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## Supporting the "Archstone of Democracy": Cooperative Extension's Experiment with Deliberative Group Discussion

### Abstract

Cooperative Extension has a rich history of providing research-based knowledge and functioning as a catalyst for change through community engagement. It is via this second dimension of its identity that Extension has long played a role in creating space for public issues to be understood through deliberative discussion. Rather than view the use of deliberation and discussion as only a recent development in Extension's approach to engaging citizens about public issues, I highlight efforts and challenges related to Extension's experiment with deliberation and discussion in the 1930s and 1940s and use this historic perspective to identify important implications for Extension today.

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## Introduction: Contested Identities of Cooperative Extension

In an article published in the *Journal of Extension*, Jacob (2013) asked, "Could the universities, our national brain trust, help revive our cities and help citizens improve their quality of life?" (Introduction, para. 2). He pointed to the land-grant university's partnership with federal and local governments supporting the Cooperative Extension Service as one of the major forces that transformed U.S. agriculture and went on to ask why we would not turn to this same "mechanism" to enable the sustainable development of urban America in the 21st century "at the same scale as agricultural Extension [had done] with rural America 100 years ago" (Jacob, 2013, Introduction, para. 2). Indeed, in both rural and urban settings, Extension has long played a role in creating space to engage public issues. There have been distinct understandings of the role of Extension professionals as "change agents" in such community-based work, and commitments to a "neutral position" (Peek et al., 2015, "Public Policy Education Key Principles," para. 2) are contrasted by arguments that Extension is a "*non-neutral force for change* . . . not only or mainly about providing information and answering questions, but *catalyzing change*" (Peters, 2006b, p. 16). Although Extension has often been defined by a "one-way delivery" model of information dissemination, the century-long practice of Extension work has also

embodied a collaborative model of "co-determining" what can and should be done in communities (Coon, 2010, p. 65). Extension engages citizens by "cultivat[ing] in [them] the qualities of character necessary to the common good of self government" (Jacob, 2013, Conclusion). In short, Extension has put into practice the role of supporting and catalyzing change in communities as facilitators of citizens' own agency in response to public issues (Colasanti, Wright, & Reau, 2009; Kelsey, 2002; Peters, 2006b). The land-grant university is shaped by multiple public purposes, providing expertise but also demonstrating a commitment to engagement (Boyer, 1996; Coon, 2010; Peters, 2010; Peters, Jordan, Adamek, & Alter, 2005).

Scholars have noted the various ways in which different narratives shape land-grant universities and Extension (Peters, 2013, 2014; Peters & Franz, 2012; Shaffer, 2012b; Sorber & Geiger, 2014) within broader discourses about the contested purposes of higher education (Checkoway, 2001; Fischer, 2009; Lagemann & Lewis, 2012; Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011; Taylor, 1981). There has always been a tension between a technocratic mind-set and an approach that is more democratic, relational, and engaging (Peters, 2002, 2006a, 2006b; Scott, 1970). For example, the Country Life Commission in 1909 called for new leaders among farmers who would "find not only a satisfying business career on the farm, but who [would] throw themselves into the service of upbuilding the community" (*Report of the Commission on Country Life*, 1911, p. 30). Peters and Morgan (2004) argued that the commission "placed great hopes in this system as a vehicle for developing and organizing a new leadership and cooperative spirit" but that "many of the experts and educators who ended up being employed in that system lacked the commission's democratic ideals and broad-gauge vision of sustainability or were overpowered by conservative business interests that often influenced and shaped extension practice" (p. 313). In other words, catalyzing change did not always align with business or professional expectations. Since its inception, Extension has been a complex organization with a complicated identity as a delivery system for scientifically based knowledge, an extensive adult education organization, and a community development agency.

In recent decades, public deliberation about issues has increasingly become part of Extension's work (Fulleylove-Kraus, 1991; Grudens-Schuck, 2003; Haaland, 2004; Haaland & Smutko, 2005; Hustedde, 1996; Layman, Doll, & Peters, 2013; Patton & Blaine, 2001; Radke & Chazdon, 2015; Wright, 2009, 2012). Deliberation resides at the intersection of (a) research and (b) information being used for educational programs aimed at improving communities through discourse with citizens. Additionally, beyond its usefulness for convening citizens around public issues, deliberation can play an important role in defining how university faculty approach scholarship, what Extension is today, and what these institutions can be in the future (Peters, 2005, p. 19; Peters, 2014; Shaffer, 2014b; Thomas, 2010; Thomas & Levine, 2011). Significantly, Extension has a long history as a "leaven at work in rural America," bringing rural people together in groups to understand public problems (Smith & Wilson, 1930, p. 1).

## **The U.S. Department of Agriculture's Experiment with Deliberative Democracy in the New Deal**

The New Deal has often been viewed as a chapter in U.S. history that relied profoundly on experts to ameliorate the challenges facing the country (Badger, 1989, p. 6; Kirkendall, 1962). Nevertheless, administrators in the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) viewed themselves and their work in a more complex way. With Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace's support, M. L. Wilson, assistant secretary (and later undersecretary) of the USDA, championed efforts to approach Extension's work through a democratic lens, building on a belief that "free and full discussion [was] the archstone of democracy" (Wilson, 1935, p.

145) and that Extension agents could play a critical role in facilitating citizen discussion about a range of public issues (Gilbert, 2009; Gilbert, 2015, pp. 142–178; Shaffer, 2014a, pp. 298–302).

Representatives from land-grant institutions in 10 states representing different agricultural regions of the country convened in 1935 to consider the use of discussion group methods in communities. With support from USDA administrators, Extension agents convened rural people in homes and grange halls to introduce them to small-group discussion methods and to engage in democratic discussion about matters of local and national importance (Lord, 1939, p. 168). Extension's presence in communities made it the logical bridge between the government and rural communities for the broader USDA programs as well as the discussion group work (Perkins, 1969, p. 97).

In the context of deeply troubling situations, such as economic collapse and environmental deterioration, Wilson believed that what was needed were opportunities for citizens to discuss issues with neighbors and colleagues in order to understand and address those issues. Land-grant institutions, Extension, and the USDA could help make that happen, not through government propaganda, but through open discussion. As McDean (1969) noted, group discussion was meant to "provide a means for the expressing of all points of view" (p. 415) about the issues that mattered to people.

The USDA produced discussion materials for communities to use to talk about a range of policy issues and materials for leading such discussions (U.S. Department of Agriculture, The Extension Service, & Agricultural Adjustment Administration, 1935). This goal of discussing issues was described in one of the farmer discussion group pamphlets as "one of the most important jobs ahead" for Americans ("What kind of agricultural policy is necessary to save our soil?," 1936, p. 1). Worthy of note, Wilson based much of his commitment to discussion on his previous work as an Extension agent in Montana, where he had brought farmers together in community discussions. He felt that something along those lines might be possible on a national scale (McDean, 1969, p. 414).

Existing scholarly literature has focused on national-level discussion about this democratic effort, with little attention on its local-level aspects (Gilbert, 2015; Jewett, 2013; Loss, 2013). What follows is a brief description of how Extension educators and citizens participated in this civic experiment.

## **Cooperative Extension's Role in Organizing Rural Discussion Groups**

On March 22, 1935, the newspaper in New Bern, North Carolina, ran the article "Discussion Plan Gains Favor with County's Farmers." The article captured the interest in the trial discussions happening in the state. One discussion group member, who the newspaper report indicated was "speaking of the value the farmers had been getting from the meetings," suggested that the discussions should last 6 or 7 years rather than 6 or 7 weeks ("Discussion plan gains favor with county's farmers," 1935). In fact, the hope was that the discussions in various communities might even be continued indefinitely ("Discussion plan gains favor with county's farmers," 1935). Another discussion group participant told Extension district agent E. W. Gaither that the discussion approach was of "considerable value" (Gaither, 1935). It was through the "give and take of what is said in discussion groups," according to Gaither, that the participant "acquires the ability to look behind the catchphrases and see if they have meaning, to analyze policies advocated by different interests, and to formulate and express his own point of view on these policies" ("Group discussions sponsored for N. C. Farm operators," 1935).

The 10 states from the initial discussion group trial expanded their efforts as other states also became

involved. By January 1936, approximately 30 states had active discussion programs, and within the subsequent 3 years, more than 40 states had discussion groups organized through Extension (Jones, 1939). The trend of the groups, according to one report, was to "discuss in free and open fashion the lively controversial issues of the day affecting agricultural policies, present and future" ("Discussion project," 1936, p. 1). In Virginia, 700 discussion groups had been established, often in association with the broader county planning program ("Discussion project," 1936). In 1935, 547 groups met, with 47,000 Virginians participating, and in each of the next 2 years, these numbers would grow to 60,000 and 75,000, respectively (Hummel, 1938). Few programs in adult education reached so many people in Virginia in such a short period of time (Hummel, 1938).

Virginia was not alone in its high level of involvement. In Ohio, between 40 and 50 counties had organized discussion groups ("Discussion project," 1936). An additional 20 counties, in a state of 88 counties, expressed interest, with the only limitation of more discussion groups being the "shortage of state personnel" ("Discussion project," 1936). Other states such as Georgia, Kansas, Montana, and North Dakota had discussion groups taking place in nearly all counties ("Discussion project," 1936). Composition of groups varied widely, yet many aligned with the Grange, American Farm Bureau Federation, and Farmers Union by integrating discussion into existent programs and groups. This approach maintained the USDA's promise to the Farm Bureau that it would not seek to create a competing organization or association (Brunner & Lorge, 1937, pp. 183–184).

In the following years, states such as Oklahoma distributed materials on small-group discussion methods produced by the USDA as well as state-specific and locally specific materials. The circular "First Steps in Organizing and Setting Up County and Local Discussion Groups," published by Oklahoma State Extension, defined group discussion as "democracy in action, a commitment to small groups (10 to 20 people), the cultivation of friendly disagreement, [and a] space for everyone to speak" ("OSU Presidents' Papers Collection," 1941–1943). Discussions were to be small enough that people could speak and engage in thoughtful discourse. A graphic produced by Oklahoma Extension showed how the USDA, the university, and local community organizations such as chapters of the National Farmers Union, rural churches, 4-H clubs, and parent-teacher associations supported discussion. What connected all these levels and layers visually was the term "Extension" vertically written amid the levels. Discussion groups were institutionalized enough that Oklahoma's 1936 Extension annual report included a statement about the formation of discussion groups in which "farm people find democratic opportunity to study and discuss their problems" (Scholl, 1936, p. 10).

In Michigan, one of the 10 trial states from 1935, Michigan State University appointed a county Extension agent to the position of state leader of discussion groups. William F. Johnston assumed this role in 1936 and dedicated his entire appointment to training Extension agents in discussion methods and convening of groups. In his monthly narrative reports, he acknowledged the challenges of implementing the program, especially when Extension agents hesitated: "I have been trying to get [agents] to see that if they will adopt the Discussion Method in their educational program, that they will do better than [with] the lecture method now in use. However, it is not easy to tear educators away from the practices they have used, with rather outstanding success for 20 years" (Johnston, 1937). This sentiment would be echoed elsewhere.

In *The County Agent* (1939), Gladys Baker noted the resistance and hesitation many agents had about the discussion efforts championed by USDA administrators. She wrote about tension between the vision of USDA administrators and the experience of Extension agents:

County agents who were responsible for setting up the discussion groups in communities and counties were not always enthusiastic about this additional project advocated by the Department of Agriculture at a time when they were already burdened with numerous federal programs. The training and experience of the agents did not fit them with the necessary tolerance and objectivity for this task; for they were accustomed to parceling out a continuous supply of "right answers" to immediately pressing farm problems and consequently often found it difficult to see the practical value of philosophical discussion groups. (Baker, 1939, p. 85)

While there was obviously energy from administrators about cultivating democratic habits in rural communities in response to political, cultural, and philosophical questions, the reactions by those organizing these efforts were more nuanced—sometimes involving explicit opposition. Altering one's pedagogical approach, especially after relying on a particular set of methods, was a very real challenge. Nevertheless, millions of rural men and women participated in discussion groups, tens of thousands of discussion leaders were trained, and more than 150 Schools of Philosophy (multiday continuing education programs through the USDA) were held with over 60,000 Extension workers and other rural community leaders between 1935 and the early 1940s (Gilbert, 2015; Lachman, 1991; Shaffer, 2013, 2016). Overall, it was a robust example of Extension's having institutional support for engaging communities through group discussion about public problems.

## So What? Implications for Extension Today

One could read this article and simply see an intriguing story from Extension's past. But I contend that there are important implications for Extension today. In the 1930s and 1940s, Extension agents were confronting complex economic, political, and ecological challenges by inviting people to learn about them through facilitated small-group discussion. More recently, Extension educators have embraced deliberative approaches in their community engagement work, dealing with issues such as economic vitality, natural resources management, and community development by creating opportunities for public deliberation (Fear, 2010; Shaffer, 2012a; Wright, 2009, 2012). I highlight three takeaways from this historical period that can inform discussions about Extension as we define its second century.

1. *Extension educators attempted to align professional identities with civic needs.* The use of small-group discussion was a shift in thinking for some Extension educators. For those accustomed to "parceling out a continuous supply of 'right answers'" to problems, taking on the role of facilitator rather than expert was challenging (Baker, 1939, p. 85). Mathews (2014) noted that the gulf separating people from institutions has "been growing for some time and is now enormous" (p. 129). One major challenge is the "difference between civic or democratic mindsets and those of professionals" (Mathews, 2014, p. 131). A dominant model of professional culture puts professionals in relationship with the communities they aim to help by serving "largely passive or, at best, receptive" audiences (Mathews, 2014, p. 133). The dilemma for academic professionals is to "decide, among various options, how and for what purposes they should bring their specialized knowledge and skills (which are forms of power) into the public sphere" (Peters, Alter, & Schwartzbach, 2008, p. 35). Embracing a commitment to democratic discussion as an approach, regardless of the topic, is a skill that has relevance for Extension. It repositions Extension as relational, rather than its being simply an organization providing services (Carcasson, 2010).
2. *Institutional identity is multifaceted.* Extension has always included a focus on the use of technical knowledge and expertise to understand and address problems (e.g., pests, diseases, soil erosion) and to improve productivity. But as an institution, Extension also has included a focus on human and community

development, building relationships and cultivating what Ruby Green Smith (1949) called "the good life" (p. 544). As Peters (2010) noted, "extension agents were not (and are not today) charged with the exclusive and narrow task of handing out scientific facts and information" (p. 40). The New Deal period was shaped largely by technocratic approaches to public problems but also fostered citizen-centered efforts such as group discussion to make sense of challenges and how to address them. Extension was central to both approaches then and should continue to broaden how it engages diverse publics around wicked problems that require technical and lay knowledge.

3. *Small-group discussion is a democratic practice, and Extension is an institution that can cultivate democracy in local communities.* As M. L. Wilson stated in 1939, "American democracy . . . today stems from the creative care given by successive generations of practicing democrats to the seedlings planted by the founding fathers. . . . the work of past generations has laid an obligation on those now living" (p. 15). And as an observer put it that year, "All that I am fairly sure of is that the real story is not in Washington. The real story is developing in terms of an increasing participation by farm men and women . . . at the grass roots, out on the ground" (Lord, 1939, p. 169). Its past use of discussion groups highlights how Extension supported and catalyzed change in communities by fostering the ability of communities to create opportunities for citizens to understand and engage with public issues. But more than just being about individual Extension educators or even institutions supporting such work, discussion groups were intended to cultivate democratic practices, contributing to the work of citizen self-rule. We should consider the broader implications of deliberative discussion as it relates to Extension's role as a civic institution cultivating democratic life in communities, our nation, and our world. This is an important dimension of Extension's multifaceted work to improve lives and communities.

Extension has always wrestled with its identity. Extension's second century can be strengthened by supporting civil discourse through discussion—the archstone of democracy. American democracy depends on such efforts.

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