

Some Proposed Curriculum Changes in Vocational Agriculture

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After having taught vocational agriculture in practically the same identical manner for the past eight years, I have come to the very definite conclusion that a change is in order. If teaching may be compared with industry, with invention, or with any of the other phases of this modern world, I'm certain that an eight-year-old "model" is out of step and that it should be replaced. I cannot understand how we may expect progress in education through faithful repetition of the same courses in the same way from year to year. Drastic curriculum and procedure changes have been made in our elementary schools during the past few years, but I am afraid our high schools have lagged behind in this important work.

As vocational agriculture is now taught in the majority of departments in Illinois, we offer soils and crops to freshman classes, animal husbandry to sophomores and so on through the four year course. Each year is divided from the preceding one in a nicely classified, unrelated, compartmentalized manner! The fact that the courses are not related is easily proved when we admit that a boy may enroll in any one of the four courses irrespective of his previous work in agriculture. As a matter of fact we alternate courses in most small communities because we do not have a large enough enrollment to teach all four courses each year. As a consequence we teach soils and crops one year and alternate it with animal husbandry or farm management and marketing. This is a most convenient situation but one which I seriously doubt as having any other merit.

I have the firm conviction that each year of agriculture should contribute towards the next—that the elementary phases of the work should be offered the beginning classes, and that the time for specialization and technical work should come in the junior and senior years. I have learned from experience that time spent with freshman boys on a detailed study of soil classes, soil bacteria, plant diseases and other rather technical subjects is time wasted. I am positive that the average freshman is not mature enough mentally to grasp the meaning of such work, and that it might have greater effect and usefulness if taught in the junior and senior year. The fact that I have many former students coming to me for help upon subjects which they had studied as freshmen leads me to believe that something is wrong with the method of presenting the agriculture course in my community. This past winter we offered an evening school in dairying and a great many former students came in for the various sessions. I asked them why they should need to attend an evening school in dairying when they had had a complete course in it while students. They very politely told me that at the time they studied dairying they thought they wouldn't need a great deal of the information, and that they never did quite understand the meaning of proteins, carbohydrates and other technical terms. In other words, they studied dairying in a concentrated, cram-style form as sophomores, and

promptly proceeded to forget it after passing the final examination. If the work in dairying had been presented over a four-year period, with each year's work contributing to the next, I believe that a great deal more information would have been retained.

In order to revise my curriculum, I shall have to divide the different enterprises now taught in the regular courses. These enterprises will be spread over a four-year period in a graduated, progressive manner. For example, shall we teach anything about soils to freshmen? If so, what are freshmen capable of understanding from a soils standpoint and just how far should we go? In my preliminary outline for my soils course, I find that I more than likely will not give them any work on soils until the second semester of the sophomore year! I am positive that I am not going to attempt the teaching of "Feeds & Feeding" until the junior year. Proteins, carbohydrates, amino acids, maltase, etc., just simply do not mean much to the average sophomore. I am firmly convinced that their mental makeup does not grasp the full meaning of a great deal of the work we expose them to as freshman and sophomore students. The mental makeup of a Junior is vastly different from the mental status of a freshman—as different as the other rapid adolescent changes during this stage of their life.

Starting next year with my freshman class, I intend to give some work in dairying, some in poultry, some in farm mechanics, some work in all of the major enterprises now offered in our regular three year course. The various units of animal husbandry will more than likely be discussed from a *project* standpoint in the first year, while they will be taken up from a *farmer's* viewpoint on a *herd* basis in the following years. If we find with certain freshman classes that no one is interested in dairying from a project standpoint, I see no reason for forcing that particular group to spend a week on dairying when that time more than likely could be used to greater advantage in discussing projects which were desired and which were being put into practise. The initiative of the instructor will determine whether or not certain subjects should be discussed—this, combined with the interests and needs of each group will map the course for the first year. The second year in dairying will find us taking up such units as dairy breeds, starting the purebred herd, feeding for milk production and other topics. The third year we shall take up feeding for milk production again, but from the advanced aspect of the chemical composition of feeds and the calculation of rations. In the senior year we shall consider dairying from the standpoint of latest experimental findings, pedigree analysis, and special problems which are particularly suited to our community.

I realize that a great deal of work must be done in order that this plan may operate properly. I realize also that it means keeping a complete record for each group for each year in order that the instructor may know just how far each class has gone. My main objection to the plan at this writing is the fact that it will take four years to make the change. Some fellow teachers have objected to it because it does not consider the transfer student. I agree that it will make it difficult for students transferring from schools that have the present system, but I feel certain that here again the initiative of the instructor will aid materially in removing this objection. My attitude is somewhat similar to that of the pioneer—nothing ventured, nothing gained. I am going to try something new—I can always go back to teaching vocational agriculture as I do now in case the plan will not work properly.