

THE TEACHING OF AGRICULTURE

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The teaching of agriculture by Aretas W. Nolan

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ARETAS W. NOLAN

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OF AGRICULTURE**

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BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY

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PREFACE

ALL well-established subjects of instruction in the public schools are more or less standardized and uniform throughout the country. The fields of science, mathematics, English, and history have been carefully outlined. Instruction in vocational subjects is not so well defined, and it may take many more years to determine the proper subject-matter and methods in order to secure desired vocational results from such instruction.

Agriculture has been taught in the public schools for a sufficient number of years to warrant the following conclusions: —

- (a) That agriculture as a subject of study contributes to certain great values and controls of life;
- (b) That agriculture applies directly to concrete problems of everyday life, whose solution has educational values; and
- (c) That the study of agriculture liberalizes the education of the student as well as trains him directly in the vocation of farming, resulting in improved farm practice.

Agriculture is one of the major vocations and basic industries. There is a fund of agricultural knowledge which has grown out of the experience of farmers and

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163

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of the educational work of the land-grant colleges for the past fifty years, and this agricultural knowledge has been and can be taught. Our problem is to organize that part of agricultural science and practice which is teachable in the public schools, and to establish such principles and methods as will guide in the proper teaching of the subject. Agriculture in the public schools should have a decided vocational aim. It should give the student a degree of accurate knowledge and skill and familiarity with the best modern farm practices. Agricultural education should guarantee that the future farmers be educated country gentlemen who work with their hands, and gather about them the best things which civilization affords.

Within these pages are recommendations concerning the aim, the scope of work, the principles, materials, and methods to be used in teaching agriculture in elementary and secondary schools.

ARETAS W. NOLAN.

URBANA, ILLINOIS,
January, 1918.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION. <i>By Eugene Davenport</i> . . .	vii
I. SOME REASONS FOR TEACHING AGRICULTURE . . .	1
II. NATURE-STUDY PRECEDING AGRICULTURE . . .	12
III. ELEMENTARY AGRICULTURE AND BOYS' AND GIRLS' CLUB WORK	21
IV. HIGH-SCHOOL AGRICULTURE	31
V. SOME METHODS AND PRINCIPLES IN TEACHING AGRICULTURE	99
VI. THE TEACHER OF AGRICULTURE	162
VII. TEACHING VOCATIONAL AGRICULTURE	166
APPENDIX	
Suggestions for a farm, home, and community survey	167
Suggested course in nature study—first six grades	179
Suggested course in elements of agriculture— seventh and eighth grades	204
Suggestions for laboratory equipment	224
Suggestions for agricultural laboratory	227
The Smith-Hughes Law and Vocational Agri- culture in secondary schools	228
BIBLIOGRAPHY	i
OUTLINE	v
INDEX	ix

INTRODUCTION

THAT the teaching of agriculture should be attempted at all was until recently quite commonly regarded as one of the fads that would speedily perish in the wreckage of its own failures. Instead, it has lived, and to-day it constitutes a basis for the recasting of many of our convictions, not only as to the materials and methods, but also as to the ideals and purposes, of education.

Whether the chief purpose in any individual instance is the education of farmers, or whether it is the utilization of the materials and methods of farming for the purpose of a general education, the living force, if there be any, in agricultural materials lies in the two facts: first, that agriculture is a part of nature; and second, that by these agricultural materials we make use of natural facts and forces for the definite end of sustaining life.

It has been but inevitable that some mistakes should be made in our earlier attempts to teach this complicated and difficult subject. We have often been quite uncertain as to whether we were teaching a science or an art, or whether after all our principal purpose was not, perhaps without our knowing it, to educate men. If the former were our purpose, we were very strenuous about materials, and if the latter

assumed greater prominence in our minds, we emphasized methods.

We have often forgotten that even in so far as agriculture is a science, it is not an exact science like mathematics. Much bad teaching has been done, no doubt, simply because of a determination to compel the student to get his lessons and to maintain grades indicative of a creditable academic standard. Have these grades or credits been too easily earned? Then the course has been stiffened by adding a mass of "memory work" not very different in purpose or character from the "busy work" of the lower grades. It must be definitely understood that no student in any branch of a natural science will ever make the grades that are sometimes found in mathematics, for example, where a mark of perfection is clearly possible.

But academic standing is not the true measure of success, either in the teaching or in the study of agriculture. That measure is found in the performance of those who actually go to the land, live there, and succeed; for, after all, the fundamental purpose of our great system of agricultural education is to insure a better agriculture and to make a country life as nearly perfect as possible.

The object of agricultural education is not even to arrest the tide that flows cityward and turn it back to the land, although that is one of the results; but the great purpose is to fit for country life those who have cast, or who are about to cast, their lots with the farm,