

## Looking at the Future of Vocational Education: Vocational Agricultural Technology

John D. Denson

The subject of Vocational Education is very personal to me, as I am an Agricultural Technology Teacher Educator. Academic subjects such as English, Science, and Mathematics are extremely important for students to communicate with understanding. Certainly, English, Science, and Mathematics classes help students in the Agricultural Technology classes as well. However, the lack of Agricultural Technology classes deprives a student of *horse sense* learning experiences.

People with *horse sense* are prudent. They can tell the real from the sham. They can harness energy to get the job done. Agricultural Technology teaches a student *horse sense* through hands-on instruction and students *get it...* they learn the *horse sense* of living a better, healthier, conservative, democratic life, within a better, healthier, conservative, democratic environment. Simply stated, improvements and progression are needed (if you are not improving and progressing, you are going backwards), but we need to hold on to our roots. *A tree without roots cannot weather the storm.*

I have had the desire all my life to become an Ag teacher. My grampy and granny had a ranch out in the country, and I would spend as much time and as many summers with them as I could, desiring to learn as much as possible about animals, farming, and ranching. As high school drew near, the desire to study agriculture

seemed to finally become a reality. However, the road to becoming an Ag teacher was filled with many potholes.

The first pothole came in high school. I was not allowed to take agriculture classes. What? I was not allowed to study agriculture? Because of plans to attend college, my high school counselor would not allow it: she explained that vocational classes were for students not planning to attend college. I was allowed, however, to take “shop” and was able to make it through high school with the shop classes. As I planned for college, it was difficult to find a college I could afford and that offered Ag classes. As a bull rider, rodeo scholarships, as well as many part-time jobs, helped finance my studies while attending college first in Weatherford, Texas, and then in Stephenville, Texas. My Ag teachers were the best, too, at both Weatherford College (WC) and Tarleton State University (TSU)! When you really are trying hard to be an Ag teacher, it shows, and there are good agriculture people who are pleased to help.

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After graduating from WC with an Associate in Farm and Ranch Management, and after graduating from TSU with a BS in Agricultural Services and Development (with a minor in Animal Science), I went on to earn a Master’s in Education at Stephen F. Austin State University (SFASU), and will earn a Doctorate in Educational Leadership during the coming year at SFASU.

This Agriculture Educator is so pleased to see renewed attention to vocational educa-

tion—to see it returning to the front arena, so to speak—and to see how people are now realizing the greater need for vocational education in today’s world, when it is perhaps more possible than ever to truly enjoy working with others to develop a better environment for the future. There is better machinery for developing crops, for providing food, and for providing clothing and shelter. There is a whole world of robots able to assist in any field.

***But, I am convinced (as both a parent and a teacher) vocationally-oriented classes will provide better training for each of these girls in each of the fields they have chosen.***

This author has two daughters, each one very different from the other. The oldest daughter is very interested in Vocational Agriculture and has hopes of becoming a Veterinarian, having the desire to care for animals. The younger daughter is more interested in the Arts. The older daughter cannot get enough of agriculture, working with animals. Her favorite pet is a pig she calls “Shadow” because it is black and follows her everywhere (like a shadow). The younger daughter has given working with animals a try, showing rabbits at the county fair, then showing goats, and finally showing a heifer at the Houston and Fort Worth Stock Shows. She did not enjoy working with animals at all.

The older daughter just seems to have a talent for working with animals and getting the animals to perform in the way she needs them to perform. The younger daughter’s talents are in the Arts. She enjoys learning and playing music. She plays several different musical instruments very well, she loves drawing and painting, and she is learning to be a seamstress, as well as cooking very well. While the older desires a scholarship in Agriculture, the younger desires a scholarship in Music and Art. But, I am convinced (as both a parent and a teacher)

vocationally-oriented classes will provide better training for each of these girls in each of the fields they have chosen. There are opportunities for learning through career technology classes that are not available through any other source; such as the new Meats Laboratory at our high school, providing education in all areas of the study of meat, or the assistance of an Ag teacher to assist in the planting of crops, or arranging flowers. There is no substitute for the assistance an agricultural educator can provide.

There are students in college today who took vocational agriculture at Longview High School with me and they now have a desire to become Ag teachers themselves. Had each of these students not taken Vocational Agriculture classes in high school, they probably would have never gone to college, and never had a desire to become an Ag teacher. There is a very special feeling when these students call me up just to talk about what’s going on in their studies. It seems obvious, too, that there are some students who take an Ag class just thinking they will get an *easy* grade; and, yet, participation in hands-on learning in the Ag classes makes such a difference, they become eager to learn.

Upon signing on to teach at Longview High School, I was immediately asked to direct the construction of the best Meat Processing Educational Laboratory in Texas east of IH-45. This Meat Lab has been such a great encouragement for students to take Ag classes. They receive hands-on training in Meats classes. Students are prepared at the time of their graduation to be employed in any area of the meat processing industry. Several of my students have been hired by Brookshire’s to be their butchers. Students graduating with these experiences are also well prepared to major in any area of agriculture as they enter college.

The children of today have a different future than any other generation: each generation experiences its own changes. This generation, however, has a greater-than-ever need for vocational education. As the vocational educators of

today, we should provide as much assistance as possible to ensure students receive beneficial, hands-on learning experiences. That they not disdain the work that got their families where they are. That they see the intelligence needed to do work well, work that supports family and community. As educators, we should strive to be the best we can be, be a role model that will encourage today's children to be the best they can be, and encourage each student to discover their calling.

In any direction, vocational classes are needed. Our children are the future of the world. We have heard this statement over and over again, but the depths of this statement are tremendous. If our children do not have an understanding of practical abilities, this world will have a sad future. The world will have just as sad a future if every student decides to go in the same direction. More than ever, our society needs intelligent and well trained people working with animals, to ensure that our food is safely produced and processed.

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There are numerous skills to learn through vocational classes. Longview High School, and most other high schools as well, offer vocational education classes for most anything a student might attempt to do in their lives. If a student loves working on a car, whether it is working

on the motor or the body of the car, there is a vocational class for an education in that field. If a student desires to be a florist, seamstress, cook, welder, butcher, farmer, or rancher there are classes in vocational education for this training; and anyone with the desire to be the best they can be at whatever they choose to be, should consider taking a vocational class in that field. However, some seemingly lead students and parents to feel vocational training results in receiving a lesser education, rather than vocational classes being an asset and broadening

their education. This is simply a lack of understanding and the need for parents to question what is available for their children.

As an Ag teacher, there are many opportunities available for assisting students in life training, and experiences of feeling the need to help students realize their talents through Vocational Education. There are needs for all talents throughout the world, each one assisting the other. If there were no agriculture or any other technical studies, we obviously would soon have no need for English, Science, and Mathematics. We can realize the world's need for agriculture to help supply for health and security of the world. But we also need to teach the skills of preservation, the ability to provide food, shelter, and clothing; and, this Ag teacher would like to think these students would have employment opportunities available for their livelihood in which they could be happy and enjoy the work they are performing.

An Ag Educator should be a leader who enjoys the employment he or she is undertaking; be the role model who is encouraging stu-

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dents to also become a positive role model and life preserver.

What, then, should a good Ag Educator look like? I attended the funeral a couple of weeks ago of a very dear friend. This very dear friend was Mr. Brown, an Ag Educator who taught *horse sense*. He could teach a lesson, and then you could instantly use that knowledge to make or save money in an agricultural operation. He was the Ag teacher that made me want to hang in there and not give up on becoming an Ag Educator to also teach *horse sense*. The very large building holding this memorial was packed with people desiring to honor this gentleman's life. There was not a person in that place that had not been touched by this gentleman's influence on their lives. Many of the people attending, such as me, were students he had taught in his agriculture classes. These students did whatever they had to do in order to attend Mr. Brown's memorial. Perhaps, this is what an Ag teacher should look like. Perhaps, quite often, life is too busy to have the time or desire to assist others.

*John Denson is an agricultural educator in the Longview Independent School District in Texas. John has been instrumental in his district as an advocate for vocational education and for the vocational classes to be a reflection of the school's racially diverse student population.*