



UNIVERSITY OF
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AEC 361

EXTENSION

Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences

Principles of Effective Extension Educational Programs¹

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Completing a successful Extension educational program is a very fulfilling and rewarding experience.

In fact, it is one of the greatest feelings of accomplishment that occurs through your Extension work. Completing an effective program results in a great deal of personal and professional gratification. Most importantly, it is more likely to bring about significant impact among those involved. So...what does it take to do this? What are the steps and principles that lead to a successful program? How do we ensure that the audience becomes involved in the learning process and then implements appropriate behaviors and/or practices?

Developing and delivering an effective Extension educational program can be a challenge, and it requires a great deal of commitment. For some Extension professionals, this may be an aspect of the job that they find most difficult. It may be a new challenge for faculty who have had little education, knowledge or experience in this area. How one carries out the various phases of an educational program directly affects its success and eventual outcomes.

There are a number of key principles and characteristics that are fundamental to effective Extension educational programs and in-service trainings. No one principle is more important than

another, and they all need to be taken into account collectively. Some need to be considered at a particular time in a program, while others must be considered during all phases –across planning, designing, developing, implementing, evaluating and follow-through.

These key principles fit within four primary categories: 1) Planning and preparation, 2) The learning environment and workshop design, 3) Instructor skills and qualities, and 4) Program follow-through. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide an overview of these four categories and the related principles that serve to create effective learning.

Planning and Preparation

Effective educational programs are grounded in ample planning and preparation. Taking adequate time in the very beginning makes a major difference between a high-quality program and one that is merely average. When planned in collaboration with the target audience, the program will be focused upon actual needs of the client and they will develop a sense of joint ownership in the program. Clear and explicit objectives and effective educational plans are necessary for meeting the specific requirements and effecting the focused outcomes of your audience.

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Learning for youth and adults is always more effective when it is clear, organized, directed and focused on relevant needs of the learners.

Points to Consider

- The purpose and expected outcomes of the educational program must be clear to you as well as to other presenters and the target audience.
- Focus on specific needs and expectations that will address real issues, situations and/or problems.
- Learners have various levels of prior understanding as well as perceptions and attitudes that may require building fundamental knowledge prior to carrying-out the actual intended outcomes. New knowledge must be integrated with previous knowledge through active participation.
- Utilize effective in-service marketing that focuses on the intended audience and creates appeal in the educational program.

The Learning Environment and Workshop Design

Learners' physiological needs must be satisfied and the surroundings must be conducive to learning. When basic needs are met, people will be less distracted and more focused upon learning. Learners must be comfortable with the instructor, other learners, the material, and their surroundings. This involves removing as many barriers as possible and creating an environment where people have a desire to learn and get involved. People have various learning styles and needs, and this diversity must be accounted for in an educational program.

Points to Consider

- Meet learner needs related to comfortable and accessible arrangements, logistics, facilities, refreshments and well-being.
- Encourage and utilize learner self-responsibility for establishing and following through with educational outcomes and activities. Adults like to be involved in setting learning objectives and expectations as well as ensuring completion.

- Structure all phases of the program around the identified learning objectives and outcomes targeting specific learner needs.
- An adult's greatest motivation for learning is his/her own internal desire and drive. Create and build upon this personal motivation through involvement, interaction and focusing upon learner interests and needs.
- Utilize a variety of educational methods and approaches that tap into people's diverse learning styles. Learning that affects all senses (sight, smell, touch, taste, hearing) is most effective. Ensure that hands-on/active learning is integrated into the program to get people involved.
- Establish a supportive learning environment where diverse groups and individuals can learn and actively participate without negative repercussions. Set an example that will elicit the involvement of everyone through the use of diverse examples and probing questions. Structure programs to accept viewpoints from people in different life stages and with different values.
- A major principle that differentiates adult and youth education is experience. Adults have vast breadth and depth of experience and this needs to be accounted for. Capitalize on this unique characteristic through audience involvement, sharing, questioning and group-work interaction.

Instructor Skills and Qualities

The success of any educational program is largely dependent upon the instructor(s) across three primary areas: knowledge of subject matter, knowledge of the learners, and knowledge of teaching and learning. This requires an ability to connect and build rapport with the target audience as well as conveying the material in a manner that leads to relevant application. Adults, in particular, learn best when they are able to establish a strong connection with the instructor(s) and when the material is delivered in a way that they can easily apply to their problems, issues, or needs.

Points to Consider

- Develop a strong rapport and connection between the instructor and the learners by getting to know one another personally and on the learners' level. To accomplish this use peer introductions and opportunities to talk with and relate to your audience.
- Utilize an approach that is focused upon the learners rather than the instructor. This requires instructors to step out and do things differently - in such a way that it truly becomes a learner's program instead of one focused on instructor desires and interests. Maximize the use of critical thinking, reflection and interaction throughout the program, thereby helping learners to understand various aspects and encouraging application of the material.
- Help people recognize their level of understanding by making use of interaction, learning reinforcement, incentives, and instructional response. Direct and prompt feedback enhances people's motivation to learn.
- Develop and utilize key interpersonal educator characteristics such as structure, organization, clarity, enthusiasm, perceptiveness, professionalism, flexibility, commitment, friendliness and empathy.

Program Follow-Through

A key aspect of training that is often overlooked is following through with learners by providing them with supplemental/reinforcing information and subsequent learning activities. Follow-through helps to maintain connection with learners and provides greater educational relevance for the material. When follow-through is prompt and well-constructed, it provides time for a learner to better understand the material and to use it, thereby helping learners attain better overall comprehension. Adequate steps must also be taken for thorough evaluation to help determine effectiveness and areas needing revision.

Points to Consider

- Since people will learn what they practice, plan for and provide subsequent learning opportunities, such as reinforcing materials and follow-up activities, where learners can apply the material and receive feedback. Utilizing relevant and applicable assignments that bridge program phases is very effective. Prompt feedback will help the learner determine his/her level of understanding and serves as a strong motivating factor. Ensure positive and constructive feedback, as adults tend to take errors personally and are more likely to let it affect their self-esteem.
- Utilize evaluation measures during and at the conclusion of educational programs. During a program monitor effectiveness via short surveys, discussion and observation. Evaluation conducted post-program should not only examine immediate results, but educators should also consider intermediate and long-term impact where appropriate to determine actual clientele change. When properly structured, these will provide feedback and observation of learning effectiveness as well as attainment of learning objectives and behavioral outcomes among the target audience.

Summary

Your educational programs will be much more learner-focused and effective by implementing these key steps and principles. These steps apply for all types and levels of adult educational programs – whether conducted by county faculty or state specialists. Research and experience have shown that adults learn best when learning is structured, relevant, hands-on, applicable, and when they have ownership in the learning experience. Following these straightforward principles can help you, as well as your clientele, achieve greater satisfaction from the work you put into carrying out your Extension educational programs.