

Extension Education and Unbiased Research

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Gary Hansen (1993), in his Forum article "When Grassroots Belief and Research-Based Information Conflict," succinctly presents a real problem in Extension programming. An educator's judgment of the best available research does often come into conflict with grassroots beliefs. However, Hansen's conclusion of putting research-based information as most fundamental is an errant concept of the Extension educator's role in a community.

An educator's role is to present knowledge in an environment conducive to learning. Issue based programming meets much of the requirement of an environment conducive to learning because the learners have a stake and an interest in the issue. It is the learners' or community's responsibility to decide how to respond to the information. For the educator to "decline to participate in a program unless it is modified to be consistent with the best available research" (Hansen, 1993) is to leave the realm of educating and enter the realm of prescribing. It is to exit a prime learning environment.

The recommendation to value research-based programming over community beliefs fails for the following reasons. First, the recommendation fails to recognize the imperfection of even the best research. Research knowledge is not to be equated with truth. Kuhn (1970), in his classic book "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions," details how various physical science paradigms have fallen and been replaced with others. Social science paradigms are subject to even greater variability than the physical sciences because social scientists are often unable to formulate an experiment under controlled conditions. Experiments in the physical sciences are usually conducted with most of the variables within an experiment controlled, allowing for comparisons against an identical control group. Social science research does not have the luxury of precise control groups though social science researchers do try to minimize variation. Thus, the different levels of statistical significance in social science research may result in variability in application in different contexts.

Second, Hansen's recommendation fails to recognize and accommodate diversity. If Extension and the academic community are going to truly value diversity then they must recognize that stark valuations of research over beliefs do not properly take into account the institutional constraints inherent in both education and research. Research which is appropriate in the inner city may be of little value in rural areas. Communities which value traditions over growth may not respond to research findings in the same manner as communities which value growth over traditions.

Most research, by design, attempts to minimize diversity and to have a homogenous control group. It is reductionist and must be properly understood when introducing it into

a dynamic issue solving context. Educators must be able to recognize the limitations of the research within the context of the institutions (church, community, school, etc.) where they work.

Third, the recommendation fails to be unbiased. The use of the term "best available research" indicates that there is published research with different conclusions currently available. The educator's view of what is the "best available" guarantees a bias. As an economist, I happen to think that monetarist theories are superior to Keynesian economic theory. Rather than refuse to participate with a group that does not hold the same bias that I do, I seek to recognize the strengths and limitations of each theory and assist the learners in appropriately addressing their issue.

A recommendation which avoids the extremism of declining to participate would be for Extension educators to attempt to serve as true educational resource persons. Such educators avail themselves of as much research as possible and present their programs with the needs and beliefs of the clientele in mind. Such a position allows the educator to be critically involved in community programs without compromise.

Extension educators who are properly trained to understand the research published in their respective fields will be able to interpret the experimental design and see where it differs from the goals and objectives of community issue teams. They have the freedom to present the possible strengths and weaknesses of various alternatives being considered by the community. They also have the freedom to mention which alternative they favor. Extension educators do not enter into the realm of deciding what the decision of the community group will be.

If the decision of the group results in a success, Extension educators stand to gain by having been a part of a successful program. If the program fails, Extension educators do not have to take the blame because they served as educators rather than as decision makers. Furthermore, Extension educators are now positioned on the inside as resource educators and will be able to help the group make adjustments to the program so that the goal is obtained. If they pull out because their biased opinion of "best available research" was not fully implemented, they are left outside when the time comes to modify a weak program.

If Extension is to maintain its reputation for being an objective and unbiased educational resource, we must discard the presumptuousness thinking that we have the answers, learn from history that the best available research is transient, and present all sides of the issue in as fair a manner as possible. To maintain that we or our research is unbiased is arrogant and misleading. Unbiased educational programming is best accomplished when we act as educators providing research-based information regarding the effectiveness of various alternatives and letting the people use that information within the context of their beliefs. This is not controversy-averse behavior but true education which allows Extension educators to challenge and confront learners with new ideas. To withdraw is to miss the opportunity to truly educate.

References

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Editor's Note

This manuscript was originally accepted for the Forum section of the "Journal of Extension." As such, it was peer reviewed by three members of the Editorial Committee. Manuscripts submitted to the new Commentary section will only be reviewed by the editor.