

Adult Education in Agriculture

J. N. Weiss

Dixon High School, Dixon, Illinois

Throughout my sixteen years of teaching in Dixon I have offered eleven years of instruction to adult farmers of the community, during the winter months. In that period several different methods were used with varied results.

The objective during the first three years was to get as many farmers in the community to attend the meetings as possible. Current agricultural problems were presented in a formal lecture by an outstanding authority from an agricultural college, or the State Department of agriculture. These meetings were successful from the standpoint of satisfactory attendance, and the valuable information presented, but in checking the value of the meetings from the standpoint of the improved farm practices adopted, which were recommended at the meetings, very little could be found.

During the next two years the general policy was changed so as to include a series of two or three lectures by successful farmers or farm managers on different farm enterprises such as beef cattle, dairy cattle, alfalfa production, soil fertility, etc. Motion pictures and stereoptican slides were used to make the meetings more attractive and to secure a large attendance. This type of instruction was entertaining and quite practical, but still very little improvement was noted in actual practice by the farmers who attended the meetings. Upon inquiry from individual members it was found that many of the methods, which they would like to adopt, were not explained in sufficient detail to make the adoption possible or, in other cases, the cost was thought to be prohibitive, and would not be profitable on their farm. This condition may have been prompted by the fact that most of the speakers were farm managers of large estates or farmers with sources of income other than that from the farm.

In 1931-32 it was decided to confine the course of instruction to one topic, "Profitable Dairying", because Dixon is primarily a dairy community and approximately fifty per cent of the annual farm income is from dairy products. An advisory committee of seven successful dairy farmers was selected to outline the topics which they thought would be of most interest to the members. Each committeeman secured the enrollment of four or five men in his respective community, who were primarily dairy farmers. It was decided that the meetings should be round table discussions with the vocational agriculture teacher serving as chairman and leader. The committee decided to meet each Monday night, for a period of twelve weeks, from 7:30 to 9:00 P. M. The course was started with an enrollment of twenty-five members, and because of their enthusiasm the Farmers Evening School became the topic of conversation where farmers were gathered to shell corn, shred fodder or hold auction sales. The result was that attendance increased at each meeting until a total of seventy-six farmers were enrolled, with an average attendance of forty-one, for the

entire course. The dairy course proved to be so popular in the community that it was continued each winter for the next three years with about the same degree of interest.

As was planned the Conference method of procedure was used in the development of the subject matter and proved wholly satisfactory. The objectives for the whole course were determined after a local survey of the community was made, which revealed situations in which there were serious needs for improvement. To prevent rambling and unorganized thinking throughout the discussion period the specific objective for the meeting was always written on the blackboard before the group, in order to keep the group on the topic for consideration. As leader of the discussion, I have very definite sub-headings under that which I wish discussed in order to bring out the required conclusion, and using experiment station data to support the experiences of the group. The opinions and suggestions of five or six individual members of the group are listed on the blackboard. These are evaluated: by ranking in order of importance, pro and con analysis, or by listing advantages and disadvantages of methods mentioned. Results obtained from agricultural experiment stations pertaining to the discussion are then presented. We then have before us enough material from which to get some decision from the group as to the best method or practice. Plans are then suggested by different members as to how to combine or eliminate in order to bring about the greatest efficiency. The following week each member is given a mimeographed summary of the previous meeting which he may file for future use.

A few of the specific results of the dairy course may be enumerated as follows:

1. A dairy herd improvement association was organized.
2. Unprofitable cows were eliminated from the herds.
3. Alfalfa acreage was increased.
4. Limestone was applied where needed.
5. Eight bull pens were built.
6. Bulls were selected by use of production records.
7. Balanced rations were fed in proportion to the milk and butter fat produced.
8. Housing quarters were improved, principally by increased sunlight and ventilation.

Some of the more important general results are:

1. Stimulates constructive thinking and a desire to evaluate all farm methods.
2. Develops an increased interest in the other fellow's problems, which naturally leads to a closer cooperation.
3. Makes them more alert to recent publications or broadcasts which pertain to the farm business.
4. Develops a much broader outlook on agricultural problems.
5. Establishes better relations between the school and the community.

Adult education in agriculture is comparatively new in the United States, but as early as 1850 in England and Scotland there were 112,500 adults enrolled in Evening Schools¹. It was not until 1920-21 that the first adult evening schools were established for farmers in the United States under the Smith-Hughes vocational education act. Since that time there has been a steady growth in the number of schools, which offer this type of education. For the purpose of this paper we are more interested to know that in Illinois last year, of the 288 schools which offered vocational agriculture only 60 offered any adult evening courses which is a ratio of about one out of five.²

¹ Sadler, M. E., *Continuation Schools in England and elsewhere*, Manchester Press, England, 1908, Page 27.

² Illinois Board for Vocational Education, *Bul. No. 66*, Page 19.

The vocational agriculture teacher is the logical person to organize and conduct adult education in agriculture for the following reasons:

1. He is employed by the citizens of the local community.
2. He is trained in technical agriculture as well as in methods of teaching.
3. He is employed in the community for twelve months of the year.
4. He understands the needs and problems of the local community.
5. His efforts are concentrated in a comparatively small area and therefore can give more supervision to the work.
6. He has the cooperation of the Agricultural Experiment Station and the department of Vocational Agricultural Education at the University of Illinois in furnishing data and literature.
7. The State Board for Vocational Education and the Federal government assist the local community in financing this type of education to the extent of fifty per cent of the teacher's salary.

Why are there not more adult evening schools in Illinois? A few reasons may be:

1. The Vocational Agriculture teacher may have to teach so many non-vocational subjects in addition to the regular agriculture course that this extra work is physically impossible.
2. An unusually large day enrollment may make it prohibitive (because of many reports and activities).
3. Farmers in these communities may be very indifferent toward adult education in agriculture.
4. The agriculture teacher may be giving too much time to the Farm Advisers 4-H club program in the community.
5. Possibly the local boards of education have not been convinced of the value of this type of education.

But all of these objections can be overcome if the vocational agriculture teacher is thoroughly convinced in his own mind that adult education is vital to his community.

The communities' interests and needs vary greatly over the state; therefore, the type of adult instruction for one locality cannot be universally adopted, but in every community farmers have perplexing problems, which will afford an opportunity for profitable instruction, if properly recognized by a study and use of a survey of local conditions.

From a personal point of view, I have had no greater satisfaction than that obtained during my eleven years working with adult farmers in the evening school program. I can see no reason why an evening school program should not succeed if the school is organized *to meet a real need*. I am satisfied that the Conference method of procedure is by far the best system to use with most groups of adult farmers.