

Relevance of Experiential Learning in the Training of Extension Agents in Nigeria: A Proposal

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ABSTRACT: *Extension agents have been described as essential backbones for extension services. The efficiency of the activities of extension agents as multi-purpose staff is determined by the quality of the training received. In other words, for extension agents to excel in service delivery opportunities must be given for training and retraining in the current trends and issues experientially in extension work. It is against this background that this paper proposes the kind and the nature of training for Nigerian extension workers. To this end, the paper examines the nature of extension work, role and qualities of extension agents, overview of extension agents training in Nigeria with a view to determining the kind of training that will facilitate their work as multi-purpose change agents. The paper concludes that curriculum of Adult and Non-formal Education in Nigerian higher institution of learning should reflect current trends in extension services and be made relevant to the real life situation to enable extension agents discharge their responsibilities as multi-purpose workers. Also opportunities for retraining through seminars, conferences, workshops, etc should be made available to practising extension workers.*

KEYWORDS: Experiential Learning, Extension, Agent, Training , Proposal

INTRODUCTION

Extension literally means to expand, to project, elongate, stretch or reach out to someone in a bid to helping that person. In a simple language extension is reaching out to people with new knowledge or discovery arising from research to affect the socio-economic life of people positively. Extension work according to Obodoechi (2006) can be defined as the bringing of education to people who are not ordinarily in close contact with an educational institution and who are likely to remain without the education, training or information needed for an improvement unless it is brought to them. The implication of this is that the dissemination and diffusion of information starting from one point to a large number of the people. The dissemination and diffusion of information is been carried out by extension agents. The effectiveness of this work however, is determined by the skills and competence of the extension agents. Certainly, a well-trained extension agent will be able to facilitate effective extension work.

Extension agents are multi-purpose workers whose work is multi-faceted and dynamic. For these workers to effectively perform their work for efficient result, qualitative training and retraining opportunities at regular interval must be provided. Extension service agents have been traditionally trained with broad knowledge of all aspects of their general programme areas-- agriculture, natural resources, health and environmental issues, community development, home economics, or youth development. In addition, the problems faced by our society today are becoming so specialized and complex that specialist extension agents are

required to be able to keep abreast of technological developments on all fronts for effective performances.

According to Buford, Bedeian and Lindner (1995), as extension agents face the challenge of learning new skills to maintain their proficiency or become qualified for promotions, the importance of an effective staff training programme for extension agents becomes evident. These authors state further that to ensure extension agents are well trained, extension management must determine training needs to increase agent capabilities. Similarly Chizari, Karbasioun, and Lindner (1998) noted that extension will be seriously limited in its ability to plan and execute effective educational programmes and other technology transfer activities, without an adequate number of well-trained agents. According to Alonge and Martin (1995), the first step toward adoption of new ideas by farmers is to provide information on sustainable practices. What has emerged, however, is bipolar evidence from proponents among extension agents on this subject. Agencies and institutions engaged in information dissemination and educational activities often have personnel specifically charged with informational and educational responsibilities whom themselves have information and education needs (Rollins & Golden, 1994). Shahbazi (1993) warned that to deny the lack of knowledge and the educational needs of extension agents of our time are to deny that technologies related to extension work are changing.

Extension has to adapt to the societal changes to reorient to a fundamentally industrial and service oriented population (Russell, 1995). The roles and responsibilities of extension agents need to change. The educational programs delivered by extension agents today are more varied than they have ever been and will continue to change to meet the changing needs of the clientele they serve (Radhakrishna, 1997).

The future of extension programs will be determined to a large degree by the ability of the agents to do the job and the extent to which they are up-to-date on the subject matter topics. As indicated by Prawl, Medlin, and Gross (1984), the success of educational programs in extension, just as in teaching, depends heavily upon the abilities of individual professionals. The delivery of a high level of competence is the principle public justification for the extension service. Furthermore, to constantly produce a high volume of quality work, employees must be competent, able to do the job, and be willing to put forth the effort required for the job.

Today's challenge for extension is an expanded educational effort to effectively relate the total expertise and resources of institutions of higher education to the solutions of complex problems of individuals and the society in general. This challenge creates a continuous need for relevant training to produce professional extension workers who understand the real life situations of their clients. This shows the importance of experiential learning to be an integral part of the training received by extension agents in Nigeria. Experiential learning is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with students in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify values" (Association for Experiential Education, 2011). Experiential learning is also referred to as learning through action, learning by doing, learning through experience, and learning through discovery and exploration. Certainly, when extension agents in training are groomed via experiential learning approach to training they will be better equipped to deliver extension services. It is against this backdrop that the paper examines the relevance of experiential learning in the training of extension agents in Nigeria with the view to emphasising its importance.

Nature of Extension Services

Obodoechi (2006) expressed the nature of extension services as total of all those ideas and thought that are involved in the learning process which can change the lives of people for better, environment in which they function and the process of bring about this change. The starting point of extension is the capability of man to learn to profit by experience, to adapt and to renovate.

Extension service differs quite distinctly from that of any other public services. Extension programme reaches rural people through educational process, a unique framework within which the extension service operates. It is charged with the responsibility of positively changing in an efficient manner the present conditions of its clientele e.g farmers, such as increasing output in food production, improving feeding habit and nutrition, efficient marketing systems, more interactions with rural members, improving health and general life of styles.

Extension services cover much essential human life such as agriculture, health, nutrition, environment, education among others. This nature of extension services portrays extension work as a multi-purpose. The basic focus of extension service is to improve the living condition of people through educational process. This is the reason why extension service goes hand-in-hand with extension education. Extension education however, refers to the non-formal education system designed to help people in a given community to satisfy their needs, interests and aspirations. It is a process of education meant to help people help themselves, using their own resources. The basic tasks of extension as pointed out by Sarille (1995) are

- i. Disseminating useful information;
- ii. Applying such information to the analysis of practical problems; and
- iii. Helping people to help themselves.

Extension services cover variety of areas of human endeavours depending on the target groups to serve. However, three broad categories of extension services are prominent namely; agricultural extension, health and environmental extension and education extension services. The unique thing about these services is that extension services are carried out through education process by extension workers.

Who is an extension agent?

An extension agent is a professionally trained individual who is expected to carry out extension services to people and community that need the services. Extension agent could be voluntary or professional. There are some extension agents that represent certain organisations (government or non-governmental) that work on their behalf. And there are some who own agencies and carryout extension services to people. Extension agents are often called agents of social change who initiate and compel changes in actual human behaviour, in social institutions, in role expectations and in attitude to work, attitude to fellow human beings, attitude to groups, attitude to government and attitude to the society or community at large. The basic characteristics of extension change agents include:

- i. intension and commitment to bring about changes in human behaviour in positive direction;

- ii. adherence to a course of action or actions that will bring changes about; and
- iii. propagation of ideas that sustain the changes so that even when he dies or leaves a place the change so introduced remains (Oni & Bello, 1987).

The extension agents deal with a variety of people and interests. The variation in the needs and interests of different people that the extension agents serve require them to be up-to-date, competent, skilled and informed to be able to serve their clients effectively.

Role of Extension Agents

An extension agent is a multi-purpose person who is expected to effectively and efficiently reach out to his/her clients. Some of his roles include;

- i. he must be necessarily be an observer; having ability to understand the existing happening around him for effective service delivery of his target community;
- ii. he must be a diagnostician; able to diagnose what he sees, hears and observes about his community;
- iii. he ought to be a strategist; able to identify ways and means of inducing changes in the target groups he works with;
- iv. he is a stimulator; being able to mobilise and induce change adoption; and
- v. he is a link between innovators and target groups. In this case, he should possess ability to apply holistic approach to development to enable him harmonize the activities of many innovators.

To be able to perform the aforementioned roles successfully, extension agents must possess the following qualities

Qualities of Extension Agents

- i. an extension agent must be tactful in discharging his responsibilities;
- ii. he must have high sense of judgement i.e being conscious of justice, objectivity, impartiality as regards matters of decision in accomplishment of tasks;
- iii. he should be able to demonstrate high level of self-restraint;
- iv. he should be able to exercise high level of patience in dealing with different personalities; and
- v. he must possess genuine interest in the progress of the organisation and community where he works. Honestly, this quality remains a pivotal that other qualities revolve around.

Ability to perform the above responsibilities and internalising the qualities of a good extension agent depends on the quality of the training received by the agent. Then what is obtainable as far as training of extension agents in Nigeria.

Overview of the Training of Extension Agents in Nigeria

Given the critical role of extension agents, it remains essential that latest information on human development and best methodologies in extension work must be made available to them. This calling is further raised due to growing concern that extension workers in the less industrialized world is not performing well or is unsatisfactory (Tenzin, 2004). While citing the case of extension services in Thailand, Tenzin (2004) reported that extension work in Thailand portrayed as being weak and unsatisfactory. The poor performance of extension is accounted according to several factors, including speculation, that extension agents are not performing as desired or that organization management is not set right.

The training programme contents of all Department of Adult Education in Nigerian universities where extension agents are trained are identical in that they all have core or compulsory courses and elective courses. Some differences may be noticed around the core and elective course (Biao, 2005). Some of the core courses include: Psychology, Philosophy, Sociology and History of Adult Education. Others include Community Development, Social Welfare, and Extension Education etc. Elective courses include: Trade Union Education, Innovation Diffusion, Literacy Development, Education of Disadvantaged Groups, Gender Education, and Media in Education among others.

It is important to note that the nature of training of extension educators requires that real life situations and experiences are presented to them. Unfortunately, some Nigerian institutions of higher learning where adult and non-formal education degree programmes are offered have less time devoted to practical experiencing for their students. Mpofu and Youngman (2004) found out that Anglophone Africa's adult educators' training programmes are made up of 14 percent practical work at the Bachelor level, 1 to 2 percent at the Masters level and 0 percent of practical work at the PhD level.

Hassan (2007) substantiated that Nigerian adult education university students undergo numerous class sessions secluded out-of town settings without the benefit of practice among the common people, for whom the knowledge disseminated is meant in the final analysis. He described this as the Ivory Tower concept of Education. Wurdinger and Carlson (2010) found that most college faculty teach by lecturing because few of them learned how to teach otherwise. The experience of the writers as teachers of adult education and their interactions with some colleagues in the Nigeria universities showed that teaching in most of the faculties of education is done in the traditional lecture approach to teaching and learning. Emphasis in the teaching is always on mastering of information and instruction in a 'banking' manner where learning is compartmentalized. Where this happens, learning doesn't reflect the real world and meaningful learning cannot take place. Certainly, if the training received by prospective extension educators is almost theoretical and banking in nature, then, meeting the needs of their clients by them may be very difficult. This situation therefore, calls for concern if the prospective extension educators should deliver. It is on this note that a proposal of training of extension agents is examined and the relevance of experiential learning is explored to further improve the quality of training received by Nigerian prospective extension educators.

A Proposal of Training of Extension Agents

In Nigeria today, our higher institutions of learning have Department of Adult and Non-formal Education offering courses leading to award of Certificate, Diploma and Degree in Adult and Non-formal Education, Extension Education, Community Development, among others. This

department is statutory to training change agents who will be able to influence the life of people positively through skilled oriented services. The capability of Department of Adult Education to meet up with this expectation depends on the richness and up-to-date of their training programme. Also, retraining opportunities for extension workers through seminars, workshops and conferences must be appropriate and need-focused to be able to improve the workers in services delivery.

Training is a process of preparing somebody for a purpose to enable the person acquires the skills, knowledge and information for effective performance. Extension agents are expected to be kept abreast of skills, knowledge, methodology associated with what they do for better result. The training will enable them to acquire technical and social skills in a bid to discharge their responsibilities effectively.

The Kind of Training for Extension Agents

The training of extension agent should be multi-purpose in nature to enable extension agents up to the task in discharging their responsibilities. They should not be confined to one subject; they should be exposed to different areas which will make them competent in service delivery. Particular emphasis should be made on subjects that will address multi-purpose needs of their clients

The content of the training should focus on issues that can contribute to the efficiency of human potential as well as sustainable progress and development. For example the training out-fits of extension agents should include in their training programmes information, skills, knowledge and competence for acquiring the necessary ingredients so that extension agents can serve as facilitators of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The training should instil in extension agents ability to work in a team. This skill will help them to practically work among their clients in a spirit of one family. The use of modern communication systems should be part of the training of extension agents. They should be introduced to the use of audio-visual aids such as television, video machine, DVD machine, computer, projector among others for learning facilitation.

The training should also introduce the extension agents to the use of demonstration and exhibition as methods of delivery. Opportunities for demonstrating past experiences on extension services for trainee to see for multi-level thinking and reasoning will help the agents to effectively carry out the multi-purpose extension services to their clients.

The training for extension agent should accommodate the use of discussion through cooperative learning. Learning must be participatory to be able to explore the adults' experiences for effective learning. To achieve this, discussion through cooperative learning must be injected into extension agents.

The trainees should be exposed to field work to enable them acquire the genuine and original skills of extension services directly from the field. Field work opportunity will create opportunity for getting first- hand information and knowledge about delivery of extension work. Field work should be given preference in the curriculum of extension services training programme since it affords trainees opportunity to feel, see, observe and experience the real situation in the world of extension services.

In the whole, the training of extension agents should build self-confidence in extension agents. It should be able to help facilitate transfer of knowledge as a source of empowerment. The kind of the contents of the programmes for the extension agents should help them to transfer extension services to the clients, for example motivating people to organize themselves for development programmes.

Generally, for extension agents to be effective, however, they also need competencies in the extension education process. In addition, they must understand the human development, learning, and social interaction processes, and they must become knowledgeable about the organization within which they work. Principles and practice of administration and management including adult learning theories with their applications to extension services delivery should be part of training of extension agents.

The above proposal of the training of extension agents can be best achieved through integration of experiential learning process. Thus, the relevance of experience learning in the training of extension agents is examined.

Relevance of Experiential Learning in Training of Extension Agents

As argued by Mezirow (1990) knowledge is inherently dependent upon one's understanding of an experience and their ability to use this interpretation to guide future decisions or actions starting. He further contends that, experience strengthens, extends and refines our structures of meaning by reinforcing our expectations about how things are supposed to be. An important process of the experiential learning cycle is the ability of the learner to reflect upon and explore their previously held beliefs and assumptions regarding the subject matter. To learn experientially, a learner must first be provided with opportunities to understand and draw upon their own experiences (Kolb and Kolb, 2008). In order to facilitate experiential learning, instructors need to skilfully create instructional and assessment strategies that promote deep or critical reflection. Critical reflection occurs when learners analyze and challenge the validity of their presuppositions and assess the appropriateness of their knowledge, understanding and beliefs given their present contexts (Mezirow, 1990). Specifically, the relevance of experiential learning in the training of extension agents can be summarised below;

- i. Experiential learning gives learners opportunities to experience real life situations. This is in form of action. The action focuses the attention on the learner rather than the teacher and the goal is for the learner to "experience" the activity in order to develop the targeted skills and competence. When the learner is encouraged to learn by doing, opportunities are presented for a wide variety of skills and competences to be practiced. An extension agent that is given opportunities to experience the real life situations of their clients either through role playing in the classroom or visiting prospective clients at their farms or communities will enable him to understand the best possible way of assisting them.
- ii. Experiential learning provides opportunities for learners to process the real life situation experiences. This is referred to as debriefing the experience which moves an experience from activity to a learning experience. The primary purpose of processing the experience is to allow participants the opportunity to integrate their learning and provide a sense of closure or completeness to their experience. In this process adult/extension educators could assist extension agents in training by: setting aside enough time for them to reflect on the experience(s), asking the right questions; listening to the learners carefully; planning appropriate opportunities to help them reflect on their experiences and

supporting each learner's unique learning. When this opportunity is provided during the training, extension agents will profit largely in mastering in and out of the subject matter and its applications in real life situation.

- iii. Experiential learning also affords extension agents in training an opportunity to share their learning experiences with one another. This opportunity builds in the learner ability to work in a group which is fundamental to extension service delivery. Sharing is accomplished by asking the group or individuals to reflect upon what they did. Ask questions that help them think about: What they did. What they saw; felt; heard; smelled, tasted; etc. What part of the experience was the most difficult and what was the easiest for them.
- iv. Learners have opportunity to generalize experience when being helped through experiential learning. In this case, the discussion becomes more personal and focuses on what the experience meant to the participant and what was learned from it.
- v. Learners have opportunity to finally apply all that was experienced. Facilitator directs learners to apply what they learned to their lives. They are asked to think about how the learning from this experience could be used at another time or under other conditions. They are led to think about how what they have learned might change the way they approach a similar task.

CONCLUSION

Relevant and up-to-date training and retraining opportunities becomes a must for extension agents to enable them to excel as multi-purpose workers. Urgent attention needs to be made to review the curriculum at the various departments of Adult Education and other departments that offer related programmes in Extension Education in Nigerian higher institution of learning to meet up with current trends in extension services and make learning more experiential to enable extension agents discharge their responsibilities as multi-purpose workers. The areas of training proposed here can go a long way to produce competent extension agents in Nigeria. Also, exploration of experiential learning and retraining opportunities for extension workers through seminars, workshops and conferences must be appropriate and need-focused and be made available by employer of extension agents to improve the workers in services delivery

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