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Awareness, Solidarity, and Action: An Educational Model

Abstract

How Extension fosters social change and innovation can be improved through the use of theory-based educational models. Educational models can serve as foundations for the conceptual designs of educational interventions. I describe, using examples from my own work, one such model: the awareness, solidarity, and action model. This three-part model involves the participant's (a) becoming aware of a need for change, (b) developing solidarity with other participants around the actions to be taken, and (c) learning skills to enable action.

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Innovation is at the core of Extension's ability to foster social change (Meyer, Boyce, & Meyer, 2015). The ways in which Extension fosters social change and innovates can be improved through the use of theory-based educational models. Educational models provide a framework for the creation, implementation, and evaluation of educational programs (World Health Organization, 2012). As described by Abell, Cummings, Duke, and Marshall (2015), the educational model used may serve as a foundation for an educational intervention's conceptual design.

Three Phases

In the context of educational programs aimed at social change, I describe and provide examples from my own work related to the use of one model: the awareness, solidarity, and action model (ASAM). This tool of the trade has been described by Mezirow (1993) and Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner (2007, p. 135). It involves the participant's (a) becoming aware of a need for change, (b) developing solidarity with other participants around the actions to be taken, and (c) learning skills to enable action. To improve program efficacy, the Extension educator might examine ways to

- create awareness by encouraging participants to reflect on their assumptions,
- build solidarity by creating opportunities for dialogue and deliberation about how to address the issue at hand, and

- enable action by providing skills-based training.

Creating Awareness

Before people will take action, they need to know what the relevant issues are and how the issues affect them or their communities. Why should a participant act? The answer is often personal in nature. How do we connect with participants on a personal level? What are the participants' interests? For example, working with landowners along the North Shore of Lake Superior, I learned that the landowners have a deep aesthetic connection to the land and a desire to do what is right to improve forest health. This knowledge allowed me to design programs of interest. Once participants have shown interest, I work with the participants to explore why action might be needed, using the history of the forest, the existing condition of the forest, and discussion about the forest's future (Reichenbach, Muth, & Smith, 2013).

Engaging Participants

Multistakeholder learning groups and collaborative processes that support social learning are increasingly used as a means to engage participants around complex and contestable issues (Rodela, 2011, 2013). Learning in groups can build on science-based knowledge and the experience and interests of the participants. As part of the Lost Forest Project in Minnesota, a social learning process was used. Participants met to learn about forests and forestry, to learn how to apply forest management principles on their own land, and to develop and implement plans to multiply the impact of their efforts to the whole of the North Shore. Discussion about the forest and its future comprised more than 40 of the 80 hr of instruction. One participant noted, "One of the things I liked about the program is it will develop an advocacy for the forest. I feel like I am armed to talk about the forest more thoughtfully than before." Other participants have helped write grants for the control of invasive species, organized and promoted additional educational sessions about the North Shore forest, and served as advisors and board members for a wide variety of organizations.

Collaborative and social learning processes allow participants time for reflection and time for dialogue and encourage idea generation. Ideas about how things need to change come from the community affected rather than from an outside directive. The knowledge and experience of the participants is held in esteem. Individuals work within groups to create meaning, devise solutions to problems, and learn to learn their way forward.

For more information about this process, contact the author or Molly Thompson, director of Sugarloaf—The North Shore Stewardship Association, www.sugarloafnorthshore.org.

Taking Action

Once actions have been identified to address the issue at hand, skills-based training may be needed to enable participants to take action. In the Lost Forest Project, skills-based training included the development of materials and videos showing how to plant and protect trees. It also involved an effort to train professionals and landowners in invasive weed identification and control. Educational

programs can be designed and delivered to provide skills-based training that enables participants to take the actions generated in the solidarity process.

Application of ASAM in Extension Education

The ASAM is based on transformative learning theory. This theory proposes that changes in beliefs, attitudes, and values, as well as changes in tacit ways of knowing and acting, can occur as a result of transformational learning (Franz, 2007; Mezirow, 1991, 1993). Merriam et al. (2007, p. 134) identify the four components of transformative learning as experience, critical reflection, reflective discourse, and action:

- The first component is the experience of a disorienting dilemma. This experience may occur during the awareness phase of the ASAM. The component may also be described as the dissonance created when new knowledge conflicts with the participant's current experience.
- The second component is critical reflection. Critical reflection often occurs throughout each phase of the ASAM model. The educator can encourage reflection by asking participants to examine their experience in light of new knowledge or view the issue at hand from another's perspective.
- The third component, reflective discourse, is analogous to dialogue and deliberation. Creating opportunities for people with diverse backgrounds and experiences to engage in dialogue and enter into deliberation about options to address the issue at hand can foster solidarity.
- The fourth component involves incorporating what has been learned into action. This assimilation can be fostered through skills-based educational programming.

Recognizing the three distinct phases of educational efforts the ASAM entails and how we as educators can foster transformative learning may result in greater success toward fostering social change.

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