

Farmer-centred extension education

The educational venue of pasture walks in Wisconsin USA and the role of the facilitator

17

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Introduction

A relatively young extension agent is talking with an older agent; the older agent is widely known for his leading role in promoting pasture walks and grazing groups. The new agent finally says, *"I think I'm going to give up on these pasture walks, not going to do them this year. They just turn into a social gatherings, I don't see the value"*. Of course the young agent still has to prove to administration that he is effective in working with farmers and he has concluded that pasture walks are not getting him where he needs to go. He finds it difficult to quantify the results and frankly, probably thinks there often are not any positive results to be quantified. The older agent sighs in disbelief. This is a common sentiment that has come round yet again.

What *happens* on a pasture walk? What is taught? What is learned in the farmer-to-farmer exchange? What gets implemented? These questions are hard enough to answer in the most controlled venue, but are just the more difficult to discern in a free forum of a pasture walk. Yet I would maintain, from my experiences with some very successful walks, that this forum provides lessons that farmers can readily apply to their own farms. Some of the reasons for this should be obvious. The farmers are walking the fields and pastures of a fellow farmer. As they walk, they talk about what has been happening in the field, changes in the animals, weather, all the other factors that lead to the situation as presented. It is all completely real. As we travel from one discussion point to the next, themes begin to emerge. A problem in one pasture is often similar to or connected in some way to the next pasture. The farmers reach for experiences from their farms to comment and lend insight. It gradually becomes clear what needs to be done, sometimes even in a priority of needs, from most urgent to the least. The discussions typically cover topics from grazing patterns, to field size, to availability of water, to cow health, to supplemental feeding and so on...all triggered by the fact that we as a group are walking these fields and talking about what is happening.

In this era of qualitative research, I observed that farmers change their management based on the discussions. This is how farmers make decisions—they walk their fields. They may do small experiments to see if changes will help, and then they walk their fields to see what is happening. They make numerous observations, keeping in mind that the farm as a system has to fit together as a whole: for

example, 'if I do this it will affect that and I won't have money for this or time for that other thing I thought might help'. Simple answers just don't apply to the situations these farmers face, and on a pasture walk there is opportunity to discuss the complexities that one decision might precipitate.

Another obvious reasons that pasture walks are unique and work well is the relationships that the farmers develop with each other and the professionals that attend pasture walks. They trust each other after a while, they get to know each other's farms, the constraints, the unused opportunities and the style of the farmer as a risk-taker or as more conservative. As a group, they are all in the same basic situation with weather, prices, and vendors and they try to help each other keep costs down and profits up.

This points to the general applicability of farmers' groups to help each other be more competitive within a shifting context of markets and environmental conditions. The knowledge gained in this venue can be applied to many agricultural contexts. There are also important lessons to be gleaned regarding the role of facilitators in the farmers' group which has wider applicability than just the context of the State of Wisconsin USA, or the farming methods unique to dairy and beef operations.

Role of the agent/facilitator

Two agents in the study, Fred and John, worked extensively with grazer groups. They were similar in their approach to assisting the farmer groups. First, they did not see the group as 'their' group; leadership came from the farmers and extension was there to assist. If extension did not participate, the grazer group would continue. Second, they saw their role as organising discussion and debate, not being the centre of debate or the final 'expert' opinion in discussions. Third, there was some agreement that experiential knowledge is good, but can be counter productive if a single experience becomes 'fact' and people begin making decisions based on a single observation.

When theories emerged and the farmers were curious enough to pursue research, the agents helped to set up some experimental plots on graziers' farms. The agents also tend to retain the history of the group and bring previous observations to bear on the moment in hand. It was not

uncommon to hear statements like, *"this is very similar to what we saw on Bill's farm last month..."*. The most important characteristic of the agent is the ability to listen respectfully to farmers and not assume that technical knowledge and expertise is necessarily important to the discussion. Scientific definitions and systems analysis have little to do with the activities of these groups and to suspend those assumptions and biases is a prime task of any agent interested in working with this type of group. This is not as easy as it might sound, as I found out in my own experience of Bill's pasture walk, the story that follows. Bill's pasture walk took place in June in Fred's county. This walk was good in many ways, but provides some clearer than usual insights because of the way the discussion unfolded and developed during the course of the walk.

Starting with the farmer's questions

A key to Fred's methodology on pasture walks is to start with the farmer's questions. After the group is assembled and attentive, Fred will usually say something like, *"OK, what is the question here"*. Then the host farmer is in a position to layout what history he thinks is relevant and what his pressing problem is in that context.

My initial reaction to this process of starting with the farmer's questions was scepticism. I was taught in my technical/scientific education that you have to ask the right questions to get the right answers. What if the farmer's questions missed the point? After a process of arguing with myself about this issue it became clear that if you are going to be 'farmer-centred', the farmer's concerns and sense of the situation *has* to be the starting point. John put it best, during a group interview of the agents in the study, after hearing my reaction to Bill's walk (See Box 1):

Box 1

John: *One of the things you know that I think...I think this example here, and I see a lot of this...maybe the guy didn't have the right questions when he started out. A lot of cases they don't, but you or I can't make him ask the right questions, but when it is all said and done, with you there and me there, the group of his peers there, few strangers, few friends, neighbours, whatever [. . .]. If nothing else, if nothing else happened out of that whole thing in the next week or month or two, this guy might start thinking [...] At that point he begins to think about...ask the question, "Why am I doing this? Why?" And sit down and look at it and begin...and it's a slow process, I mean I think we've seen a lot of this over years as this whole thing evolves. You don't solve the problem in an hour and a half pasture walk.*

Answers to individual questions are often trivial

Often the answer to a question posed on a pasture walk is relatively trivial. The real work on a pasture walk is when the group transforms from chaotic voices reacting to questions, to a chorus that sees patterns across the farm fields and what those patterns mean to the farm operation as a whole. The following excerpt from early in Bill 's pasture walk (see Box 2) shows how the initial comments can be quite diverse and chaotic in nature:

Box 2

Bill: *This area here is today's pasture and they don't seem to be very satisfied with it. I gave them a little bit of clover last night to keep them milking, but they don't seem to want to eat this and I'm wondering should I keep them in here and make them chomp it down more. There seems to be stuff left to go so that's why..*

Hal: *There's more undesirable plants here...as compared to where we were a little bit ago...*

Bill: *This here didn't get burned..*

Hal: *We've got milkweed and goldenrod and they're not going to eat these, these are basically toxic, right..*

Fred: *Can be.*

Hal: *Or can be toxic.*

[Small discussions]

Fred: *Well OK Bill 's question is, should he keep his cows out here. What's the groups' consensus?*

Don: *He can't afford to waste the land.*

Don's dad: *He can't afford to lose to the bulk tank either though.*

Ron: *Feed 'em this in the winter.*

Distant farmer voice: *Get some horses.*

Don's dad: *No, No, No*

Don: *He could burn it down.*

Don's dad: *That wouldn't help you today, you burn it down and then graze it tighter.*

Ron: *Your talking about getting rid of that stuff aren't ya.* [Thatch layer]

Don: *The soil might not be deep enough to have the same type of pasture you have over there.*

Ron: *You've got to get some seed back under there?*

Fred: *This stuff has been pastured for a long time so I should encourage you to try to get whatever species you want to encourage, spin it on or dribble it on...what's the idea...*

Don's dad: *When you see goldenrod and all that it grows on pretty poor soil...and there ain't enough even to grow a pasture...*

Ron: *Pick the flowers first..*

So is this a fertility problem, a grazing management problem, a problem readily solved through managed use of fire, or a thatch problem, or...? Everyone seemed to have an answer that differed and had some small amount of truth in it, but the important moments came later when patterns between stations started to emerge and the group could focus seriously on how Bill could improve his pastures given his particular opportunities and constraints. Box 3 shows how the conversation became more cohesive at the end:

Box 3

Bill: *This is what has survived after a grazing [...] They were on this last night and I do hope to have them graze it down a little tighter than what they have done so far.*

Don's dad: *I think you're giving them too much area again.*

Australian: *Way, way, way too much area. If I had 20 cows in here I'd have that fence and I'd just walk along here every hour, I'd move it that far.*

Hal: *That's ironic what he mentioned because several years ago I had clover just about like what you see right there and I did exactly what he was suggesting, just literally pick up this white post, stretch that wire 2-3 feet and they would be right there just munching it right down.*

Don's dad: *And they will under the wire.*

Hal: *And they will even eat right under the wire.*

George: *Yeah they eat it before they step on it.*

Australian: *Shift it every hour or so, don't let them get hungry, don't let them get too far behind, you'll lose production that way, but if you shift it every hour, just before they run out, just before they get hungry shift it again, and again. There's a little bit of work involved...*

Hal: *It really isn't Bill, if you look at this... [Moves over to post]...just pick it out like that and put it right back in the ground, you gave them 3 more feet, and if you work it out right, just the way you have a zig and a zag you can stretch that wire.*

Bill: *Do I get a second reel and have another one on the other side?*

Australian: *Not with 20 cows, just do that. When you put your fence out, make it go that way, then turn right, then left, then right. You just sort of zig zag your loop and you don't have to shift.*

A system emerges

A larger vision did emerge from this chorus of voices. Early on they were single voices in conflict or competition for attention, but by the end it was clear what Bill had to do to develop his pastures. I think he was thinking that burning was a positive activity, but even on that pasture he needed to graze it more intensively or the thatch and prevalence of less desirable species would be a continuing problem. There were even demonstrations of the solution of fence shifting to keep the cows confined and eating at the edges. In fact he decided to not have the group go to the last station because he knew what the group would suggest there; it was clear to him.

The process on this walk was a shift from 'answering' the questions to discovering the patterns on the farm from the farmer's perspective. These patterns then suggested the system that was at work: under-grazing, that led to thatch and undesirable species, that resulted in difficulty establishing clover or other milk producing forages. Once the group established this cycle, the possible solutions were clear and, given Bill's constraints, solutions were offered. This system and the solutions unfolded in a gradual way over the course of the walk and it was a satisfying process for Bill; he was quite pleased with what he learned on the walk.

The system was not a scientific appraisal of his farm. It grew out of the group walking the land and addressing his questions. This is the major difference between the conventional agriculture mind-set and that found in grazing groups. These farmers do not want to be presented with an aerial photo and a master plan for pastures and rotations. These farmers will make incremental changes in management and paddock size as they see feasible within their system, not because an 'expert' has analysed the farm and come up with a system to lay on the landscape.

Conclusions

This type of venue for education of farmers could be applied to many areas of agriculture in the North or South. This would lead to various levels of complexity that are not covered in this discussion of pasture walks, but this individuality should be expected since each group and farm has unique characteristics. Overall though, in this complexity, it is essential to have a sensitive, listening facilitator to help the group stay together and discover consensus. This requires that the facilitator have a great deal of trust in the participating farmers, and take a position of not judging farmers on technical/scientific grounds, but rather being a co-learner on the walk, a co-discoverer.

I would submit that none of this is easy for technical people. I resisted the farmer's questions as a knee-jerk reaction, even though I had studied the concepts of being 'farmer-centred' for years. There are strongly ingrained prejudices that happen in technical education and these must be overcome if agents and other specialists are to interact in a respectful and productive way with these kinds of farmer groups. The work of farmer groups need to be understood on their own terms without judgement and technocratic bias. In this way farmers can share meaningful information with each other and learn appropriate solutions to their unique problems and challenges.

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