Assessing Florida Early Career Extension Agents' Adoption of Design Principles to Communicate Messages

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Introduction and Theoretical Framework

Communicating with local clientele is a key tenant of Cooperative Extension and skillset of Extension agents (Harder, Place, & Scheer, 2010; Oakley & Garforth, 1985; Rasmussen, 1989; Seevers & Graham, 2012). Design principles were identified as a topic to train Extension agents based on the understanding that design principles can be used to visually communicate messages with an audience more effectively (Kirkpatrick, n.d.; Pettersson, 2012; Prairie Magic Design, 2016). Rogers' (2003) innovation-decision process was used as a framework to guide this study. The five stages of the innovation-decision process were used to identify where Extension agents were in their understanding and adoption of design principles. The results of this study will better aid Extension training and development professionals to more adequately develop and plan effective communication training for early career Extension agents. This study aligns with priority three of the 2016-2020 National Research Agenda – Sufficient Scientific and Professional Workforce that Addresses the Challenges of the 21st Century (Roberts, Harder, & Brashears, 2016).

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this research is to understand Florida Extension agents' experience of learning and using design principles as a tool to aid communication efforts in their Extension programs following the two 2019 cohorts of Extension Faculty Development Academy (EFDA). The two objectives for this study were (a) to understand Florida Extension agents' knowledge regarding design principles following EFDA, and (b) to understand Florida Extension agents' adoption of design principles in their communications work following EFDA.

Methods

EFDA is a professional development training program for Extension agents who enter the Cooperative Extension profession in Florida. This study focused on the 32 EFDA participants in the spring and fall 2019 cohorts (spring $n = 14$; fall $n = 18$). The EFDA participants were taught effective resources to utilize and were able to develop skills to be able to design communication materials. A component of a larger survey asked about the Extension agents' ability and intent to use design principles. The Extension agents were asked to rate their agreement or disagreement on a five-point Likert-type scale to five statements. The following real limits of the scale were used to interpret the mean scores and standard deviation: 1.00 - 1.49 = *strongly disagree*, 1.50 - 2.49 = *disagree*, 2.50 - 3.49 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 3.50 - 4.49 = *agree*, 4.50 - 5.00 = *strongly agree*. The survey was developed in Qualtrics and disseminated via email. All Extension agents completed the survey for a 100% response rate ($n = 32$). Telephone interviews were conducted with EFDA participants to satisfy the second objective and were conducted four to five months after completion of EFDA. The interviews were semi-structured in nature, and an interview guide was developed to guide the conversation. Topics included in the guide were related to the five stages of the innovation-decision process (Rogers, 2003). Sixteen of the 32 agents participated in an interview (spring $n = 7$; fall $n = 9$).

Results

The survey which asked Extension agents to rate their perceived level of knowledge after the EFDA produced the following results: (I plan to implement content from the presentation into my personal and professional life; $M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.79$); (after the presentation, I have considerable knowledge about design principles; $M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.85$); (after the presentation, I understand design principles better; $M = 3.94$, $SD = 0.77$); (I can now use design principles more effectively to communicate about my Extension program; $M = 3.81$, $SD = 0.70$); and (prior to the presentation, I had considerable knowledge about design principles; $M = 3.06$, $SD = 0.96$).

Based on the interviews following EFDA, the Extension agents had some level of knowledge of design before EFDA, but most of their knowledge was with Microsoft Office programs to design work. Extension agents discussed using some of the program skills learned at EFDA but often used other programs than what was taught. Some Extension agents indicated not being able to practice their learned design skills because of the little amount of time on the job. The Extension agents did indicate they plan to use some of these skills as their jobs are becoming busier with workshops, courses, and programs. The few agents who have been able to practice their design skills indicated they have received positive feedback on the communication disseminated. Unanimously, the Extension agents reported the knowledge and use of design principles is valuable in their work, and many expressed an interest in additional trainings focused on communication and design skills.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Prior to EFDA, agents perceived they *neither agreed nor disagreed* (they had considerable knowledge about design principles) and *agreed* to that statement after EFDA. The Extension agents *agreed* they (had a better understanding of design principles), they can (now use design principles more effectively to communicate about their Extension program), and they (plan to implement content from the presentation into their personal and professional lives).

The Extension agents' attitude towards the use of design principles was extremely favorable as all agents thought learning design principles was valuable. All participants have at least attempted to engage in some form of using design principles in their work; however, very few have actually implemented the use of design principles in their work. Overall, the beginning Extension agents participating in the spring and fall 2019 EFDA, as a group, are on the line between the decision and implementation stages of adoption of design principles in the innovation-decision process (Rogers, 2003). Meaning, the Extension agents have not made the decision to reject the use of design principles because they find value in them, however, they have not committed to fully adopting yet due to time and skill level restrictions.

The Extension agents consistently expressed the educational importance and value of learning design principles to aid their communication efforts in their programs. However, the agents recommended offering design principles training further along into agents' careers and offering more trainings than the one at the EFDA to allow more time to practice and/or more training in design principles to fully be able to implement design principles in their work. The communication and design principle training at the EFDA could be redesigned to more adequately meet the Extension agents' needs at that point in their career. More extensive and hands-on design principles training could be added to the offered professional development trainings for Extension agents to practice and further develop these desired skills.

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