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Popcorn and a Movie—Opening Diversity Conversations Across the State

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Popcorn and a Movie—Opening Diversity Conversations Across the State

Abstract

Building the cultural competencies of Extension educators to work effectively with increasingly diverse audiences has become an important goal and a timely focus for professional development. Yet reduced budgets and reductions in staff are challenging the ability to provide professional development in the traditional face-to-face delivery method. This article describes the use of diversity-focused video documentaries followed by open discussions conducted over videoconferencing to multiple county sites. The majority of participants rated this format as a good strategy for diversity education.

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Introduction

Extension educators must develop the skills and abilities to work effectively with an increasingly diverse population. Building the cultural competencies of Extension educators has become an important goal and a timely focus for professional development.

Reduced budgets and reductions in staff are challenging the ability to provide professional development in the traditional face-to-face delivery method (Conklin, Hook, Kelbaugh, & Nieto, 2002). Online conferencing systems that allow voice-over-IP provide new ways to meet professional development needs for audiences over large geographic areas at less cost (Murphrey & Coppernoll, 2006). A study by Senyurekli, Dworkin, and Dickinson (2006) found that 95% of Extension educators were "very interested" or "interested" in professional development opportunities available on-line versus attending a traditional class or workshop.

Diversity training can help Extension educators become more aware of unintentional biased behaviors and beliefs that may affect their interactions with others, thus helping them to work more effectively with people with different backgrounds and experiences. Li, Diamond, Chang, Primm, and Lu (2008) found that seeing a documentary film that deals with issues of diversity was more effective than lectures or small group discussions. They suggest that films make a difficult topic safer by objectifying it and that "Films also allow viewers to experience emotions vicariously, thus allowing them to acknowledge and process such emotions in a less personally threatening environment" (p.

292). Lee, Kane, and Drane (2009) also found the use of film to be a valuable media form that can positively contribute to diversity education.

Diversity in Two-Part Harmony

The video/discussion series, *Diversity in Two-Part Harmony*, was conducted over videoconferencing during the noon hour. Part I consisted of watching a diversity-focused non-feature documentary film in the comfort of participants' own local setting. Part II consisted of an open discussion of the diversity topic that was presented/experienced in film. Films ranged from 25 to 45 minutes. Sessions ranged from 1 to 1 1/2 hours.

To allow for effective conversations, participation was limited to nine county sites for each film. Bridge reservations were based on a first-come, first-served basis, with a minimum number of participants required for each county site. The first nine counties that registered the minimum number of participants and an identified operator for the PolyCom system were given one of the available bridge slots. Participants were encouraged to engage in open discussions with no right or wrong responses.

Diversity in Two-Part Harmony was advertised as an opportunity to:

- Consider and reflect on a variety of diversity issues,
- Let others know what you think about the issues, and
- Hear the diverse perspectives of your colleagues

Additionally, the sessions provided an opportunity for Extension educators to fulfill a part of their diversity professional development requirements for the year. A brief description of each movie was shared, along with the date and time for each session. Each movie was rated according to its potential for controversy: A=low, B=low to moderate, C= high, and D=Red Hot.

The following ground rules were set for discussion.

- There are no right or wrong responses.
- Expect and accept that there will be differing viewpoints expressed by your colleagues.
- Come as friends; leave as friends.

A brief evaluation form was emailed to each participant following the session. A total of 112 participants were registered for the four sessions. Eighty-eight completed and returned a 5-question evaluation using a Likert-type scale and an opportunity to add additional comments.

The Movies

- ABC News (Producer). (1998). *The Ugly Truth* [VHS]. American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.

A 20/20 documentary that exposes the subtle but widespread discrimination based on "average looks" versus "good looks." Rating: Low potential controversy

- ABC News (Producer). (2009). *Hidden in America: Children of the Mountains* [DVD]. American Broadcasting Companies, Inc.

A Diane Sawyer documentary on the life experiences of people in the isolated pockets of Central Appalachia. Rating: Low to moderate potential for controversy

- Dateline NBC (Producer). (1997). *Why Can't We Live Together?* [DVD]. National Broadcasting Corporation.

A Tom Brokaw documentary on the race relations in an ordinary town of Matteson, Illinois. Rating: High potential controversy

- Johnny Symons (Producer). (2002). *Daddy & Papa* [DVD]. Persistent Visions.

An exploration into the lives of four different gay men who decided to become fathers. Very High potential for controversy

Results, Conclusions, & Implications

Eighty-seven percent (87.5%) of participants "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that viewing the video increased their awareness of the diversity topic, and 88.6% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that the discussion following the video helped them to consider other perspectives on the topic. Seventy-six percent (76.1%) "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that as a result of the session they would approach the topic differently. And 98.9% "strongly agreed" or "agreed" that a video followed by an open discussion is a good strategy for diversity education. See Table 1.

Table 1.
Percentage of Respondents Who Agree or Disagree With Statements Evaluating the Program (N = 88)

Evaluation Questions	% SA	% A	% N	% D	% SD
Viewing this video has increased my awareness of this diversity topic.	43.2	44.3	11.4	0.0	1.1
The discussion following the video helped me to consider other perspectives on this topic.	40.9	47.7	8.0	2.3	1.1
As a result of this session, I will approach this topic differently.	25.0	51.1	20.5	1.1	2.3
A video followed by an open discussion is a good strategy for	59.8	39.1	1.1	0.0	0.0

diversity education.					
<p>Note: SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neither Agree nor Disagree; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree</p>					

The following are sample comments from participants.

- "Many surprising issues came out that I really didn't know existed for this population."
- "The documentary raised my awareness of the issues in Appalachia and that is always the first step towards a solution."
- "It was good to hear the feedback from other educators who have worked with youth who are openly gay."
- "Thank you for the tools to make us more able to contribute to a more open society."
- "Thank you for making this training available to us. This is a very convenient and useful format."
- "The video brought awareness to me of a topic that is uncomfortable to many people."
- "I really gained from hearing perspectives on this issue."

While the majority of participants indicated that the video and open discussion was a good strategy for diversity education, a few participants would have preferred a more structured and prescriptive approach to the topics. While the goal of the program was designed to be an open discussion that allowed for the expression of various perspectives, consideration should be given to including a more structured framework for the discussions.

Open discussion of diversity-focused documentary films using videoconferencing can create a valuable professional development experience with limited cost in time and finances for participants. This program is also recommended for use in other educational settings.

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