Programming Approaches

There's nothing as practical as a good theory! What we need is more practice and less theory! Have you heard these contradictory statements before? Perhaps you have, but don't they lead to the question: *Is theory related to practice?*

A recent study found theory (what agents comprehend and know about Extension's major programming approaches) to be the only factor related to practice (how agents actually develop and carry out programs).

Clifton Taylor, formerly at the University of Wisconsin, tested whether the planning of major impact programs by Extension agents was related to their:

1. Understanding of major impact programming.
2. Attitudes toward major impact programming.
3. Tendency to take risk.
4. Attitudes towards controversy.
5. Needs for independence in a work situation.
6. Confidence in their ability to plan major impact programs.
7. Perceptions of constraints and existing conditions.
8. Perceptions of support to carry out major impact programming.

To determine these relationships, Taylor randomly selected 85 agents (45 agriculture and 40 home economists) in Wisconsin. Their 1974-75 program plans were analyzed by a panel of judges using 27 criteria, to see if their plans were "major."

Major impact program plans were defined as "comprehensive sets of interrelated educational opportunities designed to achieve significant results." These analyses identified 38 minor programs and 47 major programs. Panel interconsistency was very acceptable and when data from agent interviews and plans of work were correlated, these, too, showed high reliability.

Through mail questionnaires and telephone interviews with agents, values were determined on the independent variables, one through eight above.

Using the Pearson chi-square statistic to test his eight hypotheses, Taylor found that agents' higher understanding of major impact programming related to their actual planning of such efforts. Agents' attitudes, tendencies to take risk, confidence, and perceptions of situations didn't relate in any significant way to type of programming. Though not significant, some tendency existed in the data for agents with higher propensity to take risk, and to plan major impact programs.

In further analysis, Taylor found major impact programs plans weren't related to agents' scope of responsibility, tenure, and formal education, but that a number of clientele problems identified by agents in planning were significantly related to major impact programming. He also found "tendency to take risk" related to the need for independent programming and confidence in own ability. Men and women didn't differ on risk taking.

Implications   What implications can we draw from this study? The obvious one is that we do what we know—common sense— but overlooked so often. Thus, if we actually plan and carry out major impact programs, we need to understand the concept. All people (administrators, specialists, agents, program leaders, and district supervisors) need a similar understanding if they're to cooperate on an extensive major impact program. Unless all have a similar understanding of the programming processes, and their subsequent expected roles, major impact programming is facing the likelihood of failure, or lack of implementation, or of neglect in the future.

Perhaps we should ask ourselves: Can we describe what we want to practice? Do we want to implement programs focused at particular problems with increase likelihood of impact? Do we fully understand what's involved in planning, implementing, and evaluating such a program? If we want to do such programming, but our understanding is low, what do we need to learn so our theory relates to effective practice?

"An Analysis of Factors Associated with Programming Approaches." Clifton Taylor. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1975.

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