



Like a light bulb

Every minute of life is full of the potential to learn and grow. Hours and even days go by without our capturing much of what could be. But sometimes, for a second or, incredibly, a string of days, we are in the flow. A light comes on.

It could be a strobe flash, leaving an incredible new image on the retina. It could be a floodlight that shows us the way. These are the lights that education psychologists call “teachable moments.” Teachers are more likely than students to see the moments as they occur, but everyone can recognize them in retrospect.

The concept dates back 80 years, but has become a catch phrase mainly in the last 20. While it’s hard to plan for a spontaneous “ah-ha,” hands-on lessons and exercises create opportunities for teachable moments. For the learner, it is a quest for sustained critical thinking. It starts with something that becomes an indelible memory, big or small, good or bad. We remember the moment when we finally got it.

Farms and ranches are natural environments for these lights. Cattle, children, employees and parents take turns as teacher and learner with interrelated lessons.

When cattle test an electric fence or jump a low gate, they experience teachable moments. Children learn many of the facts of life by observing magic moments. A new employee looks for telling signs that provide insight into what the boss expects, even what is serious and what is funny. When a calf squeezes through the side of a pre-squeezed squeeze chute, it’s a teachable moment for everyone.

Bad experiences give us opportunities to learn why something happened and to use the knowledge to avoid the same mistake in the future. It could be as simple as a bee sting or as complex as a multi-billion-dollar hurricane, solved by a quick mental note or requiring years of research.

At a basic level, the light comes on in response to something negative, such as the electric fence, sunburn or losing \$100/head on a pen full of purchased calves. Ouch! We sure won’t do that again, learned our lesson.

But there are moments of instant gratification, too. We know sugar always tastes sweet. For a cow, “almost always” is good enough. The second or third time around, it dawns on her that the honking horn and calling means there’s a pickup nearby with range cubes in the back. Do cows learn this as a herd, or as individuals experiencing teachable moments? Some of them seem to learn indirectly: when a reliable herd mate starts running over the hill, good things usually come to those that follow.

People do not usually experience teachable moments as a group, but rather as individuals. There are exceptions, such as acts of war on a national scale, but even then, the lessons learned vary by the individual.

A “herd mentality” can lead us into trouble or leave us stuck in a nonproductive routine or enterprise. We must find out what’s over the hill or around the corner, by our own definition, with value judgments.

When we respond to changes in the market with a new plan that seems likely to make more money, we have experienced a teachable moment. As we follow through on the plan, there could be a few more moments. Individual carcass data is a treasure chest full of them.

Albert Einstein is said to have defined insanity as doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. Of course, Einstein wasn’t in the cattle business, where the markets and weather can actually deliver that variation. It may be a crazy business sometimes, but the physicist’s definition will ring more true if we never try anything different.

The continual hands-on lessons and exercises on the farm or ranch create opportunities for teachable moments. We must apply critical thinking to make the most of the potential learning contained in each moment.

Next time in *Black Ink*, new author Miranda Reiman will look at “perfect competition.” Questions? Call toll-free at 877-241-0717 or e-mail steve@certifiedangusbeef.com.

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