

In-Depth Teaching in Extension

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In an attempt to increase attendance and interest in Extension meetings, the Nebraska Extension Service tried an "in-depth" workshop or short course in the early 60's. Previous Extension efforts focused on presenting specific recommendations. This workshop emphasized the "why" (background information or underlying principles), in addition to presenting specific recommendations. Response was so favorable, the program was expanded. The authors discuss the evaluation of these in-depth workshops, with emphasis on (1) what kind of farmer attends, (2) how well this method satisfies the farmer's need, and (3) what guidelines the workshop study gives to Extension workers.

EXTENSION'S function has been described as primarily educational, consisting of three parts: consultation, flow of information, and instruction in basic content.¹ Traditionally, we have used all three of these approaches, with emphasis upon flow of information and consultation. Consultation has been used to help solve specific individual problems; however, when there was new information to be disseminated or a problem common to all farmers, we have held meetings to answer the questions and disseminate the information (in other words, the function of "flow of information"). Through this latter method we were able to reach large numbers of people with the greatest efficiency. However, attendance and interest in these meetings dropped off in the late fifties. Why?

It was thought at the time that, due to increased technology, the general meetings were not satisfying the farmers' need for information. Agents and specialists expressed a concern over how to attract

¹ See "Extension's Responsibility to Commercial Farmers and Ranchers," *Extension Committee on Organization and Policy*, Federal Extension Service, August, 1965.

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audiences to programs and activities. Extension was satisfying two of the three primary functions—it was disseminating information and consulting with farmers—but it had not assigned much importance to the function of in-depth instruction in basic agricultural subject-matter areas.

To cope with this problem, an “in-depth” workshop or short course was held in one Nebraska county in 1961. This method involved holding a series of meetings with emphasis placed on background information or underlying principles, in addition to presentation of specific recommendations. Previously, the staff recommendations were based on the results of research, but the explanation or “in-depth” functioning of the research problems was not discussed. That is, the “what” and “how” were satisfied, but not the “why.” Because of the favorable reception of this method, the program was expanded to six counties. This series, the Irrigation Workshop or Irrigation Short Course, included four sessions of two and one-half hours each. The attendance and interest in this workshop indicated it was a success, and workshops were conducted throughout the state in other subject-matter areas.

Attendance alone, without any other form of evaluation, would have been enough to label this new workshop program as worthwhile. However, since the best time for these workshops was January and February, time spent on the workshop diminished the time available for the specialists to conduct the traditional general meetings. Questions were raised, such as “How would clientele accept this?” and “Can we continue to satisfy them and meet their needs through using the workshop methods?”

To answer these questions, a total evaluation of the in-depth workshop program was initiated. Specific research questions were:

1. What kind of farmer is reached by the workshop?
2. How well does the workshop method satisfy the needs of the farmer?
3. What guidelines does this workshop study give to Extension workers?

THE STUDY

To gain information about farm operators who attended the workshops during the winter, questionnaires were mailed to the county Extension chairman. Agents administered the questionnaires to 1092 farm operators at the last session of each workshop. From the 1059 returned, information was gathered regarding age, marital status, education, size of farm business, tenure, and attitude toward

the workshop (as tested by the Kropp-Verner Attitude Scale²). In addition, a checklist was administered to the participants to determine their personal acceptance of the workshop and how well they thought it satisfied their needs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What kind of farmer is attracted by the workshop method of in-depth teaching? To answer this question, comparisons were made between workshop participants and the farmers listed in the 1964 Census of Agriculture for Nebraska.³ Four characteristics were compared: age of operator, tenure, value of farm products sold, and years of education completed (See Table 1).

Farmers who attended workshops were younger than the typical Nebraska farmer.⁴ More than one-third were under 35 years of age. Sixty-seven per cent of the participants were under 45 years of age, compared to 38.2 per cent of all farmers in the state. Twenty-four per cent of the participants were in the age group 45-54, or about the same proportion as indicated in census data. Only one-fourth as many farmers over age 55 attended the workshop as compared to the total number of farmers in that age group. Statistical testing of the data led to the rejection of the hypothesis that there was no difference between the age of participants and the population.

Tenants and part owners made up the majority of participants (79 per cent) as compared to 64 per cent of the farmers in the census. Only 20 per cent of the workshop farmers were full owners, compared to 35.7 per cent of all farmers. It would appear that the younger farmers were more commonly tenants, the middle-aged were part owners, and older farmers were more often full owners. This observation is evident for both participants and nonparticipants. Younger farmers in their beginning and expanding years of farming seemed to make up the largest proportion of attenders.

Participants and nonparticipants also differed in size of farm business, i.e., in value of farm products sold. Nearly half of all Nebraska farmers (48.6 per cent) sell less than \$10,000 worth of products per year. However, less than one-fourth of the workshop participants (23.2 per cent) were in this category. Commercial farmers

² R. P. Kropp and Coolie Verner, "An Attitude Scale Technique for Evaluating Meetings," *Adult Education*, VII (Summer, 1957), 212-15.

³ U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census of Agriculture, 1964, Statistics for the State and Counties, NEBRASKA*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C., 1967.

⁴ Knox and Videbeck found similar results in regard to characteristics of participants; see Alan B. Knox and Richard Videbeck, "Adult Education and Adult Life Cycle," *Adult Education*, XIII (Winter, 1963), 102-21.

with sales greater than \$10,000 make up 51.4 per cent of the farmers in the state; however, nearly 76 per cent of the workshop participants were in this category. Farmers with sales over \$40,000 were nearly twice as common (11.9 per cent) in the workshop group as among the farm population as a whole.

Table 1. Characteristics of farm operators attending Nebraska Extension workshops, 1964-65, compared with characteristics of farmers in the 1964 Census of Agriculture.

Characteristics	Workshop participants (per cent)	1964 census (per cent)
Age in years		
Less than 35	35.1	15.5
35-44	32.4	22.7
45-54	24.1	25.9
55 or older	8.4	35.9
	100.0	100.0
Years of education		
8 or less	2.9	41.9
9-11	15.5	13.5
12	52.8	36.2
13-15	19.6	5.7
16 or more	9.2	2.7
	100.0	100.0
Gross sales of farm products		
Under \$10,000	23.2	48.6
\$10,000-39,999	64.9	44.5
\$40,000 or more	11.9	6.9
	100.0	100.0
Tenure of operator		
Tenants	38.4	30.5
Part owners	41.3	33.3
Full owners	20.3	35.7
Managers	0.0	0.5
	100.0	100.0

Educational background offered another area of comparison between the two groups. In the pre-World-War-II era, farm boys often quit school after the eighth grade. In 1964, over 40 per cent of all Nebraska farmers had eight or fewer years of schooling. However,

only 2.9 per cent of the workshop participants had less than eight years of schooling. Nearly 68 per cent of the participants had some high-school training, and 52.8 per cent were high-school graduates. In comparison, about half of all farmers in the state had some high-school education, and 36.2 per cent were high-school graduates. Over one-fourth of all the participants had some college, and 9.2 per cent were college graduates. However, less than 9 per cent of all farmers in the state reported some college attendance, and only 2.7 per cent had four or more years. In general, then, workshop participants were better educated than the average farm operator in Nebraska.

From the previous data it was concluded that the workshop attracted younger farmers, especially those under 35. This group was composed chiefly of tenants and had a higher educational level than was typical of all farmers in the state. A second and rather well-represented group, compared to census characteristics, was the age group 35-44. This group was composed primarily of farmers who owned some land and rented additional land. The remaining participants were primarily farmers over 45 who owned most of the land they operated and who tended to have lower incomes and less education than the preceding groups did.

Sixty per cent of the farmers had been 4-H members or vocational agriculture students: 18 per cent had been in vocational agriculture, and 42 per cent in 4-H.

How well did the workshop satisfy the needs of the farmers? Attitude toward the workshop as measured by the Kropp-Verner Scale indicated that 93 per cent of the participants checked the statements that the workshop dealt with their main interests in an understandable and interesting way. Seven per cent felt that the subject matter was either over their heads or missed their main interests.

In terms of satisfaction, nearly 62 per cent felt that the program was outstanding and that they received much from it. Another 32 per cent felt that many parts were valuable, others not very. Four per cent said they gained something, but less than expected. Only two men out of 1059 that returned questionnaires felt the workshops were a complete waste of time.

IMPLICATIONS

What guidelines does this study give to extension workers? The data indicate that workshops do not appeal to farm operators over the entire spectrum but are limited to a group that is above average in respect to income, tenure, and education, but younger in age.

Farmers who are attracted to workshops possess characteristics similar to those of participants in other forms of adult education. Workshops are primarily of interest to those persons who are old enough to have become established in a career but who are young enough so that business expansion is still a goal. These are the people who will be most attracted by in-depth workshops and who will derive the greatest self-satisfaction. These younger farmers have vested interest in acquiring knowledge and have the longest time to utilize its benefits.

An extension worker needs to think of his clientele as a dynamic, not a static group. The clientele system in a county or state is in a constant stage of renewal. Competition for farming opportunities necessitates that younger operators perform at high levels of efficiency relatively early if they are to compete with established operators. Farmers in the middle years seek to expand and own more of their resources, while older operators may be more interested in reducing their activities as they approach retirement. The continued growth in the size of farm business has made specialization both feasible and necessary. Therefore, the county agent needs to take a careful look at his clientele and sort out apparent special-interest groups to whom specialized subject matter may appeal. The results of this study indicate that specialized groups (such as Grade-A milk producers, irrigation farmers, or wheat producers) respond favorably to real depth treatment and that satisfaction is high when their needs are met.

The success of the in-depth approach requires a team approach on the part of the county agent and the specialist. County agents are in a strong position to visit with farmers to determine problems that might be of interest. These problems, when collected and evaluated, furnish guidelines to the specialist team in designing a systematic approach. Agents can then test this design on farmers to determine if it has appeal. Since most workshops tried in the past five years have been repeated in many locations, the specialist can spend more time developing visuals and teaching techniques than was possible in the traditional meetings.

Extension also shares another characteristic with other adult education programs: it depends on voluntary participation. Since the participant can make choices, he will most likely choose in the area of his major interests and/or problem areas. In these areas he is most subject to the appeal of the in-depth approach, and this is where the approach will make its greatest impact. We should recognize that in-depth teaching is not a mass audience device, but a specialized method to meet the needs of particular audiences.