

THE ROLE OF AGRICULTURAL EDUCATORS IN COMPETENCY BASED TEACHER EDUCATION

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Education is often like a circus, where a popular act one year is a forgotten act the following year. At times it seems that educators often grapple in the dark hoping to find the button that will become their panacea. Sometimes, in the grappling process, the American educator gets "shocked" but more often than not, he, through an almost random process, hits a switch. Once the new circuit is closed, the lights are on and all too often, with the new found light, follow many in its path hoping "This is the panacea we have needed for so long."

Even as the various factions of the educational community strive to find the answers, more often than not, an undereducated, unprepared public or governmental agency claims "This is the way" -- follow it! Teacher education does not escape this phenomena. Hence, we are all finally realizing that through someone's grappling or mandate we are now faced with putting together the "act" called competency or performance based teacher education.

When the Phi Delta Kappan devotes an entire issue (January 1974) to competency based teacher education, teacher educators can rest assured that the bandwagon is rolling. A recent survey of the fifty states by Alfred P. Wilson, and William W. Curtis showed that ten states have mandated competency- or performance-based teacher education programs.¹ If that is not enough evidence to demonstrate the seriousness or validity of the competency based teacher education movement, consider the following announcement:

"The Council of Chief State School Officers endorsed performance-based teacher certification at their annual meeting in Santa Fe in November, calling upon state education agencies 'to give direction (emphasis added) and leadership to improvement of teacher education' and involve teachers in 'policy making for teacher education and certification.'²

The Rationale for Competency Based Teacher Education

The competency based teacher education movement hopes to reverse the long history of teacher educators having their products labeled as incompetent. This writer infers that our past products have

been judged to be inferior or incompetent since the name - competency based - suggests current programs are based on something other than competence. As one peruses the literature he finds the basic premise of competency based teacher education to be the preparation of teachers who are certified based on their demonstrated teaching competence rather than on credit hours earned or grades received.

The basic rationale is quite simple, or at least so it seems. The idea is to identify the competencies needed by teachers (in our case, teachers of vocational agriculture) and then to design learning experiences which will develop these competencies. The most familiar list of competencies for vocational instructors is the exhaustive list developed by the Center for Vocational-Technical Education. Additionally there are numerous other lists of "competencies in agricultural education" which have been developed in a number of states.

Pitfalls to be Avoided

In this writer's opinion, as we in teacher education in agriculture move toward many variations of what will be called "competency based teacher education," we must beware of a "narrowness of mind" that would lead us to focus on the process while ignoring the product. Throughout the history of teacher education in agriculture there can be little doubt that our teacher educators have longed foremost to produce competent teachers of agriculture. Therefore, as we examine our process anew, and revise our programs to correspond with advances in educational technology, let us not assume that all past efforts have been futile.

This writer's greatest concern regarding competency based teacher education is that in our efforts to meet "mandates," or the pressure of our peers to conform, that some will concentrate so much on identifying desirable competencies and teaching for them singularly that they will overlook the integrated final product which is the essence of competent teaching.

Furthermore, it will be tempting with competency based teacher education, as in all educational endeavors, to place our greatest emphasis on behaviors, skills, concepts, etc. which are most easily identified and measured and often have the least to do with the total effect of any given treatment. It will not be enough to establish competencies as hurdles set up for teacher candidates to jump singularly. The process which must evolve will have to be one that focuses on integrated behaviors in the real classroom upon completion of the preparation program. The fact that a student can meet a high percentage of individually identified objectives or competencies in no way insures us that he can perform adequately or competently when most of the competencies must be exhibited simultaneously. If we

are not careful, we can develop preparation programs which appear to be doing a superior job and which provide for easy accounting and reporting but that are in reality only producing systematized robots. If this becomes the case, then we will need only to decide whether to use chargeable or "throw away" batteries. Certainly that is not what we want.

The Path of Some

As one examines a wide cross section of programs currently professing to be competency based, the following paradigm is frequently being followed. Perhaps the general notion of the paradigm is summed up by W. David Maxwell as he quotes from an article entitled "Curriculum Design" by J. Bruce Burke:

"The specification of competencies for mastery provides the student with goals toward which he may stretch . . .

In such a curriculum, detailed records constantly are maintained on the progress of each student toward mastery of all required competencies . . .

As he successfully attains competencies at each step, he feels increasing self-confidence . . . The student's capacity for autonomous judgment increases. Thus, the process leading to the development of autonomous teachers begins naturally in the competency based teacher education program. . . ."³

In effect, many programs consist of clusters of competencies for which individualized modules are designed. The student knows before he begins the modules the "competency(ies)" he is to demonstrate upon completion of the module and cheerfully goes about his task. Upon completion of the module, often consisting of a recording, readings, video-tape, pencil and paper exercise, the student then demonstrates his competence (in this singular area) to whomever is in charge.

Herein lies a great concern. What effect does the manner or method in which we prepare future teachers influence their future performance? This question has not been adequately examined. Additionally how many current competency based teacher education programs follow a competency based rationale and paradigm throughout the professional sequence including student teaching? An examination of existing programs in a variety of disciplines suggests the answer is -- not many.

Now regarding the claim of Burke that the candidate becomes more confident as he proceeds through the competency based curriculum, the research of McMillion⁴ indicates the students who have experienced a competency based methods course felt the concept of student teaching was less pleasant (not significantly so) than students who experienced conventionally taught methods courses. This suggests to this teacher educator that there is at least one area of concern for additional investigation in this area of "pleasantness" (also referred to as anxiety level).

Where Do We Go?

In essence, we seem to be faced with two major dilemmas. First, how do we accurately identify, precisely enough for accurate measurement, "what it is" that separates the successful teachers from the unsuccessful teachers? While much work is currently in progress in this area, perhaps the major shortcoming is that most competency lists tend to be composed largely of items such as: (1) advise a youth organization, (2) check the roll, (3) plan lessons. Granted all of these competencies are essential, but are these the kinds of competencies that discriminate between successful and unsuccessful teachers? If not, someone in our profession needs to devote considerable time to adequately do this job. Our second dilemma is: "What is the most sensible way to produce a teacher who possesses the competencies needed to make him/her successful?" First of all where do we begin--the freshman or sophomore year? What should be the nature of the process--formal or informal, based on academic units and time frames, university centered, or field centered?

Finally, is there anyone who really believes a four-year program can do the job? How should post-baccalaureate training be approached? If in-service programs are based on competencies, will or should this effect graduate programs? Agricultural educators need to begin to suggest the direction they believe is proper and then to empirically evaluate the results of their efforts. The seventies demand the best use of our current intellectual giants in agricultural education if competency based teacher education is to be anything other than a name.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Benjamin Rosner and Patricia M. Kay. "Will the Promise of C/PBTE Be Fulfilled?", Phi Delta Kappan, LV (January 1974), p. 291.

² Phi Delta Kappan, "Newsnotes," LV (January 1974), p. 258.

³W. David Maxwell, "PBYE: A Case of the Emperior's New Clothes." Phi Delta Kappan, LV (January 1974), p. 307.

⁴Martin B. McMillion. "A Comparison of Anxiety Levels of Student Teachers Prior to Student Teaching Under Performance Based and Other Types of Preparation," College of Education, VPI & SU, Blacksburg, Virginia, June 1973.

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