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Educators or Facilitators? Clarifying Extension's Role in the Emerging Local Food Systems Movement

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Abstract: With the recent growth of the local food systems movement, OSU Extension formed a new statewide team. In the process, Extension program delivery systems were explored contrasting traditional program delivery (historically rooted in a teacher-clientele, information transfer, demonstration methodology) vs. a community capacity-building facilitation process. This seemingly marginal distinction raised questions with deeper implications for Extension's outreach and engagement process. In brief, how can Extension fill the gap between community-expressed needs and the traditional framework of delivery? Should Extension help communities fulfill their goals and objectives by acting as facilitators, co-conveners, and true partners, rather than simply as educators?

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Introduction

The interest in growing, purchasing, and consuming local foods has exploded in the past few years. Local and national news channels report on food safety, security, and the environmental impact of certain farm practices and food transportation. In addition, there is a noticeable increase in roadside farm stands and organized farm markets nationwide (USDA, 2009). The sustainable local food system has become increasingly important for individuals, families, businesses, and communities. Interest in increased availability of food from known sources is both common and growing across the rural to urban continuum.

Nationally, Extension is positioned to collectively influence the changes and growth of local food systems. Personnel in all four program areas (youth, agriculture, family consumer sciences, and community development) are actively involved in varying aspects of local food systems development. However, this somewhat disparate group of campus faculty, research outpost, and field staff naturally comes with a variety of program delivery options and methodologies. Additionally, there generally exists little coordinated effort or communication systems to bring these people and their ideas together.

In October 2009, the desire for better communication and information sharing led to a new statewide team for Ohio State's Department of Extension. The goal was to address local food systems initiatives that were growing across the state. During this process, two prevailing yet potentially conflicting notions of program

delivery became apparent. These were:

1. Traditional program delivery (historically rooted in an information transfer from teacher to client using demonstration methodologies);
2. Community capacity-building facilitation process (in which Extension brings people together and helps them identify capacity, expertise, and action groups from within).

This seemingly marginal distinction raised questions with deeper implications for Extension's outreach and engagement process. These are not limited to Ohio. In brief, how can Extension fill the gap between community-expressed needs and the traditional framework of delivery? Should Extension help communities fulfill their goals and objectives by acting as facilitators or co-conveners, rather than simply as educators who transfer knowledge? The latter question begs follow-up:

1. Should Extension facilitate, equip, or catalyze a group with an ideology that runs contrary to Extension's generally accepted teachings on agricultural practices?
2. Does Extension deliver expertise beyond what is easily obtainable on the Internet? How or how not?
3. Is there a role for Extension as both educator and facilitator?

Background

Extension educators serve as both an expert source of information (teacher) *and* as a facilitator who can bring together existing community resources and help a group build sustaining capacity. But the seemingly obvious, quick answer is not quite so straightforward. Let's briefly recall the history from which Extension emerged and developed. It was largely rooted in two historical schools of thought.

Liberty Hyde Bailey (1858-1954) approached Extension's mission from a community-building or development perspective. He believed that rural people had the ability to sustain community and social life. Herein, Extension needed to facilitate helping a community understand the role of agriculture (the basis of the nation's economy during that time) to sustain community life. Though he believed that rural Americans were generally uneducated, he held that education could lead to reform. His approach was to bring expert advice (from the university centers), to the people to increase their involvement. In short, his approach to teaching placed a strong emphasis on local capacity building that would occur as the new information and educational lessons took hold and moved people to action.

In contrast, Seaman Knapp (1831-1911) promoted the Extension "demonstration farm" model. He also viewed people as basically uneducated and developed the demonstration model that employed local farmers who showed new and successful practices to their neighboring farmers. This demonstrating technique prevailed due to the value equation of the day: adopting technologies to add value in their agrarian economy. It may be a subtle contrast, but Bailey's approach of community involvement/building seemed to be more holistic and sustainable for the community.

Fast-forward to today. Bailey ideals reemerge in Scott Peters' work at Cornell. He sees Extension work as "human work." Peters believes in coming along side, bringing expert advice from the Institution, but it should not be "we're the teacher; you're the student." If that's the case, there's no real need for Extension. If

information and purported expert knowledge is available everywhere, why should government fund our branch or diffusion process? (Peters, 2006).

Discussion

Obviously, the conversation must be carefully positioned. In the past, delivering programs was key to Extension's business. Information was not widely available. Expertise was not a keystroke away. Extension *was* the teacher, the expert. Today, there exists a greater need for more of a facilitation role, *interpreting* information and data, and helping communities discover what's already there. This is the sustainable approach of building capacity.

Hassel (2005) describes a worldview as "basic assumptions and beliefs that form the basis of a people's comprehension of the world. 'Ways of knowing' refers to epistemology--differences in the nature of knowledge and its construction, including what counts as knowledge and the degree to which knowledge is certain." Hassel continues, "Recognizing and involving community-based subject matter experts without relying upon academic credentials or scientific validation ... is dangerous."

This presents a credible argument with respect to how we approach educating or facilitating in communities. There exists an amazing depth and breadth of knowledge in many communitiesâ experiential and non-formal, passed down outside the classroom or research lab. However, Extension educators must conduct outreach and teaching based on scientific research, empirical data, and verifiable knowledge. A shift in the Extension approach to community engagement wherein we simply *facilitate* will not work. Again, academic rigor or empirical data have a great purpose.

In an address to the 2006 OSU Extension Community Development Conference, Scott Peters (Cornell) told the following story (herein retold from personal notes taken during the seminar):

In the late 1950's, an OSU Extension Agent named J.P. Schmidt said, "Good schools, good churches and good neighbors are as important as good potatoes." Now what on earth does that mean, you ask? Perhaps he was sensing a sea change in America. Schmidt saw technology (then, a TV set) encroaching on face-to-face communication. So his statement emphasizes that our entire community (schools, churches, neighbors) are as important (i.e., are needed to reach, educate and help transform society), as good potatoes. "Good potatoes" symbolizes all the emphasis on crop technology that Extension was doing in the 1950's.

In short, he was saying that we need the new technology (to produce the good potatoes), but we ALSO need the high touch (schools, churches, neighbors) to progress as a society. This is an astounding revelation when we consider it in context. It's just as valid today. We need to use technology (due to budget constraints, electronic communications, etc.), but we must NOT let go of the face-to-face teaching and interaction.

The community currency 100 years ago was in agriculture. Today, it's food, energy, service, and manufacturingâ those things that people are able to bring together to sustain a community. This requires a new technological component along with civic and community involvement. Change is not optional. The Extension delivery system must find the intersecting points of high tech and high touch. Essentially, this equates to bridging the divide between being educators (information delivery) and the role of facilitators (building local capacity).

Conclusions

The traditional delivery/engagement system of imparting expert research and knowledge to clientele no longer provides the value that it once did. In *Catalyzing Change* (2006), Monika Roth notes:

Extension is a grassroots effort. It's more than just the process of, 'I have the information you need. I am the teacher and you are the student.' It's much more engaged. We involve people to make change.

As we work in local food systems initiatives, we must continue to function as educators, but we don't simply impart data from on high. Instead, we need to become better partners. We need to come along side and facilitateâ helping communities discover the knowledge and talent and expertise that exists within their group. Then, we need to help them develop it.

Extension should teach communities how to discover and use the resources that exist within the context of their current community. Thus, by facilitating, Extension assists people in building social capital. This creates a sustainable approach vs. an unsustainable program. Programs can and do initiate change, but a delivered program has less impact than an involved group of citizens who develop and implement their own plan for civic action.

When we help community members discover and build capacity within themselvesâ using data, expertise, and experience that we access from the universitiesâ they will develop into sustainable systems that last. Extension work is human work. It extends far beyond information conveyance.

Agricultural Extension Education is not deadâ yet. But if we do not sense this impending change, embrace the alternate methods our clientele have for accessing information, and then act to help them learn to use that information in conjunction with knowledge already available within their community, funding surely will not continue.

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