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Go Among the People: Travel as Nontraditional Professional Development

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Go Among the People: Travel as Nontraditional Professional Development

Abstract

Extension agents obtain professional development (PD) through a variety of means, some of which have been critiqued as lacking in creativity or involvement of experiential learning approaches. As Extension engages in reinvention and reimagining in response to competition in the information marketplace, direct and candid connections with a changing clientele are essential. In this article, I propose the value of travel as a form of nontraditional PD, present an approach to manufacturing relevant encounters, and include a case study to illustrate the application of this approach. Nontraditional PD allows professionals to creatively adapt programming to community need and character.

Keywords: [professional development](#), [travel](#), [creative](#), [relevant](#), [nontraditional](#)

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Introduction

Extension agents obtain professional development (PD) from various sources, including conferences, in-services, and technical trainings. Although traditional PD offerings are useful, some have been critiqued as lacking experiential or otherwise compelling learning approaches that define Extension (Feldhues & Epley, 2018). By comparison, nontraditional PD opportunities may have formats dissimilar to those used for in-service meetings and conferences and may include road trips with colleagues, immersion in farming communities, and other alternatives.

Travel, in particular, affords opportunities for exposure to new ideas. In this article, I propose the value of travel as nontraditional PD and highlight reasons for Extension professionals to actively manufacture travel-related nontraditional PD encounters. Chief among these is the difficulty of orchestrating direct insight into community members' experiences with our programs. Sometimes we as Extension professionals do not know what we need to learn, and candid encounters provide unstructured feedback that is unlike (though complementary to) traditional program review data presented at PD conferences.

Herein, I propose a structured approach to manufacturing encounters based on experiences I have had over

10 years of work-related travel. Additionally, I illustrate the approach with a case study.

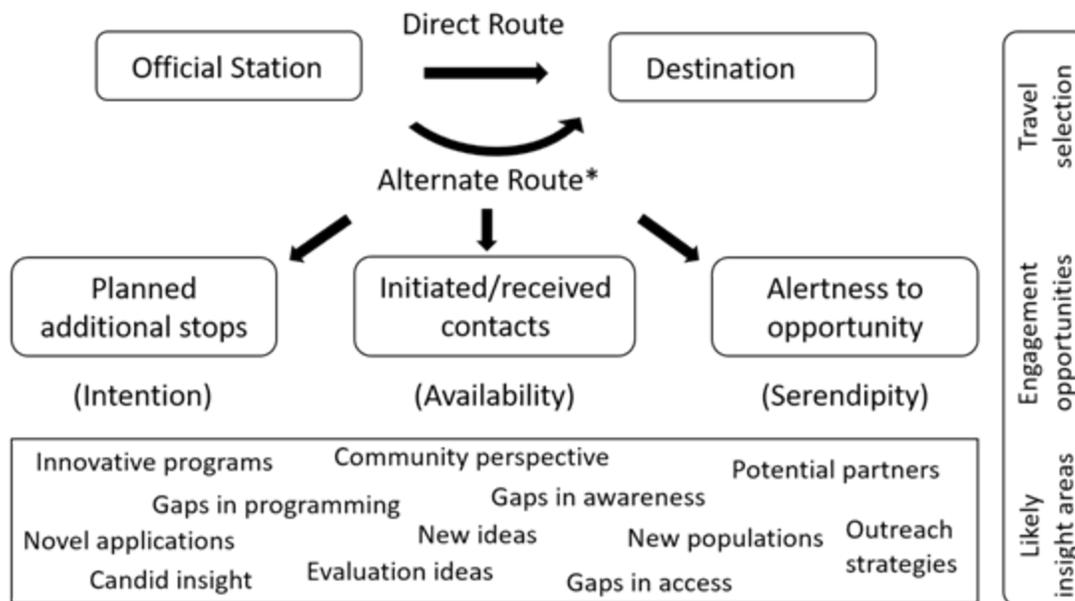
Context for Nontraditional PD

It has been noted that Extension faces new challenges and must innovate to remain relevant (Bull, Cote, Warner, & McKinnie, 2004; King, 2018; King & Boehlje, 2000). As Extension engages in reinvention and reimagining in response to various dynamics, Extension professionals need to remain creative and receptive to direct connections with a changing clientele. Although Extension has celebrated itself for working with local populations and learning about issues via "two-way communication" (Rasmussen, 1989, p. 4), retaining relevance requires innovation in all aspects of our work, including PD. The innovative experiential learning Extension is known for should be applied to PD opportunities to connect us to the needs and wisdom of our clientele.

The term *nontraditional PD* is used here to describe opportunities for knowledge gain that Extension agents are familiar with yet may not recognize as PD. Although nontraditional PD is available in many forms, travel provides opportunities for this type of growth experience, whether one is interacting with farmers while bicycling in a foreign country or meeting a community gardener on a bus. To articulate this approach, I present in Figure 1 potential means of travel selection, types of engagement opportunities, and likely insights from travel encounters.

Figure 1.

Engagement and Insight Opportunities That Arise from Deliberate Travel Selection



*An "alternate route" may include surface travel when direct air travel could occur, planned stops at specific organizations, unstructured stops at public sites such as community gardens or relevant events, selection of routes that bring us into contact with clientele, and/or including side trips to places (such as a particular farming region) of particular interest

Naturally, the type of nontraditional PD opportunities sought should be directed by one's programming. For example, I am involved in market development and community food system work. Consequently, the nontraditional PD opportunities I seek relate to these areas. Regardless of program area, however, Extension

professionals can apply a systematic approach to achieving nontraditional PD experiences. The approach I propose for using and reviewing travel as nontraditional PD is illustrated in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Approach to Manufacturing a Travel-Based Nontraditional Professional Development Encounter

<p>Who to/how to approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pace travel to allow identification of potential conversant (bicycle, walking, waiting rooms) • Notice conversant obviously engaged in relevant activity (e.g., gardening, harvest, other) • Exhibit noticeable interests on your person (e.g., shirt or hat with programming activities) • Allow for chance engagements (the potential insights may be very valuable (or not), and the need for data validation may increase) 	<p>Data stratification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Write notes postinteraction with flow of consciousness • Review and identify themes • Identify associative connections between a posteriori and a priori knowledge • Review and challenge or confirm a priori knowledge • Identify new knowledge areas for review, test, and potential implementation
<p>Engagement guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relinquish focus on a priori knowledge • Share information about your own work to evoke information from conversant • Ask questions, minimize talking • Listen attentively • Show genuine interest and care • Reserve judgment • Focus on development of a posteriori (from experience) knowledge 	<p>Data validation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information is related to legitimate community organization or effort • Knowledge shared reflects but augments professional experience • Degree of detail obviously confirms legitimacy of information shared • Information is corroborated by needs assessment data

Case Study: Gaining Traditional and Nontraditional PD Through Attending a Professional Association Conference

Traditional and nontraditional modes of PD are complementary. In the case presented here, attendance at the National Association of County Agricultural Agents annual conference provided opportunity for both. Traditional PD elements included my own delivery of a poster session and attendance at presentations on field trials, fact sheet writing, and evaluation techniques. By contrast, the nontraditional PD experience is less readily described objectively but equally valuable.

The Nontraditional PD Experience

While at a bus station waiting to embark on travel, I struck up a conversation with an urban laborer in his mid-50s. This person had little appearance of being a gardener or farmer but was raised on a farm. The individual possessed a depth of experience about crop production, culinary traditions, and food insecurity in working-class neighborhoods. He was influenced by his grandmother's cooking and shared specific methods for preparing traditional dishes. The individual described his participation in a community gardening program associated with Beardsley Community Farm in Knoxville, Tennessee. He explained that he had always been drawn to growing food (despite the hardship he associated with farming) and that he mentored neighbors in gardening. Due to his cooking skill, the individual reported that he coordinated meal preparation using

produce from the community garden and groceries purchased collectively by a group of fellow gardeners.

Key Findings: Lessons Learned from the Nontraditional PD Experience

This community encounter was valuable beyond anecdotal information as it provided several insights regarding effective community food system work:

- The personal farming history of a single individual mobilized action and interest among a group.
- Skills obtained and retained by an unassuming individual were useful in teaching others.
- Culinary traditions encouraged the pooling of community resources and cooperation.
- Efforts of a community organization had a ripple effect in the communities served, stirred latent ability, engaged those with no gardening experience, and leveraged the lessons of an adverse farming upbringing.

The encounter I have described also specifically affected my work. I subsequently expanded the focus of a feasibility assessment for a local food processing facility to include a senior meals program. The intent was to increase the value of the facility by building connections among farmers, consumers, and seniors in a manner similar to the way in which the aforementioned community garden connected neighbors.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Generating nontraditional PD opportunities is difficult in contrast to participating in traditional PD, but Extension professionals should seek opportunities to diversify their PD experiences. Informal experiential learning can be manufactured by simply adding stops, or, more specifically, public routes of travel, to already planned trips. Although information gained through travel encounters arguably could be obtained by going into one's own community, I have been more successful at manufacturing these encounters while away from my official station, or, as it were, freed from routine and obligation. There is no magic recipe, but chances of success can be improved by employing approaches proposed here. These encounters will allow Extension professionals to learn candidly about what community members know, how they communicate, why they participate, what their personal histories are, and how they influence others. Nontraditional PD allows professionals to creatively adapt traditional PD insights to community need and character. Together, traditional and nontraditional PD provide opportunities to refine programming, understand the significance of our work, and keep Extension relevant.

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