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Abstract

This article describes our study exploring Extension agents' philosophies of adult education and their perceptions of the role of Cooperative Extension for individuals and in the community. We surveyed agents in Arkansas using the Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory and open-ended questions related to the role of Extension. Most agents indicated the strongest level of agreement with the progressive philosophy. Two themes that emerged from the open-ended questions were agent as disseminator of information and impact of Extension on quality of life. Our discussion includes recommendations for professional development that involves examining one's personal philosophy of adult education.

Keywords: Cooperative Extension, philosophy of adult education, professional development

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Extension agents serve their communities as educators of adults, as well as youths, by disseminating knowledge and providing tools and resources to individuals across the country through a variety of programmatic areas critical to citizens' everyday lives (Forest, 1989). The establishment of land-grant universities as part of the 1862 Morrill Act coupled with the Smith-Lever Act in 1914 provided an adult education system for rural communities through Cooperative Extension (Stubblefield & Keane, 1989). From introducing farmers to cutting edge research on producing higher yielding commodities to educating consumers about healthful lifestyles and financial literacy to growing future leaders through 4-H youth development, Cooperative Extension empowers individuals and communities through innovative learning initiatives (Denny, 2016; Seevers, 1995).

In most cases, the educational activities carried out by Extension agents involve adult learners, a population that can be discerning about the ways learning is facilitated (Knowles et al., 2011). However, agents may not have been trained as educators or be cognizant of adult education principles (Seevers, 1995) and thus may not ground their practice in theories or philosophies that inform working with adult learners. Agents' views of the role of Extension in the lives of individuals and in the communities agents serve as well as their

perceptions and beliefs about education are borne out in their practice and the ways they support the mission of the organization.

The purpose of our study was to explore Extension agents' philosophies of adult education, perceptions of the role of Cooperative Extension for individuals and in the community, and views on how agents advance the mission of the organization. A philosophy of education is a framework for understanding one's beliefs about education, knowledge, teaching, and learning. Development of a sound practice requires considering one's values and beliefs to (a) identify one philosophical orientation, (b) apply an eclectic approach of merging elements of different theories, or (c) develop a unique personal philosophy of teaching based on a philosophical framework (Galbraith, 1998; Zinn, 1998). Scott (1998) cautioned against using instructional techniques without reflection on one's own beliefs about teaching and learning. If educators rely on teaching as they were taught or try a strategy because it is a new trend rather than grounding practice in educational theory and aligning with a core philosophy, their strategies will be inconsistent, if not completely out of alignment, with intended outcomes.

Educational philosophies differ with regard to definition and aim of education, the view of learners and role of the teacher/instructor, and the instructional strategies that develop from one's particular philosophy (Scott, 1998). Major Western philosophies include

- liberal adult education,

- progressive adult education,

- humanistic adult education,

- behaviorist adult education, and

- radical adult education (Elias & Merriam, 2005).

Zinn (1998) claimed that adult educators typically align very closely with one philosophy but that often their orientation includes two philosophies. Typical philosophy pairings are liberal and behaviorist and humanistic and progressive.

Liberal education is a teacher-centered approach to the development of rational thought through content knowledge in a particular discipline (Price, 1999). The aim of liberal adult education is transmission of a body of knowledge across a wide range of disciplines to produce "a person who is literate in the broadest sense—intellectually, morally, spiritually, and aesthetically" (Elias & Merriam, 2005, p. 31). Behaviorists emphasize the means of behavior change over the end product, are focused on observable behavior, and manipulate people to produce a behavior (Elias & Merriam, 2005). Education is viewed as a means for survival for the individual and society (Price, 1999).

In the humanistic tradition, the teacher–student relationship is viewed as a partnership and the voluntary nature of adults' engaging in growth and development is recognized (Brookfield, 1989; Elias & Merriam, 2005). Humanistic educators view themselves as colearners in a more egalitarian way than progressive adult educators (Price, 1999). The progressive philosophy emphasizes education as being lifelong and life-wide, or occurring across the many contexts in an adult's life. The role of the educator in progressive adult education is

that of facilitator, and the experience of the learner is embraced (Price, 1999).

The remaining orientation is less frequently closely paired with any of the others. Radicalists believe adult education is a vehicle for social change. The radical adult education viewpoint is in contrast with the hegemonic view of general education and formalized adult education programs. Educators with a radical philosophy challenge learners to critically reflect on assumptions and beliefs through the lens of power with respect to race, gender, age, and socioeconomic characteristics (Price, 1999).

As an adult education provider, Extension has had successes that "have been due largely to its ability to shift program emphasis to new and emerging concerns of adult clientele who are at the teachable moment and to its ability to provide practical education on those concerns" (Forest, 1989, p. 341). Adult educators should study the philosophies of adult education, along with the criticisms of each, to reflect on their own values and alignment with practice throughout their careers (Elias & Merriam, 2005). The question is whether Extension agents even view themselves as adult educators or have reflected on their philosophies or approaches to teaching. Even if agents' philosophies are unknown or are inconsistent with their actions, their views on education affect their choices related to instructional objectives, content, and the design of interaction and assessment (Zinn, 1998).

Methods

Participants

To explore Extension agents' philosophies of adult education, perceptions of the role of Extension, and views on how they advance the organization's mission, we invited 196 Extension agents from all 75 counties in Arkansas to participate in our study. Eighty-three agents from the areas of 4-H, agriculture, and family and consumer sciences (Table 1) participated in the study, for a 42.3% response rate.

Table 1.

Appointment Areas of Participating Arkansas
Cooperative Extension Agents

Area	*f*	%
4-H	13	15
Agriculture	24	29
Family and consumer sciences	19	23
4-H/agriculture	13	15
4-H/family and consumer sciences	11	13
Did not respond	3	4

Of the participants, 63% were women and 33% were men; 3% did not answer the associated question. Participants described themselves as White (90.0%), American Indian or Alaska Native (1.3%), Black or African American (1.3%), or Hispanic or Latino (1.3%); 6.3% did not answer the associated question. The number of years spent working as an Extension agent was fairly evenly distributed, with 30% reporting that

they had worked as an Extension agent for 4 years or less, 31% reporting 5–14 years, and 36% reporting more than 15 years; 3% did not answer the associated question.

Procedures

We used the survey method to meet the first goal of the study, which was to investigate agents' philosophies of adult education. We sent an email that included an invitation to participate and a link to the questionnaire to all county Extension agents in Arkansas via an electronic mailing list. Participants completed Zinn's (1983) Philosophy of Adult Education Inventory (PAEI), an instrument designed to examine the philosophies of adult educators. Respondents rated their levels of agreement with the 75 items on the instrument using a 7-point Likert-type scale (1= *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*). The PAEI questions relate to the purpose of adult education, the role of the teacher, teaching methods, and so on. Zinn developed the PAEI as a self-assessment and reflection tool for adult educators using field testing, instrument revision, jury validation, factor analysis, and reliability testing (Zinn, 1983). A jury of six experts confirmed content validity of the instrument, and factor analysis of 86 responses yielded results supporting construct validity and internal consistency of the instrument (Zinn, 1983). Seventy of the 75 items had significant correlations ($p = .001$) with the associated philosophies, and the alpha coefficients of the scales ranged from .75 to .86, indicating further evidence of high internal consistency (Zinn, 1983).

We used demographic questions to gather information related to agents' gender, race, years of experience working for Cooperative Extension, and area of appointment (e.g., 4-H, agriculture).

We also included three open-ended questions to address the second and third goals of our study, which were to explore agents' perceptions of the role of Cooperative Extension for the individual and in the community and to explore agents' views of the role of the agent in advancing the mission of Cooperative Extension. These questions were as follows: "What do you believe to be the role of cooperative extension for individuals?"; "What do you believe to be the role of cooperative extension in the community?"; "How does your role advance the mission of cooperative extension?" We applied a basic inductive coding process to analyze the textual responses to the open-ended questions, which were included to elicit more in-depth information from participants. Each member of our research team conducted an initial review of the individual responses and reduced important words and phrases into codes to summarize the text. We then analyzed the responses again using these codes as a guide to consider the responses from an alternative perspective and to potentially develop broader categories, or themes.

Results

Survey Results

There were 79 complete surveys from the 83 participants. We scored responses to the PAEI items using the PAEI scoring method, meaning that each topic could have a score ranging from 15 to 105 based on the respondent's agreement with a philosophy (Table 2). The progressive philosophy had the highest mean, minimum, and maximum scores ($M = 85.94$, range = 63–102, $SD = 7.84$) of the five philosophies of adult education. The radical philosophy had the lowest mean score and the largest variance ($M = 71.80$, range = 30–99, $SD = 11.94$).

Table 2.

Philosophy of Adult Education Scores of Participating Arkansas Cooperative Extension Agents

Orientation	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*
Progressive	63	102	85.94	7.84
Humanist	61	97	79.01	7.76
Behaviorist	50	97	77.48	10.51
Liberal	44	98	73.32	10.09
Radical	30	99	71.80	11.94

According to Zinn (1998), scores of 95 or higher indicate strong agreement with a particular philosophy, scores of 66 to 94 indicate agreement, scores of 56 to 65 indicate neutrality, scores of 55 to 26 indicate disagreement, and scores of 15 to 25 indicate strong disagreement. As shown in Table 3, participants indicated higher levels of agreement (i.e., they either strongly agreed or agreed) with the statements related to the progressive philosophy (9 strongly agreed, 68 agreed) and humanist philosophy (1 strongly agreed, 75 agreed). No participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with the progressive or humanist philosophies, and no one indicated a strong level of disagreement with any of the five philosophies (Table 3).

Table 3.

Philosophy of Adult Education Scores by Level of Agreement

Orientation	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
Progressive	0	0	2	68	9
Humanist	0	0	3	75	1
Behaviorist	0	3	8	66	2
Liberal	0	3	13	62	1
Radical	0	8	12	58	1

The individual statements with the highest mean scores were "In planning an educational activity, I try to create: the real world—problems and all—and to develop learners' capacities for dealing with it" (*M* = 6.35), "Decisions about instructional content should be based on: a consideration of learners' 'real-life' needs and problems outside the classroom" (*M* = 6.28), and "The primary purpose of adult education is: to increase the learners' capacity to solve everyday problems and fully participate in the society in which they live" (*M* = 6.28). Participants indicated the lowest level of agreement with the statement "Evaluation of learning outcomes: is not of great importance and may not be possible, because the impact of learning may not be evident until much later" (*M* = 3.29).

Themes Emerging From Open-Ended Questions

Two overarching themes emerged from responses to the three open-ended questions. These were agent as disseminator of information and impact of Extension on quality of life.

The first theme, agent as disseminator of information, related to our second goal of exploring agents' perceptions of Extension's role for individuals and in the community. Agents participating in the study saw their role as that of disseminator of information, and, in particular, research-based information. Some shared their perceptions of themselves as conduits between the university system and the citizens with whom they worked, with one stating that she served as the "link to the researched-based information that is generated at the Land Grant institution" and another suggesting that agents function as "the bridge builders between trusted, non-biased, researched-based information and individuals in such a way as to make [Extension's] resources (information) relevant." A similar focus was on sharing best practices to meet the specific needs of constituents and helping them make practical, informed decisions. In addition to need, words such as "issues," "problems," and "relevant" were used to illustrate this attention paid to participants' expressed needs. One agent described the role of Extension in the community as "providing learning opportunities for all citizens that utilizes research-based information that best addresses the needs identified by those same citizens."

The second theme that emerged centered on agents' responsibility to help individuals elevate their quality of life through the provision of education. This theme helped us answer the question of how agents perceive that they advance the mission of Cooperative Extension. One agent shared his thoughts about the role of the agent, stating,

> I think it's the opportunity to share research-based information that helps improve [community members'] lives. In rural communities we are so limited. Extension is a lifeline for many people when it comes to improving leadership, health, finances, nutrition, and agriculture practices.

This notion of making a positive impact on the community was a common refrain. According to one agent, an agent's role is "to provide individuals with research-based information and educational experiences to improve their lives, their families and their communities."

Several participants stated that their task was to "educate," but only a few said they perceived their role as that of an instructor, facilitator, or teacher. Just one referred to her responsibility to facilitate learning, saying, "My role is to be a facilitator of research-based information to meet individual's [*sic*] needs with the intent of their adoption of best practices."

Overall, the agents' responses overwhelmingly aligned with the mission of the organization. For example, one agent wrote this:

> I agree with the mission. I try to work with a group to find out what they need, motivate them to learn if they are not already, teach them new information, show them something they can do with that information in their own lives and discuss how to incorporate it.

Discussion

Although there was a high level of agreement with all five philosophies, progressivism was the philosophy agents agreed with most strongly. In their writing on the philosophies that undergird the field, Elias and Merriam (2005) shared their perspective that progressive adult education is focused on practical knowledge and problem-solving skills. Educational initiatives in Cooperative Extension are also based on these concepts.

Radical adult education, which is focused resolutely on social change and equality between the learner and teacher in the learning transaction, was the philosophy with which agents most strongly disagreed. This is not to say that the transaction between agents and adult learners is not important, but agents who responded to the survey overwhelmingly said their role was to present knowledge that has emerged as a result of research. This finding implies that agents see themselves more as purveyors of information than as equal partners in the teaching/learning process.

Agents' approach to the teaching and learning transaction is partly a result of their philosophical orientation. Because of the broad array of topics Extension professionals address, it is important for them to be flexible facilitators and develop the ability to tailor instructional approaches to varied subject matter and different learners' needs. Awareness of and the ability to communicate one's philosophy are related to decision making and, in turn, may lead to purposeful rather than haphazard teaching or a reliance on doing things the way they have always been done (White & Brockett, 1987).

One implication for practice might include professional development activities to help agents think critically about their philosophical orientation and how those beliefs affect their decisions about instructional design and delivery. Agents come to the field with expertise in disparate areas, and although they serve as educators above all else, they may not recognize themselves as such or have a background in teaching or educational methods. If in fact a link exists between alignment with a philosophy and informed decision making regarding instructional strategies, professional development activities should focus on ways to improve programming through the development of theory and its application to practice (Cummings et al., 2015).

Echoing Franz (2007), awareness of adult education philosophy and use of adult learning theory can aid agents in developing a participatory approach to Extension work. In addition to emphasis during academic preparation, professional development focused on adult learning throughout an agent's career can allow for critical reflection on practice, collaborative review of educational programs, and opportunities for organizations to model instructional strategies. In our study, most agents reported agreement with all adult education philosophies, indicating a potential need for professional development support in refining an eclectic personal philosophy throughout one's career.

Results of our study exploring Extension agents' philosophies of adult education and perceptions of the role of Extension suggest that the use of Zinn's (1983) PAEI may encourage agents to develop an identity as an adult educator and a framework for critical reflection on professional practice. Use of the tool also could provide a common language for discussing the educational outreach activities of agents and alignment of their practices with the mission of Cooperative Extension during professional development activities.

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