

Planning extension activities for impact

Jenny Crisp

Department of Agriculture and Food Western Australia, Locked Bag 4, Bentley Delivery Centre WA 6983,
Email: jcrisp@agric.wa.gov.au

What, when, why?

We all want our extension to have an impact. This paper presents an approach to planning activities to deliver impact, by outlining simply the *types* of activities congruent with identified levels of change.

The approach is most applicable to planning discrete projects with, for example, one to three year planning cycles. It can be used in forward planning or to review the suitability of existing project activities. It is designed to be useful for those with little extension knowledge, as well as a check for the more experienced extension planner. The approach is not limited to the field of extension; it should hold for project planning generally, as long as there is a component of intended change for a target audience.

The approach was developed in response to an observed constant lack of congruency between project objectives and activities when reviewing the logic of numerous agricultural and natural resource management projects (mainly Department of Agriculture and Food WA projects, but some others as well) in the past 5 years. It is highly unlikely for example, that a journal paper, 2 field days and an article in the rural media will deliver significant practice change in a rural community. There are two issues of (lack of) congruency involved; the proposed suite of activities not having the capacity to deliver stated objectives, and also the objectives being overstated and not achievable within the project funding and timeframe. This paper will focus only on the issue of activities not being congruent with project objectives or level of intended change.

Levels of change

In order to outline the types of activities congruent with identified levels of change, it is first necessary to be familiar with the options for the level of change. Four successive levels of change (evolved from Bennett’s hierarchy of outcomes (Bennett 1975; Bennett and Rockwell 1995) are described (see Figure 1) as a guide to identify the level of change a project is aiming for. Level 1, change in awareness, is the smallest suggested level of change, moving up to level 4, improved environmental, economic or social conditions as the highest level of change. Each successive level generally requires greater resources (time, money, expertise) to achieve. Levels 1, 2 and 3 refer to change relating to people.

Figure 1. Four successive levels of change

Level 1	Change in awareness
Level 2	Change in knowledge, understanding and skills at a generic level
Level 3	Change in practice or behavior (small or large scale)
Level 4	Improved environmental, economic, social conditions

There is rarely just one level of change associated with a project. There will be an overall identified change (or impact or outcome), which reflects the highest identified level of change for that project. There will also be a suite of other changes of varying levels that together deliver the overall change. When looking for congruency between project objectives and activities, it is best to start by considering the highest level of intended change for the project.

Intended change for a project is much more complex than simply choosing a level of change. Understanding the extension situation, and exploring and making decisions about the target audiences for change, scale and complexity of the change, adoptability of technologies related to the change and potential influence your project has on effecting the change, are all elements of rigorous extension planning. This paper however, is not an adequate forum to consider all these complexities, and is focused only on congruency between activities and level of change.

Activities for Level 1 - Change in awareness

Activities congruent with changing awareness centre on attracting the attention of your target audience to the point they are aware your message, product or technology is relevant to them. As with all extension activities, it is necessary to first identify and prioritise your target audience individuals and groups, consider their characteristics and needs, and develop packages and processes targeted to these characteristics and needs. The next step is to ensure your target

audiences are exposed to the message, product or technology. Mechanisms are potentially endless, but examples include:

- Use of mass media, such as locally relevant newsletters, rural newspapers, rural TV and radio, Farmnotes, and Agmemo. The key to success is setting up lines of access to the sources, and allocating staff to be responsible for particular sources ahead of time to make submissions quick, easy and a regular part of project activities. In this situation, target audience identification and segmentation, and understanding the characteristics and needs of the target audience will be necessarily broad.
- Targeted individuals or groups, such as a particular consultant, grower group or reference group. In this situation, clearly identifying and segmenting the target audience, and understanding their characteristics and needs will be a process unique to that individual or group. A relationship between your project and the target audience will be the key mechanism for ensuring the package is right for the audience, and the audience are exposed to the product.
- Use of websites. This could be a website developed specifically for the situation, or strategic use of existing websites. Please note that making something available, for example placing on a website, is only part of awareness-raising.
- Targeted activities. These could be whole activities aimed at raising awareness, such as field days, field walks and product launches. It could also involve 'piggy backing' on bigger events such as workshops and training courses with something like a short promotional presentation as part of a bigger day.
- Physical cues such as signage, stickers, badges, hats, stationery and T-shirts. These provide a cue or link to the message, product or technology rather than provide information directly.
- Value-add by placing the same material in a range of distribution points.

Activities for Level 2 - Change in knowledge, understanding and skills at a generic level

The key focus for activities congruent with changing knowledge and understanding is that they must allow in-depth information exchange, clarification and discussion between the target audience and those recognised as holding key knowledge and understanding, and between target audience members. Where generic skill development is the aim, activities need to demonstrate the skill and provide opportunity for hands-on practice of the skill in conjunction with gaining knowledge and understanding. Example activities include:

- Workshops, training courses, seminars, some field days. Note most field day formats do not allow sufficiently in-depth exchange, clarification, demonstration or practice to easily support change at level 2, and are more suited to level 1. A series or sequence of workshops or events which support a cycle of workplace action and review by participants between modules would be congruent with a higher level practice change - level 3.
- Networks that allow information exchange and discussion across a range of stakeholders, for example farmers, researchers, extension officers and others. These could include interactive web-based educational learning groups, web-based communities of practice, email networks and regular face-to-face meetings.
- Use of and access to experts, peers and information that are credible and most relevant to target audience.
- Expert or peer demonstrations, show-casing strong and/or locally relevant case studies.
- Tools to support more informed decision making, including running interactive group sessions with the target audiences in the use of those tools. Economic modelling tools, for example 'STEP' (Peek and Abrahams 2005) are useful in supporting discussion around changes in economic position of a farming enterprise resulting from new technical innovations or practices.
- Some ideas to encourage commitment to action at end of level 2 activities, such as workshops, include next steps and available support clearly outlined; target audience/participants write down, or verbalise intended actions in presence of others; suggest/request follow up on intended actions after a period of time; suggest/request setting up support networks such as grower groups, learning sets, and mentor-type partnerships to take next steps together.
- Application of adult learning principles and theory (Knowles 1990; Mumford 1993; Malouf 1994; McGill and Beatty 1995; Burns 1998) is particularly valuable when planning extension events that lead to increased knowledge, understanding and generic skills.
- When aiming for a level 2 change, activities for level 1 as well as level 2 would generally be necessary.

It is important to remember that a well-informed decision *not* to initiate a particular practice change is just as valuable as a well-informed decision to make the change.

Activities for Level 3 - Change in practice or behavior (small or large scale)

For target audiences to initiate a change in practice or behaviour, they need to have the confidence and motivation to initiate the change, access to situation-specific knowledge and skills, and the necessary physical resources to act. Activities or actions supporting a change in practice or behaviour need to focus clearly on these three elements, including:

- Small-scale trialing on the target audiences own site, or for their own situation or business. A positive experience on a small scale can result in increased (site-specific) knowledge and skills, increased confidence, and potentially greater motivation or desire to adopt on a large scale. (A negative experience could equally lead to a decision not to adopt on a larger scale.) Skills practice at a small-scale trial site has greater relevance compared to (for example) a regional workshop where skills demonstration and practice is more generic.
- Financial incentive, for example money to establish and manage trial sites, free trees, free soil sampling, training subsidies, devolved grants.
- Where a trial site is being established (in part) for research and development, formal recognition of (or payment for) the farmer's experience and knowledge (intellectual property) could provide an additional incentive to take part.
- A series/sequence of workshops, technical modules or other activities which support a cycle of workplace action and review by participants between the modules.
- Innovation/practice specific peer networks which support technical learning, action, reflection.
- Working as a group or part of a team can motivate action in itself, as individuals feel more supported, and often have a greater sense of commitment and responsibility in a group.
- Personalised technical support. Some examples could be: a list of contact details with that little bit extra, such as after hours numbers (as appropriate); information packages tailored to the specific property, site, situation, individual needs; password protected websites that only 'project members' can access.
- Providing evidence that technical support will still be ongoing after initial trial establishment. Some examples could be longer term project websites with site data and updates and a designated local resource area, for example in the local Shire
- As previously mentioned, some ideas to encourage commitment to action at end of level 2 activities (to support level 3 change) are to: have next steps and available support clearly outlined; have target audience/participants write down, or verbalise intended actions in presence of others; suggest/request follow up on intended actions after a period of time or suggest/request setting up support networks such as grower groups, learning sets, and mentor-type partnerships to take next steps together.
- Whilst not an activity as such, negative incentives, including regulation or policy instruments may be a vital tool in some situations.
- When aiming for a level 3 change, activities for level 1 and 2 as well as level 3 would generally be necessary

Comment on community level practice or behaviour change:

Where you are aiming for practice or behaviour change on a community level, the key is for individuals within that community to develop ownership of the change.

- Invite the community to be involved in the process of change, particularly in planning and decision-making. This could be through formation of community/industry steering committees, advisory groups, reference groups, community consultation. Be transparent about the process from the start, so individuals know how they will be involved and how their involvement could influence change. Check that community members aren't there to 'push their own barrow'.
- Keep the community informed through relevant awareness-raising mechanisms for that community. This needs to be ongoing – and right from the start of any change process.
- Investigate the potential impact of the change, on individuals and on the community generally, and keep in mind for all planning and implementation activities.
- Always provide some level of feedback on how community comment/feedback has been utilised (never waste community time by consulting as a 'tick the box' exercise).
- Publicly recognise and acknowledge community members for their involvement in community change activities – things for the good of the community – rather than them

as individuals. It takes time and effort to be on involved. This could be via the local newspaper or local awards etc

Exploring and making decisions about scale and complexity of the intended practice or behavior change are key elements to address in the development phase of project/extension planning. This paper does not attempt to discuss the issues of scale and complexity at all; instead providing a simple decision aid listing types of activities congruent with practice change generally.

Activities for Level 4 - Improved environmental, economic, social conditions

Outcomes relating to change in environmental, economic and social conditions will result from achieving change at levels 1, 2 and 3. The focus at this level is consequently on monitoring and evaluating expected change, rather than on actual extension activities. The two key areas to plan for and implement at this level are:

- To clearly describe the program/project logic that theoretically supports expected level 4 changes occurring. This takes place in the project development phase, and identifies the expected cause-effect relationships between activities and intended change from level 1 through to level 4.
- To evaluate whether identified elements of the improved environmental, social or economic conditions have been achieved. Do this by developing a rigorous monitoring and evaluation plan in the project development phase, clearly linked to the described project logic. The plan should include monitoring of inputs, activities and outputs for all identified levels of change, as well as evaluating against agreed intended impact/outcomes at levels 2, 3 and 4.

Summary

Two key messages from this paper are:

- It is essential when planning extension projects to identify what change, or impact, is intended, and with whom.
- The suite of extension activities planned for any project should be clearly congruent with the overall intended level of change.

Activities for Level 1 (change in awareness) need to be focused on identifying the target audiences and distribution mechanisms for greatest impact. Activities for Level 2 (change in knowledge, understanding and skills at a generic level) need to be focused on facilitating information exchange and discussion, and as relevant, skills demonstration and opportunity for practice. Activities for Level 3 (change in practice or behavior) need to be focused on increasing confidence and motivation to initiate the change, access to situation-specific knowledge and skills, and the necessary physical resources to act. Activities for Level 4 (Improved environmental, economic, social conditions) are not extension activities as such, but are focused on clearly describing the program logic, or cause-effect relationships, that theoretically support the change occurring, and developing a congruent evaluation plan.

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