

Developing a Philosophic Model for Vocational Agriculture

Robert J. Birkenholz, Assistant Professor
Agricultural Education
University of Missouri-Columbia

Accepted for Publication June 1985

Teacher educators in agriculture are charged with the responsibility of preparing individuals to maintain and advance vocational agriculture programs in local communities. This responsibility requires that future teachers of agriculture be provided with the "tools" necessary to accomplish that purpose. Traditionally, such tools have included good teaching methods, knowledge of agricultural subject matter and skills in agricultural mechanics to name only a few.

Preparing students to become successful vocational agriculture teachers also requires that they understand the philosophical base upon which vocational agriculture programs are founded. Many agricultural education students have difficulty comprehending the importance of such philosophy when presented in a lecture or discussion format. The ability to visualize how philosophy permeates all aspects of vocational agriculture is of paramount importance for many students.

Importance of Philosophy

The need to adequately convey philosophic principles is obvious. Future teachers cannot be expected to maintain or advance vocational agriculture if they do not understand the principles on which the program is based. Butler (Pal & Myers, 1967) noted that successful transmission of well-conceived educational philosophies would reduce the random experimentation that has plagued education in the past. Adequate and accurate communication of philosophy is essential to reduce the gap which exists between theory and practice.

Educational philosophies naturally change with the passage of time (Brubacher, 1962). As new theories, ideas and beliefs are developed, philosophies must likewise change and adapt. Changes in educational philosophy and society as a whole appear to be the only constant.

Philosophy, as a topic of discussion, is disliked by some members of the agricultural education profession. Those who appreciate the need for educational philosophy understand its role in developing sound educational programs. Decisions concerning the future of vocational agriculture programs should consider the philosophic principles upon which such programs are based.

Agricultural educators are usually pragmatists in that they view students as individuals who are unique and important (Thompson, 1973). Knowledge theory in vocational agriculture projects students as problem-solvers striving to adapt to their environment.

Differences have arisen in philosophies held by agricultural educators, but in general, they profess the need to provide learning experiences as their most important responsibility and that these experiences may be unique for each individual student (Evans, 1971). This principle of agricultural education prescribes means as well as ends of education. Means focus on providing suitable learning experiences whereas ends involve the overall growth and maturation of each student as an individual (Rosenfeld, 1984). Education is viewed as a process without end, and

*Journal of the American Association of
Teacher Educators in Agriculture
Volume 27, Number 1, pp. 13-17
DOI: 10.5032/jaatea.1986.01013*

learning experiences produce consequences which give rise to additional learning opportunities in an exponential fashion.

Philosophies held by agricultural educators, although different, have many commonalities. Areas of consensus should be promoted through pre-service and in-service teacher education programs in an attempt to provide a greater understanding of the importance and necessity of philosophy in agricultural education. Areas of philosophic agreement should be communicated to provide the leadership needed by future members of the profession. Brubacher (1962, pp. 359-360) described his views concerning the need to effectively transmit philosophic principles when he wrote:

The philosophical differences . . . which divide and separate us are not biologically inherent. For the most part, they are learned. Consensus, therefore, may also be a matter of learning, or perhaps better, relearning. Perhaps nothing corrects . . . or so reveals the real opposition as does face-to-face discussion of issues.

Brubacher (1962) continued by describing the importance of expanding areas of consensus among prevalent philosophies in the profession without compromising the unique aspects of any to a significant degree. Each well-conceived philosophy provides a unique contribution to education in that it prevents stagnation of the educational scene in these times of change. Differences should be acknowledged by members of our profession, but greater emphasis should focus on practical changes which are supported by areas of agreement among prevalent philosophies in the field.

Program planners (e.g., teacher educators, state supervisors, curriculum specialists, etc.) plan an important role in bridging the gap between philosophic theories and practice. These persons must communicate areas of philosophic consensus in the pre-service and in-service programs which they develop and conduct. Their duties are difficult as they must have "feet in both camps" and provide the link between philosophy and practice. Local vocational agriculture programs should reflect areas of philosophic agreement in the profession in addition to exhibiting relevance on the practical level of implementation.

Developing a Philosophy

Philosophies are developed through a synthesis of ideas and beliefs relevant to the profession and by identifying principles upon which programs should be based. Ideas and beliefs concerning education, agriculture and society in general must be analyzed as they relate to vocational agriculture programs and should be incorporated in the resulting philosophy.

A diagrammatic model, developed at Iowa State University, which identifies principles undergirding one philosophy of vocational agriculture is provided in Figure 1. This model illustrates the process through which a philosophy is developed and how it should interrelate with all aspects of vocational agriculture programs.

Beginning with a nearly infinite set of beliefs, ideas and theories concerning education, agriculture and society in general, an individual must analyze and synthesize those beliefs in the development of a philosophy. Such a philosophy should be based on conceptual principles which provide a defensible foundation for vocational agriculture programs. Principles such as those identified by Kahler, et al., (1976) provide a logical point to begin an examination of this philosophy.

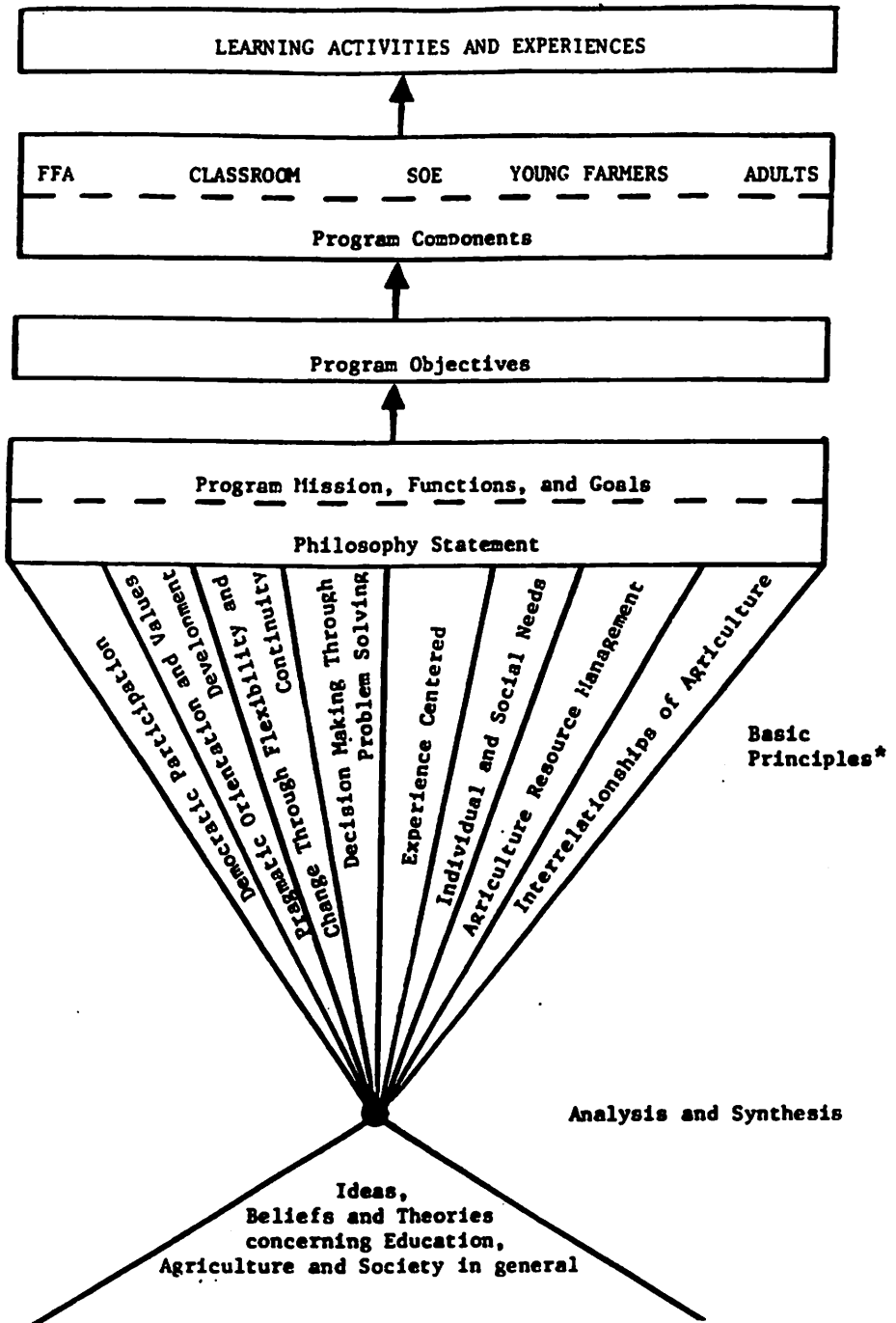


Figure 1. Philosophic model for vocational agriculture.
 *Source: Department of Agricultural Education, Iowa State University, 1976

Basic Principles

The principle concerning democratic participation denotes the importance of developing programs which encourage self-direction. The aim is to avoid dictatorial decisions governing the learning experiences provided by encouraging student, parent and community involvement in addition to guidance provided by the local vocational agriculture instructor. Democratic principles also contribute to a determination of appropriate teaching methods in an attempt to provide successful learning experiences.

Pragmatic orientation and values development addresses the need for developing and conducting educational programs which closely reflect or simulate society in general. Learning experiences provided should result in active learning and encourage students to examine their ethical and aesthetic values where relevant. A key point involves the realization that specific actions result in certain consequences which may in turn require further action and thus further consequences in a continuous fashion. Again, both ends and means are important considerations in vocational agriculture programs and ends alone should not be considered as final.

Vocational agriculture programs must be able to adjust and adapt to changes in the environment in which they function. Change through flexibility and continuity emphasizes the importance of conducting programs which facilitate change while maintaining a degree of continuity. Students should have an opportunity to experience change without revolution and ultimately develop their own ability to cope with changes which are likely to occur in the society in which they live.

Life itself is comprised of problems which require solutions. Decision making through problem solving acknowledges the need to prepare students to systematically solve problems and make necessary decisions. This principle has direct implications for the selection of appropriate teaching methods as problem solving is an ability which improves with practice. In conjunction with the principle involving pragmatic orientation, students should address realistic problems through learning activities in vocational agriculture to receive maximum benefit.

Experience has been described as the medium through which human beings live and die. Therefore, learning in vocational agriculture should be experience-centered by providing active rather than passive learning activities. Past and present experiences of students should be utilized to enhance their learning. The components of local vocational agriculture programs (i.e., classroom, SOE, FFA) provide various and unique opportunities to expand student experience.

Students have needs which are unique to themselves as individuals as well as those which are characteristic of all students and society in general. Student needs should be identified and attempts made to fulfill the needs of each individual. This principle emphasizes the importance of conducting programs which meet needs common to all students as well as providing opportunities to fulfill the more specific needs of each individual student.

Vocational agriculture programs have subject matter which is of primary concern. The principle of agriculture resource management focuses on that relevant subject matter. Special emphasis should be placed on managing the factors, forces, processes and resources which are involved in conducting agricultural enterprises. Specific enterprises should be identified and relevant experiences provided, based on the needs of the local community.

Agriculture cannot be taught as one discipline of science, separate and distinct from all others. Interrelationships of agriculture acknowledges that the teaching of agriculture should attempt to promote the importance of agriculture as it relates to other aspects of the society in which we live.

Each of the principles identified should be examined on its own merits before incorporation into a philosophy statement. A statement of philosophy should describe the mission of vocational agriculture, the functions which the program should serve and the overall goals of the program. As a profession and individually, we must examine our philosophy in view of current trends facing education, agriculture and society. Recent and anticipated changes in these areas may provide the impetus needed to "modernize" our philosophy of vocational agriculture as we prepare to enter the 21st century.

Program components and objectives, such as those depicted in Figure 1, should be based on the philosophy developed. These features of vocational agriculture programs, if deemed important, should be incorporated into local programs. Unique differences in vocational agriculture programs should become apparent through specific learning activities and experiences provided at the local level.

Vocational agriculture programs have expanded their scope in recent years as a result of legislative mandate. Unfortunately, educational philosophy has not been the guiding force for those changes. Leaders of our profession must continually re-evaluate the principles upon which our philosophy is based and use them to guide and conduct effective vocational agriculture programs. Failure to do so will undoubtedly result in programs which are guided by legislative or political philosophy rather than by educational philosophy. Changing times require that changes also take place in the education of students. Program changes should be the result of adjustments in our guiding philosophy rather than a "knee-jerk" reaction to legislation.

References

- Brubacher, J. S. (1962). Modern philosophies of education. New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., Inc.
- Evans, R. N. (1971). Foundations of vocational education. Columbus, OH: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Co.
- Kahler, A. A., et al. (1976). Basic principles for agriculture and agribusiness education. Ames: Iowa State University, Department of Agricultural Education.
- Pal, Y., & Meyers, J. T. (1967). Selected readings in the philosophy of education. New York: The MacMillan Company.
- Rosenfield, S. A. (1984). Educational agriculture: A model for educational reform. Education Week, 3, 24, 21.
- Thompson, J. F. (1973). Foundations of vocational education, social and philosophical concepts. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc.