

DAWN IS BREAKING: ARE WE PREPARED FOR THE NEW DAY?

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Abstract

It is indeed a privilege and honor for me to have the opportunity to address you at our annual awards breakfast. I thank you Bob for inviting me to deliver the distinguished lecture and giving me the opportunity to share some of my thoughts with those assembled here today. When Bob asked me to serve as your mystery speaker, he told me that the choice of topic was mine to make. After considering the breadth of agricultural education, I chose to focus my remarks on an occurrence that I have observed happening in our profession throughout my professional career. Its intensity has steadily increased over the years to the point that I believe it requires that we consider some changes in how we prepare young people to enter the agriculture teaching profession.

Purpose of the Agriculture Teacher-Agriculturist or Educator?

In March of this year, I spent 40 hours teaching, not observing, in an Iowa high school agriculture program. I discovered that it is a different world in the agriculture classroom than when I taught agriculture. I found that many of the students in my classes were not interested in what I was teaching. I was challenged by students asking why they should study this or that topic--questioning its value to them. I had to continually break into their discussions about past or pending school or community events. I had to deal with several confrontations wherein students refused to perform tasks that I asked them to do. Some of my students just sat passively while I taught and waited for the bell so they could leave. Several of the students were visibly troubled and it was apparent that they were in deep thought about what was bothering them. It became clear to me that I was not reaching them and that I did not have enough techniques in my professional methods bag to pump up their interest in what I was teaching. I was reminded about what John Dewey said when he wrote about interest in his book Democracy and Education. He wrote that: "When material has to be made interesting, it signifies that as presented, it

lacks connection with purpose and present power(the learner) . . . that to make it interesting by extraneous and artificial inducements deserves all the bad names which have been applied to the doctrine of interest in education." As I drove home the last night and reflected on my experiences that week, I remember thinking that I had led them to the watering trough and provided them with clean, fresh water, but they were not thirsty and chose not to drink and I asked myself why. Where had I gone astray? Why wasn't I more effective as a teacher?

It made me wonder about the purpose of a teacher of agriculture. Is that purpose being a presenter of knowledge about agricultural subjects or to help the learner solve problems and build the personal skills required of an effective, participating adult in our society? Should this person be an agriculturist or an educator? Or should this person be both? If both, which should come first? If the teacher is first an educator, is he or she addressing the needs of learners as they perceive them? Will addressing those needs enhance student understanding of the subject matter that is being taught and assist them in becoming effective, participating adults in our society?

What do I mean by "needs of the learner as perceived by the learner." Tyler (1971), in his book entitled Basic Principles of Curriculum and Instruction defined these needs. He defined them as the kinds of learner interests, problems the learner is encountering, and the purposes the learner has in mind.

Some in our profession would identify the agriculture teacher's purpose as that of presenting knowledge about agriculture, being an agriculturist. They believe that through the study of agriculture, along with the study of other subjects in the school, the learner will develop those skills needed to enter and become effective adults in our society and that the agriculture program is addressing the needs of the learner. They point to the research and development activities of the profession over the past and present and show how the profession has moved from a single focus on teaching production agriculture to focusing on the competencies requisite for entry into all occupational areas of the agricultural industry.

This perspective has been with our profession for quite some time. I was at a Central States meeting of agricultural educators in Chicago in 1965. A community college administrator was asked to address the meeting to share how he had revised the agriculture program at his college to meet the new mandates described in the Vocational Education Act of 1963. He went to great lengths to describe the content of his revised program and how it focused on the needs of the agricultural industry. During the question-answer period that followed, he was asked how he addressed the needs of the learner in his program. His response was "The answer to that question is obvious. I'm not going to take the time to discuss it."

Others in our profession, the educators, would respond differently to these questions. They are members of our profession who see good teachers working hard to prepare and deliver well-thought-out lessons only to have what they are

teaching fall on deaf ears. They see students with little interest in what is going on in the classroom and feel the frustration that the teachers feel when students are not receptive to their efforts. They feel that there is a wall between the teacher and the learner and the teacher is not successful in scaling it so that the teacher can join the learner and interact on the same learning playing field.

When I was an undergraduate at Colorado State University, my mentors impressed upon me in the strongest manner that my first responsibility as a teacher was to help my students solve their problems. I was taught that I should start where the student was and help him grow. Meeting student needs came first followed by the subject matter I taught. Over the years, however, I believe that serving as agricultural knowledge disseminators, focusing on the needs of the agriculture industry and on teaching agriculture subject matter, have emerged as our first priority and addressing learner perceived needs has been placed on the side burner. A review of the content of the Agricultural Education Magazine and our research journal over the past 15 to 20 years, reveals a wealth of information dealing with what we should teach and how we should teach it. You will find little information on identifying the learner perceived needs and how to deal with them effectively.

When you ask teachers if they are focusing their programs on addressing needs of learners as they perceive them, teachers will respond in the affirmative and tell you that what they are teaching is meeting the needs of employers in the agricultural industry. This response I believe reflects the preservice and inservice training they have received on this subject. Are we to assume that employer needs and needs of learners as they perceive them are the same? If so, why aren't our students setting on the edge of their chairs totally absorbed in learning the agricultural information being presented to them?

I remember the time I was attempting to teach principles of agricultural finance to one of my senior classes. My approach was to identify and apply the finance principles I wanted to teach to buying a piece of land. This approach seemed appropriate because all of my seniors planned on entering farming when they graduated. Things did not go well. My students were not interested in buying land and I could not get them excited about learning what I had prepared to teach them. After much thought, I decided to switch my approach. Rather than buying land I switched to buying a car and related the principles in purchasing a car to purchasing land. Their interest immediately changed and it held to the end of the unit. In the process I was able to teach the principles I felt needed to be taught and relate them to buying land. Their interest, their need as they perceived it, was different than what I had perceived it to be.

Historical Perspective

Think back with me now. When the agricultural education program was established in 1917 and schools began initiating programs throughout the nation, our students came to us with well-defined, known characteristics. They were farm boys. They were accustomed to working hard and accepting responsibility for expectations placed upon them. They were part of an intact family unit with parents who were very interested in their education and in seeing them succeed in school. They were active in their churches and generally operated under a homogenous set of lofty ideals and standards of personal conduct. They were goal oriented and enrolled in the vocational agriculture program because they saw it as a means of becoming established in farming. Because of these known characteristics, we were able to structure the agriculture program to provide the training that these students needed to realize their goal. Our familiarity with those factors that influenced the learner from the home, church, and community helped us solve student problems through our instruction on agricultural subjects.

It was easy for teacher educators to develop and conduct programs that would prepare teachers to lead young people into farming. Prospective agriculture teachers needed a knowledge of technical agriculture, instruction on how to develop programs that would deliver that technical knowledge, and instruction on how to effectively teach it.

During this developmental period of our program, research was being conducted at the University of Chicago to determine problems confronting high school age students. Havighurst summarized the findings of this research in his book entitled Developmental Tasks and Education. Havighurst wrote that the period from twelve to eighteen in the life of the learner is primarily one of physical and emotional maturity. The principal lessons are emotional and social, not intellectual and during this period emotional independence from parents is established. He pointed out that boys and girls become attracted to each other, adolescents learn to work together on common interests, and they learn to subordinate personal differences in pursuit of a common goal. He stated that school loses its appeal to the wide-open mind of the learner and must cater to the selective interests of the learner. He concluded by stating that the vocational interest comes to the fore and toward the end of this period may come a time of altruism, and reflection on problems of good and evil.

While these researchers were documenting developmental tasks confronted by learners that had little to do with the subject matter students were studying in school, teachers were perceiving the needs of the learner in terms of the subject matter they were teaching. How many times have you heard a teacher say, when challenged as to why he was teaching a certain subject, that it may have little value to the learner now but may have value in the future--that because it may have future value, it is important to study it now.

Through the strong influence of the home, church, and community in addressing the development of the tasks described by Havighurst, we were able to focus our program efforts on preparing our students for entry into farming. Our subject matter was technical agriculture. Our method was solving problems that the students would encounter when engaged in farming. Supervised farming programs were required of all our students to insure that they understood how to apply what we taught. We were even able, because of the sureness we had about the purpose of our programs, to contribute to societal expectations by training our students to become community leaders when they became engaged in farming.

Changes Impacting the Program

The scenario that I just described held intact for 46 years guided by the Smith Hughes Act. In 1963, however, the flood gates for change were opened with the passage of the Vocational Education Act and the water level from this flood is still rising.

While the agricultural education program was experiencing these changes, however, dramatic societal changes also began to impact our programs. These changes have altered the knowns that we operated under for those 46 years. Our students are no longer just farm boys. They are boys and girls from a variety of ethnic groups. In many instances, the majority of our students come from urban environments. They are not necessarily hard working individuals and some rely on the generosity of society to satisfy their expectations. Many avoid accepting responsibility and will perform only if they see immediate personal benefit. Over fifty percent of our students come from single parent homes and many from career-oriented two-parent homes with parents that may have little knowledge of and interest in what their child is experiencing at school.

As a group, they may not be active in their church and many operate under a set of ideals and a code of personal conduct that will provide them with what they want with the least amount of effort. They may be in agriculture classes because they find them to be easy classes and they use the FFA as an avenue to achieve personal goals. Some enroll in agriculture classes because of their love of nature and animals. Still others enroll because mom or dad had enrolled while they were in school and they want their son or daughter to have the same experience they had as students. They come to our agriculture classes with a variety of aspirations many of which are not agricultural in nature. They may be thinking about a vocation but have little or no interest in becoming involved in a career in agriculture.

Our young people live in a time when they find it difficult to identify role models they can follow in establishing a set of values and ideals they can use to guide their conduct and lives. They find themselves in situations where messages about what is right and what is wrong are confusing and contradictory. As a result, an attitude of "if it feels good then it's O.K." prevails among them.

They find that peer pressure is one of the strongest influences over their activities. Because of this pressure, they become involved in questionable, even dangerous, activities without any guidance from their elders and superiors as to how to manage these activities and this pressure.

Students find that to seek the confidence and advice of older people is considered taboo. Students view older people's opinions as being outdated and out moded for the times and totally lacking in understanding of their situations, goals, and aspirations.

These societal changes have been forced on the learner and they have been forced to deal with them without the help of significant others they need to consult with as they confront and deal with each

change. In order to find their place, many students have resorted to activities of a criminal nature to satisfy their needs. According to Kevin W. Riley, a program resource teacher and race relations consultant in the San Diego City Schools, youth gang activity is on the rise and is permeating all areas of the country. He pointed out that virtually all gang members are or have been students in our schools.

Many students, because of the pressures bearing upon them, become depressed. They lose their enthusiasm and interest in becoming involved in happenings around them and seem to just exist from one class period to another. Others have resorted to using drugs and alcohol as a means of alleviating the pain and frustration they are experiencing due to a variety of social and emotional problems. Still other students are contemplating or have decided to get away from the pressures bearing upon them. According to Jerilyn Pfeifer, assistant professor at Abilene Christian University, suicide has become the second leading cause of death among youth aged 15 to 24 in the United States. She pointed out that as educators, our lives are intimately meshed with those of young people. She continued by saying that many of us elected to be teachers for that very reason--to work with young people. She concluded by saying that our commitment to these young lives makes their deaths incomprehensible.

Many students are experiencing some form of physical, emotional, or cognitive abuse. This group is much larger than we realize. It is difficult for a teacher to recognize whether a student is being abused and what the abuse is unless the student confides it with the teacher.

Schools are experiencing a new phenomenon that I did not have to deal with when I was a high-school teacher. It is the increasing number of teenage parents that are students in agriculture classes. Many schools are now providing in-school child care facilities for their students to use so they

can continue their study toward graduation. This is not a problem unique to any ethnic or socioeconomic group.

Each student carries into the agricultural classroom a bundle of baggage that he or she is trying to manage. This baggage affects the student both socially and emotionally and demands the majority if not all of the student's time, attention and thought. Students sit passively all the while thinking about their problems, and move to their next classes and the teacher wonders why he or she was not able to reach them.

What do our teachers know about the needs and problems of the students they teach and how to effectively address them in their classrooms? How can they be effective when they have not dealt first with the problems and concerns that are a priority with those they are to teach? It appears to me that in order for us to become effective in teaching agriculture, we must first help students solve the problems that are uppermost in their minds and organize our instruction around helping them solve these problems. If learner needs are addressed first, then they will be receptive to learning the agricultural concepts being taught.

When this approach to organizing our instruction is shared with teachers, several reactions emerge. Some teachers say "I'm here to teach agriculture, not a social issues course. That is the job of the school counselor. Let him or her tackle those problems." Again, I believe that this perspective originates in their preservice and inservice training. Such an attitude does not change the situation. Students are not tuning into what the teacher is teaching and learning does not take place. Other teachers will state "I like this approach, but I do not know how to deal with these needs. Where can I get help to be able to identify problems confronting my students and how do I deal with them when I have identified them?"

I ask you, how do you prepare your prospective teachers to deal with these problems? Do you provide instruction on how to deal with youth gang activities, drug addiction, physical and emotional abuse? Do you expose your students to suicide signs and how to deal with a student who may be suicidal? How do you prepare your students to identify the needs of learners that are most important to them and how to deal with them? How do you prepare your prospective teachers to hurdle the wall that seems to exist between them and the learner? Unless we do something about these needs first, it is like spitting into the wind. Our efforts to teach will come back to us and never reach the students.

These needs and problems are not unique to learners at the secondary level. Many of the young people we are preparing to become teachers are experiencing many of the same problems. One of my advisees committed suicide. I know the haunting anguish that one feels, knowing something was wrong and something might have been said or done to help this young person through the crisis that caused him to put the end of a shotgun barrel in his mouth and pull the trigger.

Changes in Our Teacher Preparation Programs

So what does what I have said mean to us as we prepare young people to enter the agriculture teaching profession? What can we do to better prepare prospective teachers to recognize these needs and become more effective teachers of agriculture?

Let's begin by taking needs of learners, as they perceive them, off of the side burner and begin giving them the same attention that we give agricultural subject matter. Let's first be educators and then agriculturists. In order to effectively focus on the problems young people are experiencing, we must become familiar with their interests, needs and problems. How can we prepare prospective

teachers to recognize and deal with learner needs if we, ourselves, do not recognize them and know how to deal with them? Through our faculty seminar programs and individual contacts with people knowledgeable in this area and through observation and actual teaching in the secondary classroom, we can begin to become familiar with these problems in a very real way.

We must become familiar with the literature in other disciplines that deals with youth interests and problems and make this literature available in libraries that our students use to prepare to become teachers. We must then plan activities and assignments that will require our students to use this material.

We must develop collaborative efforts with our colleagues in human development, social psychiatry, psychology, and other disciplines to develop programs that will help our prospective teachers understand the problems students are confronting and how to deal with them.

We must cease just being advisors to our students and become their mentor--be a role model. In doing so, we can become familiar with their problems and needs and develop programs for each of our mentorees that will help them hone their skills in identifying and addressing the interests, needs and problems of students they will be teaching. I have never believed in the so called "generation gap." A mentoring relationship will show our students--prospective teachers--that we understand their problems and needs and are very interested in helping them find solutions to them. Through this relationship we can lead our mentorees to be keen competitors--competing not against each other but against themselves and experiencing the thrill that comes when they realize that they have succeeded. Student participation in a mentoring relationship at college will demonstrate how they can establish the same relationship with their students when they become teachers.

We have long promoted the student teaching experience as a way of relating the real world of teaching to our prospective teachers. We must do the same. We must get out of our offices and away from our universities and establish contact with and experience the real world that our students are experiencing.

An Iowa agriculture teacher who had been teaching 15 years in the same school recently told one of our faculty members that students are different than when he began teaching and that they have a completely different value system guiding their actions. He cautioned that we, as college professors, had better become knowledgeable about what is going on in the high schools because we would be facing these students in the years ahead at the university.

We must add identifying and dealing with learner problems and needs to our inservice focus. Teachers realize that these problems exist and would welcome any help we can provide in this area. As with our inservice programs, we must include in our research focus the study of youth problems and needs and how we, as agricultural educators, can effectively deal with them. Our study must include secondary as well as college-level students and the results of our research efforts should be shared widely.

I would suggest that an ad hoc committee of this group be established to look at, study, and develop activities that will help members of our profession to recognize and deal with learner perceived needs and bring them to the front burner of our attention.

I suggest that we reevaluate the focus of our teacher preparation programs. While we distinguish ourselves from other disciplines in the school curriculum by the subject we teach, the content will not necessarily be enough to motivate students to learn that subject matter. We must reassess our

teacher preparation priorities and adjust our programs to satisfy our priorities. That may mean that we find ways to change the requirements that are put on us by teacher education committees and colleges to allow more room in our program requirements to focus attention on meeting learner perceived needs.

I suggest that we breakout of the traditional approach to preparing prospective teachers. We need to consider restructuring and expanding the professional phase of our programs around two to four-week units that focus on specific topics and that these topics include those areas of need that students are experiencing in our schools.

We need to experiment with alternative ways of preparing prospective teachers. We need to test different ways of meeting certification requirements and when we find alternatives that improve our teacher preparation programs, we need to work to change the requirements for receiving a teaching certificate.

Finally, I suggest that a field experience be planned for each prospective teacher each of the four years of their schooling. These field experiences should be carefully selected and students placed in situations in and out of the school setting that will expose them to young people experiencing a variety of problems that the prospective teachers will encounter when they become teachers. The observations made by the prospective teachers should be incorporated into our professional courses and instruction provided on methods of dealing with what these students observed in their field experiences.

In conclusion, I believe it is time to rethink and change our program goals, adjust our mission, and change our programs that shape our preparation of young people who become teachers of agriculture. We must experience the real world to become familiar with what our teachers are experiencing with their students both in and outside of the classroom. We must prepare our prospective

teachers to scale that wall that exists between the teacher and learner, engage the learner on the same learning playing field, and deal first with the problems confronting the learner. It is then, and only then that we can excite them about the agricultural subject matter we have to share with them.

The dawn is breaking. Time is fleeting by us. We must prepare ourselves to manage the reality of the day ahead of us. I thank you for your time and attention.

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