

Poster Type: Innovative Idea

Collective Thinking for Extension: The Value of World Café

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Introduction/Need for Innovation

Extension professionals are often tasked with solving robust, interdisciplinary, nationwide issues, which plague their constituents. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services National Prevention Strategy identified healthy and safe community environments, empowered people, elimination of health disparities, and clinical and community preventative services as strategic directions for prevention efforts (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2012). In response, Cooperative Extension conducted an assessment of national health trends and a strategic analysis, which resulted in the development of a National Health Outreach Conference and National Health Implementation Teams (Braun et al., 2014).

Implementation teams were formed in the following areas: Positive Youth Development for Health, Health Literacy Action, Chronic Disease Prevention and Management, Health Insurance Literacy, and Health in All Policies Education. For the 2016 National Health Outreach Conference, the pre-conference planner was tasked to create a session, which involved midway reviews and input on the progress of the implementation teams. The pre-conference theme was established as: “A Picture of Health: How are Land-Grant Universities Fitting into the Puzzle?” An interactive World Café (WC) was developed to accommodate the 90 session participants in meaningful follow up discussions on the implementation teams’ reports. Additionally, this activity supports the National Research Agenda for the American Association for Agricultural Education Priority 7- Addressing Complex Issues by providing an avenue for interdisciplinary conversation focused on wicked problems (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

How it Works

The WC is a structured methodology, which provides an opportunity for collective thinking through open dialogue between participants. WC is based on the assumption of participants having knowledge and experience within themselves, which they are able to communicate with others (Kempnich & Costanzo, 2014). The structure of this evolutionary network is the opportunity for growth and development in explorations, knowledge-sharing, and innovative ideas (Schieffer, Isaacs, & Gyllenpalm, 2004).

The concept is simple; engaged dialogue, which focuses on information exchange and the generation of ideas for social action, in a relaxed environment with peers (Anderson, 2011). For the National Health Outreach Pre-Conference tables were set with two tables assigned to each team topic. Over the course of five 15 minute rounds, participants were encouraged to either visit all five topics one time, or select a couple of topics they were most interested in and visit both tables during the rotations. There were six overarching questions used as discussion prompts, which were laid out as three per table. The design allowed participants to visit both tables of a given topic and offer input and discussion around all six questions. This design allowed participants to generate visioning for community development and viable solutions (Burke & Sheldon, 2010). Notes were recorded on flip charts. Further, a host was placed at each table to summarize the previous conversations for the participants to continue fluid movement in conversation.

Results to Date

Observational field notes indicated that the majority of participants were fully engaged in all conversations. Often the group would begin by asking clarifying questions about the previous

group's notes or original data reported by the implementation teams. Then, the group would participate in further discussion around the topic and questions posed. Notes written on flip charts were transcribed and shared with implementation teams. Further, a pre-conference summary was developed to include the overarching themes and topics discussed at the WC session. This summary was reported at the opening general session of the conference. The implementation teams utilized the results to engage in further conversations around priorities and initiatives. Overall, the data collected served as valuable feedback for the implementation teams and extension at large.

Advice to Others

The overall goal of WC is to bring about an emancipatory nature and empowerment of community members (Aldred, 2009). However, a few things need to be taken into consideration when preparing to conduct a successful WC. To begin, one must elucidate the context and discern the right participants for the event (Schieffer et al., 2004). This includes taking into account the role of power and supporting an environment built on authenticity and mutual respect (Delaney, Daley, & Lajoie, 2006). A facilitator then must focus on questions to start the conversation and provide an opportunity for participants to ask deeper questions (Schieffer et al., 2004). They should also assist with participant rotation during rounds, which can become a confusing task. Proper facilitation and organization can assist to prevent this issue. Table hosts should listen for patterns in responses, encourage equitable participation, and to decipher and share collaborative discoveries. With all these things in mind, WC provides an innovative way to generate collaborative visions through engaged collective dialogue.

Cooperative Extension prides itself on being a system where communication and collaboration are the backbone of the organization and the reason for continued program success. While communicative efforts continue to drive and influence decisions made within organizations, active methods of research indicate a shift in collaboration among extension employees. According to Brown (2002), WC is both a technique for engaging people in group dialogue as well as a metaphor for the way we generate knowledge and make meaning of our world. WC provides an opportunity to improve collaborative efforts across Extension entities, while encouraging visioning, leading and learning together, enhancing community presence, showcasing an active presence of teamwork, and fostering collaborative learning (Sandmann & Vandenburg, 1995).

Cooperative Extension continues to work towards strengthening communities and families, while fostering the lives of constituents. Incorporating a WC approach ensures current knowledge and ideas are shared, heightening the ability to improve upon program facilitation and success. Although there are barriers for utilizing WC, such as proper facilitation, the opportunities and benefits at Extension events and meetings are endless. Extension professionals should consider WC as an approach for increasing communication and generating shared knowledge for programs and meetings.

Costs/Resources Needed

The resources and costs needed to effectively implement a WC approach are minimal. A WC approach requires multiple tables and chairs setup "cafe" style. Each table will require a table tent to label the respective topic. In addition, paper and a writing utensil are required to record responses. Flipcharts and markers are recommended as writing devices.

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