

A View of Digital Scholarship in Extension

Abstract

Methods for Extension personnel to engage clientele are developing rapidly. Social media and online content are used by eXtension members to generate information and deliver it quickly. These methods are found useful by information consumers; however, many universities fail to adequately address them in the promotion and tenure process. Engaged eXtension members understand the importance of using digital methods, yet career value of the effort is unclear. This ambiguity has caused participation issues within eXtension Communities of Practice. A new examination of how Extension content is valued by the consumer and by colleagues within the academic arena is warranted.

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Scholarship was defined by Culp (1999) as creative, intellectual work that is created, synthesized, applied, and communicated. Based on that definition, adding the use of computer or electronic technology and having it validated by peers would constitute digital scholarship. Online methods of delivering scholarly information, such as eXtension, are becoming the norm rather than the exception, yet promotion and tenure committees have yet to fully grasp how to assess this type of work in terms of scholarship. Online relevance is a challenge for traditional Extension, but eXtension is a method to reach the public in a more direct way and thus become more valuable to those who do not yet recognize the existence of Extension. But, if those efforts are not recognized as scholarly, the incentive for Extension personnel to dedicate the time and effort into new, innovative digital work is diminished.

Ultimately, Extension is responsible for its representation to the public—and the public does not concern itself with the academic definition of scholarship. Online digital platforms like social media (e.g., blogs) and eXtension are viable outlets for scholarly creative innovation, but making them fit into a traditional peer-review world is complicated. Online communication is about relevance and immediacy, an entirely different model than refereed journal publications. Thus, a significant re-evaluation of what digital scholarship means within the new world of communication opportunities is necessary.

Digital Scholarship in Extension

Although Extension and research faculty have different immediate audiences, scholarship in Extension is defined within the same parameters as for a researcher (Culp, 2009; Monroe & Hochmuth, 2011). This definition is too narrow to adequately encompass all of the possible scholarly work in Extension. Culp (2009) suggested six types of scholarship for Extension, one of which was creative artistry. Creative artistry is the creation of new ways to interpret research development of innovative teaching strategies and even how to expand current teaching methods to create broader appeal. Sufficient examples of creative artistry in other disciplines are available across campuses. What do other inherently artistic programs (e.g., art, graphic design, creative writing, etc.) at universities reward as scholarship, and why could their definitions of creative work not be translated to agriculture disciplines?

Ultimately, scholarship is coalescing, packaging, and presenting creative work in such a way that translates to successful interpretation by the intended audience, thus furthering their knowledge base. Extension administrators should consider programs and incentives that leverage the knowledge and expertise of personnel and allow them to make full use of their interests and talents (Argabright, McGuire, & King, 2012; Franz & Cox, 2012; Hoag, 2005). Innovative Extension personnel should have incentives for taking risks to modernize Extension programming (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011; Seger, 2011), such as meaningful financial and career enhancement rewards.

Extension personnel who have been established in their positions for several years fear they will alienate clientele if they begin to use technology such as social media (Diem et al., 2011; Seger, 2011) and eXtension. However, availability of information and educational online tools is becoming the new standard. Younger audiences who expect online access will soon become the core constituency of Extension. If Extension is not up to the task of catering to them, then the future looks bleak. Social media delivery of educational and informational content is a cost-effective method to reach users. Social media has the benefit of being able to "push" content to users, and this offers both challenges and opportunities within Extension to make use of these new technologies (Diem et al., 2011). A mentoring program for those who wish to learn new technologies would also be a useful and non-threatening way to help those who struggle with technology to find their niche (Seger, 2011). This could be supported by mini-grants or awards by Extension administration that exhibit the value placed on technological activity (Seger, 2011). Extension must embrace creativity and innovation, or risk-taking, as a way toward better engagement rather than settle for customary practice (Argabright et al., 2012; Franz & Cox, 2012; Hahn, 2008).

Striking a balance between traditional and online programming is key, as well as the ability to foresee future changes in direction (Seger, 2011). Universities must provide resources, training, and support to improve online offerings, including the promotion of eXtension (Diem et al., 2011; Kelsey, Stafne, & Greer, 2011) as a valuable and integral part of an Extension educator's career.

Digital Scholarship in eXtension

eXtension is an innovative method for adapting to the future (Hoag, 2005). Several Communities of Practice exist, and more are being created every year. Although still finding its way in the digital

landscape, eXtension is now a proven model for distribution of science-based, factual information. Pankow and O'Neill (2008) stated that creating a new culture within Extension through eXtension is challenging and exciting, but conveying the benefits of eXtension to administrators as well as colleagues is crucial to establishing this new culture. Currently, university Extension programs do a poor job of promoting eXtension as another tool for clientele to use and also as a method for Extension personnel to collaborate and learn in an online environment to enhance their own knowledge (Diem et al., 2011; Sellers, Crocker, Nichols, Kirby, & Brintnall-Peterson, 2009).

Participation in eXtension is hampered by the perception by faculty that their work will not count toward promotion and tenure (Sellers et al., 2009); even though much of the published content on eXtension is peer reviewed. The perception of a potential negative is enough to dissuade contributors. Even though the perception and reality may not be equal, the reality is often poorly communicated by departments and colleges within the university. Even in more traditional Extension publishing, research faculty eschew Extension and outreach publications as being unworthy of their limited time because they are not equally rewarded for them (Osterreider, 2012). A reassessment of what counts as a publication in the promotion and tenure system should be addressed (Burbules, 1997), especially scholarship presented in journals or online outlets, such as eXtension, that use innovative or "risky" methods.

Efforts to engage in an eXtension Community of Practice are also often perceived by faculty as an additional burden rather than an integral activity (Jaeger, Katz Jameson, & Clayton, 2012; Kelsey et al., 2011; Xu & Kelsey, 2012). Faculty members receive mixed messages from colleagues and administration on the value of that activity, as it may not produce the traditional types of documentable scholarship activities that are so highly valued (Hoag, 2005; Jaeger et al., 2012). Franz and Cox (2012) stated that disruptive innovation is rare in Extension because of several factors, including a risk-averse organizational climate, lack of diversity in staff and clientele, strong links to academia, and clinging to the expert model rather than a collaborative one. Extension has other institutional barriers (e.g., budgets, Hoag [2005]) that hinder creative achievement and innovation, but programs such as eXtension challenge those barriers by encouraging collaborative work environments, scholarly freedom, and organizational encouragement—all signs of an organization that recognizes and encourages creativity and innovation (Argabright et al., 2012).

Even with the present barriers, members who take the risk to work in an eXtension Community of Practice realize they are working in an advanced technological environment (Sellers et al., 2009) that places them in the vanguard of Extension workers. They also realize benefits such as increased national visibility, new learning opportunities, and peer-to-peer networking.

Re-Thinking Scholarship

Extension has a long-standing reputation for delivering high-quality, research-based, unbiased information and education (Hoag, 2005). Yet even that competitive advantage is tempered by the ability of online users to distinguish between high-quality, fact-based content and propaganda or opinion pieces (Bathurst, 2000/2001; Diem et al., 2011; Greene et al., 2010). In fact, online users no longer need an expert to give them information. They can search for and find it themselves (Hoag, 2005; Seger, 2011). Ultimately, the public relies on what is readily available, not what is best

(Bathurst 2000/2001). So it is critical that information be presented in an exciting, accessible, credible, and engaging way without sacrificing accuracy, integrity, or relevance (Gallagher, 2012; Bishop, 2012), and this can be done through digital scholarship.

It is well understood that the traditional peer review process is the currency of the academe. However, this traditional system does not necessarily represent the vanguard in academic scholarship. To truly create breakthroughs in fundamental research or communication of that research, some element of risk-taking is necessary. Thus, some of the preconceptions inherent within the promotion and tenure system must be reconsidered if the risk of employing creativity is going to be rewarded in accordance with its scholarly value.

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