

20. Experiences Gained and Lessons Learnt from the Training Workshop

Steve Harrison, Ed Mangaoang and John Herbohn

This review module attempts to draw together some of the experiences gained and lessons learned from conducting the training workshop on socio-economic research methods in forestry research. A workshop of this nature had been an ambition of The University of Queensland forestry research group for more than two years, so it was gratifying to see this ambition fulfilled. As a first run by the research group at such a training workshop, this was something of an experiment, and impressions gained here may be of assistance should the 'training package' be employed in other situations. This paper reflects on the workshop experience and on the feedback obtained from delegates and presenters. No formal survey was undertaken to gain impressions of participants, but considerable informal feedback was obtained.

1. OBJECTIVES OF THE WORKSHOP

In designing the workshop, a number of objectives were in mind:

- The workshop would fulfil part of the capacity-building objective of ACIAR project ASEM/2000/088 – Redevelopment of a Timber Industry Following Extensive Land Clearing. In particular, there would be development of new skills by participants in socio-economic analysis and in modelling forestry systems.
- This would be an opportunity to communicate the forestry research mindset of the Australian team to the Filipino team, and obtain feedback, and hence to explore interactively the paradigms, methods of analysis and assumptions upon which each group is working.
- The planning of the ACIAR project would be advanced, particularly through the research 'case studies' which were tightly tied to objectives of the project. This would include development of a prototype model for simulation of community forestry systems.
- The workshop would establish the basis for improved communication and closer understanding between

the researchers throughout the remainder of the ACIAR project.

- A further objective in planning the workshop was to provide a stimulating and enjoyable experience for participants.
- A planned tangible output was this training manual, to be supplied subsequently to all participants.

2. PLANNED WORKSHOP ARRANGEMENTS

Formal presentations were designed on a number of specific topics, but with a view to group participation and discussion. More specifically, the workshop meetings were designed to include the following components:

1. Presentations by authors of the notes
2. Presentations by discussants
3. Small-group development and presentation of case studies
4. A fieldwork component
5. 'Hands-on' computing sessions.

Ideally, the instruction papers would have been prepared and distributed to delegates in advance of the workshop. This would have allowed formal sessions to concentrate on specific issues, and provided a basis for contributions by discussants. Nominated discussants could have been invited to prepare brief

presentations on the basis of materials provided to them in advance. In particular, they could have lead discussion on the relevance of the particular concepts and methods in forestry research, from their organizational perspective. However, in general this was not possible, and a folder containing some of the printed modules was provided to participants at the time of registration, with other modules provided during the workshop.

An objective of the workshop was to have each participant prepare a small simulation model using the Simile package, and most were able to achieve this.

The first three days of the workshop covered the main presentation sessions, with the emphasis for the next three days on case studies. The field trip was scheduled to provide a change from the formal sessions, and to collect data for subsequent used in development of the prototype community forestry model.

3. LOCAL ARRANGEMENTS

The organisation on the part of staff of Leyte State University was excellent, in terms of meeting facilities, copying of materials, transport and meals. This kind of meeting always imposes a heavy burden on the local organisers, and their efforts were greatly appreciated. A number of social events were organised, which made the occasion memorable and built morale and cohesion in the group.

4. REVIEW OF TOPICS COVERED

Five major topic areas were covered, namely:

1. Basic computing skills, using spreadsheets, discounted cash flow analysis and statistical analysis software.
2. Specific research techniques (sample surveys, cost-benefit analysis, non-market valuation, linear programming).
3. Modelling and simulation of community forestry systems with Simile.

4. Grant seeking, research administration and publication strategy.

5. Practical exercise in developing a research project.

5. SUITABILITY OF THE CONTENT AND ENGAGEMENT OF PARTICIPANTS IN DISCUSSIONS

As a first run, it was to be expected that there would be some glitches. An ambitious agenda was planned for the workshop, and though much material for presentations had been drafted before the meeting, continued module development took place between workshop sessions.

The choice of topics of necessity depended on the interests and skills of the group of presenters. In this regard, it was fortunate that the visiting group covered a wide range of interests, and that senior staff from Leyte State University were also able to make presentations.

The program proved to be highly ambitious, in scope, complexity and amount of material presented. However, flexibility was provided in the schedule, between presentations of new materials, discussion of case studies and computing sessions. In general, days ran from 8 am to 6.30 pm. Despite this pace, by all impressions, delegates found the workshop absorbing, sometimes continuing computing through coffee breaks.

It was hoped prior to the meeting that the presentations would simply be lead-ins to topics, and that there would be considerable interaction and debate at workshop sessions. To some extent, this ambition was achieved. However, it is to be noted that the material presented was rather foreign to most of the participants, and this at times constrained the discussion. Although the participants had a background in natural resource management, and were engaged to some degree in policy and extension work, most had little background in economics or social research.

No doubt, at times some participants felt rather lost with the topics, and it will require

further reflection to gain a working understanding of the techniques presented. Were a similar training workshop run in the future, with the materials which are now available, it would be possible to provide notes for reading in advance and hence make greater use of meeting time.

6. LEVEL OF COMPLEXITY AND BACKGROUND KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS ASSUMED

One difficulty in holding a workshop for a group of people from varying academic, industry, local government, NGO and other backgrounds is that the level of familiarity with the presentation topics and the level of expertise with computers can be expected to vary widely. In that the training workshop was designed to broaden the skills base and interests of the participants, and was outside the area of professional experience for most, some of the concepts in economics and sociology were found to be new and strange.

The modelling package Simile takes considerable effort to comprehend. Becoming adept at a complex computer modelling package such as this by nature takes a good deal of time, for assimilation, experimentation and consolidation, to gain confidence as a user. The workshop provided an ideal introduction to Simile, but substantial further time will be required before participants can start to develop and run realistic models. An added complication here is the need to become familiar with the concepts and procedures of modelling and simulation, which can be a hurdle for people without a background in this area.

It was found during the hands-on sessions that most of the delegates did not have the level of computing experience expected of the presenters, particularly in regard to the use of the Microsoft Office package and the Excel spreadsheet. While a desktop computer and this software is regarded as a standard facility at The University of Queensland, the high cost of computers relative to university budgets can make access more limited in lower-income countries. In the College of Forestry at Leyte State University, the stage has not been reached where each faculty member can have exclusive access to a desktop or

notebook computer, and so there is less familiarity with Excel, which was applied widely in the modules for financial modelling (including discounted cash flow analysis, cost-benefit analysis and linear programming). Hence it was necessary to provide some background coaching in use of Excel.

7. WORKSHOP OUTCOMES

Areas found to be of high interest

There was clear enthusiasm for the modeling activities and hands-on computing in relation to the simulation modeling package Simile, development of financial analysis spreadsheets with MicroSoft Excel and linear programming using the Solver facility. The modules on research administration and publication strategy also appeared to be of high interest.

Benefits derived by delegates

In general, the workshop objectives as listed above were achieved to a high degree. As well as the more formal training aspects of the workshop, some practical assistance in computing was provided to the delegates, e.g.

- providing practical tips in computing, particularly with regard to use of the Excel spreadsheet package
- providing access to the add-ins in the Excel spreadsheet package, such as statistical techniques and the linear programming package (Tools – Solver).
- providing copies of the Simile modelling and simulation package developed by the University of Edinburgh, which was downloaded from the developer's Web site.

Development of the prototype community forestry model

An important objective of the workshop was to make some steps towards development of a model of community forestry, which could be used to simulate forest industry development and carry out simulation experiments with alternative reforestation

policies. It was recognized that only limited progress could be made during the short period of the workshop and with the competing objectives planned. In particular, a field visit – unless organised as a participatory rural appraisal meeting – could not be expected to provide a great deal of detailed information for modelling purposes, although it did provide an excellent chance to gain first hand observations of a community forestry site.

Suitability of Organisational Arrangements

Some difficulty was found in providing sufficient access to computers during the hands-on computing sessions. Three notebook computers were brought to the workshop, and another notebook computer and one desktop computer were available locally, which meant that groups of about five people were sharing computers. Groups of three would have probably been preferable.

It was noted that local delegates were unable to attend all sessions. This was to a large extent due to their involvement in the preparation of materials and other arrangements for the workshop, and partly because of other commitments. This suggests that there could be advantages in holding workshops of this kind away from

the normal place of employment of delegates, such that they become a 'captive audience', though this would of course require an out-of-semester time window, and would tend to increase costs in terms of travel and accommodation.

8. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

In general, the workshop appears to have been highly successful. While some tentative recommendations might be made for future training programs of this type – e.g. make available more computers to allow smaller user groups, gain a better idea of the computer access and computing experience of participants – it would seem desirable to retain flexibility to meet the needs of the audience and adapt presentations as suits the progress of the group.

It was to be expected that some problems would arise, but overall the workshop appears to have been highly successful in achieving its objectives. Lasting benefits are expected for the ACIAR research project in terms of a shared research methodology and vision, and progress in planning of specific activities. This engenders confidence for conducting such a training program as a capacity-building exercise in other locations.