

SOS learning networks

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Senior citizens banding together to form a food cooperative. A long waiting list for conversational Spanish in a small rural Kentucky community. Learning preventive dentistry, fruit tree grafting, vegetable gardening, crime prevention, personal finance, and do-it-yourself solar energy in an educational system where there are no course fees and the instructors teach for free. An educator's idle dream? Not at all. These activities and many more are happening in Kentucky's growing system of learning networks, which have now been successfully established in a wide variety of distinctly different communities.

What It Does

An SOS Learning Network is a made-for-Extension system of community learning.¹ It's a natural next step for Cooperative Extension—a small step, but a significant one. For decades, Extension home economics and 4-H programs have sensitively, creatively, and extensively tapped the vast talent of community volunteers.

An SOS Learning Network employs essentially the same principles, but, in addition to strengthening the home economics and 4-H programs, a learning network also reaches out and actively involves large numbers of individuals and families who have had no prior connection to Extension. It shares Extension-bred expertise with these people and simultaneously draws on their wealth of often underrecognized abilities.

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An SOS Learning Network:

- Greatly increases Extension's visibility in the public eye.
- Actively involves a large number of previously unreached people.
- Is a program through which home economics, 4-H, agriculture, and community development can collectively focus their energies.
- Is an opportunity for groups and organizations to cooperate in a mutually beneficial community effort.
- Requires only a short-term commitment and is, therefore, appealing to nonjoiners.
- Is the most cost-efficient community learning to date.

What It Is

An SOS Learning Network is a model of community learning. Its acceptance and success prove that its time has come. SOS stands for Sharing Our Selves. An SOS Learning Network is an organized, but informal, way for people to share their ideas, talents, knowledge, and hobbies with others who are curious and eager to learn. It's a forum for meeting community needs and a mechanism for joining people who have similar interests. It's a project that extensively involves the grass-roots people of a community and gives them an important measure of control over their own lives.

A learning network also serves as a common meeting ground for people of all ages and backgrounds, giving them the opportunity to share concerns and work together. It's based on an amplification of the two principles that have made Extension what it is today—helping people help themselves and creative involvement of volunteers.

Each learning network consists of two components. The first component, the offerings of community learning and development activities, represents the *heart* of a learning network. The second component, the Community Resources Index, is an important, but nonessential, part of an SOS Learning Network. Both components are integrated and mutually supporting.

Community Learning and Development Activities

This component is built on community needs and interests that are identified in large part by a simple, yet effective, methodology. After being introduced to the SOS Learning Network concept, community groups, as well as individuals, are given a small blank sheet of paper. They're asked to put their name, address, and phone number at the top of the paper and to list three things they'd like to learn. On the back of the paper, they're asked to name one or more subjects

they know well enough to share with others. Typically, an impressive array of learning-exchange possibilities is accumulated.

This simple technique isn't only a means of needs assessment, but it's also a way of designing learning activities to meet the assessed needs. Usually a significant overlap exists in what people want to learn and what they're competent to teach. The process is based in great measure on the understanding that essentially every individual, regardless of formal academic credentials, has skills, knowledge, talents, or experience worth sharing with others.

Learning network activities can be built around almost any subject of community interest such as home landscaping, preventive medicine, beginning guitar, bread making, sign language, first aid, macrame, picture framing, creative writing, or tune-ups for sick cars. Forums for examining issues and concerns facing community life such as proposed zone changes, special needs of the elderly, and challenging drug abuse can and should be included in the program. Learning networks are also an excellent way of bringing together people with common interests and needs, thus facilitating activities such as farmers' markets and day care cooperatives.

After community interests have been identified and learning activities and volunteer teachers/leaders have been chosen, a catalog of activities is developed and distributed to the general public inviting them to register. Teachers and leaders may or may not have degrees. Meetings take place in churches, schools during "off hours," libraries, parks, homes, banks.

*Community
Resources
Index*

The Community Resources Index, an optional but valuable activity, is coordinated from the county Extension office. The principal objective behind this service is the development of a centralized index (and awareness) of individuals in a community who have expertise in certain areas and are willing to occasionally volunteer to share their expertise. The Community Resources Index is a resource that potentially can benefit a total community. It also recognizes expertise, both formal and informal, of which many in the community aren't aware. Extension's growing computer capability, incidently, can efficiently organize and update local resource indexes as well as interface such systems into an area or statewide resource system.

An SOS Learning Network, then, is an integrated, dynamic, informal community learning and development program based on the following concepts: (1) we're all learners and we're all teachers, (2) we often learn best when we share with others,

(3) we grow as we share ourselves, and (4) sharing ourselves is one of the keys to creative community development.

Need for Learning Networks

In addition to the rapid emergence of Kentucky's 8 learning networks in spring, 1981, and the nationwide surge of interest in self-help,² recent data from an independently conducted statewide Kentucky telephone survey³ (n=600) indicate that the public is highly interested in participating in learning networks.

Kentuckians were asked, "Do you believe that most people in your community possess skills which, if widely shared, could greatly benefit the community at large?" A total of 78% of the respondents said "yes." Community size, incidently, didn't influence how those surveyed responded to this question.

Of those randomly surveyed, 64% said they'd be interested in attending a free, informal, educational program where people share their skills and hobbies. Of the respondents, 41% said they had skills they'd like to share in a learning network.

. . . Real education stimulates a deep sense of appreciation, trust, and faith in ourselves and those around us. Real education is *people-growing* and *people-growing* is what SOS Learning Networks are all about.

National Leadership in Community Learning

Kentucky's learning network program was catalyzed in large measure by the University for Man (UFM), located at Kansas State University (KSU) in Manhattan. Based on the concept that "anyone can teach and anyone can learn," UFM started as a small, free university on the KSU campus in spring, 1968. Initially offering 7 volunteer-led courses, UFM enrolled about 150 people. Today, UFM offers some 800 different events a year with over 12,000 participants.

In 1975, in response to a growing number of requests, UFM developed an outreach program and began to help small rural communities around the state of Kansas develop their own programs of free university-type community education. The courses, led almost entirely by local people, have covered every conceivable facet of interest, skill, and activity. The response of the people has been nothing short of phenomenal. The enthusiasm and excitement generated when people realize the value of their talents and the value of sharing these resources has been an incredible community morale booster.

Over 35 of these community learning programs now exist across Kansas with some 30,000 individuals participating annually. As spinoffs of these efforts, three manuals, a training film, and a large number of papers and articles have been done.⁴

The outreach effort was further expanded in 1979 to test the assumption that the UFM model, developed in Kansas, was transmittable through different network systems. One of the systems invited to participate in these pilot efforts was the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service. The forthcoming help from UFM gave the Kentucky concept of SOS Learning Networks—at that time merely an idea struggling for existence—just what it needed to get off the ground.

An important educational distinction between free universities and Cooperative Extension Service programs exists. "One of the keystones of Cooperative Extension is the fact that it operates through specialists out of a knowledge base at the university."⁵ Free universities, on the other hand, draw primarily on a variety of other knowledge sources such as the formal or informal expertise of local volunteers.

SOS Learning Networks are taking a significant step forward by merging these two very valuable, yet distinct, bases of knowledge, and making the resulting information widely available to the total community. The fact that local citizens are responding in numbers beyond expectations suggests that this merger is meeting important needs.

**Large Enrollments,
New Clientele,
Saved Dollars**

As of fall, 1981, 15 SOS Learning Networks are operating across Kentucky. In many other Kentucky communities, learning networks are in various stages of development. Average enrollment per community for each SOS session has exceeded 300. Each person enrolled for a course usually participates in a series of two to five classes. Adding the enrollments of the 15 existing learning networks together results in a joint enrollment exceeding 4,500 for the fall session alone. *Well over 60% of these program participants hadn't previously been actively involved in the Cooperative Extension program.*

With only 15 learning networks involved, and based on 3 sessions (spring, summer, fall) per year, total annual enrollment exceeds 13,500. Using the very conservative figure of \$15/course that's typically charged in most community education programs, we can say that in 1 year the participants in 15 existing free learning networks saved over \$200,000. With a greatly expanded system of learning networks, the amount of "saved dollars" would clearly be phenomenal, not to mention the public visibility given to the Cooperative

Extension program. Moreover, our initial evaluation efforts point to dollars saved and public visibility as only two of a vast and impressive array of benefits that result when receptive communities establish SOS Learning Networks.

People-Growing

Real education is much more than just a pumping in of facts, figures, and concepts. Real education is primarily a drawing out from one another what we already know. It involves people helping people see, enjoy, and share existing and potential capabilities. Real education stimulates a deep sense of appreciation, trust, and faith in ourselves and those around us. Real education is *people-growing* and *people-growing* is what SOS Learning Networks are all about.

Footnotes

1. *SOS Learning Networks: Introductory Booklet* (Lexington: Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, 1981); *SOS Learning Networks: A Photo Essay* (Lexington: Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, 1981); and the SOS Learning Networks slide/tape show (may be borrowed from Kentucky).
2. Alan Gartner and Frank Riessman, *HELP: A Working Guide to Self-Help Groups* (New York: Franklin Watts, 1980) and Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: William Morrow, 1980), chapter 20.
3. A special series of questions on learning networks was included in the fall, 1980, edition of a random digit dialing telephone survey that's conducted biannually by the University of Kentucky Survey Research Center. The overall purpose of the survey is to periodically tap, in a scientific way, the opinions and attitudes of Kentucky citizens. The inclusion of the SOS Learning Network needs assessment questions was made possible by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education.
4. A variety of resources are available from the University for Man (1221 Thurston, Manhattan, Kansas 66502, 913-532-5866). Particularly helpful are: Bill Draves, *The Free University: A Model for Lifelong Learning*; Bill Draves and Cathy MacRunnels, eds., *The Free U Manual*; "Grassroots Education," a 20-minute, 16 mm color film directed and filmed by Dennis Lofgren, 1977; and Bill Draves and Cindy Bryant, eds., *The Rural and Small Town Community Education Manual*.
5. John O. Dunbar, interview with Jim Killacky, December, 1980. Dunbar was then director of the Kansas Cooperative Extension Service. He is currently dean of agriculture, Kansas State University.