face moving forward.

