

SHOULD WE TRAIN GENERALISTS OR SPECIALISTS

TO TEACH VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE?

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There are several factors which have combined to make the teacher of vocational agriculture a generalist or a person involved in a broad range of rights, duties, and obligations in his relations to his students and farmers. Among these are: (1) the teacher's farm background with the associated view of farming as a way-of-life, as well as a means of making a living, (2) an unusual value orientation which ideally involves a "community of fate" in which the teacher is expected to share the joys, as well as, the sorrows of those he serves, (3) a teaching philosophy grounded in the philosophy of John Dewey which synthesizes theory and practice, and (4) the requirement of completion of a broad training program which grows out of the legal and administrative prescriptions to train present and prospective farmers and to serve the needs of rural people.

This general or diffuse orientation of the vocational agriculture teaching profession occurs at a time when professional and commercial relations in modern society are characterized by an increasingly high degree of specialization.<sup>2</sup> In addition, the broad responsibility of the Vo-Ag teacher is increasingly harder to consummate as farming becomes more scientific and complex and as farmers increasingly take on the values and techniques of the "business and industrial community". In other words:

. . . the Vo-Ag teacher's position is essentially that of a generalist in a situation which increasingly appears to call for the services of specialists or for the services of a generalist in combination with a staff of specialists.<sup>3</sup>

These trends and conditions cited appear to cause various stresses in the role performance of the teacher of vocational agriculture. In a depth interview study conducted by the writer, responding Vo-Ag teachers generally agreed that they were agricultural generalists with perhaps some degree of specialization in the most important agricultural enterprises of their community. A majority of the respondents also believed that their supervisors, teacher-trainers, and local administrators expected them to be general agriculturalists. On the other hand, more than half of the teachers believed that the majority of their most significant reference groups (all-day students and especially the adult farmers) needed and expected expert help over a wide range of areas. In other words they expected the teacher to be both generalist and specialist.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the teachers seemed acutely aware of the impossibility of being both. The resulting stress is pointed up in the following typical teacher remark: "We can't be both, but we are torn between both now."

Added to the stress growing out of conflicting expectations is the realization that in our present society professional prestige is awarded largely on the basis of specialization or the command of those who have this qualification. Certain factors seem to have prevented specialization on the part of the Vo-Ag teacher. Among these factors are: (1) the low proportion of all-day students with specific occupational aims, (2) legal prescriptions, (3) primacy of the

diffuse orientation, and (4) insufficient funds. At the same time, the teachers of agriculture typically have not had a significant staff of specialists at his command.

If there is a need for both general and specialized services, and if Vo-Ag teachers feel the stress of conflicting expectations to perform both roles, what are some ways out of the dilemma?

There are varying possibilities for escaping this pull in opposite directions. In the space available only a few alternatives with some possible consequences can be mentioned. These are suggested to stimulate further thinking by those more qualified to discuss this problem.

First, the Vo-Ag teachers can continue to strive to be both generalist and specialist. In so doing, one could expect that they would continue to feel a considerable amount of stress since they literally cannot be both.<sup>5</sup> Also, they could be expected to be marginal in the performance of both their generalist and specialist duties. This marginal performance could adversely affect public evaluation of the program.

A second course of action could be to train each agriculture teacher to be a specialist in one of a number of agricultural areas. One difficulty in this approach is that the number of students who would be certain enough of their occupational future to take a specialized course would probably be small. Also, a small school community with a diversity of agricultural enterprises might find it difficult to hire several agricultural specialists.

A third alternative could be to renounce the specialist role and make vocational agriculture training even more general. It is well known that the training program including the FFA program has long involved not only general agriculture and rural life but many aspects of general education as well. One could soundly argue that a skillfully taught course based upon projects and the vocational agriculture philosophy of "leading others through the scientific thought process within a democratic setting to solve problems and to learn by doing" would be good for any student regardless of his future occupation. Certainly the profession has developed a methodology that is well suited to citizenship building, problem solving, integrated learning, and vocational guidance which should be an example to others. However, a problem resides in the National Vocational Education Act which establishes the vocational objective of the program. Another argument which might be advanced by some general educators is that other teachers could teach these general skills and attitudes around other problems. (One could ask, do they?) From the point of view of the teacher of agriculture, this approach could be criticized because it could be a means to the loss of the distinct identity of the Vo-Ag teaching profession.

The fourth and last alternate course of action to be discussed here is to meet the dual needs by having different persons fill the roles of generalist and specialist. This is occurring, but more slowly than in most professions. As students of complex organizations are well aware, a trend closely associated with increasing knowledge, specialization, and size of organizations has been a great increase in general positions to coordinate, supervise, and administer

the specialized positions.<sup>6</sup> There are certain trends which support this approach. Among these are the dual needs described above and the trends toward consolidation of schools and development of multiple departments. Another supporting factor is the increasing number of states which are supporting their regular teachers with special state and area teachers.<sup>7</sup>

In conclusion, the innovator who would change the present program of vocational education in agriculture should be reminded that there is the possibility of creating new problems as he solves the old ones. Also, it should be remembered that an appropriate solution in certain types of communities is not necessarily the best solution for other communities. This situation, especially when coupled with the rapid rate of change in our society, suggests that changes introduced into the occupational structure should be designed, in part, for increased occupational flexibility.

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<sup>1</sup>Harold L. Nix and Frederick L. Bates, "Occupational Role Stress; A Structural Approach", Rural Sociology, XXVII (March 1962), pp. 7-17.

<sup>2</sup>According to Durkheim, the increasing division of labor or specialization is the most significant process in the history of human societies. See Emile Durkheim, The Division of Labor in Society, translated by George Simpson (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1947), pp. 70-111.

<sup>3</sup>Harold L. Nix, "A Sociological Analysis of the Roles and Value Orientation of an Occupation: Vocational Agriculture Teaching", (unpublished doctor's dissertation, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, 1960).

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., pp. 298-304.

<sup>5</sup>The writer found in a review of eleven occupational follow-up studies that one of the three most often given reasons by Vo-Ag teachers for leaving the field was conflicting or excessive expectations. See Ibid., pp. 232-240.

<sup>6</sup>As a matter of fact, there is a strong tendency to professionalize and make a specialty of the general and coordinating roles.

<sup>7</sup>Compared to other professions there are relatively few positions above the regular Vo-Ag teacher. The writer of this article found in a follow-up study that of 215 men who were graduated in vocational agricultural education from the University of Georgia between 1935 and 1940, only 1.4 per cent had advanced beyond the regular Vo-Ag teacher level by 1950 which was ten to fifteen years after graduation. See Nix, op. cit., pp. 224.