

2-1-2019

Novel Use of Conceptual Change Framework Improves Video on Challenging Science Topic

Matthew J. Helmers
Iowa State University

Timothy D. Youngquist
Iowa State University

Nancy Grudens-Schuck
Iowa State University

Recommended Citation

Helmers, M. J., Youngquist, T. D., & Grudens-Schuck, N. (2019). Novel Use of Conceptual Change Framework Improves Video on Challenging Science Topic. *Journal of Extension*, 57(1). Retrieved from <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol57/iss1/20>

This Ideas at Work is brought to you for free and open access by TigerPrints. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of Extension by an authorized editor of TigerPrints. For more information, please contact kokeefe@clemson.edu.

Novel Use of Conceptual Change Framework Improves Video on Challenging Science Topic

Abstract

Educational campaigns are more complicated when members of our audiences hold scientific misconceptions related to new technologies. Our prairie strips research and education team produced a brief, focused video aimed to dispel a misconception related to the effect of prairie strip plants' roots on agricultural drain tiles in the Midwest. Our "Field Tile Investigation" video was based on the conceptual change framework from science education and featured a discrepant event. The goal was to move farmers, landowners, and their advisors to an understanding of prairie strips that was more compatible with the scientific standard.

Keywords: [agricultural drainage](#), [best management practices](#), [conceptual change](#), [roots](#), [science education](#)

Matthew J. Helmers
Dean's Professorship
in the College of
Agriculture and Life
Sciences
Director, Iowa
Nutrient Research
Center
Agricultural and
Biosystems
Engineering
mhelmers@iastate.edu
[u](#)
[@ISUAgWaterMgmt](#)

**Timothy D.
Youngquist**
Agricultural Specialist
III
Agronomy
timyoung@iastate.edu
[@prairiestrips](#)

**Nancy Grudens-
Schuck**
Associate Professor
Agricultural Education
and Studies
ngs@iastate.edu
[@ngrudensschuck](#)

Iowa State University
Ames, Iowa

Introduction

An adult's scientific conceptions may be at odds with scientific standards (Strike & Posner, 1992), and misconceptions may stall adoption of new ideas or technologies in the Extension education setting. We encountered and addressed this phenomenon while educating farmers, landowners, and advisors about prairie strips, a conservation best management practice (BMP) used in the Midwest (Schulte et al., 2017). Specifically, we confronted a misconception related to the interaction of prairie roots with agricultural subsurface drainage tiles. Application of the conceptual change framework from science education assisted us in addressing the misconception in a new way. We recommend that Extension educators consider application of the framework when designing nonformal curriculum materials on challenging concepts.

Prairie Strips

Prairie strips are native plantings located along the contour and at the toe slope of a crop field. Application of this

conservation treatment involves maintaining about 10% of a field as prairie strips (Grudens-Schuck, Helmers, Youngquist, & Johnson, 2017). The BMP helps control sediment, nitrogen, phosphorous, and other contaminant losses (Schulte et al., 2017). Also, the strips provide wildlife habitat, including for pollinators (Schulte, MacDonald, Niemi, & Helmers, 2016). Tile lines are installed below the soil surface to provide excess soil moisture an unimpeded path for exiting the field. Prairie roots grow to depths of 10 ft or more, where they may interact with subsurface tile lines.

Misconception

Through outreach events and social media interactions, we learned that individuals believed that prairie roots, by their very nature, would plug tile lines. Clogged tile lines are costly, so we appreciated the concern. However, there were no incidences of plugged tiles during the 10 years of our prairie strips field research or among the experiences of our farmer cooperators. Despite these circumstances, we recognized that the misconception could have a dampening effect on adoption (Reimer, Weinkauff, & Prokopy, 2012). The causal model for the misconception went something like this: The long, fibrous prairie roots seek out and grow into drainage pipes, clogging them.

Conceptual Change Framework

Science educators use the conceptual change framework to plan curriculum and instruction in the fields of physics and biology, and Extension educators have used the framework to a limited extent (Knoot, Grudens-Schuck, & Schulte, 2006). The framework focuses on conditions under which a learner "makes a transition from one conception to a successor conception" (Strike & Posner, 1992, p. 148). A learner's causal model (accurate or inaccurate) about a theory can be supported by aesthetic and cultural elements and may be strongly held. A misconception is more complex than simply "not knowing" something and may prevent an individual from changing his or her mind, even after correct information is provided. Direct contradiction, such as "No, prairie roots won't do that," typically is ineffective in changing a learner's mind. Instead, changing a prior misconception involves applying the following steps:

1. create dissatisfaction with the current concept;
2. consider describing or demonstrating an evidence-based discrepant event;
3. provide an alternative explanation that is simple and plausible; and
4. provide an alternative explanation that allows the learner to solve future problems (Strike & Posner, 1992).

A key to the process is drawing attention to a discrepant event. A discrepant event provides evidence that is difficult for the learner to refute (Clement, 2008, p. 421). The discrepant event typically causes the learner to feel less strongly about or to discard the misconception (Di Sessa, 2014). A reasonable near-term outcome would be for the learner to report less confidence in his or her misconception (Hemmerich, Van Voorhis, & Wiley, 2016). The "leap" from the misconception to the standard science conception does not always occur immediately.

Video Strategy

We produced a brief video titled "Field Tile Investigation" (6:03 min) to provide a challenge to the misconception

we had identified (Youngquist, 2017). The video focuses on the interaction of prairie plant roots with agricultural subsurface drainage tile. A technician opens the video by acknowledging that prairie plants have deep roots but focuses right away on the key question "Are those deep roots penetrating into tile?" The video reveals a field-based demonstration that involved the placement of a second, separate video camera inside a drainage pipe that had been installed under prairie in 2008. An agricultural engineer narrates the travel of the video camera through the tile line. The viewer is able to see that there are very few roots (step 1). Yet something comes into view—but it is not a prairie plant root. The obstruction that becomes visible is a cluster of cottonwood roots (*Populus deltoids*). Cottonwood is a fast-growing tree species and is not considered to be prairie. In prairie, cottonwood is a weed, to be controlled or removed, because it competes for light, water, and nutrients. The internal video camera then moves to a drain tile under a field planted to continuous corn, a plant with less vigorous roots. The narrator explains that the amount of root matter in the pipe is the same or slightly higher than in the pipe of the 10-year prairie. The discrepant event (step 2) is the *absence* of significant root matter in the tiles from prairie (or crop). The alternative explanation (step 3), is that nonwoody crop and prairie roots are more likely to function the same with respect to drainage tile. The management reminder (step 4) directs farmers and landowners to control woody species in prairie strips to increase the vigor of prairie strips but also to protect the integrity of tile lines.

Discussion and Conclusion

The conceptual change framework for science education ties in with principles already valued by Extension educators, especially observability (Reimer et al., 2012). In our video, we paired the principle of observability with the tenet of the discrepant event to persuade the audience to move away from the idea that prairie roots routinely damage tile lines. The design of the video focused on a misconception and the steps required to unsettle prior knowledge. The video was brief, and it was focused.

We used the video with audiences enrolled in Become a Prairie Strips Consultant programs in 2017. Additionally, we can report that the video garnered 2,500 views between August 2017 and November 2018. Continued use of the video has included integration in online professional development courses and on-location workshops.

Most topical areas addressed by educators in Extension and partner agencies and organizations do not require an approach such as the one described here. It is likely, however, that misconceptions occur with some force regarding some of the subject matter we deliver. We urge educators to experiment with the conceptual change framework to improve communication with audiences regarding challenging scientific concepts.

Acknowledgments

Our work was supported by the U.S. Department of Agriculture National Institute of Food and Agriculture, McIntire Stennis project 1015700; is a product of the Iowa Agriculture and Home Economics Experiment Station, Ames, Iowa, Project No. IOW05511; and is sponsored by Federal Hatch Act and State of Iowa funds. The video was produced by the Brenton Center for Agricultural Instruction and Technology Transfer with Central Iowa Televising. Eric Krueger received the 2018 Silver Award for producing the video by the Association for Communication Excellence (<https://www.aceweb.org/>).

References

Clement, J. (2008). The role of explanatory models in teaching for conceptual change. In S. Vosniadou (Ed.), *International handbook of research on conceptual change* (pp. 417–452). New York, NY: Routledge.

Di Sessa, A. A. (2014). The history of conceptual change: Threads and fault lines. In R. K. Sawyer (Ed.), *The Cambridge handbook of the learning sciences* (2nd ed.) (pp. 265–281). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Grudens-Schuck, N., Helmers, M. J., Youngquist, T. D., & Johnson, M. S. (2017). Prairie strips for sediment and nutrient control and biodiversity. *Journal of Extension*, 55(1), Article 1TOT6. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2017february/tt6.php>

Hemmerich, J. A., Van Voorhis, K., & Wiley, J. (2016). Anomalous evidence, confidence change, and theory change. *Cognitive Science*, 40, 1534–1560. doi:10.1111/cogs.12289

Knot, T. K., Grudens-Schuck, N., & Schulte, L. A. (2006). Watershed learning activity: Coming to terms with geographic scale. *Journal of Extension*, 44(3), Article 3TOT4. Available at: <https://www.joe.org/joe/2006june/tt4.php>

Reimer, A. P., Weinkauff, D. K., & Prokopy, L. S. (2012). The influence of perceptions of practice characteristics: An examination of agricultural best management practice adoption in two Indiana watersheds. *Journal of Rural Studies*, 28, 118–128.

Schulte, L. A., MacDonald, A. L., Niemi, J. B., & Helmers, M. J. (2016). Prairie strips as a mechanism to promote land sharing by birds in industrial agricultural landscapes. *Agriculture, Ecosystems, and Environment*, 220, 55–63. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.agee.2016.01.007>

Schulte, L. A., Niemi, J., Helmers, M. J., Liebman, M., Arbuckle, J. G., James, D. E., . . . Witte, C. (2017). Prairie strips improve biodiversity and delivery of multiple ecosystem benefits from corn–soybean croplands. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the USA*, 114(42), 11247–11252. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1620229114>

Strike, K. A., & Posner, G. J. (1992). A revisionist theory of conceptual change. In R. A. Duschl & R. J. Hamilton (Eds.), *Philosophy of science, cognitive psychology, and educational theory and practice* (pp. 147–176). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.

Youngquist, T. (2017). *Field tile investigation* [Video file]. Ames, IA: Iowa State University, Department of Agronomy. Retrieved from <https://vimeo.com/232982174>

Copyright © by Extension Journal, Inc. ISSN 1077-5315. Articles appearing in the Journal become the property of the Journal. Single copies of articles may be reproduced in electronic or print form for use in educational or training activities. Inclusion of articles in other publications, electronic sources, or systematic large-scale distribution may be done only with prior electronic or written permission of the *Journal Editorial Office*, joe-ed@joe.org.

If you have difficulties viewing or printing this page, please contact [JOE Technical Support](#)