

PHILOSOPHICALLY SPEAKING!

by

John S. Rankin, Jr.*

I am sure that Don Kinsman asked me to begin this session at 8:15 with an innocuous prologue to take up time while all the late comers, common to 8:00 o'clock classes, can find their way here. Then, the important speakers will not be interrupted by banging doors and shuffling feet! As I left the house, my wife handed me a note which read: "KISS, Julie!" Sounds like a fond departure. Actually, in our acronymic society, it means: "Keep it short, stupid!" I will just make a few general comments, which I hope will be an appropriate setting for the next few speakers.

Let me assure you, I am no philosopher, nor have I ever had a formal course in Education. If you think that I am going to give an erudite lecture on the philosophy of education, you will be like the girl who thought that she was pregnant – you will be laboring under a misconception! However, I would like to share with you some principles of communication derived first from a few great teachers in my early training and, second, from countless students and colleagues over the past 40 years, all of whom are responsible for whatever success I have had in communicating with others. Extension is really communication as a result of education. I hope that these remarks may be helpful to all concerned with Extension Service.

Principles of Communication

Let me list these principles first and then elaborate a bit on each:

1. Know the territory.
2. Abstain from confusion.
3. Abstain from an encyclopedic approach.
4. Be open-minded.
5. Be able to depart easily from a prepared text.
6. Challenge your audience.

1. *Know the territory.* No one wants to be known as a Social Security Number. Nor does one want to be unknown as far as one's area of interest is concerned. Unfortunately, size of classes and absorption with research have been used as excuses for not knowing students. David Starr Jordan, former presi-

dent of Stanford University and a world-renowned ichthyologist, decided one day that as President he ought to know the student's names. However, he found that for every student name he learned he lost a fish name! That was the end of *that* experiment! Know the people with whom you come in contact. Be able to identify them on a first name basis. Be visible and available. Don't hide behind directives and reports. A sympathetic understanding of problems and possible answers will do more to bridge gaps than anything else.

2. *Eschew Obfuscation* is a sign that I have had on my office door for many years. More students and staff have stopped to try to determine its meaning. One student remarked: "I cannot remember what it is, but I do remember that my mother had one sent home from Europe." *Eschew* – to abstain from or shun, *Obfuscation* – confusion or making obscure. Keep it simple. Some delight in finding outrageous synonyms, fanciful examples, long-winded descriptions, supposedly, to show a broad knowledge of a subject. Actually, such tactics are not fooling anyone. A clear, concise explanation of any subject will endear you to any audience.

3. How many of you have come into a class or lecture and found the black board covered with minute details, formulae, or directions? Or, have been given hand-outs that described in extreme detail what was on the board and, then, to have the speaker *read* everything on the board and handouts? This, plus additional information tossed at the audience, results in frantic continual notetaking of everything possible. This kind of reaction is carried over into other situations and classes. I had a student who claimed she never got my jokes until she read her notes for the final exam!

Most subjects actually have very few basic principles. For example, all living things are trying to satisfy but three main exigencies of life: to eat, to keep from being eaten and to reproduce. All biology courses are built around these three principles. De-

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pending on the teacher, or text book, a course can be boring or stimulating considering the treatment of these principles. Too many feel that they have to fill every lecture with facts, the latest terminology, recent explanations — so much so that the basics become lost. Plan each lecture, or demonstration, or discussion around one basic principle or facet of that principle. Use pertinent examples to illustrate what you mean, succinctly, and to the point.

4. Have an open mind. Never get to the point where you are afraid to say: "I don't know." Always be ready to listen to other points of view. Make sure that your arguments are based on facts — not opinions. Don't be like the one who claimed: "I may have my faults, but being wrong is not one of them!"

5. Don't be too perfect. Be able to depart easily from a prepared text. Nothing is as boring and soporific as listening to someone drone on and on especially when reading from typewritten speeches. I remember an annual meeting of the American Society of Zoologists where G. H. Parker, a famed Harvard biologist, staggered out after listening to Ralph Lillie, an equally famous biologist who had just delivered the presidential address. "Some things," said Parker, "have to be experienced to be believed!" Even though you have prepared carefully and have everything in order, plan to make it seem as if some times you are ad libbing. After all, 'tis better to ad libbed and lost than never to ad libbed at all!

Bring in anecdotes of your own personal experience that will illustrate your point, especially those which may seem to make you the butt of a joke, intended or otherwise. Since we all *are* at some time, we laugh at someone else's predicament. Several years ago I was studying the parasitic worms of frogs. In naming new species one should use a characteristic of the organism as a ready point of reference. *Rana sylvatica*—wood frog—is a good example. I found some worms belonging to a group that were being studied by a

colleague in Mexico. He thought that one was new and named it after me, thinking it was an honor, *Megalodiscus rankini*. (Some *do* this sort of thing!) But, when I realized the translation of *Megalodiscus*, I began to wonder. It means "big sucker"! This anecdote does teach a lesson, in a nice sort of way, of course!

6. And finally, try to challenge you audience. Be provocative. Don't spoon feed. Make them think and not learn just by rote memory. Of course there are times when rote memory may save lives — as in the army! What I am trying to say is that you will appreciate very much the response that you will get when you have forced someone to think about the subject in such a way that a new light has dawned. Require, also, logical thinking, again, with conclusions based on fact. And above all, enjoy what you are doing!

In spite of all that you may do, you will always find someone like the scientist I knew who was interested in the jumping habit of fleas. He trained a flea to jump over a hurdle on command. Soon he sought the source of the flea's ability to recognize the command. By the usual process of elimination, he cut off one of the flea's legs. On command, the flea jumped over the hurdle. He then cut off a second leg. The flea still cleared the hurdle. But when he cut off all six legs, the flea did *not* jump on command. The scientist concluded that when all legs are removed, the flea becomes deaf! Which shows what happens when you jump to conclusions!

These few principles or methods of communication certainly are not new. They have been used successfully, however, by me for a long time. I hope that they may be of some interest or use to you. I don't know what I did to Elsie Fetterman. Since she suffered through my General Zoology course back in the Civil War days, she hasn't *stopped* communicating!

Thank you very much for your indulgence.