

Are You Ready to Flip? A New Approach to Staff Development

Abstract

A modified flipped classroom model was used to present content on the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA) to Community Nutrition Educators (CNEs). CNEs read the DGA prior to discussions at staff meetings. The purpose of the readings and discussions was to increase knowledge of the DGA and offer strategies for applying these concepts professionally and personally. Ninety-two percent agreed or strongly agreed the readings and discussions were relevant to their work and life. This modified flipped classroom process enhances CNE understanding and application of new information. Current staff development opportunities now include this modified flipped classroom model.

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Introduction

Extension staff value networking and sharing ideas with other Extension staff. Due to reduced budgets and distance staff needs to travel, the number of face-to-face meetings may be limited. Therefore, it is important to make face-to-face staff development time as meaningful as possible. One way to do this is to use a "flipped classroom" approach.

Theory and Research Informing the Educational Approach

Flipped Classrooms

In most flipped classroom models, short video lectures are viewed by students at home before the class session, while class time is devoted to exercises, projects, or discussions. The value of a flipped classroom is in the repurposing of class time into a workshop where students can inquire about lecture content, test their skills in applying knowledge, and interact with one another in hands-on activities. During class sessions, instructors function as coaches or advisors, encouraging students in individual inquiry and collaborative effort. At the same time, collaborative projects can encourage social interaction, making it easier for students to learn from one another and for those of varying skill levels to support their peers (Educause, 2012).

Experiential Learning

According to Ota, DiCarlo, Burts, Laird, and Gioe (2006), trainers should recognize that the richest resources for learning reside in adult learners themselves. Emphasis in adult education should focus on techniques that tap into the experience of learners, such as group discussion, problem-solving, case methods, simulation exercises, games, and role-play, instead of primarily using transmittal techniques such as lecture (Brookfield, 1986; Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). Our course focused on Knowles' assumption of the role of the learners' experiences, tapping into them through the technique of group discussion.

Application for Staff Development

In an effort to provide a learning opportunity for Community Nutrition Educators (CNEs) that emphasized experiential learning, a modified flipped classroom model was used to increase their understanding and application of the 2010 Dietary Guidelines for Americans (DGA). Community Nutrition Educators were assigned a series of lessons over a 6-month period of time, based on content found in the 2010 DGA Policy Guide. Each of the six lessons included chapter reading assignments and optional content application activities (i.e., preparing a food related to the 2010 DGA Policy Guide chapter; using a related website tool; selecting a personal health behavior to improve) for CNEs to complete between face-to-face meetings. Discussion questions were provided for CNEs to reflect upon between meetings. Questions focused on application of the DGA reading assignment, particularly how the chapter content might relate to the CNEs' professional and/or personal life as well as the lives of their low income participants. At each meeting, time was spent discussing those questions and sampling foods that related to the specific DGA chapter.

Course designers developed a facilitator's guide that included course background information; course objectives; class preparation tasks; food sample suggestions; specific chapter discussion questions; suggested facilitation techniques; and evaluation tasks. All lessons and the facilitator's guide were made available to participants and course facilitators through an online portal. The six lessons and facilitator's guide are available upon request from the authors.

Conclusions/Implications

Follow-up evaluations indicated the flipped classroom model was an effective method to offer new content. A total of 119 participants (103 CNEs as learners; 16 program coordinators and Extension educators as facilitators) were asked to complete an evaluation following the six flipped classroom lessons. Overall, CNEs responded very positively to the learning model, with 80% of CNEs agreeing or strongly agreeing the learning model helped them understand the DGAs; 87% of CNEs stated the discussions provided information that was relevant to their work; and 94% of facilitators indicated the CNEs were either somewhat or very engaged in the discussions. Furthermore, 90% of CNE's indicated they felt confident incorporating the DGA into their teaching.

Due to strong interest in using the flipped classroom model, regional and statewide trainings of Health and Nutrition staff in Minnesota now use this method as part of their staff development plan. CNEs currently receive staff development at monthly meetings, held via conference call or in person. In order to maximize use of in-person time, the flipped classroom model has enabled CNEs to gain knowledge prior to the meetings and use face-to-face time for in-depth discussions and content

application. For example, the annual statewide training in the Fall of 2013 used a flipped classroom strategy for the Nutrition Update session. Extension Nutrition Specialists recorded videos and provided online fact sheets for CNEs to view prior to face-to-face meetings. This allowed time for CNEs to reflect on content before meeting to discuss and apply the content to their work. The Nutrition Update session received the highest rating of four sessions offered in the statewide training, indicating CNEs continue to find value in this flipped classroom model.

The flipped classroom model shows potential for Extension staff development opportunities in other subject areas. Keep the following in mind when flipping your staff development.

- Ask Yourself: What's the best use of face-to-face time? If it's lecture, then plan on it. But if face-to-face time is best used for dynamic collaborative projects and discussions, consider flipping your staff development.
- Place as much emphasis on your face-to-face time activities as you do on the content sharing aspects.
- "Chunk" content into manageable pieces, and consider discussing in a series of meetings.
- Be ready to explain the flipped classroom concept to skeptics. Emphasize the importance of the engagement that occurs in the face-to-face setting.
- Take it slow, and set modest goals. Not every teaching event calls for flipping a classroom. Assess and evaluate as you move forward.

References

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