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Teaching or Facilitating Learning? Selecting the Optimal Approach for Your Educational Objectives and Audience

Abstract

Both teaching and facilitation are effective instructional techniques, but each is appropriate for unique educational objectives and scenarios. This article briefly distinguishes between teaching and facilitative techniques and provides guidelines for choosing the better method for a particular educational scenario.

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Introduction

One of the first on-the-job realizations new Extension educators have is that how you deliver information to your audiences is as important as the content of that information. Extension educators often focus too much on the content of the information they provide and too little on the processes through which adults can be engaged and motivated to adopt new practices or make changes in behavior (Wise & Ezell, 2003). As well, audiences may be motivated to put into practice recommendations received during a learning activity partially because they felt individually respected and valued by the instructor. As new educators soon learn, generating a change in behavior, practice, or belief requires a much more sophisticated science and art than simply selecting the correct information to deliver (Wise & Ezell, 2003).

Eventually, most successful and experienced Extension educators develop a portfolio of methodologies that they can customize to the characteristics of their audiences and educational scenarios. That these methodological skills are critical to their success as an educator is often recognized by both educators and their supervisors. However, even though these skills may distinguish successful educators from their less successful peers, the skill sets are more commonly developed through individual trial and effort than through systematic professional development across the organization.

One such skill set includes facilitating learning (as opposed to simply delivering information), distinguishing facilitation from more traditional teaching, and knowing when to use each methodology. Most degreed professionals are comfortable and familiar with the teaching methodologies most often used in high school and college classes—lecture, lecture-demonstration, and out-of-class assignments. Fewer come to their Extension careers with the facilitation skills needed to effectively engage adult learners.

Over the last decade, certain authors have pointed out the need for facilitation skills in Extension work. Cyr (2008) demonstrated that in-depth facilitation training and practice can effectively prepare Extension staff to help groups achieve positive change. Rilla, Paterson, Manton, and Day (2006) described how facilitative strategies emphasizing process, relationships, and results made a difference in meeting effectiveness and benefited community efforts. Haskell and Prichard (2004) reported changing meetings from inefficient to productive and enjoyable through a replicable facilitative focus on process and preparation. Each of these discussions focused on the efficacy of facilitation to group process.

Extension professionals also have noted the need for facilitation skills in resolving conflict. Cooley (1994) pointed out that Extension educators across the country were being asked at the time to address conflict-laden public issues with minimal encouragement and incentive. He argued for performance evaluation guidelines that would encourage and reward the use of nontraditional teaching paradigms such as facilitation and conflict resolution. Later, Corp and Darnell (2002) argued that Extension faculty should play a role in developing community capacity to resolve conflicts, noting that facilitation is a role Extension is uniquely suited to fill and recommending that Extension staff be trained in facilitation.

In addition to its use in group process and conflict resolution, facilitation has a role in individual learning. As distinguished from traditional teaching, facilitated learning has certain advantages. It engages the learner in his or her own learning and places responsibility for successful educational outcomes largely on the learner. It focuses on real-life issues and practical solutions. It identifies alternatives and connects choices to consequences and outcomes. It essentially elevates the status of the learner relative to the teacher or trainer and synergizes the contribution of learners to the educational process. If educators use facilitative learning techniques effectively, they can meaningfully affect the lives of learners, not only by imparting information on a specific topic but also by empowering learners to use that information to improve their well-being overall.

Distinguishing Between Teaching and Facilitating

Although teaching and facilitating are not mutually exclusive processes, each method has a set of characteristics that distinguishes it from the other. The paired dichotomies in Table 1 can help newcomers to educational methodology make a general distinction between traditional teaching and facilitating.

Table 1.

Comparison of Teaching and Facilitating

Context	Teaching	Facilitating
Focus	Teacher focuses on lesson content	Facilitator focuses on learning process
Recognition of expertise	Teacher's expertise is more valuable than students'	Participants' expertise is just as valuable as teacher's
Responsibility for learning	Teacher assumes major responsibility for learning that takes place in classroom	Major responsibility for learning is placed on participants

Determination of educational content	Teacher determines what students need to know	Participants work with facilitator to determine what information and skills they need to obtain
Obtaining of information	Teacher has responsibility for obtaining information and delivering it to students	Facilitator gives guidance to participants in seeking out their own information
Role of in-class activities	Activities reinforce remembering or applying information teacher has provided	Activities provide practice in obtaining information and using it for making real-life decisions
Evaluation	Teacher or others are vested with power to evaluate participant performance	Performance is self-evaluated in terms of how well important issues in participants' lives have been addressed by training activities
Problem focus	Hypothetical problems are addressed	Real-life problems are addressed
Expected outcomes	Focus is on solutions	Focus is on alternatives
Place of interaction	Interaction occurs in classroom	Interaction occurs beyond classroom
Instructor position	Teacher stands at front of room	Facilitator sits with participants
Contribution to learning	Expertise of teacher is critical in instruction	Facilitator identifies and draws on expertise of participants
Authority	Teacher knows answers	Everyone helps figure out alternatives
Relativity	Answers are either right or wrong	Different alternatives yield different consequences

Which to Use—Teaching or Facilitation?

In spite of the advantages of facilitative learning, it is not the best method for every educational scenario. For example, if the purpose of a session is to provide instructions about how to accomplish a work task or use a piece of farm or lab equipment, it is more straightforward to simply use instruction. If the purpose is to persuade participants to take a certain action or adopt a practice, prearranged testimony about that action might be more effective than two-way discussion.

Facilitation is best done with an informal seating arrangement, so if the only space available is set up in a formal arrangement, with all the seating facing the front, the instructor may not have the option of using facilitative techniques. The amount of time scheduled for the session also may dictate whether the instructor chooses teaching or facilitation. If there is only a short amount of time—say 45 min or less—to deliver information, it may be better delivered quickly and efficiently through teaching.

In most cases, a certain amount of trust is required for the individual members of a group to feel comfortable sharing information or expressing opinions. If group participants are strangers and the time available is inadequate for establishing trust through group activities or discussion, it may be preferable to deliver information using teaching techniques.

Although articles cited herein mention the use of facilitative techniques for resolving conflict, facilitative conflict resolution requires a precise set of skills and a negotiation process that can take some time. There are times, however, when agents may need to deliver information about politically charged or controversial topics. (Examples are universal health care, animal rights, climate change, and genetically modified organisms.) In cases in which opening up the topic to discussion may lead to polarization of opinions or outright conflict, or when the instructor knows that one or two participants may dominate discussion, the preferred technique may be to deliver information quickly and efficiently through teaching. Table 2 can provide guidance as to which method is preferable under different educational scenarios.

Table 2.

Questions for Determining Whether Teaching or Facilitation Is Better Method

Question	Answer	Method
What is your objective for the session?	To deliver information	Teach
	To solve a problem	Facilitate
	To discuss a common issue	Facilitate
	To come to a mutual conclusion	Facilitate
	To persuade participants to do something	Teach
	To generate ideas	Facilitate
How is your space configured?	Space is formally arranged with seats facing the front and cannot be easily reconfigured	Teach
	Space is informally arranged in a circle or u-shape or can be reconfigured easily	Facilitate
How much time do you have with participants?	A short amount of time	Teach
	A long time or several relatively lengthy sessions in a series	Facilitate
How well do participants know and trust one another?	Participants are strangers to one another and have not established trust	Teach
	Participants know one another well or can quickly establish trust	Facilitate

Is the information you are delivering likely to be controversial or politically charged?	Topic is controversial or politically charged	Teach
	Topic is not controversial or politically charged	Facilitate
Do you need to keep tight control of the group?	Group needs to be tightly controlled to remain orderly and on track	Teach
	Group does not need to be tightly controlled to remain orderly and on track	Facilitate

Both teaching and facilitation are effective instructional techniques, but each is appropriate for particular educational objectives and scenarios. Instructors who are able to apply both methods strategically and effectively can realize greater success in delivering information and empowering Extension audiences with insight and confidence in its use.

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