

The Case for a Paradigm Shift in Extension from Information-Centric to Community-Centric Programming

Abstract

Since its establishment through the Smith-Lever Act, the Cooperative Extension Service has sought to use non-formal education programs centered on community needs to provide research-based information. However, the onset of the information age has transformed the way knowledge is shared and as a result altered the way people access information. Based on observations and program evaluations clients are more interested in the development of communities than passive dissemination of information from traditional Extension programs. Consequently, we assert that the current Extension paradigm of information-centric programming is no longer adequate and Extension should move toward one that is community centric.

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Extension's Information Centric Paradigm

Since its inception in 1914, the Cooperative Extension Service (Extension) has used research-based, non-formal education programs to improve individuals, families, and communities (USDA, 2014). To this end, technology transfer, imparting knowledge, and problem solving have been the conceptual models that have framed the Extension programming paradigm for the past century (Seevers & Graham, 2012). However, the onset of the information age has transformed the way knowledge is shared and as a result forever altered the way people access information. Concomitantly, Extension's top-down, linear approach to education and information transfer has been questioned in recent decades, and some, like Peters (2002), recognize this as stemming from a Kellogg Commission report calling for land-grant universities to move beyond the traditional one-way practice of knowledge transfer to engaged "partnerships, two-way streets defined by mutual respect among the partners for what each brings to the table" (Kellogg Commission, 1999, p. 27). Consequently, we assert that the current Extension paradigm of information-centric programming is no longer adequate and that Extension should move toward one that is community centric.

The advent of the information age revolutionized the way information is disseminated and accessed, and is a contributing factor to the critiques of Extension's information-centric paradigm. Internet access is now prevalent, with 74.8% of the U.S. population being connected (US Census Bureau, 2014). Furthermore, 63% of adults use their cellphones to access the Internet (Pew Research Internet Project, 2014). Recognizing the shift of clients' preferences to Web-based information, eXtension was launched in 2007, coalescing a majority of individual state Extension services and information into one website (eXtension, 2014). It is clear that clients are increasingly looking to Extension to be conveners and organizers empowering them to address their communities' needs (community centric) rather than primarily disseminators of information (information centric).

There is some evidence indicating state Extension systems are attempting new methods of affecting communities through engaging, empowering, and organizing. For example, a recent Extension symposium on dry-land organic agriculture recognized the role Extension can play in creating communities of producers. Organizers recommend that in similar situations Extension should facilitate information sharing and networking between stakeholders (Piaskowski, Weddell, Fuerst, Roberts, & Carpenter-Boggs, 2013). Additionally, community development projects that focus on building social capital exemplify client engagement through Extension (Robinson, Jr., & Meikle-Yaw, 2007). However, despite these efforts, the prevalent programming paradigm, especially in agricultural programming, is still information centric, relying primarily on 20th century conceptual models.

Case Study of Michigan Producers

We have observed clients' desire for a shift in Extension's paradigm. For example, in 2014, we conducted a focus group with Michigan beef producers as part of a formative evaluation of a sponsored Extension program. The overarching consensus among producers was that the most beneficial impact of the program was the creation of a producer community and not the disseminated information.

During the focus group, producers emphasized the benefits of learning from one another's ideas. According to one producer, "... the grant has provided the funds and resources so that we can get together and learn from each other's ideas." Another said "I think the other big thing is, let's not be afraid to ask each other for help." Later, a discussion of how producers planned to make on-farm improvements shifted off topic to a conversation about the benefits of different grazing crops. Some producers with less experience sought out the advice of others with intricate knowledge of certain crops. Later on, a question was brought up about the nutritional content of a specific type of grass, and a producer used her phone to quickly look up the answer even though there were four Extension specialists in the room.

This is just one example, but we have heard the same message from advisory councils and feedback from attendees at field days. Clients are more interested in the development of communities than passive dissemination of information from traditional Extension programs. Numerous studies support this idea that producers learn from other producers or users of a technology (Brashear, Hollis, & Wheeler, 2000; Gaul, Hochmuth, Israel, & Treadwell, 2009; Miller & Cox, 2006; Vergot III, Israel, & Mayo E., 2005). Additionally, as evidenced by the producer who used her smartphone to access technical information, the way people access information has changed, and Extension personnel are

not the first choice if at all. An important question arises from these observations: How can the current information-centric paradigm of Extension programming shift to better meet the needs and desires of its constituents?

Discussion and Recommendations

There are signs of Extension professionals who recognize the need for a community-centric programming paradigm and are implementing alternative programming methods such as facilitation, community building, and organizing. However, we contend that community-centric programming, where the focus is on the client and not content, needs to be the dominant paradigm. Diminishing budgets have resulted in a decrease of Extension personnel located in communities across the country. Consequently, Extension personnel's face-to-face interaction with clients must be maximized.

A recent development in formal education is the flipped classroom. In this model, traditional classroom activities that convey information are completed at home, and valuable class time is spent engaging students in active learning facilitated by their teacher (Herreid & Schiller, 2013). The underlying concept of flipped classrooms should be extended to Extension programming. Extension personnel should facilitate their constituents' nonformal educational needs and link them with peers rather than talking *at* them to impart knowledge. Constituents can access the needed information online and from their peers in the learning communities facilitated by Extension personnel.

Additionally, Extension should adopt participatory action research as a method of conducting research *with* the communities it is trying to affect. By bringing "together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issue of pressing concern to people" (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 4), Extension needs to move away from a top-down paradigm to education towards a collaborative, bottom-up paradigm to solving the grand challenges society faces.

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