

10-1-2010

Speaking the Same Language in Paraprofessional Staff Development

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Recommended Citation

Baker, S. S., & Pearson, M. (2010). Speaking the Same Language in Paraprofessional Staff Development. *The Journal of Extension*, 48(5), Article 12. <https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/joe/vol48/iss5/12>

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October 2010
Volume 48 Number 5
Article Number 5IAW2

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Speaking the Same Language in Paraprofessional Staff Development

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Abstract: Literacy is an important consideration in the development of new staff orientation and ongoing training programs for Extension paraprofessional educators. In a project to develop core competencies for nutrition paraprofessionals, investigators learned that some of the competencies, (developed by a panel of Extension professionals) were not expressed using terminology understood by paraprofessionals. Implications for developing effective training programs include using terminology understood by paraprofessionals, engaging in intentional dialog with paraprofessionals to determine common language, and teaching paraprofessionals new terminology when necessary.

Introduction

Literacy is an important consideration in new staff orientation and ongoing training programs for Extension paraprofessional educators. The term "literacy" in contrast to "jargon" (or the use of language unique to an organization), refers to the ability to read and write to a competent level and to knowledge or training in a particular subject or area of activity (US Department of Education, 2004). Understanding key words and phrases used in their subject area by Extension colleagues and community partners is important to Extension paraprofessionals' success. Without the consideration of the use of language both in print and spoken language, the effectiveness of staff training can be seriously diminished (Edwards & Jahns, 1990; Warrix, 1998; Miller, 2001).

According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy, an estimated 30 million adults (14% of the U.S. population) have "below basic skills" defined as "no more than the most simple and concrete literacy skills" (US Department of Education, 2004). An estimated 29% have "basic skills" (can perform simple and everyday literacy activities), and 44% have "intermediate skills" (can perform moderately challenging literacy activities). A number of national and state organizations have identified intermediate skills as a minimum standard for success in the workplace (Comings, 2001; Sum, 2002).

Do We Speak the Same Language?

The importance of literacy was demonstrated in an Extension project to develop core competencies for paraprofessional nutrition educators in the Food Stamp Nutrition Education program (now titled the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program-Education) (Baker, Pearson, & Chipman, 2009). The core competencies delineate the skills and abilities paraprofessionals in Extension nutrition education programs are expected to have or develop as well as the processes required to achieve success.

The competencies were developed by an expert panel of Extension professionals and validated by 90 Extension nutrition paraprofessionals. During the validation process, the paraprofessionals reviewed the list of core competencies in preparation for conference call discussions. Using a focus group format, project leaders invited each paraprofessional to share thoughts and reactions to each core competency. After each competency was read aloud, leaders asked questions like, "Is this one of your job tasks?" and "Is this something you do as part of your job?" If there was consensus among the paraprofessionals that the core competency in question was a job task, leaders asked the paraprofessionals if the wording was appropriate and expressed clearly. Project leaders also asked the paraprofessionals if there were additional job tasks that should be included.

We Don't Always Speak the Same Language

Results from nine focus groups revealed that many words used to express key concepts commonly used in Extension and by community collaborators are not clear to Extension paraprofessionals. The terms identified by the paraprofessionals that were unclear were:

- "land grant university system,"
- "research mission,"
- "learning styles,"
- "direct and indirect contacts,"
- "demographics," "stakeholders,"
- "civil rights requirements,"
- "program outcomes,"
- "memoranda of understanding," and
- "personal accountability."

The paraprofessionals typically understood the concepts, but often were not familiar with the names assigned to them. Investigators asked paraprofessionals to suggest alternative words familiar to them. Consistently, the different groups of paraprofessionals suggested similar names for these unfamiliar terms. In some instances, the investigators determined that the paraprofessionals' terminology adequately described a concept and therefore revised the wording of the core competencies. When the suggested rewording did not accurately describe a concept, the issue became a matter of introducing the paraprofessionals to new vocabulary.

Common Language Is Key

The development of a common language among Extension professionals and Extension paraprofessionals is an essential component of successful training programs and program management (Warrix, 1998) involving both the trainer and learner. Professionals must willingly use alternative language to ensure comprehension (Miller, 2001), and, when necessary, paraprofessionals must be willing to learn new vocabulary.

Approaches to address issues of comprehension include

1. Defining key words in several ways;
2. Presenting concrete examples;
3. Coming to consensus about the word/term to use in the future; and
4. Being aware that verbal communication poses literacy issues as well.

The use of intentional language within Extension begins with the awareness that Extension professionals and paraprofessionals at times use language differently. Program leaders must invest time in a deliberate dialog with paraprofessionals to determine shared terminology. It is important to examine differences in language usage to be certain the intended meaning is communicated and understood.

Acknowledgments

Funding for this project was provided by Extension directors and administrators of the land-grant university system and by the Families, 4-H, and Nutrition Unit of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture (NIFA) of the USDA (formally the Cooperative State Research, Education, and Extension Service).

For identifying the need for paraprofessional core competencies, we thank Helen Chipman, National Program Leader of Food and Nutrition Education, Cooperative State Research Education and Extension Service. Our appreciation also goes to the panel of experts: Phyllis M. Dennee, Montana State University; Terry Egan, University of Missouri; Heidi LeBlanc, Utah State University; Kathy Majewski, Michigan State University; Mary McFerren, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University; Diane Murrell, University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff; Susan Stephenson-Martin, Rutgers University (New Jersey); Donna Vandergraff, Purdue University (Indiana); Cami Wells, University of NebraskaâLincoln; and, Linda Wells, New Mexico State University. Lastly, this project would not have been possible without the essential input of the FSNE paraprofessionals from Indiana, Michigan, Missouri, Montana, New Jersey, New Mexico, Utah, Montana, and Virginia.

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