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## From Potluck Suppers to On-line Seminars: The Evolving "Face" of Social Interaction

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## From Potluck Suppers to On-line Seminars: The Evolving "Face" of Social Interaction

### Abstract

As our culture evolved, so did the methods used to facilitate social interaction in adult education. This article highlights what social interaction is and why it is important. It briefly reviews a few tools that have been used by educators in the past and highlights new ways to use social interaction with the emerging availability of on-line seminars.

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Social interaction is not new to Extension. One might say that the Cooperative Extension System cut its teeth on its ability to effectively use social interaction as a tool in adult education. As educators, we have historically talked about its importance and often subconsciously integrated it into programming (Torrell, Bruce, & Kvasnicka, 1999; Staats, 1995; Risdon, 1994).

As culture evolved, so did the methods used to facilitate social interaction. In Norman Rockwell's day, the potluck supper might have been one of the primary vehicles for social interaction. Although a simple tool, gathering around a meal did provide the opportunity for adult learners to interact, share ideas, and learn from one another. Today, although networking around food is still used, social interaction is now being integrated in many other ways into the learning environment.

This article defines briefly social interaction and why it is important to adult learning. Then, it looks at historical educational tools and the latest use of on-line technology to incorporate social interaction into adult education.

## Background

Classically defined, social interaction at the classroom level is "the method by which two or more interdependent individuals influence one another in a group" (Forsythe, 1990). Traditionally, it is thought of in terms of two-way instructor-to-learner and learner-to-learner interaction. It can be successfully woven into a wide variety of learning situations, from the standard face-to-face environment to various multi-media situations in today's distance learning.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) have acknowledged that most distance education learners want some kind of interaction with their instructor and fellow learners during an educational event. This may be for purely social reasons or for getting feedback on their ideas and questions. In traditional distance classroom learning environments, email, fax, telephone, and mail all offer methods to connect with the instructor and other learners.

Social interaction is important because it can contribute positively to a person's learning. Research indicates that it assists in one's ability to focus towards production (enables accomplishment), innovation (encourages new ideas, explores relationships, and creates change), and maintenance

(restores one's self concept or interpersonal relationships) (Berlo, 1975). In contrast, when social interaction is lacking in a learning environment, it is typically viewed negatively by the learner. Taken to the extreme, it can contribute to the adult's decision to persist or drop out of the learning situation (Kember, 1989).

## **Historical Use in Extension**

It didn't take long for the first County Extension agents to realize that social interaction was an important component of traditional face-to-face educational programming. Initially, interaction was necessary to counteract the social remoteness of agricultural life, and to some degree it still is important for that same reason.

Today as professionals, we casually joke about the use of food as a component to entice people to attend meetings. Perhaps we are doing ourselves a disservice by not looking deeper--what does that social time offer the adult learner? In reality, it provides a venue for social interaction that will enhance the learning process. In 1999, colleagues reminded us of this fact.

Never underestimate the need for social interaction. Due to the remoteness of agricultural life and the nature of the business, people look forward to attending Extension meetings for the social aspect as well as the educational materials. Schedule time before or after the program for social interaction. After a few years, this social time becomes tradition and supports attendance at meetings. Many times more Extension work takes place at these social functions than during the program itself (Torrell, Bruce, & Kvasnicka, 1999, 3).

## **Early Teleconferencing**

As new program tools became available, new ways to incorporate social interaction were explored. The use of technology opened up a unique set of opportunities and challenges.

In the mid-80s, Rogan and Simmons (1984) discussed the generic use of teleconferencing as a method for disseminating information to Extension clientele. They acknowledged the pros and cons of the then new distance delivery systems, discussing three basic types: video-conferencing (television-like communication augmented with sound); computer conferencing (printed communication through keyboard terminals); and audio-conferencing (verbal communication via the telephone with optional capacity for telewriting or telecopying). They clearly recognized that one of the disadvantages of the system was the lack of informal, one-to-one social interaction and the challenge the system had in creating an atmosphere of group rapport.

A decade later, teleconferencing via satellite was becoming popular for selected Extension programs. When carefully crafted, professionals realized the potential positive impact of social interaction, especially for audiences that now could be connected via technology.

Teaching via satellite has permitted information transfer to many producers in states and locations previously too distant to reach with traditional programs. Dialogue between audiences of diverse regional and social backgrounds enhances the educational benefit of the program (Staats, 1995, 4).

## **The Use of the Internet**

Today, as the use of the Internet has grown, so has this technology's ability to function as an adult learning tool for educators. The Internet is reaching out into the realm of social interaction as only computers and the Internet can do. One illustration of this was the rapid development and universal use of a wide variety of graphic emoticons, the best known being : ) for happiness and : ( for sadness, as a way to transmit emotional responses via the written computer word.

As Extension professionals, we have not let the role of social interaction via the Internet go unnoticed. The morale benefits that accrue from the collegial interaction via e-mail discussion groups and the close relationship between morale and productivity were acknowledged over 10 years ago in (Trotter & Risdon, 1990).

Currently, Nebraska Cooperative Extension is piloting the use of the Internet as a program delivery mode using a relatively new tool--an on-screen platform for real-time sight and sound. A closer look at this tool may provide others with new ideas for future ways to integrate social interaction in adult education opportunities.

## **On-line Seminars as an Outreach Tool**

To reach more rural businesses, the University of Nebraska Panhandle Learning Center - Scottsbluff, in partnership with the University of Nebraska Rural Initiative and corporate sponsors, launched an Internet-based business seminar program on September 17, 2003. Called NU Skills®, the highly interactive service allows presenters to share presentations, documents, applications, and Web sites. Attendees log into a virtual seminar room for the visual presentation and dial into a phone conference for the audio portion.

NU Skills makes it convenient for rural business people to attend training without traveling and taking time away from the office. Seminars last 1 hour and cover a range of business topics. The premier series, "Running a David Business in a Goliath Economy," covers eight essential keys to help small businesses succeed in a competitive environment. Because it is Internet-based, interested individuals can view upcoming seminars and enroll online at <http://nuskills.unl.edu>. Costs are kept low, \$29 per seminar, to make it affordable for small businesses and individuals.

The technology has been available since late 1999. Online meeting services have been used successfully for in-house training, professional association educational programs, technical support, sales demonstrations, and collaborative meetings. Extensive Internet searches show that NU Skills is the first use of this application for public business development seminars. NU Skills also extends the reach of the University of Nebraska Panhandle Learning Center beyond Western Nebraska to anyone anywhere with Internet access.

This service allows participants to interact with each other and a presenter from their desks. Interaction is live and can take a number of forms.

- Presenters may take "polls" that allow participants to answer questions; the presenter can then post the results within seconds.
- The technology allows participants to work collaboratively on a "whiteboard"; for example, they may type text, highlight anything or free-draw.
- Participants may ask questions via a "Q&A" function in which the question is typed in, or using phone conferencing.
- A "chat" function also allows private and public chat conversations depending upon the assigned privileges; this function allows private participant-to-participant interaction during the seminar. While the instructor may not view this favorably, one attendee commented, "This isn't the answer you probably want, but the capability to privately chat was the most valuable. There were several persons at the seminar that I needed to ask questions of; this was a quick and easy way to do it while still attending the seminar."

Once individuals become familiar with and feel comfortable with this technology, they can maximize the social interaction features that encourage learning. It should also encourage idea sharing and experience-sharing that would benefit the participants in their businesses.

The major drawback to this technology is that because attendees participate from their desks, distractions are a danger. Someone entering their offices may distract them, or, should they find the material uninteresting or irrelevant, participants may also opt to check e-mail, browse the Internet, or do other work. Therefore, the presenter must work diligently to keep interaction levels high and adapt content to make presentations compelling.

## Conclusion

Social interaction is an important part of the learning process. As adult educators, we have consciously and unconsciously incorporated it into our program delivery process. Historically, as new program delivery opportunities have developed, Extension has found ways to incorporate social interaction into the learning situation.

Today it may be the use of an on-line seminar. Tomorrow, who knows? Regardless, we can be sure that the "face" of social interaction may change, but the role it will play will remain important in Extension programming.

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## Discussion