Using Hands-on Learning to Educate Producers

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Why Hands-On Learning

Many agricultural producers prefer to participate in educational programs that actively engage them in
the learning process. Hands-on or participatory learning is a common method used by Extension
specialists and agents to educate producers. This type of learning helps producers adopt or adapt new
technology and production practices to better address their specific needs (Green, et al., 1993).

Adults are reluctant to participate in educational experiences unless they understand the benefits of
participation. If adult learners are interested in the educational program, they will contribute time and
effort to reap the benefits (Tough, 1979). Adult educators also use appropriate instructional methods
(eg., hands-on approach or participatory learning) to allow them to explore and bridge the gap between
their present and future situation (Knowles, 1990).

Recent Research on Hands-on Learning with Producers

Twelve focus groups were held with 94 producers in Louisiana, Tennessee, and Virginia to discuss their
preferred learning methods and what that means for Cooperative Extension program development and
delivery. Each participant completed a questionnaire consisting of 25 learning methods. They were
asked to check “prefer” or “do not prefer” for each learning method. Hands-on learning was preferred by
99% of the producers.

Producers responded they prefer hands-on learning because:
• They can see and hear information simultaneously
• Extension specialists or agents talk them through the process while they practice
• Immediate feedback from specialists/agents is provided
• Practical experience is important
• It enhances understanding and retention of technical information
It is interactive

**Tips for Extension Professionals to Successfully use Hands-on Learning**

Hands-on learning is an effective method to educate producers in a small setting. Producers can practice the skill being taught and receive instant feedback from Extension specialists and agents. Also, specialists and agents can provide one-on-one technical assistance to producers who are having difficulty learning a new skill. Specialists and agents should ask questions of producers to check for understanding and retention of information. By checking for understanding and retention, producers are more likely to use the new technology or practice in their operation. Hands-on learning has a distinct advantage over other learning methods because diverse learning styles can be effectively addressed.

**References**

