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## Experiential Learning and Cooperative Extension: Partners in Non-Formal Education for a Century and Beyond

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# **Experiential Learning and Cooperative Extension: Partners in Non-Formal Education for a Century and Beyond**

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**Abstract:** How often do Extension educators—those doing the planning, educating, and evaluating of Extension programming—pause to consider their role in the learning process? Joplin's (1981) model defining experiential learning should serve as a guide for educators planning Extension programs. Reflection is a key piece of the experiential learning process that is often ignored due to an overwhelming effort to have participants complete a program evaluation. By using the experiential learning model as a guide, Extension educators can be sure to incorporate this critical component into the program lesson.

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"Experiential learning" is a buzzword within Extension. The educational philosophy of the 4-H program is "learn by doing," and the agriculture and natural resources, family and consumer sciences, and community and economic development program areas have adopted similar educational methods (National 4-H Headquarters, 2006). No matter the state, no matter the program area, Cooperative Extension vows to educate through experience.

How often do Extension educators—those doing the planning, educating, and evaluating of Extension programming—pause to consider their role in the learning process? Do educators realize they are an important catalyst in the experiential learning model? Employing an experiential learning model in the development, implementation, and evaluation of Extension programs will ensure educators include all essential stages of the experiential learning process and provide the most effective opportunity for learning.

## **Experiential Learning and Cooperative Extension: Making the Connection**

Experiential learning has been around nearly as long as Cooperative Extension. Seaman Knapp, considered the father of Cooperative Extension, wrote, "What a man hears, he may doubt; what he sees, he may possibly doubt; but what he does himself, he cannot doubt" (International Adult & Continuing Education Hall of Fame, 1997). This idea evolved into a conceptual model Cooperative Extension would continue to use to transfer agricultural knowledge and research. The Smith-Lever Act of 1914 brought Extension to life and outlined a two-fold mission: "developing practical applications of research knowledge and giving instruction and practical demonstrations of existing or improved practices or technology in agriculture" (United States

Department of Agriculture, 2008).

Some years later, Dewey introduced the theory of experiential learning. Although Dewey stated that all learning is experiential, he was quick to point out that not all experiences are "educative" (1938, p. 25). Each learner brings prior knowledge with them to each new experience. Quality educational programs require participants to recall prior knowledge, introduce new knowledge, and help participants make connections between prior and new information for individual internalization. Therefore it is the responsibility of Extension educators to ensure opportunities for reflection—not just program evaluation—are a part of the learning process.

## Experiential Learning Models

Since Dewey (1938) introduced experiential learning, many scholars have expanded upon his theory by creating representations or models (Dale, 1946; Joplin, 1981; Kolb, 1984; Roberts, 2006). While each model has its advantages, Joplin's model of experiential learning is a practical tool that should be used for planning, implementing, and evaluating Extension programming (1981).

She suggests that experiential learning is a five-step process including the following stages: focus, action, support, feedback, and debrief. During the *focus* stage, learners prepare for learning. Learners may be quickly introduced to the topic, or they may begin to gain information about the experience they are about to have. The *action* stage is where the experience occurs. During the *debrief* stage, true learning occurs. The learner reflects on what occurred in the action phase, makes internal connections between this new experience and past experiences, or applies the new information, and then uses this information as they move into their next experiential learning cycle.

In her model Joplin refers to the action stage as the "hurricane stage." Simultaneous with the action stage are the *support* and *feedback* stages—two components other experiential learning models overlook (1981). Support and feedback are two important stages that should not be overlooked, especially in Extension programs, when educators would like to see learners disseminate their new knowledge to others in the community (e.g., Master Gardener or Master Naturalist programs) or to attend future workshops (e.g., a workshop or speaker series).

The experiential learning model proposed by Joplin aligns with Dewey's theory that experiential learning is a "continuum" (Dewey, 1938, p.33). Past experiences are built upon with each new experience. The creation of knowledge occurs when the learner makes new connections between their past experiences and their new experience. Hence, with each experience, the learner takes with them all of their past knowledge, and the experiential learning process is ongoing.

## Applying Joplin's Experiential Learning Model to Extension Programming

True learning occurs through the reflection and application of the experience (Dewey, 1938; Joplin, 1981). Reflection is not simply for helping learners make internal connections between past experiences and the new information. Franz points out, "groups that engage in critical reflection could be more inclusive, learn as a group, raise their awareness of change issues, and be collaborative and democratic in their approach to the change process" (2007). In today's day and age, when traditional Extension clientele are hesitant to embrace technological change that many times they do not understand, reflection can be an important piece of the educational puzzle that helps learners realize the potential impact the new information has on their lives.

Many times, Extension educators become so immersed in transferring the knowledge and completing the program evaluation they simply skip over the most critical learning component—the reflection. Franz said it best: "Extension staff tend not to reflect on their work, let alone reflect critically. The work environment rewards doing, rather than reflection" (2007). Extension educators cannot afford to skip over reflection in their programs. By using Joplin's experiential learning model in the program planning and execution processes, Extension educators may ensure that the reflection piece is built into the program design, which may decrease the possibility of leaving out this crucial component of learning.

It is the Extension educator's responsibility to provide a complete program—one that includes focus, action, debriefing, support, and feedback—to ensure clientele truly learn from their experience. However, educators cannot use, or train volunteers to use, a model they do not know. Training materials and information relating to the experiential learning model are available through the 4-H program; however, the experiential learning model is not common in materials for other Extension program areas (Enfield, 2001; Enfield, Schmitt-McQuitty, & Smith, 2007; Jamison, 2002). New guides should offer suggestions in how to use the model in Extension program planning. To keep up with the changing curriculum, these training materials need to be working documents that evolve to keep up with the times and technology.

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