

Improving Teaching Self-efficacy of Early Career Extension Agents in Florida

Introduction/need for innovation

As one of the key pillars of the Land-grant mission, Extension has been deeply rooted in accessible community education in the United States since its inception in 1862 (National Research Council, 1996). Extension agents are key players in disseminating information to communities from university research (Washburn et.al., 2022). Their key roles and responsibilities largely include coordinating, creating, and teaching programs for adult-age community members to engage with agricultural and life science research in an effort to increase accessibility to knowledge in communities (Stofer, 2023). However, despite their role as adult-educators and program developers, rarely are there professional learning opportunities for local Extension agents to learn the necessary skills to be effective adult educators (Strong et.al., 2010). Program development and teaching are a substantial piece of Extension work (Hawkins, 2022). Agents need more background knowledge and training to be effective adult educators, especially early in their careers (Diaz et al., 2019). However, there is a gap in early career Extension agents comfortability and confidence in teaching adult education programs (Roberts et al., 2024). This gap of confidence can impact the effectiveness of Extension programs and exposes a need for more training and resources for agents (Roberts et al., 2024). Overall, retention is important for early career Extension agents and offering them more resources to be successful could help to reduce agent turnover (Hagerman et.al., 2022). If agents are more self-efficacious in teaching strategies, it could lead to more effective program development and delivery. Therefore, a team of educators developed an in-service training program – Transformative Teaching in Extension - for Extension agents to increase their teaching self-efficacy. The purpose of this innovative idea abstract is to share the current progress of this program and the self-efficacy research results to date.

Program Phases

This study is ongoing through an 11-month training for early-career Extension agents to assist in program delivery. The online portion of the course is delivered through the [University] public facing e-learning Canvas platform and contains five modules: Module one is an overview of the course material, module two addresses individual learning processes, module three contains templates and theories for developing instruction, module four focuses on program delivery, and module five is about evaluating learning. An in-person session was conducted in January, where agents learned various teaching methods and styles through agricultural education faculty and graduate students, and there will be another in-person session in June for Extension agents to present content and receive feedback on their instructional strategy and development from online learning activities, and the in-person gathering in January.

Methods

The Transformative Teaching in Extension training program is a 11-month program with a series of online modules, bi-monthly virtual meetings, and two in-person gatherings. The aim of the program is to allow agents an opportunity to develop skills in program delivery through a specialized workforce development program for early career agents. In this program, a

qualitative research method will be utilized to explore the self-efficacy of Extension agents in their role as community educators. This design is guided by Diffusion of Innovations (Rogers, 2003) to capture agents perceived confidence in instructional delivery and program development throughout the innovation-decision process. Utilizing Rogers (2003) innovation-decision process of knowledge, persuasion, decision, adoption, and confirmation stages, formative evaluations will be collected from participants to document their emotional experiences at the innovation-decision process milestones throughout the program (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). The persuasion and decision processes will be combined to reflect one point in time for data collection purposes. Data is currently being collected, as the program is still in progress, and will not be concluded until June 2026. At this point in the program, data has been collected for two of the four innovation-decision process milestones. The journey mapping data collection method was implement to determine program participants' actions, thoughts, emotions, and insights at the different milestones (Rosenbaum et al., 2017). Data were collected at the knowledge stage during module 1 at the first virtual session and at persuasion/decision stage between modules 2 and 3 at the first in-person session.

Results to date

The commentary from participants in the Module one reflection form has continued to solidify the need for this program for the development and delivery of extension programming. Participants were quick to outline a willingness to learn, and an excited outlook on gaining a better skillset in teaching and learning theory as it relates to their delivery and development practices, which indicates a positive attitude at the knowledge stage for the first data collection. The module 2 and 3 reflections show a willingness to implement new teaching strategies and program development processes as a result of the program.

Future plans/advice to others

Moving forward, participants will continue to complete the online modules and prepare a brief teaching demonstration utilizing the concepts introduced throughout the program. Participants will utilize a program they already deliver and revise it to be more aligned with proper teaching and learning principles to reflect good practice as community educators. After this revision process, they will utilize this revised content to demonstrate a new practice they learned through their course work. After this experience, participants will complete a summative evaluation at the conclusion of the program to determine the increase of knowledge and skill of instructional delivery and their actions, thoughts, emotions, and insights at the implementation stage. Furthermore, a 6-month evaluation will then be distributed to participants to gauge what new teaching strategies were implemented in the program development and delivery in relation to the program and their actions, thoughts, emotions, and insights at the confirmation stage. Finally, a one-year post evaluation will be utilized to determine the more long-term impacts of the program. In this collection, agents will be asked about their level of self-efficacy as a community educator, and provide more insight into the longevity of their perceived self-efficacy. Data from this long-term evaluation will be used to develop and refine the program moving forward, and to curate data driven content for the next cohort of early career agents.

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