



New Approach To Program Planning

The Cooperative Extension Service is the largest single adult education organization ever created. True, its first responsibility remains with the farm family. But, through reinterpretation and revisions of the original Smith-Lever Act, today's programs also try to reach and help the nonfarm rural and urban residents. Extension programs today cover many areas—leadership and community development, social adjustment, environmental concerns, and many other special interests.

Administration of this great educational organization is unlike many federal agencies and large industrial complexes. The administrative authority for decision making and operation doesn't rest at the federal level. It rests with state and to a great degree the basic county unit. This type of administration has provided local Extension professionals with the flexibility needed to plan, develop, and implement programs based on the needs and desires of the local clientele.

When Extension was started in 1914, the greatest needs of its clientele could be best served by teaching basic skills related to agriculture and home-making. These skills were for the most part simple and long lasting. The flow of new information usually wasn't very fast and the old skills taught weren't likely to be outdated for many years. Also, by teaching skills that filled a "real" immediate need, Extension was able to establish itself as a change agent.

Several factors at work in Extension should lead to a new approach in our program planning today. One of the biggest is the changing nature of Extension. From its beginning, with service to agriculture and homemaking, it has been asked to bring more and more programs to different people. The flow of new information today is unbelievable. Someone said that 75% of what we talk about today wasn't known 25 years ago. Another big factor is time. There just isn't enough of it to go back to the same people every time new information comes out if we're to reach all of the people with a need.

The concept approach to program planning is the one we should be using. A concept is a set of things that have something in common. Right now, with most agencies and people responsible for "teaching," there's too much emphasis on teaching skills. We should spend more time on learning "processes" or concepts and less time learning single skills. We must move from single to multiple learning, from isolated to inter-related content.

Skills will still be important, but they must become a programmed part of the curriculum that's planned to meet the objectives set up by the agent and his clientele. Soil sampling will illustrate the difference between skills and concepts. Explaining and helping a farmer pull a soil sample deals with a particular skill. If pulling this sample is one phase of a learning process concerned with improving soil fertility, then it's part of a concept. Another example is providing help in selecting hybrid corn varieties. Giving a farmer the name of the best variety to plant is providing information that's important this year. A program dealing with the characteristics needed in a hybrid for his farm is a concept and allows him to select the right hybrid year after year.

A recent study about the disadvantaged pointed out some shortcomings in our present programs that must be dealt with. We know we have to deal with the total life situation if we're going to help these people. It will do little good to teach dressmaking if our clientele has spent the dress material money on some unnecessary thing. These people need a program developed to use all of the skills needed to give them a better life, not just one or two isolated skills.

Helping the farmer with the soil sample, giving him the name of a hybrid corn to plant, or teaching homemakers sewing skills isn't bad. This is helping with a real need and can be used to establish rapport. The bad part is when most of our time is spent on this type of teaching—we're putting out fires, instead of teaching fire prevention.

There are a number of reasons why we spend so much time on skills rather than on concepts. Our clientele have been trained over the years to expect this type of help. All their lives they've been given information or facts with very little explanation. In most cases, this method began with their parents ("Do this because I say so."), continued in school, and is still being used by most agencies they contact. They've learned to expect this and will be disappointed if they don't receive this treatment.

Another reason our clientele are still learning skills instead of concepts is that we as educators feel more comfortable with skills than concepts. This is the way we've always worked because it was the way we were taught. Often it's just as hard for educators to change and try new ways as it is for learners. We know that we can give them information that they need without learning new tricks. Also, some educators have a self-serving need

that's fulfilled when they're the only "expert" around. They want no part of any learning process or concept that will allow their learners to gain information without their help.

Here's a brief review of the reasons why we need to start using the concept approach in our program planning:

1. Fast pace of new information.
2. Changes in Extension clientele.
3. Administrative setup that allows flexibility.
4. Lack of time.
5. Shortcomings of present programs.

By taking advantage of the opportunity that is ours, we can change Extension from a reactive to a proactive agency.

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