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Tips for Teaching Non-Traditional Audiences

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Abstract
One of the greatest thrills for an Extension educator is being asked, "When's the next one?" at the end of a session. To keep that question coming when teaching non-traditional audiences, these county educators share their tips for designing programs that increase the learner's comfort and create a non-threatening atmosphere. Relationships, cultural differences, use of time and resources, and finding new ways to measure learning progress can all influence programming success.

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Introduction

One of the greatest thrills for an Extension educator is being asked, "When's the next one?" at the end of a session. And, when the questioner is participating in a program targeted to a hard-to-reach or underserved audience, it is even more rewarding.

Delivering educational programs to those of different cultures can challenge us to re-think our methods, mindsets, and assumptions (Schauber & Castania, 2001). Successful educational programs start with a design that is culturally appropriate for the learner. The design considers the current resources of the learner, including transportation, childcare, timing, duration, and even prior topical experience. Overall, a successfully designed learning experience increases the learner's ability to participate in the world around them. It allows for the evolution of the learners and should be at the heart of what we do.

Influential Factors

We have found six categories that influence programming success. They are key areas to consider when designing new programs or retooling existing programs for new audiences.

Relationships

Relationships are crucial to program success. More emphasis is placed on relationships in many other countries (Warrix & Bocanergra, 1998). Who you know and the quality of the relationships you have will influence success. Finding an individual who is directly connected to the audience and with whom honest and open discussion is possible can provide valuable inroads. Strengthen that relationship by becoming a learner and really listening. Be humble, and realize that, although you may know a lot, you don't know everything. Make the environment comfortable. Be sure to take note of family relationships among the participants.

Teaching Tip: Focus the first few program sessions on social engagement, with only a small amount of instruction. As you get to know the group better and as they begin to know you and trust you, it will be possible to achieve more of a balance between instruction and relationship building.

Cultural Considerations

Cultural considerations are key to determining the scheduling of programs, the depth and breath of subject matter content, the extent of technology use, and how impacts are measured. Non-traditional audiences (e.g., low-income, non-Anglo, etc.) are apt to respond better to instructors who can appreciate their values and culture (Couchman, Williams, & Cadwalader, 1994; Wilson, 2001). Within many cultures, families are the center of their lives. Failing to accommodate for this may affect the level of participation in a program.

Teaching Tip: Conduct whole family events with quiet places for children in another part of the same room. Parents may feel less stress having children close than having children in another room out of sight. Do not assume that your new audience does things the same way you do. Be open to learning about cultural differences in manners, food, speaking in a group, eye contact, and other factors.

Language

Language is the lifeblood of the culture. "It loses in translation" is a phrase not to be taken lightly. Materials must be appropriately designed for the target audience. Materials designed for middle-class, Anglo, or English-speaking groups may not have the same meaning to a low-income audience or people native to Mexico, Central or South America, or Asian countries (Couchman, Williams, & Cadwalader, 1994; Watson, 2001).

Teaching Tip: Learning is more effective in the learner's native language. Put the focus on the learner by hiring appropriate staff to deliver the education in the learner's native language. Verbal translation can be time consuming, cumbersome and inaccurate.

Time

Time is a precious resource. Within the culture of Extension there is the tendency to cram as much as possible into an hour, rushing through interactions, multi-tasking, throwing reports together, and eating on the run.

If you do not have time to build relationships with key individuals, however, you probably do not have time necessary to create effective programs for audiences of other cultures. The time you take to build essential relationships and learn important aspects of the culture is time well spent.

Teaching Tip: Have realistic expectations for the first year of a program plan. Allow the time needed to gain deeper understanding of the audience. Work with key individuals to create a learning opportunity that will be meaningful to the learners.

Local Resources

Local resources will affect educational program design. Many agencies and organizations are trying to reach people they never have before (Couchman, Williams, & Cadwalader, 1994). No single organization has what it takes to do it all. Partnering with agencies that work with your target audience is a successful method of capitalizing on organizational strengths. When each organization does what they do naturally, it is not seen as extra work.

Teaching Tip: Collaborate with local agencies and services that are linked to the target audience. Many will be interested in cooperating. When each can do what they do best, all will win.

Measuring Progress

Measuring progress the "Extension way" usually means collecting information through written surveys. What are other, less-structured possibilities to evaluate a program's impact? A menu of different techniques should be considered. Personal journals and in-depth interviews of staff can reveal important information. Focus group discussions and follow-up phone calls may uncover pertinent, reportable facts.

Teaching Tip: The way information is collected must be designed with the same integrity as the program. If programming efforts reflect a high degree of relationship building with participants, the evaluation must honor the relationships built.

Conclusion

When reaching out to new audiences, we must take the time to fully understand the dynamics involved and be prepared to set aside egos and traditional ideas. "The way we've always done it" does not mean that's the way it always should be done.

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