



Outside the Box

► by **Tom Field**, director of producer education,
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Lessons from the barn

As my oldest son heads off to the university this fall, I find myself looking more avidly for those teachable moments that will help prepare him and his brothers for life beyond my daily influence. Raising them in a quasi-suburban area has limited their agricultural experience, but their 4-H breeding heifer and market steer projects have provided a vibrant classroom.

Educating the citizenry

We are also blessed to live in a community where agriculture still clings to the economic and geographic landscape and where many of our friends make their living from the land. Not long ago, as our neighbor artificially inseminated (AI'ed) one of the 4-H heifers, the moment provided a unique learning opportunity. I handed one of the boys an AI sleeve and steered him to the back of the chute. His initial reaction to his first palpation was, "my teachers are not going to believe this."

His words elicited only a smile at first,

but as I recounted them later it struck me how profoundly problematic it was that his teachers really wouldn't believe it. Somewhere in our attempt to educate each generation we forgot that the subject matter equal in value to history, literature, biology, algebra and P.E. (physical education) is that of agriculture and the economics, production, processing and distribution of food. The lack of agricultural knowledge is having profound effects as policy makers, legislators, journalists and activists function from an uninformed, if not ignorant, foundation as it relates to food and agriculture.

As I pondered the challenge of educating the citizenry about agriculture, a number of technical, demographic and process-based topics came to mind that ought to be included in a curriculum designed to introduce the topic to people with limited knowledge. But more important than the technical topics, there are lessons to be learned from the practice of agriculture that go far beyond the process of filling bellies and into the realm of building philosophical and spiritual perspectives. The benefit of delivering such lessons in barns, fields and farm shops would be dramatic.

Life lessons

For those of us blessed to experience and work in agriculture, lessons about life came early and often in our training. From those experiences we can create a list of valuable lessons obtained from agriculture. As I have watched my sons as they navigate life with only a limited set of experiences in agriculture, I have held out hope that they had still gained valuable insight and experience. Many of these lessons would be valuable fodder for creating a good school curriculum:

- The first rule of the barn is accountability — feed on time, look to the condition of the stock, close the

gates, keep the stalls clean, and don't let the water tank run over.

- Finish the job even when conditions are less than ideal. Overcome heat, cold, rain, snow and the myriad of conditions that conspire to make a job more difficult. Despite the hardships, find a way to finish.
- Life is messy. Deal with it. Whining is wasted breath, and nobody is listening anyway.
- Just about anything worth having will require effort, dedication and some level of personal sacrifice. No amount of money or luxury can replace the personal satisfaction of a job well done.
- Take care of tools and equipment. Superior workmanship is the result of a creative mind, skilled hands and the correct use of appropriate tools. Even though many things are indeed replaceable, replacement is a far less preferred approach as compared to taking care of them in the first place.
- Peace of mind can be found in the simplicity of a barn, where the smells of cattle, tack and hay and interaction with God's creatures provides assurance that there is balance in the world.
- Teamwork is central to success, and every member has to carry his or her own weight.

The notion that these lessons are of value to America's children is not a new idea. Thomas Jefferson and a host of colonial leaders advocated that every citizen of the new republic should understand both the production of food and the role of agriculture in society. Agriculture was on the list of the curriculum that Jefferson implemented when he founded the University of Virginia. Yet, over the decades, agriculture's role has slipped from the core curriculum into a specialization; and, in too many schools, agriculture is largely ignored or misrepresented by activist's agendas or politically motivated curricular supplements.

Thus, the time has come for agricultural leaders to advocate for their own profession by engaging schools in the process of providing a basic knowledge of the food system as a part of its core offering. The lessons from the barn have a lot to offer America's youth, and a citizenry educated about the food supply chain will avoid policies that undercut the ability of the nation to feed her people.

Editor's Note: Tom Field is a rancher from Parlin, Colo., and executive director of producer education for the National Cattlemen's Beef Association.