

CHECKING THE PULSE OF THE DISCIPLINE

Larry E. Miller, Professor
The Ohio State University
1990 Distinguished Lecture

"Wouldn't it be just great if it were the last game of the World Series, the score was tied, the home team needed a pinch-hitter for the pitcher, and the manager looked up into the stands and remembered you from Little League and put you in to hit and you hit a home run to win the game and the Series?" "And wouldn't it be great if, then, you get to meet the President, and he brings...." So goes a current beverage commercial in my area.

Extending the thinking, many of you could easily speculate: "Wouldn't it be great if, one day while you were taking personal leave, the President-elect of AATEA called you at home and asked you to give the Distinguished Lecture and you espoused monumental words of great meaning which established a precedent for the future of the profession?" And wouldn't it be great if you accepted and your presentation caused issues to be debated, new directions charted, and a revolution to occur within the AATEA?"

Ahh, the stuff of which dreams are made. I am afraid that the latter scenario may be just as much a dream as the commercial. Nevertheless, no recent assignments have caused me as much consternation as this one. To be asked to give the Distinguished Lecture is an honor which cannot be turned-down, and places one among an elite group. It is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to share thoughts with your colleagues on some issues or problems which you perceive should receive consideration. The invitation was followed by two months' cogitation, worry and reading. The task was ominous. You will be the ultimate judge of the results of the invitation and concern.

Dreams

I want to share with you some dreams for the profession. Dreams of one individual, yes, but dreams which I perceive the profession should address. Dreams which I have visualized as touching our pulse: elements of our heartbeat. A pulse is one of the vital signs to assess the welfare of a living thing. Four signs I will address are our scholarship, our substance, our sustainability and our successorship.

Scholarship: Wouldn't it be just great if true scholars existed among our ranks, if they were known across the agricultural disciplines, if they were known across the educational disciplines, and if they were known throughout academia? Wouldn't it be great if we could extend our expertise in conducting research into real scholarship. Wouldn't it be great if we were known as "thinkers" as well as "doers"?

Having given most of my teaching energy for the past decade to teaching about the conduct of research, through a course on research methods, and occasionally in research design and instrumentation and data collection methods; I have observed and taken great pride in how much better the methods employed in our research have become. My teaching of students from 68 of the 100 graduate programs at OSU has permitted me a unique view of research as conducted broadly across the disciplines. Let me assure you that we are far better than most in the methods we employ to conduct our research.

We are not novices at the politics of the promotion and tenure process within our colleges and universities. We know that research articles and papers result in the positive benefits which one can accrue in higher education: renumeration, promotion, tenure, membership on the graduate faculty, etc. I suggest that we, just like many of the other areas such as the social sciences and humanities, begin to bring due recognition to the creative efforts, the theoretical writings, and other forms of scholarship. The ultimate of performance in many disciplines is the creation and publication of a book. How would most departments of agricultural education handle the person who produced a piece of seminal work?

Has the expertise in research methods and our research productivity really resulted in creating truly scholarly endeavors? I believe the profession has a number of good researchers, but few who can qualify to wear the label of "scholar". While research is the creation of new knowledge, I perceive a broader definition of scholarship. Scholarship, to me, involves the ability to analyze, synthesize, and evaluate the knowledge produced and create new applications of the concepts. Webster defines

scholarship as “the systematized knowledge of a learned man (sic), exhibiting accuracy, critical ability, and thoroughness; erudition” (1978).

How much of our work qualifies for the scholarship label? Wardlow (1989), in his call for “Alternative Modes of Inquiry for Agricultural Education”, Journal of Agricultural Education, was noting we should assess the contributions which could be made by interpretive research and critical science. I believe this is a part of my contention.

We must begin to practice the skills espoused by several of our current researchers (Newcomb & Trefz, 19; Miller, 1990): critical thinking. Such capabilities will help us fit into broader research systems, which will address some of the “messy” problems I spoke of last year at the National Agricultural Education Research Meeting (Miller, 1989b) and in another article (Miller, 1989a).

Few of our many departments/programs of agricultural education around the nation have a sufficient critical mass of professors to have extensive programs of research. Too much energy must necessarily be expended on performing the teaching and service functions, with excellence, as both Crunkilton (1988) on **preservice** preparation and McCormick (1985) on inservice education reminded us must be done.

I would maintain that, while the individuals in the smaller departments may not be able to have extensive programs of research, even they should be able to think and consider what is happening in our profession, or what should happen, and that they should do so and share those ideas with the profession. The charge would be same for all AATEA members if we are to become the academicians which McCracken (1983) so admirably charges us to become.

I would assert that we do not think and write often enough. One of our OSU professors recently noted (Regan, 1990) that professors should write often and published seldom? We design systems to assure that our **undergraduate** students are writing, but how often are we, ourselves, writing? As past Editor of both the Journal of Agricultural Education and The Agricultural Education Magazine, let me assure you that the task of getting written **copy**, produced by our profession is an extremely difficult task. Teacher educators pose a difficult **group**, but are **exceeded greatly** in their reluctance by supervisors and teachers.

If writing is a manifestation of scholarship, why are we so reluctant to share our thoughts? Can we create a professional environment where we share our ideas openly, have others add to them, have others critique them, and have these creative events occur in the open, constructive atmosphere which has characterized our discipline? Why did the Journal of Agricultural Education end the debates feature? Was it editorial policy, the lack of issues to debate, or the reluctance of the members of the profession to contribute? My dream would be that we would all deserve the scholar title, and that we each become as well known for that as the courses which we teach.

Substance, it be just great if students from all across your campus came clamoring to enroll in your courses, to “sit at the knee of a master”, to respect the discipline for not only the quality of its delivery, but the substance it has to deliver.

Shulman (1989) challenged educators to have substance in their teaching. I believe we need to closely examine our own courses and ask: “How much real substance is there? How much of the content is fluff? How can we eliminate the fluff and enhance the substance? Can we look critically at what we are doing in our courses and add substantially to the ideas presented, the cognitive abilities necessitated, and the methods we use to deliver it. Regarding the latter, having been employed in four major Land-grant universities, I would assert that we are consistently better teachers than our peers. The wrappings on the box, do not speak to its contents, however. We must strive to improve our content and make it more substantive.

Thinking about the quality of the courses taken by our students as they enroll in courses outside our departments, we must also continually insist upon substance. No, I do not purport to infringe upon the academic freedom of our colleagues, but if our students are not getting substance from their courses, even if the course is required for teacher certification, we must protest. We must assure that they procure the knowledge they need and not just courses on their transcript.

Colleges of agriculture have as much responsibility for the preparation of agriculture teachers as do teacher educators. They provide much of the substance which our students will use in the field. It is our duty to see that our students acquire that substance. We have accepted mediocrity for too

long under the aegis of: “Well, the other department should know its content” or “They just need it on their transcript for certification, anyway, so, don’t rock the boat”. Or perhaps we fear that if we start inspecting them too closely, they might start inspecting us.

Reputations of colleges of education are, likewise, established every day as our graduates practice their profession. My rationale of permissive acceptance also extends to them. Our pulse will weaken greatly if we do not exercise broad powers in policing the quality of the pedagogy and andragogy as well as the technical content. Where inadequacies are detected, we must use our abilities to rectify the situation. The reputations of departments of agricultural education rest on our ability to not only assure quality within our units but from all disciplines where our students receive instruction.

My dream would be that we would improve the substance of our courses. I would hope that we could create better thinkers and doers and when the public examines our products, and checks our pulse, they find it strong and knowledgeable.

Sustainability: Our teachers in the schools and extension offices are still some of the very best recruiters that exist for colleges of agriculture and education. We need to continually bring this fact to the forefront as colleges and universities, in their continual curricula revision, become more elitist.

We must remind peer faculty and administrators that their charge is more than preparing future graduate students and scientists for their discipline, that a college education is a form of vocational education, and that “hire” education is not necessarily a misspelling. We must not be a part to letting the doors to higher education close to those interested in agriculture because of excessive high school requirements, instituted without empirical evidence of effectiveness, because of exorbitant costs, and the attempted conversion of Land-grant universities into facsimiles of liberal arts institutions. We can have excellence without elitism, and superiority without servility, rigor without ambiguity, and education without empathy. Within this professional group are undoubtedly numerous stories of how people have risen from obscurity and poverty, gained a college degree in a Land-grant university and went on to succeed and make major contributions to humankind. Let us not let those opportunities cease during our period of stewardship of the profession.

We must support the reform efforts which lead to more substance, better prepared teachers, extension agents, and communicators. We must continually seek to be a part of the decision making process in our colleges and universities, and in education in its broadest sense. To fail to fight for better things, would leave us appearing to be accepting of the lesser. Indeed, we should lead the charge!

Agricultural education contributes to the overall education of students. Just as Warmbrod (1974) warned us against dichotomizing education into the vocational and the academic, I echo that charge. Agricultural education has a vital role to play in education whether at the primary, secondary, post secondary or higher education level.

Agricultural education is a medium for the delivery of very effective learning skills which helps students master many developmental tasks essential to their future well being. It provides an interesting and motivating means to learn about science, mathematics, and economics; provides the opportunity to practice those abilities, and provides extraordinary learning opportunities through its co-curricular organizations. It helps keep students in school, learning, and off welfare rolls; among many other things.

We must envision our role in the total educational process and cooperate with other educators and publics in the reform endeavors. Our place in education will not be assured by magic, legerdemain or simply waiting for it to occur. We must fight and work hard to preserve it.

Wouldn't it be really great, if we became known for our rigor? Not rigor created by ambiguity, but rigor because of real substance. Rigor that taught people how to think and not just what to think? Wouldn't it be really great? Wouldn't it be great if each of us could be like Jamie Escalante in Stand and Deliver?

My dream would be that we could play a role in determining our own destiny. I would aspire that we be capable of pulling together the agriculturalists and educators to have a common mission.

Successorshin: Agriculturalists are rightly voicing concern about from where the next generation will come. One hears it from farmers as they look at the paucity of young people entering the industry. One hears it as the availability of agricultural workers is rapidly diminishing. One hears it from those examining the enrollment trends in agricultural education. One hears it as you look at enrollment in colleges of agriculture and departments of agricultural education. One hears it within the ranks of agricultural scientists and administrators. I would purport that we should be cognizant of these voices as they portend an area of concern even for professors.

One could rationalize and declare that, as long as there are professional teachers and agents, we will always have persons aspiring to enter higher education. We can attract numerous international students to fill our graduate classes, can't we? We can always find some domestic students to enroll in the programs for masters' and doctorates. Let us renew our vigilance to select the very best for our profession. Let us not be swayed by the fact that an "assistantship" needs to be filled because there is a project to be completed.

I hope we can subject our own graduate programs to the same scrutiny that we teach others to use in evaluating programs. To frame my concerns, I will pose several questions I believe we should be asking. Does the graduate program produce scholars? Is there substance to it? Does it deserve to be sustained? Are international student applications, which carry full sponsorship, given the same careful admission scrutiny as other applications? Is there a dualism in our graduate programs: one program for domestic students and another program for international students?

Do international students get the same treatment as other students with access to internships; exposure to agriculture in your state, to primary and secondary education programs, to extension programs; with equal access to study areas and computer facilities; with equal opportunities to attend professional meetings like this convention? Do international students receive the same mentoring, same research and statistical preparation, and careful perusal of their work?

I would hope that your answers to all the previous questions are positive. If we are going to purport to be advocates of internationalization and global awareness, there is no better place to start than in our own departments. We have a serious responsibility to provide the very best education possible to international students, which is suited to their conditions, which is transferrable and which provides concepts appropriate for their environment. The role they will play in their countries is no less vital than the role our domestic graduate students will play in the future of our profession. We cannot give a second rate educational program just because the graduates will be many miles away and complaints may never reach us.

Reality

To be able to dream is one of the wonders of the human mind. Dreams hold the substance of the future. The height of our dreams must be exceeded by the depth of our knowledge and the breadth of our concern. To paraphrase Newton, we are but dwarfs on the shoulders of giants, seeking to look ahead. What will the next generation have to say about us?

How clear will be our vision? I believe omens can be read and that we can check our own pulse. I believe that our scholarship, our substance, our sustainability, and our preparation for our successors are resonances of our pulse to which we should attend.

References

Crunkilton, J.R. (1988, Spring). Thinking out loud about this process we call teaching. The Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture, 29(1), 2-10.

McCormick, F.G. (1985, Spring). A profession at risk. The Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture, 26(1), 3-14.

McCracken, J.D. (1983, Spring). A profession in need of academicians. The Journal of the American Association of Teacher Educators in Agriculture, 24(1), 2-12.

Miller, C. (1990). Higher order thinking: an integrated approach. Vocational Education Journal, 64(6), 26.

Miller, L.E. (1989a, Spring). An epistemology for knowing in vocational education. Journal of Vocational and Technical Education, 5, 2-12.

Miller, L.E. (1989b). Making a "mess" of research in agricultural education. Proceedings of the National Agricultural Education Research Meeting, Orlando, Florida.

Newcomb, L.H. & Trefz, M. (1987). Levels of cognition of testing and student assignments in the College of Agriculture, The Ohio State University. Department of Agricultural Education (unpublished).

Regan, G. (1990). Reisch Distinguished Lecturer, College of Agriculture, The Ohio State University (unpublished).

Shulman, L.S. (1989, June). Toward a pedagogy of substance. AAHE Bulletin, 8-13.

Wardlow, G. (1989, Winter). Alternative modes of inquiry for agricultural education. Journal of Agricultural Education, 30(4), 2-6.

Warmbrod, J.R (1974). The liberalization of vocational education. AATEA Lecture, Danville: The Interstate Printers and Publishers.

Webster, N. (1978). Webster's New Twentieth Century Dictionary of the English Language. Collins World.