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# Contribution to Swapmeet Discussion

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Much of the discussion about what should be included in tertiary programs in agricultural economics starts with the wrong question. The issue should not be what students should know, but what they should be able to do. Defining behavioural objectives sets the learning agenda much more clearly. It also has important implications for assessment methods. All those students who can do what they are supposed to be able to do, pass, and all those who cannot, don't pass. (They need not fail because they can be allowed to study further until they can pass.) Grades depend not on how well students perform the prescribed tasks but on what range of tasks, in addition to the basic ones, they can do.

Contrast this with present assessment methods wherein, typically, with pass grades of around 50 per cent and choice of questions in examinations and tests, the minimum standard is that students half know about half the material. Small wonder that employers complain that new graduates are useless until they have been taught their jobs.

Of course, the proposal begs the question of what behavioural objectives should be set. These should be determined by the academic staff in consultation with prospective employers and former students. Experience in trying to apply the approach shows the need to cut back savagely on what is attempted. It takes much longer to teach students to be able to do some tasks rather than simply to pass an examination about some aspects of those tasks.

There are many impediments to the introduction of this suggested approach. The first is academic conservatism and inertia. Change is always resisted in universities. A related point is that it is not easy to identify behavioural objectives for some courses. This is a fault in the design

and content of the existing courses rather than a weakness in the approach, but persuading colleagues that they have not thought deeply enough about what they are doing is not easy. For example, objectives for a course in basic microeconomics should be expressed in terms of students being able to resolve certain classes of problems to derive useful predictions or prescriptions, rather than in terms of being able to define such concepts as elasticity or marginal cost.

A further problem is that the approach cannot be successfully introduced bit by bit. Students simply don't believe it when told, in one of many courses, that they must have full command of certain skills. The innovating teacher is faced with the option of a very low pass rate or of reverting to the old way.

Teaching schedules would need to be changed so that quick learners can either move on to other courses and graduate sooner or can have the opportunity to enlarge their range of skills while slower learners are still mastering the basics. Such flexibility is inconsistent with the old chalk and talk approach to teaching and flexible methods of delivery, such as programmed learning, would be needed. Again, such changes will be resisted by the conservatives.

Despite the problems, maybe in the new post Green Paper era there will be a Faculty somewhere that will be adventurous enough and sufficiently attuned to the real needs of the market for agricultural economists to give the approach a serious trial.

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