selecting extension teaching methods

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Extension has its roots in research in the physical sciences, but the method of sharing this information with clientele depends on a social science process. The major role of Extension agents in this process is teaching. It's a teacher's responsibility to structure learning situations so students can learn.

No one technique is suited to all situations. But how many agents venture beyond the few "tried-and-true" methods? How many spend time analyzing each situation and then drawing from a reservoir of teaching tools the most appropriate ones?

Teaching methods in Extension should be selected carefully and specifically and should emanate from a knowledge base that addresses all facets of the learning situation.

Based on my reviews of Plans of Work and interactions with agents, I'd say "not very many." But I don't think this is due to agent indifference. Rather, the focus in Extension tends to be more on content than methodology. In-service training and support materials for agents usually focus on *what* the agent is to teach, with little attention on *how* to teach.

Considering the fact that agents are usually hired because of their expertise in a technical subject-matter area, we shouldn't assume that they're also prepared to fill a teaching role.

Here are some ways for the agent to enhance his/her teaching effectiveness with a variety of techniques and an understanding of factors to consider in selecting and applying these techniques. The material is based on a review of the literature and my own experiences and observations in working in Extension.

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Teaching Methods

Three general classifications of Extension teaching methods have been identified by Pesson.[1] These are: (1) individual contact, (2) group contact, and (3) mass media. The first two classifications involve a one-to-one and a one-to-several ratio of agent teacher to clientele. Both involve personal contact and interaction.

The third classification, mass media, involves a one-to-many teaching ratio. An additional feature is that the contact is impersonal. The "message" must be interpreted by the recipient without benefit of explanation from professional sources, unless the message stimulates further contact with the Extension staff.

Table 1 shows examples of teaching methods included under each of the 3 classifications.

Selecting Method

In addressing which method(s) to use in helping an individual or group achieve a specific educational objective,

Table 1. Examples of teaching methods.

Individual Contact

1. Office visits	17. Interview
2. Farm, home visit	18. Exhibits, fairs
3. Personal letter	19. Clubs and organized groups
4. Telephone call	20. Simulations
5. Counseling	-Gaming
6. Correspondence course	-Creative dramatics
	-Role playing
Group Contact	21. Debate
1. Illustrated lecture	22. Brainstorming
2. Speech	23. Audience teams
3. Discussion	-Reaction
4. Inquiry	-Listening, observing
-Problem solving	24. Buzz session
-Questioning	25. Idea inventory
5. Forum	26. Question period
6. Colloquy	27. Screening panel
7. Demonstration	
8. Clinic	*Mass Media*
9. Institute	1. Lecture recording
10. Workshop	2. News story
11. Seminar	3. Radio
12. Symposium	4. Television
13. Field trip (tour)	5. Publications
14. Field day	6. Posters, billboards
15. Large meeting	7. Circular letter
16. Contest	8. Electronics
	-Computers

the literature suggests considering several factors. To pull all this information together and provide a framework for decision making, I have synthesized these suggestions into 7 major areas, as shown in Figure 1. These seven areas are:

1. Clientele audiences.
2. Classification of subject matter.
3. Desired change.
4. Learning theories.
5. Primary function of method.
6. Need and time factors.
7. Availability of method.

These major areas are subdivided to clarify groupings. Examples related to each of the areas should explain how factors might be considered in selecting methods.

Clientele Audiences   Let's look first at characteristics of clientele audiences. As an example, studies have shown that the lower the socio-economic status of a particular area, the higher the proportion of people who want adult educational activities located within their own neighborhood, because these people feel uncomfortable when they go out of their own familiar surroundings.[2] This factor should be considered in selecting appropriate teaching methods for this clientele. Another consideration might include the economic situation and its influence on adoption behavior—high income is nearly always associated with high levels of practice adoption.[3] Thus, the staff needs to know the economic status, for this, too, would influence the selection process.

Subject Matter   When looking at classification of subject matter, consider the level of difficulty of the subject matter. For example, an appropriate method for presenting general information could well be a large meeting with a guest lecturer, but for controversial subject matter, a forum might be more effective. Closely related to this is consideration of the primary function of the method: Is it for information-gathering or information-sending?

Desired Change   In terms of the desired change, teaching objectives should be written to indicate the level(s) of change desired. Then, methods should be selected to match the objective. If working on the attitude level, for example, appropriate methods might include experience-sharing discussions or role playing. But, at the skill level, hands-on experience would provide the training needed.
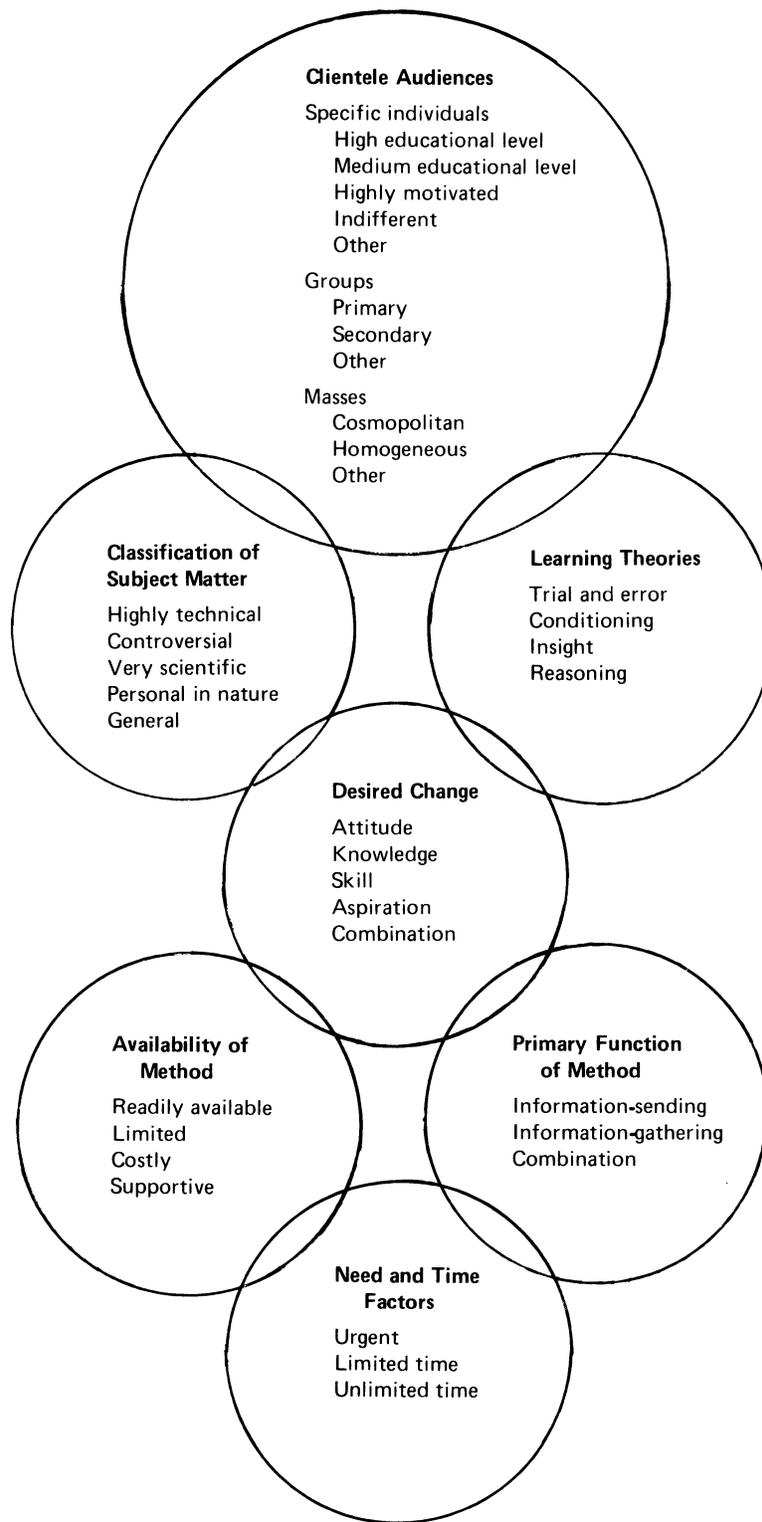
Clientele Audiences

Specific individuals
    High educational level
    Medium educational level
    Highly motivated
    Indifferent
    Other

Groups
    Primary
    Secondary
    Other

Masses
    Cosmopolitan
    Homogeneous
    Other

Classification of Subject Matter

Highly technical
Controversial
Very scientific
Personal in nature
General

Learning Theories

Trial and error
Conditioning
Insight
Reasoning

Desired Change

Attitude
Knowledge
Skill
Aspiration
Combination

Availability of Method

Readily available
Limited
Costly
Supportive

Primary Function of Method

Information-sending
Information-gathering
Combination

Need and Time Factors

Urgent
Limited time
Unlimited time

Figure 1. Interrelated factors to consider in selecting teaching methods.

Learning
Theories
A knowledge of learning and conditions conducive to learning would certainly help the planning process. People learn from the time they're born and continue to do so throughout their lifetime. But how do they learn, and what does this say to the teacher?

One learning theory is referred to as "conditioning." An excellent example of this theory in practice is in advertising, for advertising uses conditioning to get people to favor the advertised product.[4] And isn't Extension sometimes concerned with "advertising" its programs? When used effectively, methods based on this theory can open up new avenues of awareness in clientele.

Method's
Function
Feasibility of methods in terms of time, cost, and availability must also be considered. Large expenditures may be justified in a priority program area such as energy, but for a problem peculiar to a small segment of clientele in one county, costly techniques would hardly be appropriate.

Need and
Time
The various factors are all interrelated, and all subject to consideration when structuring learning situations. Even for the conscientious teacher, the task of selecting the right technique for the right occasion can be fraught with difficulties. Many times there's a tendency toward "faddism"—what is everyone else doing? Other times, there may be a tendency to go overboard on new techniques that have just been mastered, i.e., wanting to use the same ones on every occasion. The ability to select the most effective technique(s) for a given purpose is probably best developed through well-evaluated experience and knowledgeable experimentation.[5]

Summary
An understanding of behavioral sciences is basic to selecting teaching methods, for Extension deals first with people and then with subject matter. Its teaching processes are concerned with having messages accurately received, interpreted, and acted on so that desired change may occur. People learn in different ways—some by reading, some by listening, some by discussing, some by doing. Extension studies have shown that the more teaching methods used, the higher the percentage of people changing their practices.[6] Thus, using a variety of techniques will be the most effective approach in seeking to bring about behavioral changes.

Teaching methods in Extension should be selected carefully and specifically and should emanate from a knowledge base that addresses all facets of the learning situation.

Footnotes

1. Lynn L. Pesson, "The Plan of Work," in *The Cooperative Extension Service,* H. C. Sanders, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966).
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Fred P. Frutchey, "The Learning-Teaching Process," in *The Cooperative Extension Service,* H. C. Sanders, ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966).
5. Malcolm S. Knowles, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education* (New York: Association Press, 1970).
6. Frutchey, "The Learning-Teaching Process."