

Is the Innovator Dead?

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Paul challenges the principle that all farmers in a community learn and adopt from a single innovator. Extension ". . . must get closer to the operating farmers as a whole." Successful farmers have no intention of sharing their information and techniques. What should Extension's role be when working with the less productive farmers: (1) to improve their efficiency or (2) to consider them as socioeconomic problems and handle them by trying to get them to move off the farms, by carrying them at a subsistence level, or by ignoring them?

Is the innovator in a community dead? Has the over-the-fence method gone or been modified? Is there a new breed of innovators? Are there more innovators, each in his economic grouping and each requiring specialized attention? Are the innovators and early adopters influencing their neighbors at different stages of adoption than in the past, and if so, what implications does this have for extension?

The well-known principle of innovation is that the majority of farmers learn new ideas and adopt new practices through examples set by their more progressive and successful neighbors.¹ This principle no longer applies.

McBlain, a farmer in Ontario, when addressing the Canadian Soci-

ety of Rural Extension in 1968, referred to how farmers formerly exchanged information. But he added, "This over-the-fence exchange may be drying up due to the competitive nature of modern living."²

Another Canadian farmer notes the conservative outlook of farmers and how tradition is a trap:

As new farming techniques were developed, the people were not quick to accept them. And, because soil in the region is generally poor, it does not respond as well to new techniques as does soil in many parts of the province.³

In 1967, Gleave, farmer and past president of the National Farmers Union of Canada, said:

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We have assumed up to now that if we could reach the "innovator" type of farmer then the knowledge would filter down. But apparently it does not work out that way. We must get closer to the operating farmers as a whole. Let us try some new methods.⁴

The current role of the innovator was questioned by Hurd of the Canadian Federation of Agriculture staff when he told extension workers in 1965:

It is interesting to speculate as to whether or not the innovator, early adopter sequence which we hear so much about in extension circles is merely a description phenomenon—sort of conventional wisdom that has outlived its usefulness. In dealing with the problem of low-income farmers in Canada, some enterprising research work in extension methods might well lead to a solution of the problem of reaching the 35 to 40 percent of farmers who have no participation with our extension programs⁵

Hurd also quoted a study in India which pointed out:

The usual picture of improved practice adoption through the innovator, early adopter, later adopter sequence, which is prevalent in North America, does not seem to hold among Tanjore farmers. Rather the picture is a broad forward movement in adopting new practices. . . . This study indicates that much more of a mass development of agriculture is possible . . . than is generally conceived.⁶

Similar evidence of change was forcibly brought to my attention when I studied the advisory services of England and Wales in 1967-68. Some successful commercial farmers said that when they have new information and techniques that are useful, they have no intention of sharing them. When I presented this view to a seminar of government extension workers, several mentioned the increasing difficulty of getting leading farmers to permit their farms to be used for demonstrations or farm walks where details of methods and results would be discussed.

It's pointed out by Tully of Australia that the theory on the role of the innovator

. . . rests on the assumption that it is lack of knowledge that retards adoption of innovations. Many workers have thrown doubt on this assumption Research . . . does not seem to have given any very strong evidence that these characteristics can be used to predict adoption behaviour. To attribute the adoption . . . to the innovation seems fallacious Objective, relative advantage of an innovation as perceived by extension workers might have little predictive value for adoption.⁷

The farmer's acceptance of available information will depend on its relevance to his problem, and to his resources and desires.

Increased complexity in agriculture, greater specialization, and more stress on economics and competition are bringing about changes that affect extension.

A decade or two ago, the size of the farm units and capital investment didn't vary greatly. The types of farming, enterprises, problems, and solutions were quite similar. The economic and management problems lacked today's variety.

This meant extension could focus on those farmers who were really interested in new information and techniques, and were prepared to test and adopt. It also was a pleasure to work with these people. There was no need to be concerned about the other farmers; they would learn from the innovators. By working with innovators rather than all the people, the extension officer thought he would be more effective. Today this practice is at times officially justified because it's the progressive commercial farmers who contribute to the national economy and who will survive. The other farmers must show interest and initiative in seeking help to merit attention.

The fact is that in recent years agriculture is moving toward two major poles. One pole is the efficient farms that are increasing their efficiency and expanding further. The other pole is the major group of less efficient farms that can't achieve the essential expansion and are falling behind. Van Vliet sums it up:

In the last ten years . . . we are getting more and more of our total group of farms into a sort of blocked off group which is not going to make progress.⁸

By focusing on innovators, the large hard core group is overlooked.

The question is: What should extension agencies do about it? Industry and producer groups are interested in commercial farms. The questions for government then is: What should be its objectives and its role toward the less productive:

1. to improve their efficiency and make them viable?
2. to consider them as socioeconomic problems and handle them as such by trying to get them to move off the farms, by carrying them at a subsistence level, or by ignoring them?

In comparing the past with the present, the farm changes of today are less obvious, more subtle, and involve a greater degree of efficient management. Decisions now are related more to economic records and their evaluation rather than to visual assessment. The result is that a farmer can't as readily learn from his neighbor by over-the-fence observations and exchange. The important information is in the farm records and balance sheets which persons don't readily reveal.

The importance of differences in social groups, cultures, education, economic orientation, and identification with the rest of the community is pointed out by Austman in his work with Indians in Manitoba.⁹ The theory of the innovator overlooks or minimizes these factors. It assumed that all men are equal in all things, and that delayed adoption is merely a personal decision.

The significance of this to extension is that we must take a new

look at our goals, our programs, and our methods. If the effect of the innovator is dead and if we want to serve the middle- and lower-economic farm groups, then we must give more attention directly to them. A recent study in one Canadian province shows that 80 per cent or more of the present extension involvement is with 30 per cent of the farmers who produce 70 per cent or more of the agricultural production. This is justified by "this group represents the innovators and we learn a great deal from them." My observations would indicate that the extension approach in England and Wales is similar. But lower- and middle-economic farmers are increasingly rejecting this idea. Also, with the rapid changes in agriculture, the slow man is the lost man.

A major "beef" of the lower- and middle-economic farmer is the dearth of coordinated operational research data applicable to him. He has questions that are not being answered. This is one reason for the rapid development of nongovernment agencies. Industry, for instance, is helping fill this gap by testing materials and techniques under local conditions, and providing economic data and guidance in operation and management. Thus agri-business is acting as a type of innovator. On the other hand, in government research agencies, there's a trend away from research on problem solving, which has left a void in practical information.

In addition, the stratification of farmers within a community means

that information for one group may not be pertinent to another group. Yet in spite of these recognized differences, we still focus our extension programs and methods on the "successful" farmers who have risk capital to test ideas.

There are examples of farmers not following the traditional adoption sequence; in a recent campaign for soil testing, the blitz method was effective.

An extension worker with modern communication methods, for example, television, may act as an innovator by demonstrating results obtained by persons unknown in local communities.

The need for innovators is probably greater today than ever before, but with the added complexity and competition in agriculture and the extra costs of testing, it means that much of it may be done by large agencies, thus modifying the role of the local innovator. Some innovators can be motivated by concepts and abstractions, while others require actual demonstrations.

The onus to help those who need it the most must fall on government agencies, which will work with, and decide the fate of, this group. It is government that must strive to develop educational programs, alternatives, appropriate credit. These farmers can do little to help themselves without outside help.

We need more information on what changes are occurring, how they are affecting people, their capacities and their plans, and what

alternatives can be offered to those who most need assistance. We are the ones now challenged to do some innovating!

Footnotes

1. Herbert F. Lionberger, *Adoption of New Ideas and Practices* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1969), p. 164; and Everett M. Rogers, *Diffusion of Innovations* (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1969), p. 367.
2. B. McBlain, "How I Get Farm Management Information," Proceedings of Canadian Society of Rural Extension, 1968, pp. 58-63.
3. W. George Wood, "Tradition Is a Trap," *AIC Review*, XXIV (September-October, 1969), 16-17.
4. A. P. Gleave, "The Farmer and the Future," Proceedings of Annual Meeting of Saskatchewan Institute of Agrologists, 1967, pp. 25-27.
5. L. W. J. Hurd, "What Farmers Expect of Extension," Proceedings of Canadian Society of Rural Extension, 1965, pp. 7-12.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Joan Tully, "Farmers' Problems of Behavioural Change," *Human Relations*, XXI (November, 1968), 373-82.
8. H. Van Vliet, "The Current Position of Saskatchewan Agriculture," Proceedings of Saskatchewan Institute of Agrologists, 1967, pp. 2-12.
9. H. H. Austman, "The Outsiders: Indians Must Be Included in Extension," *AIC Review*, XXIV (September-October, 1969), 14-15.