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Evaluating Horticultural Site Visits and Individual Teaching Activities in Extension

Abstract

Horticultural Extension professionals spend much time and effort on one-on-one email, telephone, office, and on-site consultations. This group has expressed challenges in evaluating the many landscape site visits and other individual consultations they conduct and may report these activities as only participatory contacts even when they result in greater levels of outcome. Time constraints and diversity of individual contact teaching are major barriers to evaluating this activity, while building cooperative relationships and demonstrating environmental and financial outcomes are major benefits. This commentary emphasizes the importance of focusing on evaluating this area and provides recommendations for practice and further resource development.

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Introduction

The personalized service Horticultural Extension professionals offer through landscape site visits, phone calls, consulting emails, and office consultations makes Extension truly special to clientele by providing solutions to problems at the local level (Donaldson et al., 2006). These personalized, typically one-on-one educational activities can be collectively referred to as "individual contact teaching methods" (Seevers & Graham, 2012). Horticultural Extension professionals may find it challenging to evaluate the substantial number of these activities they conduct, in part because of the "plethora of insects, weeds, and diseases diagnosed and treated" (Donaldson et al., 2006).

Individual contact teaching can be resource-intensive, considering the travel, diagnostic work, research, reporting, and follow-up activities they involve. While Extension professionals' one-on-one consultations are among the educational methods that may have the greatest costs, they also have the greatest potential benefits (Galindo-Gonzalez & Israel, 2010). This educational method produces results that include beneficial behavior changes, economic and environmental value for Extension

clients, and measureable impacts (Petrzelka, Padgitt, & Wintersteen, 1999). Reciprocally, Extension professionals benefit from the opportunity to build credibility with clients while remaining current on field conditions and securing access to ongoing research opportunities (Petrzelka et al., 1999). Demand for professional development and support concerning individual contact teaching evaluation has been revealed by recent Extension needs assessment activities. It has been reported that individual contact teaching may result in greater levels of change among clients in comparison to group instruction (Dollahite & Scott-Pierce, 2003). However, it has been noted that individual contact teaching activities are often only counted as contacts (i.e., participation-level evaluation) when there are greater outcomes to report (i.e., behavior changes, water savings, etc.).

Current Use of Individual Contact Teaching Methods and Evaluation

To explore this topic, a group of nationwide horticultural Extension professionals who attended a recent professional development in-service training ($N=41$) were surveyed on their use of individual contact teaching and subsequent evaluation methods, and the response rate was 61% ($n=25$). Respondents provided information related to their general use and evaluation of individual contact teaching methods and their current objectives associated with this activity. Nearly all (95.2%) surveyed said they conduct individual teachings and site visits as a part of their Extension responsibilities, yet only half (52.4%) had established objectives associated with these activities for their annual plans of work. Of those who did have objectives associated with their individual contact teaching, the majority used participatory (38%) and/or knowledge (88%) objectives. All of the respondents indicated a desire to improve this area of their program planning. It is unfortunate for potential benefits that may result from individual contact teaching to go unrecognized, undocumented, or unreported. However, it is acknowledged that the evaluation of this activity can be extremely challenging.

Perceived Barriers and Benefits to Evaluating Individual Contact Teaching

The Extension professionals who attended the in-service training were engaged in a discussion of the perceived difficulties and benefits to evaluating individual contact teaching. Some of the barriers pointed to the nature of an Extension job itself, while others addressed the variable nature of individual contact teaching. Horticulture Extension professionals may be uncertain of exactly how to evaluate their individual contact teaching and how to translate evaluation data into meaningful outcomes and reports. Some identified lack of time, or the justification of the use of substantial amounts of time, as a barrier. Challenges with organization and planning for documentation, follow-up, and evaluation were also identified. The lack of a consistent measuring tool that can capture a broad range of activities was noted as a major obstacle. Finally, Extension professionals perceived a difficulty in acquiring responses from participants, noting that it was often difficult to secure feedback once a client's problem was solved.

While Extension professionals may perceive a number of barriers to evaluating individual contact teaching, they also recognize several benefits to doing so. Individual contact teaching and its follow-up evaluations can serve as a tool to build and strengthen relationships with community members. These relationships can be vital to the individual Extension professional and the Extension system

overall. Extension professionals who evaluate individual contact teaching have found that individual contact clients can be more willing to share valuable, in-depth information than clients who attend group programs due to the relationship that develops through this personalized service. A benefit to planning for thoughtful evaluation of individual contact teaching is the access to immediate feedback from clients. Finally, Extension professionals recognize the ability to demonstrate behavioral, environmental, and financial outcomes/impacts.

Recommendations for Future Professional Evaluation Activities

Horticulture Extension professionals have asked for professional development support and tools to improve the documentation of their individual teaching efforts. They need tools that can be used in evaluating diverse individual contact teaching events. Training can be provided to guide the establishment of objectives associated with individual contact teachings and strengthen reporting for these activities. Example objective and outcome statements have proven helpful with participants in recent professional development activities.

The survey and discussion reported here illuminate opportunities for improvement. All of the respondents conduct various forms of individual contact teaching, yet approximately half did not have objectives associated with this service. The diversity of individual contact teaching methods and topics serve as a major barrier to evaluation of this activity and there is room for improvement in this area of evaluation. Based on the feedback received, we plan to continue providing professional development activities related to this under-evaluated area of Extension activity, and others may consider doing the same. Recent discussions on this topic have sparked collaborations on standardized tools that can be used to organize critical data, document activities and recommendations, and evaluate these activities.

Recommendations for Extension Professionals

Extension professionals may find it beneficial to focus on site visits, individual consultations, consulting emails, and phone calls in the same way they do other Extension programs. It is important to state a clear set of objectives that address the situation and needs of the community, with meaningful evaluation activities planned to measure those objectives (Boone, Safrit, & Jones, 2002; Seevers & Graham, 2012). Because time was identified as a primary barrier to evaluating individual teaching activities, it is important to develop streamlined processes that support documenting efforts, organizing information, and scheduling follow-up evaluation.

While it is important to recognize the similarities among the different forms of individual contact teaching, it is also important to recognize the differences. Email, office, and phone consultations, as well as physical site visits are examples of this type of personalized service. The amount of resources used for each may vary. A phone consultation may be solely a 20-minute conversation to provide recommendations for a problem. However, a single client's problem may necessitate weeks or months of reoccurring phone conversations and site visits. The outcomes will vary greatly, and evaluation activities may be approached with as much diversity as the services themselves.

Several strategies may be useful to Extension professionals evaluating individual contact teaching methods. In many cases, it may be practical to report on the contribution these activities make

towards a larger objective (Carr & Clarke, 2002). Broad measures such as client satisfaction (Donaldson et al., 2006) and participation can be used with most individual teaching events. Additionally, it may be appropriate to measure and report broad categories of outcomes, such as clients' adoption of sustainable landscape behaviors, and then specify the most commonly occurring behavior changes in additional detailed explanations in reports. As with all Extension programs, the key to meaningful evaluation of individual contact teaching is thoughtful planning and organization.

Discussion and Conclusions

Quantifying the outcomes and impacts of individual contact teaching methods is a shared challenge among many Extension professionals, and evaluation is important to program planning decisions and overall accountability (Boone et al., 2002; Seevers & Graham, 2012). What is critically important is not to focus on measuring everything, but to use thoughtful planning so that major outcomes and impacts are not missed. One of the major benefits to conducting and evaluating individual contact teaching activities is the development of strong relationships with community members.

The evaluation of personalized teaching activities represents an area where data are not always collected or not always collected adequately. Extension professionals representing horticultural Extension programs around the county responded positively to the dialogue on this topic. There is a need for further conversation on this area, and it is hoped that discussions will continue and lead to enhanced evaluation practices and tools for individual contact teaching.

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