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Doing the Work of Extension: Three Approaches to Identify, Amplify, and Implement Outreach

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Doing the Work of Extension: Three Approaches to Identify, Amplify, and Implement Outreach

Abstract

This article explores the literature and practice of how the Cooperative Extension Service does its work and asks if traditional outreach and engagement models have room for innovative delivery mechanisms that may identify emerging trends and help meet community needs. It considers three innovative approaches to the educational mission: sense-making, contextual (typological) framing, and an internal starting with why concept. It discusses how each might offer processes that would help Extension workers identify and act on community needs, and how the approaches could become critical work skills that will help sustain Extension in the future.

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Introduction

How does Extension achieve meaning and impact in its work? Does our traditional outreach and engagement model have room for new and innovative delivery mechanisms? This article explores literature and practice, and then presents a case for considering how Extension might begin to look beyond traditional approaches in order to respond to emerging issues, identify new trends, and take proactive steps to improve positive community impact and sustain operations in the future.

The national Cooperative Extension Service has amassed a 98-year history of extending information and knowledge from the university center out to the public. The delivery method has largely followed a positivist scientific approach in which Extension educators develop or consult university-based, peer-reviewed, vetted research and share it with clientele who seek information or solutions (Dimitri, Effland, & Conklin, 2005; Bordelon, 1985; Holt, 1922). This original approach was missional and quite necessary because a century ago information was not readily available as it is today. But the emphasis now is on interpreting information. Clients often need help understanding what data mean. The work of Extension is changing. But is Extension changing to meet these needs?

One way to answer that question is to look at how well Extension identifies and addresses emerging trends that often drive change. This is at best an art. Futurist or predicting literature is replete with examples of how organizations (including higher education and Extension) might affect and direct

their futures (Siemens, 2009; Young, 2009; Ludwig, 1997). Among the many, this article reviews three theoretical approaches that may have positive implications for Extension's non-formal educational delivery system.

The first approach is rooted in the notion of complexity theory and how organizations respond to often emergent and unpredictable arising issues. The second is rooted in how organizations could reframe emerging issues based on their typology. Last, an internal mindset construct asks how an organization's workers approach their tasks. Each discussion considers ideas that could help Extension workers identify and act on emerging trends, ultimately benefiting their clients and partners. These could become highly useful skills to help sustain Extension in the future.

Background: Extension's Traditional Approach

The traditional operations of the Extension system (nationally) can be quantified in four broad categories. Others certainly exist, but these arguably capture the majority of Extension's education tactics and provide a frame for considering how it might deal with improving outreach and delivery processes.

1. Program Area Categorization

Across the county, most Extension organizations categorize their programming outreach in the four traditional areas of Agriculture, 4-H Youth Development, Family & Consumer Science (FCS), and Community Development. These categories offer great breadth, depth, and diversity of programming outreach. Though each program focus area has its specializations, programs often overlap as they are applied in real-world situations.

For example, new programming in the local food systems area incorporates curricula, seminars, and materials from all four program areas. A community or nonprofit organization seeking assistance in this area might partner with the Extension agricultural program staff to offer seminars on growing more diverse foods for local retail sale. They might also desire food safety or food preservation seminars in conjunction with FCS educators. The Community Development team may then offer new business assistance models and/or cooperative development training to help create new systems of aggregation and distribution for the local foods industry. Last, 4-H educators may well be involved by offering programming aimed at getting youth interested in local foods, healthy eating, and potential entrepreneurial activities around the topic. These might be conducted in school or during after school programs or with other local youth organizations.

While the four program area categorization model is well founded, there may be other configurations that could work as noted by the great overlap all of those program areas in the local food systems example. This is explored in the theoretical section.

2. Rural vs. Urban Delivery

Extension's original audiences were mostly rural in nature. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, around 40% of the population farmed in the 1920s compared to only 2% today (Dimitri et al., 2005). So there was an inherent positive bias toward serving rural clientele. Today, however,

over 75% of Ohio's eleven million people reside in urban or metropolitan areas (US Census, 2010). Thus, consideration must be given as to how Extension approaches people and communities. The question of rural versus urban becomes more explicit. Though both are important, a growing body of literature suggests that Extension's future must include a more focused look at urban areas. The *Journal of Extension* and other land-grant-related organizations offer this evidence.

In 1992, a study of 13 state urban program leaders was conducted to understand how programs in urban counties differed from rural (Fehlis, 1992). The author noted that urban work "brings challenges not present in more traditional [rural] Extension outreach." Others agree. The Brookings Institute (2010), the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities' Commission on Urban Initiatives (2010), Cornell (2012), and the USDA NIFA (2012) all cited Ohio's urban and metropolitan regions as key to the state's future prosperity. They noted that Extension's urban outreach helps communities deal successfully with a wide range of issues, problems and opportunities and said "urban Extension programming is a cost-effective way of reaching a large number of citizens." Overall, urban outreach considerations must accelerate to catch up with the population percentages that have already shifted.

3. In-Person vs. Electronic Delivery

Technology is changing education pedagogy and praxis across the board. From traditional classrooms to non-formal Extension outreach, technological inputs and access methods require a reexamination of all educational delivery systems (Robideau & Santl, 2011; Dromgoole & Boleman, 2006; Elbert & Alston, 2005). In the 1990s, people questioned whether farmers would embrace the use of technology in their fields. Today, smart phone applications for farmers are in wide use (Guenthner & Swan, 2011). From simple weather forecasts to GPS navigation to more complicated planting and financial tracking software, many farmers are technologically savvy and are taking advantage of these new tools. In youth and family programming, Extension clients often see Quick Response (QR) Codes on brochures and posters. Click-through response data show people are using them.

On the national level, eXtension's online university-based collaborative system responds to the growing number of Internet questions from citizens on topics that are regularly addressed by Extension personnel. Technology allows Extension workers to increase capacity and reach new audiences with limited staff. But as noted above, information of or for its own sake is only half of the equation. Expertise in interpreting information is key. Both are required. The conversation ensues.

4. Educator vs. Facilitator/Capacity-Builder Role

The Extension educators' role is well grounded in the original mission of delivering information out from the university center. Today, they still serve as the expert source of information, teachers. But they also play a role as facilitators who can bring together existing community resources, interpret information and data, and help communities build sustainable capacity.

At Cornell, Scott Peters (2006) sees Extension work as "human work." Though technology is important and serves as a useful tool, he suggests Extension educators should not say, "We're the

teacher; you're the student" (p. 168). Instead, he advocates for a co-construction or participatory-based outreach. If Extension serves only in the former capacity (information delivery), Peters says there is no real need for Extension. Information and expert knowledge are available nearly everywhere; so "why should government fund our branch or diffusion process?" (Peters, 2006).

Delivering programs continues to be a key to Extension's mission and success. Credible information is not always readily discernible. But today, the need for a facilitator who may help in *interpreting* information and data is critical. It is also the sustainable approach of building capacity for a community or group.

In summary, though Extension's track record using these four basic approaches to educational delivery is quite positive, the question remains as to the future ability to meet explicit and implicit citizen/community needs with these traditional methods. Is there a better process for Extension work—perhaps one that identifies emerging trends and responds to community needs more proactively—before the request is received or an issue is already contentious? The next section explores three potential approaches to this issue.

Theoretical Literature: Exploring Three Approaches

The three approaches explored herein are either not broadly utilized, or not formally cited in Extension programming. This brief review sets the stage for a discussion on how Extension might begin to think about including new processes, frameworks, and approaches to its work of identifying programming needs and framing roles for program delivery and/or building capacity in communities.

Complexity/Sense-Making

In the mid-1850s, Henry David Thoreau (1993) noted, "As much as one simplifies his life, matters of the universe become less complex" (p. 39). In today's technology-driven world, however, simplification may have reached the level of near impossibility. How can an education organization such as Extension begin to make sense of ever-increasingly complex data/input sources, community questions, or emerging issues?

One answer may be found in the notion of complexity theory, which, in its simplest form, says that organizations adapt to their environments based on change created by events. How does Extension respond to the often-emergent (and unpredictable) issues that arise? One idea is that instead of attempting to predict the future, Extension workers might work to hone their *sense-making*—the ability to scan the environment to determine what's next (Davies, Fidler, & Gorbis, 2011). The Institute for the Future, a 45-year old independent, non-profit research institute, posits this sense-making idea as what we do with information we have and how quickly we are able to appropriately respond to the stimulus, whatever it may be. In sense-making, the idea is to increase your ability to determine the deeper meaning or significance of what is being expressed.

For example, in 2008 the U.S. economic and financial collapse was felt particularly hard in Southern Ohio, and especially in Clinton County with the loss of DHL, a distribution facility with 3,000 employees. Though few could have predicted the events, the response was rapid. Ohio State University Extension created a website clearinghouse to share information called "5 County

Solutions" (<http://5countysolutions.osu.edu/>). This was a large initial step in restoring confidence to the community and visibly showing that something was being done, even though no one knew at that time what was coming next. Sense-making skills help create unique insights critical to decision making (Davies et al., 2011). One method of sense-making is found in reframing work by context or typology. This Cynefin framework is described below.

Reframing by Context or Typology

Snowden (2005, 2007, 2010) introduced the Cynefin framework to organize problems, situations, or systems into contexts or typologies that then guide a response, explanation or solution. The concept included a notion of a community's collective past—cultural, religious, geographic, tribal—that plays a role in decisions and actions. Snowden described the complex systems within which we live and work as uncertain and evolutionary in that they constantly change due to human interactions that are influenced by experience. The real challenge then is in how to frame our actions.

The key to the Cynefin model is that it uses sense-making, not a categorization. That is, with sense-making *the data precede the model*. In standard categorization or matrix models, one begins with a model and then plugs in the data. This works well with known parameters; everything fits nicely. An example may be Extension's extensive use of the Logic Model (University of Wisconsin, 2010), which provides excellent guidance on how given community issues or problems can be addressed with inputs, outputs, and projected results or impacts. But when dealing with complex systems, allowing the data to lead by using a sense-making approach opens new doors and possibilities for solutions. Starting with the data allows patterns to emerge instead of attempting to put them into a box or matrix. By following the new patterns, opportunity for potential new actions and solutions can be seen (Snowden, 2010).

Figure 1.

Cynefin Framework (Snowden, 2010)



Figure 1 shows how the framework is broken into five domains. In the *simple domain*, relationships between cause and effect are obvious. Here organizations simply implement best practice. In the

complicated domain, cause and effect require some higher level of analysis or the application of expert knowledge. Extension often works in this realm to solve agricultural or community problems. Responses herein are recognized as *good practice*. When entering the *complex domain*, causes cannot be determined in the present. It requires looking back at historic events. Responses here are labeled as *emergent practices*. Finally, in the *chaotic domain*, nothing makes sense. There is no relationship between cause and effect. Responses here are novel approaches. Persons acting in this domain may be seen as innovative, or they may be seen as troublesome, largely depending on whether new results are successful or not. The final domain is disorder. Herein, everything is unknown. Decision-making reverts to personal comfort levels and/or gut-level responses.

The Cynefin framework may be instrumental in answering questions, planning activities, and determining funding strategies within the traditional four program area categorizations of Extension. It may help identify new configurations or processes to better respond in today's ever-changing and technologically-advancing world.

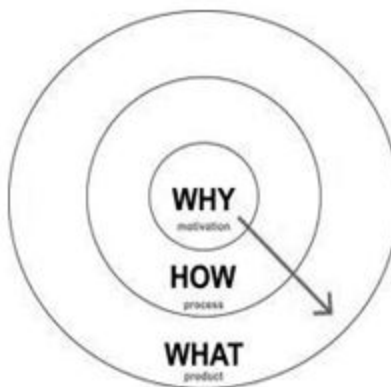
Starting with *Why*

Regardless of how organizations like Extension make sense of information, or how community issues are framed by context or typology, the manner in which people in an organization determine how or why they act to serve populations is arguably the most important consideration. In his book, *Start with Why* (2009), Simon Sinek posits an exemplar that could easily overlay Extension's education/outreach philosophy and offer guidance or inspiration on approach. In brief, the process asks if Extension workers should initiate solutions based on what they see, or could they begin with why and build solutions from the inside out?

The process begins by asking why people do what they do. He questions why some people and organizations are more innovative (or influential or profitable) than others. In brief, Sinek says that all great innovators think, act, and operate in the same way. And he says it is the exact opposite of everyone else. He calls it the "Golden Circle" (Figure 2).

Figure 2.

The Golden Circle (Sinek, 2009)



Sinek declares that nearly everyone knows what an organization does. They can readily explain what

they do in their daily routines at their jobs. Next, he notes that some workers in an organization know how things get done. However, only a few people truly know why things happen. Why is the purpose, the call, the belief, the motivation. The true why is the absolute basis that motivates all action.

Most people, businesses, and organizations start by asking what they need to do each day, then how will they accomplish it, and last why it matters (coming often in the form of an evaluation). By flipping this around, Sinek suggests that businesses, organizations, and people can be completely transformed. By thinking, acting, and communicating from the inside out, the possibility for achieving greater results is dramatically enhanced.

Sinek's thesis fits perfectly into the idea of changing mindsets or approaches to identifying new and emerging trends, programs, and opportunities in communities where Extension works. Starting with why can fundamentally change the way Extension workers look at every issue, challenge, opportunity, or question that is presented. In the numerous new local foods initiatives, for example, Extension could first seek to understand why the popularity of local food is now growing so rapidly; then, action steps (programs, curricula, trainings) could be better constructed and perhaps more meaningful to participants.

Discussion/Implications

Will new approaches make an impact? Can new thinking change Extension's future? The examination of four typical Extension approaches to doing outreach and education juxtaposed with three exemplars of new tactics provides opportunity for rich discussion about future possibilities and direction of Extension's work. Opportunities abound.

In recent years, numerous articles have called for re-thinking the Extension mission and delivery process. Argabright, McGuire, and King (2012) asked, "How can Extension thrive, not just survive?" They suggested there is a strong need for an "organizational cultural transformation, aligned with an opportunity for creativity and innovation." They challenged Extension to re-conceive our future using creative thinking and innovative action to lower some of the traditional barriers that have limited success.

Outside Extension's organization, others are suggesting new thinking as well. In *The Speed of Trust*, Stephen M.R. Covey (2009) notes that "technology, globalization, and the knowledge worker economy have...put us in a more challenging atmosphere to be successful in today's workplace" (p. 14). Over 40 years ago, Toffler (1970) posited a similar idea listing learning, unlearning, and relearning as critical skills that will be needed for success in the 21st century. In John Gardner's *Self-Renewal* (1995), he says that one of the reasons people stop learning is that they become less and less willing to risk failure. These instances all point to the need for Extension to try new ideas, look for innovative ways of framing the educational delivery options, and continuously learn new approaches.

In returning to the example of Extension's work in the local food systems area, it would be very easy to focus on *what* needs to be done across all four programming areas using traditional programs to help solve the needs of farmers, aggregators, processors, and distributors. However, by

starting with *why*, the traditional program plug-in approach might look totally different. New solutions heretofore unimagined may emerge that could positively affect families, farms, communities, and even job creation for individuals. The framing sets up new opportunities and leaves the door open for innovation, creativity, and potential.

Conclusions

The possibility for exponential impact that can be achieved within our national Extension system by leveraging the power of new technologies and social networks has exploded. The opportunity for Extension to adopt new frameworks such as *sense-making*, *reframing*, and *starting with "why"* has the potential to connect Extension's work with new and expanded audiences. The notion of being one of America's "best kept secrets" may finally be overcome.

As Argabright, McGuire, and King (2012) conclude, "Extension's priorities must transform to meet the needs of the people, the way they need to be met, doing things in ways that have never been done before."

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