PROCEEDINGS

of the

WESTERN FARM ECONOMICS ASSOCIATION

THIRTY-SEVENTH ANNUAL MEETING

JULY 15, 16, 17, 1964

CALIFORNIA STATE POLYTECHNIC COLLEGE
SAN LUIS OBISPO, CALIFORNIA

THOUGHTS ON EFFECTIVE TEACHING

Manning H. Becker, Oregon State University

Mark Twain once said, "Everybody talks about the weather, but nobody does anything about it." To paraphrase this famous quotation, I might state, "there is a lot of talk about effective teaching, but what is being done about it?"

The topic assigned to me--"Thoughts on Effective Teaching"-- is certainly a broad one. When asked to give a specific title to this paper, I could think of nothing better than the one assigned. I like the title because it gives me plenty of latitude, and does not specify whether these are to be my thoughts, someone else's, selected thoughts, or random thoughts.

After having accepted this assignment, I began to have reservations. I began to ask myself, "What do I know about effective teaching?" What contribution can I make to this complicated subject? Why was I asked? Lastly, why did I ever let myself get talked into this?

The answers to these questions are short and simple. I know little about effective teaching. The contribution will be small, if even noticeable. I don't know why I was asked. I suspect it was because no one else was foolish enough to expose their ignorance. I let myself be talked into it because I like to teach--at least I like to try. I don't know whether I am an effective teacher or not, but I would like to be. If putting some thoughts down on paper will improve my own effectiveness, then the effort and exposure of my limitations will have been worthwhile from my standpoint. If by chance this paper brings forth some discussion, disagreement, or stimulates interest, so much the better.

Right here at the beginning, I want to make it perfectly clear that I am violating one of the principles I consider to be of the utmost importance in effective teaching. I am attempting to discuss a topic about which I know very little. Teaching begins with learning. Here again, I find myself guilty of not learning more. Last winter at the time I accepted this assignment, I was sure there would be ample time to read the literature, discuss the problem with others, and in general learn more about the process. But, like the rest of you, I found other things coming first; by the time I had taught three courses spring quarter, it was time to write this paper, and my only opportunity to continue learning was to learn by doing. I would remind you that my assignment was not "How to Teach Effectively", but rather to give you some thoughts on effective teaching.

In Lowell Harden's presidential address before the American Farm Economics Association meeting in Minneapolis last summer, he had this to say: "In the teaching area, we have both service and major roles to perform in raising economic literacy. Effective teaching, like meaningful research, does not come about automatically. We have already turned our professional spotlight on meritorious research. Equal seriousness about teaching excellence is in order." It seems appropriate that the program committee has chosen to devote

a portion of the Western Farm Economics Association meeting to this important area of our work. I am sure that this came about, not as a result of trying to emulate what the American Farm Economics Association is doing, but rather because the program committee genuinely felt that this area of our work and responsibility is worthy of the time.

Last summer it was my privilege, along with some of the rest of you from this group, to attend a workshop on the improvement of undergraduate instruction of agricultural economics held at Bimidji State College, Bimidji, Minnesota. By now, each of you should have received copies of the proceedings of this excellent workshop. I would recommend these proceedings to you for your study. Obviously, one cannot get as much from reading the papers as by participating, but I am sure that several of the papers and conclusions from the workshop groups would be well worth your time to read. I shall not go into the details of this workshop, but only give you briefly the mechanics of the workshop. There were about ten major papers. The participants of the workshop were divided into groups to discuss the papers. The work groups' topics were: 1) Objectives of Undergraduate Instruction in Agricultural Economics; 2) Facilitating the Learning Process; 3) Standards of Excellence for Effective Teaching; 4) The Role of the Adviser in Undergraduate Education; 5) Teaching Innovations Implications for Agricultural Economics; 6) Responsibility to Graduates. I should like to report briefly on two or three of these topics. I shall not attempt to summarize all the papers, but only bring appetite to the extent that you will read and study some of these proceedings.

Dr. Fisher, College of Medicine, University of Illinois, has this to say in his paper on being an effective teacher, "It may be a tautology to state that teaching is far from a simple task, but it is that very complexity which escapes the attention of the instructors floundering their ways through their courses. Teaching seems a simple task because so few factors comprise the process. There are, after all, only three elements--the instructor, the student, and the subject matter." He goes on to say, "On the first analysis it would appear that the definition of an effective teacher should follow the same straightforward pattern. An effective instructor is one who (a) knows his subject matter, (b) knows his student, and (c) knows himself. Most of us have little difficulty accepting the first criterion. While there have been times in the past when each of us may have been only a few pages ahead of the student, as we began to have true mastery of our discipline, the strength derived from knowledge manifested itself in increasingly effective teaching. To teach without preparation is foolhardy; to teach without knowledge is disastrous. But what truly constitutes mastery of one's own discipline?"

I shall not go on with the other explanation, but rather shift to the conclusions that the workshop group arrived at after consideration of this paper. From the report of the work group on standards of excellence of teaching, I take the following information: "The teacher faces two tasks in his classroom, one is the transmission of current knowledge. The other task is that of inspiration and challenge--asking students to do their best so that they contribute fully towards bettering society. The relative importance

of the two tasks depends upon the goals for a particular institution, course, and instructor.

An ideal teacher combines talents for:

1) Organizing course contents so that meaningful structures emerge in student's minds.

2) Presenting the material to facilitate meaningful structure.

3) Inspiring students to develop during the course and to progress after its completion.

4) Challenging students with the major problems of society.

5) Evaluating students so that others will have an accurate appraisal of their talents and limits.

6) Recognizing and treating each student with dignity and respect.

7) Reappraising personal teaching efforts to achieve excellence.

To this list suggested by the workshop group, I would add two more. Perhaps either or both are implied in the list above, but I feel they should be spelled out specifically.

1) He must have the ability and wisdom to sort out the truly relevant facts, principles, concepts, and be able to communicate these to the students.

2) He must be convinced that these <u>are</u> important, and must be able to infect the student with this same enthusiasm.

Too often, I'm afraid, we cover material in our courses that we really are not convinced is important. When we do this, it seems to me that this is an admission of lack of mastery of the subject by the instructor, or laziness on his part because he follows what is in the book rather than taking the time to organize and present what he considers more appropriate material.

A different group at the Bemidji workshop considered the topic "Evaluation of Students." They reported the following: "Evaluation of students is a particularly important aspect of teaching because examinations signal the course highlights to students.

Five purposes of examinations are:

1) Motivation of students.

2) Determination of grades--largely administrative duty.

3) Helping students to restructure their knowledge.

4) Feed-back to the professor concerning class progress.

5) Feed-back to the students so that an appreciation of what he knows and does not know develops."

Again, what I have to add may be implied in the five purposes of examination, but I personally consider the examination as much an evaluation of the instructor as the student. When my students do poorly in an examination, I feel that I have failed to communicate with, or teach them what I consider to be the important parts of the course work covered by the examination. When they do well, I feel I have made some progress with them. This is not just a matter of making examination questions easy or difficult.

An illustration at this point might be helpful. Following an examination in one of my courses this spring, a student came into my office to, as he put it, "discuss the previous examination." One of the questions he missed on the examination dealt with the application of an economic principle in solving a farm management problem. He had completely missed the question, but stated he couldn't understand why, because he knew all the material relevant to this problem. I asked him to define several terms, which he did correctly. I told him so, and he replied, "you see, I do know all this material." My reply to him was, "Yes, you know it, but of what value is it to you?" He sat there a little while and finally said something like this, "I see, you teach differently than other instructors. You really don't care if the student knows the material, you only give credit if he can apply it." This apparently came as a shock to this young man, and he was a little bitter about the whole proceedings. Maybe I was wrong, but the complaint he was expressing about my teaching and examination I considered as a compliment. Maybe I hadn't effectively communicated with the students as to what I wanted from them--a demonstration of their ability to apply principles--but at least this student had finally come to the realization of what I was trying to do.

Let us continue this evaluation of the instructor. A work group at the work conference of Deans and Directors of Resident Instruction in Agricultural Land Grant Colleges and State Universities meeting in Stillwater, Oklahoma, in 1961,* arrived at these characteristics of a good teacher:

A. Technical competence:

1. Mastery of his discipline in the past.

2. Breadth and depth of scholarship indicative of his future.

3. Recognition of his own limitations.

B. Personality:

1. Warmth in dealing with other persons.

2. Fairness in dealing with student problems.

C. Originality, including creativity and independence.

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* Manual of proceedings, July 16-20, 1961, "Evaluating the Effectiveness of Instruction in Agriculture."

D. Ability to organize:

1. Time.

2. Efforts.

3. Subject matter in his own and related fields.

The other subjects and conclusions of this work group I leave to your further study. I am sure the deliberations of this group encompassed more than the outline. I shall comment on only one point of this outline--the first--Technical Competence. The subheadings under this point include (1) Mastery of his discipline in the past, (2) Breadth and depth of scholarship indicative of his future, (3) Recognition of his limitations.

Mastery of the discipline is certainly a part of competence, but nowhere did I see any reference to ability to transmit this knowledge to the students. To me this is of paramount importance. Complete mastery of the subject matter is only one side of the scale of competency--the ability to transmit this knowledge brings the scale into balance. This balance is essential in all instruction, but even more so at the undergraduate level. Maybe we are guilty--in the opposite extreme--of some of the criticism often leveled at the preparation of primary and secondary school teachers. Where many feel there is too much emphasis on methods and not enough on subject matter in preparing primary and secondary school teachers, we may have gone too far in the other direction. How many of you have had any course work or really have studied methods of instruction and principles of learning.

The comment is often made that the rewards for excellence in teaching are not commensurate with excellence in research. Even though excellence in teaching may be difficult to evaluate, I feel the good teacher is rewarded. Perhaps the rewards may not be as great in a monetary sense, but the truly dedicated teacher is well rewarded by his efforts in other ways if he is really good. It could be that those who make these statements are not the good teachers they think they are.

One further thought on evaluation. With all their limitations, I have found student evaluation forms to be extremely useful. By careful study and evaluation, the instructor can improve his effectiveness, at least in the short run. The longer run impact on the student may be more difficult, but not impossible to evaluate.

Much thought and effort are being directed toward improving teaching efficiency and innovations in teaching. I shall not comment on this subject--as important as it is. Rather, I would call your attention to Dr. Warren Vincent's excellent paper, the discussants' remarks, and the report of the work group on this subject in the Bemidji workshop proceedings.

At this point I would like to make a suggestion. It's not new or very original, but I believe it has merit. My own experience in participating in the workshop at Bemidji was enlightening and stimulating. If we really want

to improve our effectiveness as teachers, I believe we could all benefit from attending and participating in a teaching workshop. The exchange of ideas and teaching techniques at the Bemidji workshop in which I participated was most helpful to me. I would hope that a similar one could be held in the West. If this is not possible, departmental seminars would be of value.

Part of my philosophy about teaching can probably be best summed up this way: When class time comes around my attitude is: I get to go to class--not I have to go to class!