

Teaching Tips/Notes



Using Social Learning Theory to Engage Adults through Extension Education

Social Learning Theory is an effective way to engage all learners and help them to adapt to the learning environment. “Man’s capacity to learn by observation enables him to acquire large, integrated units of behavior by example without having to build up the patterns gradually by tedious trial and error,” Bandura, (1971 p. 2) illustrates how Social Learning Theory can be used to educate in a direct, yet limited access environment.

In Extension Education, facilitators are often limited to a few meetings or only a single instance to teach a certain topic. The limited amount of time can prove difficult for both the facilitator and the learner as the time can slip away quickly. However, Social Learning Theory can be helpful to the learner as they observe their surroundings. We are quick to follow the crowd if we have low confidence in the situation, but are quick to adapt to our surroundings and search for success. By observing peers around you and learning more about those peers and their experiences, you are able to gather information, which could help you later on. The experiences from peers may not necessarily relate to the certain topic discussed during the session, although they could allow for deeper thought along the way. As peers exchange thoughts, they may discover new ideas or expand on thoughts that came to mind through the lecture discussion. Those that participate in these discussions may be able to take the ideas and behaviors of others and use them in their daily lives. For example, an Extension farm management specialist is facilitating a workshop on leasing farmland. In the audience are landowners, agribusiness representatives, and tenants. During a break, the audience begins to discuss the material and sparks ideas amongst the small group. The members take those ideas home and can look at their situation to see if there is a way to implement those ideas.

Bandura (1971 p.3) also stated, “New patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others.” Thoughtfully describing how learning can be taught through direct experience to achieve a different learning behavior. The learner can view the situation and based on the reaction which is received develops a behavior. If the outcome returns a reward, there is a likelihood that the learner will continue to show the behavior. However, if punishment is the outcome, the chances of the action being repeated are decreased. The punishment method can lead to the saying; “You can never make the same mistake twice because the second time is not a mistake, it’s a choice.” (Nguyen, 2015 p.26) This saying describes that if you continue to repeat such a behavior, it becomes a choice rather than a mistake. The development of behavior can change how information is learned over time. “Students learn more when they participate in the process of learning, whether through discussion, practice, review or application,” (Promoting Active Learning | Teaching Commons) As learners are interacting with their peers, they are taking in more information, which they can use in their lives going forward.

In Extension, I have observed groups that engage in active learning, and in reaction, the impact is greater than if they had not. In many Extension workshops, facilitators encourage conversation with them or invite discussion amongst groups. The practice and review elements can be involved when assignments are given to help put the topics and discussion into perspective. Evaluation of the work then can help clarify and the results are positive starting points for ideas that everyone can use for themselves. An example, is during a farm transition planning workshop series each week may focus on a different topic but each tie to another making the succession easier to follow. At the end of each session, the participants are given a goal and an assignment that they can take home and apply to their farm business

and discuss with stakeholders. They are able to bring the assignment back, where it can be evaluated and adjusted. They then can apply this to their situation and use it as a tool for future use.

When looking at how to use Social Learning Theory in the education setting, one can look at the experience as unpredictable. Youth and adults are both susceptible to presenter's behavior and will follow how they see fit. For example; youth, when allowed to become out of control, may set a negative example to others. This can cause them to believe they no longer feel the need to listen or pay attention to authority in the room. The education setting can be vital in keeping order in the room and as a presenter, having behavior others want to follow is key.

Just like youth, adults too can react in a similar fashion. If an adult believes that they are already knowledgeable in a situation, they may attempt to take advantage by interacting with outside distractions. The distractions can lead others to believe that this is an acceptable behavior and before long the space becomes out of control. This is a situation, which often happens with pre-recorded informational videos shown at local county Extension and Outreach offices. Many of the participants have been shown versions of the video before and feel that if they are not under surveillance, they can participate in other activities. By discouraging this behavior and adding a consequence to being distracted, the response changes and the participants choose to be more engaged in the program. Just as how important education setting is in youth, the setting is also very influential in adults.

In live interaction settings, an important aspect is to provide the learners with interactive activities where they can learn hands-on and use their knowledge as a base to build on. Many adults and youth come into sessions with prior experiences, which they can contribute to the discussions. Using the prior experiences in discussions, peers are able to learn from mistakes and successes of the other peers. By doing so, the group can make better decisions and make choices based on what others have experienced. Through the sessions, Extension education can help people learn by providing factual information, allowing them to develop new and innovative ideas, and leave a session knowing they are better off than they were before.

People constantly develop new ideas by what they observe. Cultural changes can be made simply by the actions of one person or a group. Social Learning Theory changes the learning environment. When an individual can observe the behavior of an instructor or peer, they can adapt quickly to the environment and begin to think about their behavioral decisions. Using Social Learning Theory in Extension education is a great way to positively engage groups in critical thinking and discussion while allowing the sharing of ideas to flourish. Always remember that the audience learns from all elements in the learning environment and individuals have different points of view. Encourage discussion and welcome innovative ideas as keys to success for all learners.

References

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