

The On-Farm Mentor's Guide:

Practical Approaches to Teaching on the Farm

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From Chapter 1.1, The Fine Art of Teaching – Principles and Practices

“WORK & EDUCATION. When it comes to farming, it’s impossible to draw a line between work and education. Even for practiced farmers, a job that seems routine can turn out to be instructive. This is particularly so for trainees—every job they do, even if they think they have “done it before,” is an opportunity to deepen their learning.

This makes a farm a rich teaching environment. It also makes your job as a teacher much easier. Even without your guidance, curious, hard-working trainees will learn. However, a good farmer mentor can enhance this process, not only by teaching useful background concepts and efficient techniques, but also by helping trainees avoid some of the mistakes most beginning farmers make.

Many farmers say that the first and most important thing they teach trainees, particularly beginners, is how to work. Thanks to our contemporary culture, very few young people arrive at a farm prepared for full days of doing hard manual labor in cold rain, under a scorching sun, or even in ideal weather conditions. Nothing you can say prepares people for this experience. Nonetheless, when you interview, you must lay the groundwork by stressing that being able to do physical labor for long periods of time in miserable weather conditions is an absolute requirement of the job. Of course, this is true whether you are simply hiring farm labor for the summer or are offering a fully developed on-farm training program.

If possible, given your workload and the time of year the trainee arrives, try to let people gradually adjust to this aspect of the job. Break up the day by having them do something inside a building on frosty mornings—seeding in the greenhouse, measuring out rations in the barn, or cleaning up the equipment shed are all possibilities. After lunch, when it’s a bit warmer, you won’t feel bad about sending them out to pick rocks all afternoon or dig trenches for header pipes for the irrigation system. By the end of the second week, they should be toughened up enough to handle eight hours of lard labor in nasty weather, but even then, you may want to break up the jobs to prevent their getting bored.”

From Chapter 1.2, The Fine Art of Mentoring – Principles and Practices

“Mentoring is all about relationships. Farm mentors don’t pick up their books and go home after teaching a class. Nor do farm trainees. Instead, both parties resume working together and, very often, go home to the same house for lunch and dinner, spend their evening recreational time together, and get up the next morning to do it all over again. This constant togetherness is one of the factors that make on-farm mentoring so much more complex than most types of teaching. Another is the inclusiveness of the subject matter; farm mentors aren’t simply teaching their students how to farm, they are also teaching them how to be. They must model and transfer the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that enable someone to be a good farmer, a good business manager, a good personnel manager, and more often than not, a good teacher and mentor. Mentoring is a demanding task, so it’s no wonder that it takes some years and a great deal of practice to master.

When you take on the role of mentor, you agree to go well beyond the role of instructor. A successful mentorship is learner-centered and it takes some skill to balance this training approach with the needs of your farm business. Pause and ask yourself why you choose to take this leap into mentoring trainees....”