

## Must Training Be Practical?

G. L. Carter, Jr., THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN

This article focuses on the important question: "Can on-the-job training for Extension staff be made more effective and efficient?" The author, a former *Journal of Extension* editor, believes that on-the-job training can be accomplished that has a demonstrable impact on the way a county Extension administrator performs his job. He cites a case study to prove his point.

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How can the professional-practitioner be helped to improve his capacity to function in his job? Is this best accomplished by providing him with specific information, skills, techniques, and procedures? These things are typically called "practical"; things that can be used directly on the job and "as learned." Such things are usually best learned through some kind of drill.

As I reflect on the years of efforts of on-the-job training for Extension personnel, I have a gnawing uneasiness about the long-range consequences of much of what has been done. Much of what we in Extension "teach him" seems to make little difference in how he functions. He continues functioning in his job much as before. There's a limit to the time that can be devoted to training. The Extension profes-

sional can't spend much time away from the job. Demands made of him exceed the time he has available.

Because of such a perspective, we concentrate on helping him with the here and now—what can be applied directly and immediately to the job. Of course, the next day when he's back on the job, he'll probably meet another difficulty. If that difficulty persists and reaches a crisis state, Extension organizes another training session to deal with the crisis.

We simply don't see how, under the circumstances, we can afford to spend time with what might be called the "theoretical."

This article describes a case example that illustrates:

1. How fairly comprehensive learning efforts can be done on-the-job, coupled with

- help that can be acquired in sessions away from the job as time allows.
2. How learning experiences can be done that are useful to the broad spectrum of professional responsibilities and still not overlook the things that need immediate attention.
  3. How what's critical to be learned can be identified.

### **In-Service Workshop, 1970**

The case concerns work undertaken with Irish county extension administrators. Their title is chief agricultural officer (CAO) in the Agricultural Advisory Service of Ireland. Their program and staff leadership functions have many similarities to a county office chairman in the U.S.

As a visiting professor to University College, Dublin, and temporary director of the Kellogg Agriculture Extension Centre,<sup>1</sup> I worked with the chief agricultural officers.

I was undertaking to introduce to them the general notion that the purpose of administration in an extension undertaking is to facilitate programming. CAO's perceived administration as doing what needs to be done to maintain and keep the organization functioning—the mechanics of the organization.

The activities took place over a period of three years.

They were part of a developing training program that involved one, three- to five-day session each of the three years. In these sessions, I was working directly with the CAO's in a group situation. Participants took part in exercises on the job, in between annual sessions.

I'll refer to the time when we were meeting together as "session" or "in-session." Activities engaged in individually by CAO's while they were at home base (on the job) will be referred to as "on-the-job."

I've selected one of the ideas dealt with to illustrate the nature of the work we did together. The overall design of what I'll refer to as a workshop was aimed at improving CAO's functioning as administrators. The boundaries of the workshop were opened.

My first involvement with the CAO's was a 3½-day session. Before the session, I didn't know much about the CAO's as learners or their work situations and requirements. Therefore, the design of the first session, held in 1970, was based on my general insights, not on insight into their specific situations.

First, I asked the participants to list problems they have in their role as administrators. The composite lists of these problems fell into three categories: (1) organizational, (2) programming, and (3) resources. The resources category could be divided into sub-

headings: (1) staff, (2) facilities, (3) finances, and (4) time.

Specific problems classified under time:

1. Difficulty in arranging time to keep in touch with instructors (agents), particularly in training young instructors.
2. Insufficient time to tackle problems requiring attention.
3. Deciding what time should be devoted to—and avoiding involvement in other matters.
4. Insufficient time to visit with staff members to give guidance and indoctrination.

Then I asked them to examine how they spent their time during the preceding month. They relied on information recorded in their work diaries.

I believed that this exercise would provide insight into how they function. I felt it could increase the possibility of my helping them deal with matters pertinent to the job.

A systematic examination of how they use their time could reveal:

1. Demands of their time they were yielding to.
2. What they may be consciously or otherwise giving priority to.
3. How adequate work-diary information might be used as a basis for further planning and making adjustments in their functioning.

4. The potential usefulness of abstract ideas I planned to introduce.

When discussing time problems later in the first session, I discovered the participants weren't accustomed to thinking of time as a resource. Time was time. There wasn't enough of it.

Since the notion of time seemed to strike a spark of interest, I judged we should focus on thinking of time as a resource:

1. Time becomes a major factor in Extension programming.
2. Time is a fixed ingredient in any organizational endeavor.
3. Time available to a professional is one ingredient over which he has substantial control.
4. How we use our time is subject and amenable to planning.

There's little resource material available on the notion of time as a resource, or time as a specific factor subject to planning. It's implicit in much of the literature on planning, but seldom explicit.

Because of the absence of usable resource material, we developed our own. The remainder of this article will describe some of the exercises we did to: (1) generate materials to work with, (2) establish a basis for developing the concept of time

as a resource, (3) connect what we were doing directly to the job, and (4) connect time as a resource to other ideas we were introducing in the workshop (and eventually to programming).

### On-the-Job Exercise, 1971

On the job and in preparation for the 1971 session, I asked CAO's to analyze their work load (time-use) for the 12-month period ending March, 1971. They were to send this analysis to me before the session scheduled in June, 1971. Data would again come from their work diaries.

I asked them to classify (in day-equivalents) their time-use into broad, major categories and subcategories. Each was to come up with his own categories of time-use. Each was reminded of the broad categories that evolved during the 1970 session.

Next, each was asked to classify the "character" of time devoted to the various categories: Could what he was doing be characterized as administrative management, as defined by Evans?<sup>2</sup> Could it be characterized as administrative leadership? During the 1970 session, we studied the article by Jean C. Evans, "Administrative Manager or Leader?"

I also asked them to analyze and discuss this classification of their time in regard to:

1. The way they used their time.
2. Difficulties encountered in applying Evan's management and leadership orientations to the role of the administrator.
3. The types of activities engaged in that couldn't be classified as management or leadership.
4. Usefulness of the exercise in thinking about what they did during the 12-month period.

There was variation in the classification systems developed. From their own written analyses and discussions of the exercise and oral discussions during the 1971 session, these things were detectable:

1. They discovered inefficiencies in the way they were using their time.
2. They were revealing more of an orientation toward thinking of time as a resource.
3. They were finding some possible meaning in Evan's administrative management and leadership notions.

In a parallel on-the-job exercise, they'd been asked to examine and analyze the work of the County Committee of Agriculture during the past year, as revealed in the official minutes of the meeting of the committee. The County Committee of Agriculture in Ireland is comparable to county committees in the U.S.

Participants were provided a framework by which they could analyze official actions of the committee in terms of: (1) what the action was about (content), (2) the kind of action involved, and (3) who initiated the action. Again, they were to discuss their analysis, including the role of the CAO and possible alterations in the role and functioning of the CAO.

### **In-Session Exercise, 1971**

On-the-job exercises and the tentative agenda for the 1971 session were developed by a committee. The committee wasn't made up of workshop participants. It consisted of potential resource people for the sessions. I felt we hadn't progressed to the point where participants could effectively be involved as planners. They'd had no prior experience in this.

We spent 4½ days in-session in 1971. Part of the 4½ days was devoted to learning experiences to help participants further develop their concept of time as a resource. Activities related to time as a resource included:

1. Small group discussions based on the analyses participants had made of time use during the preceding 12 months. In these discussions they were to: (a) try to develop some composite picture on how they spent their time (categories, subcategories, problems encountered, etc.), (b) analyze this composite picture in terms of the way time is allocated and how changes might be made in the use of time, (c) decide if and how their time might be used more advantageously to better achieve goals and purposes of the organization. An hour was allocated to this activity.
2. A review, in a general session, of the work done in small groups and consideration of a specific case example related to time use. An hour was devoted to this activity.
3. Listening to a presentation by a former graduate student (Pat Malloy, an instructor [agent] from one of the counties) on his findings from a master's thesis project. In this project, Pat analyzed official actions reported in Committee of Agriculture minutes over a 10-year period. Time was allowed for questions and discussions for clarification. This took 1½ hours. A copy of Pat's findings had been distributed the previous evening.
4. Small group discussions (1½ hours) in which CAO's compared their analyses of their own committee minutes with those of Malloy's—in regard to who initiated action, and type of action taken. They

were also asked to interpret the outcome.

5. Listening to Malloy discuss his interpretation of his findings and, in general discussion, comparing their small group interpretations with Malloy's (1½ hours).

The case example discussed as part of activity number 2 above had been provided by one of the CAO's (one of the on-the-job exercises CAO's were asked to do). These case examples were to show an action, activity, or observation (a specific incident) that would illustrate some idea that had been introduced in the 1970 session.

Here's the case we used:

In the tillage areas of the county (where farming is based on crop production), during the month of May, there are many demands on instructors' (agents) time. To keep up with these demands, it is usual for instructors to do as many as 12 farm visits per day—all dealing with such problems as weed control, insect pests, diseases, and deficiencies of cereal crops. Over the years, the position has remained unchanged, with the same farmers coming back for advice on the same problems, despite the fact that each winter cereal growing is dealt with in detail at classes, lectures, and symposia organized by the instructors in these areas.

At the end of the 4½-day session, participants made suggestions about topics they'd like

to pursue in subsequent exercises. They worked in small groups developing a list of topics. First or second on every list was a request for pursuing the idea of time as a resource.

A steering committee of participants was identified to help resource people make the final plans to continue the workshop into the next year. We had provided preliminary experience by having a "steering committee" of participants functioning as a feedback mechanism during the session. Time as a resource was defined as one of major organizing ideas around which work for the coming year (1972) should be developed.

#### **On-the-Job Exercise, 1972**

An on-the-job exercise was prepared and sent to CAO's to pursue the idea of time as a resource and provide case materials for the next session (scheduled for June 1972).

The following suggestion was prepared and distributed to CAO's in March:

Engage the entire county staff (or as much of it as feasible) in an exercise of systematically recording and analyzing how they invest (allocate) their time. It is proposed that this be done by actually recording the way time is utilized over the period of, say, one month, rather than by doing it by recall (work diaries) as we have done for the previous sessions. It might be done in this way:

1. Decide when the recording is to be done (over what period, starting when).
2. Decide on some basis for classifying time. For example, it might be done on basis of: (a) subject dealt with, (b) methods used, (c) roles performed, or (d) combinations of above.
3. Acquaint the staff with the exercise, its purposes, procedures to be followed, etc.
4. At the end of the recording period, arrange a staff meeting at which each member presents his report. Discuss implications.
5. Summarize staff presentations and submit for use in June session. Add your own comments on the reports and on the subsequent discussion.
6. Prepare a case example describing the experiences you had in engaging your staff in working in small and/or large groups in this exercise. This experience will provide the basis for exploring notions about group work during the three major organizing ideas around which the June session was being planned.

#### **In-Session Exercise, 1972**

Six hours of the in-session time were allocated to specifically pursuing the on-the-job, time-use exercise. Analyses of individual county cases were done in small groups. These exercises had been submitted to the Centre staff and selected ones reproduced for specific use in-session. These

analyses were followed by general discussions.

In addition, a day and a half was devoted to defining "the job to be done" by the county extension service. This was done to help participants refine the definition of the job as it was evolving from the staffs' analyzing and classifying their time use. This exploration of "the job to be done" involved inputs from two masters and one Ph.D. theses projects. These projects had been completed by personnel of the Advisory Service as part of their graduate programs.

Near the end of this session, we began examining one activity engaged in by all county staffs as a means of extending our considerations to the broader concerns of programming. Each county conducts Winter Farm Schools. These are fairly time-structured activities. They are organized for young farmers. The imposition of predetermined time limitations on the schools emphasizes the importance of planning. We started our consideration of these school activities by examining what would be realistic to expect learners to cope with in specified periods of time.

As in previous sessions, written feedback was sought from participants at the end of this session. It was elicited by means of open-ended questions. Three-fourths of the participants specifically said they wanted and intended to engage in further

follow-up, on-the-job exercises in relation to time as a resource. They wished to pursue the matter with their staffs.

### Conclusion

One of a half dozen ideas introduced and worked with during this three-year, open-ended workshop has been used as an illustration. Some reference has been made to connections made in the activities and exercises between the idea of time as a resource and other ideas being worked with (for example, administrative management and leadership). This has been done to show that we were beginning to structure the learning situation to purposefully facilitate participants in integrating the ideas that were potentially relevant to their jobs. Our work together had become sufficiently comprehensive to make this feasible.

However, an ongoing workshop could have been organized around fewer ideas than we had undertaken, if less time had been available for in-session activities.

The intent in citing this case example has been to:

1. Illustrate that fairly comprehensive ideas can be dealt with in in-service situations.
2. Suggest that these comprehensive ideas have the potential for greater impact on the way participants function

in their jobs than equivalent, or even greater, resources devoted to "practical matters."

3. Demonstrate that exercises on-the-job are essential if practitioners are to comprehend and use abstract ideas to guide them on the job.
4. Reveal that the necessity for and experience in generating resource material through the efforts of trainee-participants has many possible positive features.
5. Illustrate that such an effort can become self-regenerating when participants perceive a connection between what is dealt with in training and reality.

Observable evidence indicates that this workshop is having an impact on the functioning of CAO's. It's observable in their oral testimony. But more important, it's observable in how they're functioning. Not with all of them. There were doubters among them. The doubters continued to participate, but they kept tongue in cheek. However, at the end of the 1972 session, word filtered back that the doubters were beginning to say, "You know, there may be something to all this stuff." Some of this feedback came direct to me from confessed doubters.

One thing was obvious: as we moved along through the workshop we were more clearly

zeroing in on substantive problems that administrators were facing. They were recognizing and defining them more clearly. We were increasingly able to organize experiences focusing on problems as they were defined. The closer we got to the perceptible problems and on-the-job experience, the higher observable motivation became and the more useful (practical) participants were perceiving abstract ideas (ways of thinking) to be.

Participants were seeking ways to improve their functioning. Some saw the meaning of "improving" to be strongly related to "making easier." Others saw the meaning of improving more as "making more effective (productive)."

My orientation to the meaning of improving was toward making more effective, efficient, challenging, and personally and professionally rewarding.

Participants entered into the activity seeking to be provided "things" that would improve their jobs. I entered the activity hoping to introduce them to and help them develop ways of thinking by which they could constantly examine and reexamine their functioning; ways of thinking that were generalizable beyond a specific problem or situation.

A fourth "annual" session was held in June, 1973. I didn't

participate. Nor did I participate in the planning of the session or the on-the-job exercises that were done before the session. That was accomplished through the efforts of Irish resource people. I did counsel some with the staff.

By the conclusion of the 1972 session, it had been decided that the 1973 activities would begin consideration of the broader matter of programming. A steering committee for 1973 had been named. The Irish were on their own. I'm receiving reports of satisfactory and continuing progress.

My input to the first three years of the workshop was guided by the notion that learning occurs as a result of activities engaged in by the learner.

#### Footnotes

1. The establishment of the program of the Kellogg Agricultural Extension Centre, University College, Dublin, is being supported by a grant from the W. K. Kellogg Foundation, Battle Creek, Michigan.
2. The two orientations are management and leadership. Management orientation gives attention to keeping the organization operating (housekeeping). Leadership gives attention to long-range goals and planning. Jean C. Evans, "Administrative Manager or Leader?" *Journal of Cooperative Extension*, V (Spring, 1967), 55-61.