

BeefTalk 588: Did You Learn Anything?



It is satisfying to watch and appreciate as people learn.

A hot topic in agriculture is generational transfer. It starts the day the heir is born. So why live in denial? As with all seasons, time goes by fast and the season ends. Life is the massive compilation of seasons that shrink as time goes on.

Likewise, school semesters start and there seems to be a lot of time from when a student looks at the syllabus and schedule until the final reports and exams are due. That time also travels fast and another semester of learning is coming to a close.

The word "satisfaction" probably is not descriptive enough. However, it is satisfying to watch and appreciate as people learn.

The cattle business, like every business, requires a certain amount of understanding. The biology and how these living systems work can be tweaked. These tweaks help producers add a dollar or two to their bottom line. Likewise, economic and financial management are processes that producers can learn to make the business side of the operation work.

At Dickinson State University, I teach the cow-calf management class. One of the exercises that the students are asked to do is an essay on surviving in the beef business. This year, the underlying tone of those essays was a simple message. We, as students and future producers, need to know more.

Keeping up with technology and business were identified as key as the students look forward to integrating into their professions the increasing understanding of living systems.

They want to understand more than the touchy-feely parts of grass and soil. They also want to understand how cells function and how the cells work with roots, bacteria, fungi and protozoa to produce grass.

"Are we actually selecting for better plants and beef cattle or are we changing the bacteria, fungi and protozoa that ultimately determine the ability of grass and beef to survive?" a student asked.

Good question and certainly mind provoking. As one learns and studies beef cattle, the world of ruminant science opens up and the eyes of the students grow wide when they realize and comprehend that, in the world of ruminants, one feeds microorganisms that in turn keep the rumen going and ultimately the cow.

If one studies it, the same is true of grass. The success of grazing systems is hidden in the world of microorganisms that we don't see on a daily basis. The successful grass operator creates healthy soil that is home to all kinds of microorganisms all year long. Without the microorganisms, the input list gets very long if grass producers try to do what the microorganisms do naturally.

The students yearn to understand these principles and look forward to trying to adopt new thoughts in a very old world. The satisfaction of teaching is instilling new ideas that supplement proven practices. Adding some facts to one's back pocket never hurts. Interestingly, as students age and are absorbed into the busyness of life and work, the old proven ways often hold. However, as I note in class, without asking challenging questions, in all honesty, the world would be without wheels. Perhaps we still would be huddled around a campfire not far from a cave in case severe weather sets in.

The industry challenge is to welcome new and old thoughts ultimately to establish principles that reflect the essence of what the beef industry is. Students bring these principles with them and leave with them intact. However, I hope that with just a bit more understanding, when they become elders and leaders, they will leave open the door just a bit so the new and old can mingle.

These students soon will be at home sharing the many activities they did during the semester or maybe introducing their parents to a new friend. The excitement always is palpable and there may be a need for a hug or two or at least a quick jostle with the homebound siblings.

Eventually the dust settles as the meals are consumed and the friendly visiting tapers off. At that point, why not ask what the student learned in the classroom? Once the quick looks around the room by the student passes and the sheepish "well, maybe I learned something" is spoken, grab the opportunity to visit, share, probe and maybe, just maybe, allow the torch to pass briefly to absorb just a bit of the future.

May you find all your ear tags.