COOPERATIVE VENTURE FOR CAPACITY BUILDING

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Researching Capacity Building in Rural Australia

Information on demand

Extension organisations and individuals involved in extension and capacity building use a variety of mediums for getting their messages out, including printing hard copy, posting information on websites, sending out regular updates using email, sending SMS messages on mobile phones. Are there any guidelines for developing information so that we know, as far as possible, it meets the needs of the audiences it is designed for?

Work by the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building (CVCB) provides some helpful pointers.

As the result of a 2-year national review of extension and education across Australia, Jeff Coutts, Kate Roberts, and Fionnuala Frost identified characteristics of different extension models (see box) and used these to develop indicators for success.

Extension models

Facilitation. This model focuses on participants increasing their own capacity in planning and decision-making and in seeking their own education and training needs based on their situation. Groups may do their own research. The project will often provide or fund a facilitator to help groups to define their own goals and learning needs and to help them realise these.

Technological development. This model is about individuals working together to develop specific technologies, management practices or decision support systems which will then be available to the rest of the industry or community. It often involves local trials, demonstrations, field days and on-site visits.

Training. This model is about delivering specifically designed training programs and workshops to targeted groups of landholders, community members, government personnel and others to increase understanding or skills in defined areas.

Information. This model is about providing a range of blanket information that individuals and groups can access from a distance and at a time that suits them. It can be based on a website, information centre or other centralised locations.

Consultant. This model recognises the interaction between a mentor or a consultant who works over time with an individual or community to improve their managerial, technological, social or environmental situation - or individuals from different backgrounds working together on a 1:1 basis.

This factsheet looks at the **information model,** typified by websites, libraries and collections of information to do with a particular subject, which are designed so information can be accessed at a time that suits the individual. This aspect, of making critical information available on demand to users, is important in supporting the capacity building process.

A key principle of the model is that people need different information at different stages of their decision making processes. This means that information access is much more than simply making reports and other information available online or in hard copy. Rather, the model recognises that different people seek information in different ways and that it has to be packaged differently to meet these needs.

MAKING INFORMATION ACCESSIBLE

The researchers looked at a number of different ways of providing information to develop some guidelines for making information accessible so that it suits the needs of a variety of users with different needs. Information access isn't about providing lots of information that people may not want, understand or have a use for, i.e. it isn't about quantity. Rather, what is important is to understand what people want as far as information about a particular subject is concerned and then to provide pathways to that information. Providing these pathways allows people to best understand information in the context of their own situation and needs.

Know your objectives and your audience. It is crucial to know what you want to achieve in providing information and who your potential audiences are. Without clearly defining these elements you risk churning out lots of data or paper rather than useful information that can be used for decision making.

As an example, many organisations have websites that are static repositories for information so that using them is similar to using a library where everything is catalogued. There is much more potential for websites than this. Research shows that more you can take advantage of the interactive and search functions of the web, the more relevant and useful the information on your site is likely to be. Examples of increasing the interactivity of a website include having live links to other pages in the site and to other websites; having electronic discussion groups; having electronic newsletters and updates; having search functionality; and having information specifically designed and labelled for different audiences.

Provide information pathways. It's not just enough to provide a report or publication and think that it will suit the needs of all those seeking information on that topic. Rather, you need to provide pathways for people to find information in forms that are useful to them, when they want it. This might mean taking a report or series of reports from a project and providing the information in different ways for different audiences, e.g. from someone who just wants a general overview of the topic to someone who wants information that they can relate to their own situation for decision making.

It also means using different formats based on your knowledge of the different audiences and their information seeking behaviour, e.g. one group of people might like a written publication while others might prefer to "discuss" a particular topic in an online discussion group.

Monitor feedback. Don't think of information as a static thing that will never change. Monitor your information system and get feedback from users so that you can respond to their needs and make changes accordingly. You can incorporate feedback mechanisms in your information system or have it externally evaluated or do both.

Think creatively. Linking information with those who need it doesn't necessarily have to be expensive, time consuming or complex. With a bit of creative thought there are all sorts of options for keeping people up-to-date with information, e.g. sending out a short email regularly with links to sites and information you know your audience(s) is(are) interested in, sending out fax updates and having "virtual" meetings.

Keep information up to date. Whatever formats you produce information in, it must be kept up to date. There is nothing worse than searching through information and then realising that it is "old news".

Support and train staff. Information development and management is a skill in itself. Make sure that whoever is managing your information system is trained in the area and keeps up to date with developments.

Reason for providing the information. Be clear about why you are providing the information as this can affect its credibility. If users suspect there is a paprticular purpose or agenda behind then they are less likely to access it or they may discount its value.

CHECKLIST FOR EVALUATING INFORMATION ACCESS PROJECTS

You can use this checklist for assessing projects that involving providing access to information. Of course, this is a guide only and these elements may well be varied for good reasons. The aim is not to have a mechanistic and mindless checklist, but to provide a series of prompts to help with refining activities and projects.

Element	Comments	Ranking (1-5 where 5 is fully covered and 1 is not covered)
Objectives and information client groupings are clearly identified.	The default option of providing information 'because it is there' should be avoided.	
Use of information and client needs can be monitored and feedback provided.	This is a critical element that is central to this model. It may include external evaluation.	
There is opportunity to link to 'real people' and peers who may be searching for similar information or have relevant information.	There are a number of mechanisms, both virtual and physical, to link people in with other 'searchers' and staff.	
Information pathways are clearly provided to meet individual needs.	One size doesn't fit all. It is the facilitation and guidance of people accessing information so that they don't feel 'overwhelmed or lost' that is critical.	
QA systems are in place to ensure currency, relevance and quality of information.	There are a range of QA approaches – transparency and rigour is important.	
Creativity and 'risk-taking' is encouraged and provided for.	This is an area that is still in its infancy and 'action research' would appear to be a needed component.	
Staff and information providers are well supported and training is available where needed.	The assumption can't be made that staff managing and providing information know how to do this best.	
There is 'space' for people to 'play' and experiment with their information seeking.	The principle that information access projects should be fun and allow user experimentation is important.	

About the project

"What Works and Why" was funded by the Cooperative Venture for Capacity Building and Innovation in Rural Industries. The aims of the project were to evaluate extension and education programs being implemented around Australia, looking at best practice as a means of sharing and learning, and to identify how new guidelines, principles and tools will generate effective information and learning.

Researchers were Jeff Coutts, Kate Roberts and Finnoula Frost.

If you want to know more about the project contact Jeff or Kate:

Jeff Coutts, email jeff@couttsjr.com.au

Kate Roberts, email kroberts@robertsevaluation.com.au

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