

AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION'S ROLE IN "THE VER-  
MONT DESIGN FOR EDUCATION"

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After reading J. C. Atherton's excellent article on change in the March 1971 AATEA Journal, perhaps some tales regarding change in the Green Mountain state would be in order. Change is nothing new for Vermont because such outstanding change agents as Ethan and Ira Allen, Senator Justin Morrill and John Dewey were spawned from this state.

Soon after settling at the University of Vermont in the Department of Vocational, Technical and Extension Education, the department chairman suggested the author to familiarize himself with a booklet entitled "The Vermont Design for Education." This 25 page illustrated booklet, distributed by the State Education Department, discusses seventeen concepts which collectively describe a process of education.

The immediate 'gut' reaction to the booklet was, "This sounds alright. It's like our basic philosophy in Agricultural Education!" This first reaction could probably be labeled as a rather smug and egotistical reaction, but Agricultural Education has done many things well for a long time. Procedures fundamental to the program of vocational agriculture are still being "discovered" by many educators. This discovery power is certainly not to imply that our segment of the profession has all the answers, but Agricultural Education does have a backlog of experiences readily transferable to other sectors of the educational community -- vocational and otherwise.

The "Vermont Design for Education" contains such basic concepts as, "The emphasis must be upon learning, rather than teaching," and "All people need success to prosper," or "People should perceive the learning process as related to their own sense of reality." These concepts, while perhaps stated in slightly different words, are certainly implicit in the foundations of Agricultural Education.

Well, what's the message if everything is so copacetic? The first message was that the "Vermont Design for Education" was considered too liberal and "new" to be palatable for many Vermonters. A person would have difficulty to determine if the new process was responsible for getting people "up tight" or the fact that the Vermont Design came from the top down. In any case, the Vermont Design was always a surefire topic to generate heated discussion. Probably the main reason for these heated debates was that the design represented changes in many educational systems, which would always create discussion. These frequent discussions were exactly what the State Board of Education had in mind. Each school district was charged with the mandate to prepare their own local plan for implementing the concepts described in the process. This mandate was a desirable exercise for most school districts as this situation forced them to focus on the basic teaching-learning process rather than the usual concern for the "nuts and bolts" and "bricks and mortar."

One result of all this education soul-searching was that the whole area of vocational education looked better all the time. Area vocational schools were planned for fifteen locations throughout the state of Vermont, placing most students within fifteen miles of a center. This type of building is typical of what has been happening in other states for the past several years, and while this type of vocational school has certainly expanded the vocational education available to each student, some rather special problems for Agricultural Education have been created. Previous to the new design, the only vocational offering in local Vermont high schools was vocational agriculture and now the vo-ag program must compete with perhaps a dozen or more programs for students.

This competitive situation also occurred in many other states and the forced examination of our objectives and clientele should only serve to strengthen the entire program. The change which is taking place concurrently in the vocational teacher education program is exciting and perhaps quite different than the situation in some larger states. Under the strong leadership of Dr. Gerald R. Fuller, the "old" department of Agricultural Education has

an expanded title and a greatly enlarged mission. The preparation of undergraduates to teach vocational agriculture is still a major part of the program, but in addition, encompasses trade and industrial education and extension education. In essence the vocational teacher education program at the University of Vermont expanded in two directions simultaneously. There were the expanded offerings in Agricultural Education plus the industrial education program.

Just as the experience with the Vermont Design strengthened the belief in our basic concepts, the experience of working with all "kinds" of vocational teachers is a convincing example that the documented experiences and methods inherent in Agricultural Education can be applied to other vocational areas. Agricultural Education has had the most successful high school youth organization and the motto of the FFA, "Learning by Doing," is now being "discovered all over the place."

The implications of our experience with change in Vermont are many for teacher educators. Some of the adjustments were made in Vermont to assure survival, but survival without undue concern for the retention of the name--Agricultural Education. This is not a "cop-out," but rather recognition of the fact that Agricultural Education can get the job done just as well while working within the larger context of vocational education. The agriculture programs in the local high schools and area vocational centers are alive and well, plus the teacher education staff has better rapport with all vocational teachers. The staff teaches classes composed of teachers from all vocational subject areas and the resulting discussions in class should carry over and translate into better cooperation with all vocational education areas throughout the state.

These are recent changes which most of the smaller states have made in one way or another, but perhaps the larger states could also profit from more mixing and less nixing. The sequence of events in Vermont is not unique, but the fact that these events happened in a predominantly rural state with a conservative reputation might have some significance. The opposite course of action, to paraphrase Senator George Aiken, might have been to "Declare a victory for Agricultural Education and retire from the scene."

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