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Building and Sustaining Small Acreage Programs

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Abstract: Living on the Land (LOL), a Western Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education curriculum for small acreage landowners, has been successfully used in Southwest Idaho for 8 years. During that time, Extension organizers have built and sustained a small acreage learning community using systems thinking, team teaching, alumni participation, and community partners. These concepts could be applied to other small acreage and natural resource Extension programs to keep the programs relevant, useful, and functioning for an extended period of time.

Introduction

The dramatic increase in small acreage landowners and their lack of knowledge to provide economic and environmentally sound stewardship over that land is a concern in the growing western states. As population increases in the West, there is a demand for information and technical assistance to help them "do the right thing" for their wildlife, land, plant, animal, human, and water resources. *Living on the Land: Stewardship for Small Acreages* was introduced in 2001 (Donaldson & Hefner, 2001) and revised in 2008 (Donaldson & Hefner, 2008) to address these specific issues. University of Idaho Extension began using the curriculum in 2002 to reach small acreage landowners in the Treasure Valley of Idaho and South Eastern Oregon. Eight years later, the program is thriving and proving very successful.

Who the Learners Are

Individuals come to the Idaho Living on the Land (LOL) Extension programs seeking practical information regarding small acreage management. Because many are new land owners or own smaller sized acreages, they realize that they may be viewed by others as outsiders to the agricultural community. There is often self doubt among learners (Peck, 2008), who come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences having nothing to do with land management or agriculture.

Enrollment is on a unit basis, which allows up to two people to attend for one fee. Learners define what constitutes a unit, usually spouses, neighbors, or sometimes parents and children. This option encourages discussion and planning between neighbors, family members, or spouses. Offering the course for academic, continuing education units, and dual credit (high school) has been another enticing option for some participants.

Organizers used three key findings from How People Learn (Donovan, Bransford & Pellegrino, 2000) in the planning, instruction, and delivery of the course.

- Key Finding #1â Accept them where they are at: Learners come to the classroom with preconceptions about how the world works. If their initial understanding is not engaged, they may fail to grasp the new concepts and information that are taught, or they may learn them for purposes of a test but revert to their preconceptions outside the classroom.
- Key Finding #2â Go deep: To develop competence in an area of inquiry, learners must: (a) have a deep foundation of factual knowledge, (b) understand facts and ideas in the context of a conceptual framework, and (c) organize knowledge in ways that facilitate retrieval and application.
- Key Finding #3â Make them think: A "metacognitive" approach to instruction can help individuals learn to take control of their own learning by defining learning goals and monitoring their progress in achieving them.

Building a Program

University of Idaho Extension educators are the core planning team members. They meet three to four times annually to determine scope and sequence for LOL delivery. This framework, coupled with outcomes from an annual planning meeting conducted with all instructors, cooperators, and alumni, is what continually shapes the program.

During the course, organizers provide hands-on in-class activities, planning experiences at home, research assignments, and soil, water, and forage testing. This provides for shared discussion through a charrette (Charrette, n.d.) activity, during which learners compare and contrast their individual land use plans, and in sessions, when test results are returned and discussed. No one site or learning group is the same. Recognizing this and throwing away the cookie cutter approach is what has sustained the excitement, ownership, land use planning, and learning that has taken place.

Most of the LOL classes are team taught, creating the opportunity for partnerships with agencies, local businesses, and organizations to develop and be strengthened. The numerous cooperators and stakeholders who contribute to LOL are a large part of the success of the program (Table 1).

Table 1.

Number of Living on the Land Program Contributors and Cooperators 2002 to 2009

2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
23	22	28	44	44	53	32	33

How to Sustain and Keep Programs Functioning

Over a period of 8 years, organizers trained 227 units and 326 individuals using LOL. Beginning in 2007, concurrent classes were taught at multiple locations. See Table 2 for a breakdown of units and participants per year. The LOL course accomplishes a secondary benefit of community leadership. Several alumni have gone on to become instructors or serve on non-profit and government boards.

Table 2.

Treasure Valley Participants that Completed Living on the Land Class 2002 to 2009

Year	Units Completed	Total Number of Participants
2002	17	25
2003	22	28
2004	25	30
2005	23	27
2006	20	25
2007	42	61
2008	35	56
2009	43	74

Creating an alumni group is a great way to extend the program's educational experience. Keeping alumni involved in ongoing learning has resulted in the continued marketing of the course by word of mouth to friends and neighbors. Below are activities that have fostered the Treasure Valley LOL alumni group and sustained the LOL program.

- LOL alumni may return to individual classes at no cost to refresh their memories on a subject, network with the new learners, and share their experiences.
- A newsletter helps keep alumni progressing in their management plans and aware of upcoming events. Instructors take turns writing articles in their areas of expertise.

- Alumni are notified of upcoming events and educational opportunities through -mail and the University of Idaho Canyon County Extension and Small Farms Team Web sites.
- Small acreage tours held multiple times throughout the year are provided free to alumni. Often tour stops are hosted by alumni.
- Partnership of alumni is fostered with the University of Idaho Small Business Incubator and Food Technology Center to create value-added products.
- Local food systems are used and supported in program planning and delivery, including the frequent use of alumni products and examples.

Summary

Throughout the program, learners gain knowledge of land management and develop skills in decision-making processes they can apply as individuals and collectively in their operations. Realizing that not all small acreages face the same issues, organizers designed the program towards increasing learner capacities and resources rather than achieving adoption of standardized technologies. Partnering with other agencies and organizations has enhanced the program by bringing new ideas and resources to the learners' attention. Involving alumni has kept current learners motivated as they relate to frustrations and hear about success stories. These key principles have made the Living on the Land program successful in Idaho, and they can be applied to other natural resource Extension programs across the United States.

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