

Putting New Wine in Old Bottles: Utilizing an Immersive International Experience to Develop an Interdisciplinary Extension Program in Food Systems

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Abstract: The growing interest in local food nationwide has caused the cooperative extension service to develop new interdisciplinary approaches to extension education, as well as to identify professional development opportunities for extension professionals who want to engage in foods systems work. This study conducted focus groups with participants of an innovative, immersive educational experience trip in Italy. Participants were extension agents, state specialists, and non-extension non-experts. This study explored participants' understanding and conceptualization of the terms "food system" and "local food", as well as their intent to adopt aspects of what they learned into their educational programs and personal eating patterns. Results of the study showed that experts and non-experts defined food systems related terms similarly. The immersive experience of exploring an Italian food system effectively stimulated participants' intent to adopt what they learned during the trip, both professionally, such as seeking collaborations across extension programs, and personally, such as cooking and eating differently. Researchers suggested extension programs provide immersive educational programs for professional development of extension agents as well as for lay consumers. Future research should expand this study to multiple groups and compare the results. A follow-up study examining whether the participants in fact were able to convert their intent into action would also be intriguing.

Introduction

The term "food system" is an agricultural innovation that has been used frequently in discussions about nutrition, food, health, community economic development, and agriculture. The food system includes all processes involved in keeping us fed: growing, harvesting, processing (or transforming or changing), packaging, transporting, marketing, consuming, and disposing of food and food packages. The food system operates within and is influenced by social, political, economic, and natural environments (Cornell University, 2017).

The concept of food as part of a system dates back to the very beginning of agriculture and agricultural trade, but the use of the term started to gain traction with the rise of large-scale commercial agriculture following World War II (Welch & Graham, 1998). Food systems can be based on conventional agriculture, or alternative means of production such as local food. Interest in local food systems has been growing, due to an emerging consumer focus on the sustainability and availability of food from known, local sources (Raison, 2010). Local food systems, in

particular, have also been connected to healthy eating and obesity prevention (Morgan & Fitzgerald, 2014).

Extension services around the United States have responded to the increasing interest in the food systems movement by trying to take a more active role in bringing together agriculture, public health, and food policy to expand the access and availability of healthier foods. As a result, this has necessitated the need for change in terms of developing new interdisciplinary approaches to extension education, as well as to identifying relevant professional development opportunities for extension professionals who want to engage in foods systems work.

Nationally, the extension service is well positioned to be a leading organization in moving toward a more sustainable food system. Extension has the network, and it has the subject matter expertise to be the authority on how to move in this direction. However, the localized nature of extension, and the traditional focus on conventional agricultural production and producers, combined with the interdisciplinary nature of food systems work, create challenges, as many state specialists and county faculty are more familiar with focusing on a specific program area or commodity and do not see themselves as part of a larger system (personal communication, April 12, 2017).

The traditional way in which extension educators develop new programs and become members of programmatically focused teams has been through professional development. Professional development within extension is usually conducted via the classic face-to-face in-service training, as well as online trainings, webinars, videos, etc. However, moving from a specific, commodity-oriented mindset and way of operating to more of a systems thinking approach is not easy. Such programmatic innovations might benefit from a more innovative approach to professional development opportunities for those who wish to learn more about working in a sustainable food systems environment.

Theoretical Framework

According to Rogers (2003), diffusion is a process that begins with an innovation, and then passes through certain communication channels over time between members of a social system. This innovation can be a new product, a new idea, or a new practice, which possesses a certain level of relative advantage, compatibility, complexity, trialability, and observability to appeal to the potential adopters (Rogers, 2003). Over time, extension has adopted a variety of methods to educate their target audiences, including extension professionals, clientele, and the public. Previous literature has documented training techniques such as small/large group training workshops, webinars, electronic learning materials and printed learning materials used frequently in extension programs (Lakai, Jayaratne, Moore, & Kistler, 2012). These methods are commonly preferred because of the convenience for both the extension educators and the learners. While many research findings showed a certain level of effectiveness using these training techniques (e.g. Everett, Blanchet, & Hughes, 2010; Heleba, Parsons, & Sciabarrasi, 2004), many of these methods only produce short-term knowledge gain instead of meaningful career or personal impact.

Experiential learning is based on the foundation that personal experience while learning matters. Many education scholars and practitioners have believed that learning occurs when the learners make connections between their past and new experiences (e.g. Dewey, 1938; Dale, 1946; Joplin, 1981; Roberts, 2006). For adult learning, the experiential learning method has been especially emphasized. According to Lindeman (1926), "experience is the adult learner's living

textbook" (1926, p. 7). Hence, adult education was "a continuing process of evaluating experiences" (Lindeman, 1926, p. 85). Brookfield (1995) stated, "almost all the textbooks on adult education practice affirm the importance of experiential methods" (para. 9).

Having the external and internal motivation is important for successful adult trainings (Knowles, Swanson, & Holton, 2005). These external motivations could be getting a better job and obtaining a higher salary. The internal motivations such as increasing self-esteem and increasing job satisfaction are usually more important (Knowles et al, 2005).

For any innovation, including a novel adult training, to be diffused in a social system, it is important to reach the *critical mass*, the point after which further diffusion becomes self-sustaining (Rogers, 2003). To reach the critical mass, Rogers (2003) listed a few strategies: 1) target highly-respected individuals in the social system to adopt the innovation; 2) shape individuals' perception of the innovation, such as suggesting the adoption is inevitable; 3) introduce the innovation to the intact group whose members are likely to be more innovative; and 4) provide incentives to adopt the innovation until critical mass is reached.

Incorporating experiential learning into extension training is not a novelty. In fact, Torock (2009) has claimed that Cooperative extension vows to educate through experience. However, experiential learning is available through some programs such as 4-H program (Enfield, Schmitt-McQuitty, & Smith, 2007), but has not been adopted as a common practice in other programs, such as programs that strive to educate the adults about the food system. There are examples of extension educators using conferences (Abdul-Rahman, Bartley, Cummings, & O'Brien, 2013), print materials (Ralston, Orr, Goard, Taylor, & Remley, 2016) and online classes (Case, Cluskey, & Hino, 2011) to teach about food systems and/or a local food system to adults. However, no empirical study has been found that examined the impact of using experiential learning strategies for teaching adults about food systems and local food systems.

With the current focus on food systems and the U.S. extension service's critical role in supporting this effort, an innovative international experience was designed to educate extension faculty and non-extension consumers about the Mediterranean diet based food system and production practices in Southern Italy. The immersive experience was planned as a professional development opportunity to allow key players in the state's extension service to explore and compare food systems in Southern Italy and the U.S.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to explore participants' understanding and conceptualization of the terms "food system" and "local food", as well as their intent to adopt aspects of what they learned into their educational programs and personal eating patterns.

Objectives were as follows:

1. Determine how program participants define the terms "food system" and "local food"
2. Compare and contrast how expert (state and county extension faculty) participants define the terms as compared to (non-expert general consumers) participants;
3. Identify participants' intent to adopt aspects of what they learned into their educational programs and personal eating patterns.

Methods

This innovative international experience was designed to educate program participants about the Mediterranean diet based food system and production practices in Southern Italy, including the regions of Puglia, Basilicata, and Campania. This immersive educational program was comprised of a ten-day trip to Italy by the 35 program participants. The participants toured the area and visited four vineyards/wineries, pomegranate and olive production, olive oil production, packing and distribution, floriculture nursery production, a botanical garden, a high-density apple orchard, a cooking demonstration, and two nutrition presentations.

Researchers of this study used focus group methods to collect the qualitative data. A focus group is a series of discussions aimed to “obtain perceptions on a defined area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 2). Through asking questions, talking to and commenting among participants within a focus group, researchers have the opportunity to learn about participants’ perceptions, attitudes, as well as the rationales of their opinions and behaviors (Kitzinger, 1995). The method of focus groups is preferred when interviewees are similar and cooperative with each other, and when their discussion can generate the best information (Krueger & Casey, 2014; Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990).

Focus group methodology includes the use of special methods in terms of purpose, size, composition and procedures. In this study, purposive sampling techniques were utilized. Participants were the trip attendees from a U.S. based state extension service in a large southeastern state, including 25 county extension agents and state specialists, and ten non-extension general consumers.

A total of three focus groups were conducted with the participants of the trip (two individuals did not participate). The three groups were comprised of expert participants who were extension educators (two of the focus groups) and non-experts (one focus group). Each of the expert participants groups had a balanced representation of expertise in agricultural production, family and consumer sciences, nutrition, ornamental horticulture, 4-H/youth development, economics, community development and public health. The same moderator introduced the purpose of the focus group activities, and facilitated all three discussions. A moderator’s guide was developed to guide the focus group discussions, and to ensure the quality of questions (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Questions were developed focusing on participants’ understanding of food systems and local food, as well as intent to make changes after the trip. IRB was obtained for the moderator’s guide and informed consent. Each participant filled out the informed consent form before the focus group session started. The moderator gave a verbal summary during and after each focus group discussion for member checking purposes (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Participants were encouraged and reminded to share their thoughts throughout the discussion.

The discussions were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Themes were identified through the constant comparative analysis method, in which, as themes and sub-themes were identified, categories of themes were created and new data was compared to existing categories to determine if they were similar or part of a new category (Glaser, 1965). The researcher who analyzed the data obtained a terminal degree in agricultural communications, and had previously been trained in qualitative data collection and analysis. The co-researcher who confirmed the themes was an experienced researcher with a doctoral degree in communications.

Pseudonyms were assigned to each participant for confidentiality (Table 1).

Table 1

Pseudonyms of the participants

	Pseudonyms	Job title
Non-experts (Focus group (Fg) A):		
	Fg A Participant 1	Home maker
	Fg A Participant 2	Retired nurse and a home maker
	Fg A Participant 3	Extended sabbatical
	Fg A Participant 4	Dental hygiene clinic manager
	Fg A Participant 5	Librarian
	Fg A Participant 6	Office assistant
	Fg A Participant 7	Not from the U.S.
Extension experts (Focus group (Fg) B):		
	Fg B Participant 1	Professor in Food science and human nutrition
	Fg B Participant 2	Professor in pharmacology
	Fg B Participant 3	Extension Director
	Fg B Participant 4	Extension Director and Family and Consumer Science Agent
	Fg B Participant 5	4H Agent
	Fg B Participant 6	County Director
	Fg B Participant 7	Extension Administrator
	Fg B Participant 8	Associate Professor
	Fg B Participant 9	County Extension Director and Commercial Ornamental Horticulture Production Agent
	Fg B Participant 10	County Extension Director and Urban Horticulture Agent.
	Fg B Participant 11	Horticultural Sciences Department Professor
	Fg B Participant 12	Extension Scientist
Extension experts (Focus group (Fg) C):		
	Fg C Participant 1	Regional water specialist
	Fg C Participant 2	Family Consumer Sciences, Housing, and Financial Management
	Fg C Participant 3	Commercial Hort. Agent
	Fg C Participant 4	Commercial Horticulture Agent
	Fg C Participant 5	Professor and Extension Specialist, Food Safety and Quality
	Fg C Participant 6	4H Agent
	Fg C Participant 7	Family Consumer Science, Food Systems
	Fg C Participant 8	Horticulture Agent
	Fg C Participant 9	Emeritus Professor
	Fg C Participant 10	Assistant Professor Consumer Economics, Horticulture Economics
	Fg C Participant 11	Family Consumer Sciences and County Extension Director
	Fg C Participant 12	District Extension Director

Results

Objective 1. Determine how program participants define the terms “food system” and “local food.”

Participants in all three groups were asked how they defined the term “food system.” Results indicated one primary theme, which focused on food systems as a process, and some additional individually related perceptions as follows:

Primary Theme #1: Food System is A Process from Production to Consumption

The majority of the participants indicated their understanding of the term food system as a process, beginning from agricultural production to human consumption. Fg A Participant 2 said, “I think a food system is how food gets from where it’s grown or produced to the people who are going to consume it.” Similarly, Fg B Participant 3 defined a food system as “all the way from the production to the harvesting, to the consumption of the food.” Fg C Participant 3 and Fg C Participant 4 used the term “soil to the fork” and “farm to table” to describe the food system. According to participant Fg A Participant 4, “I think food systems are where it starts and how consumers get it and then what you do with it once you have it and that includes cooking and, you know, so it’s the whole process of it being grown and produced whether it’s animal or vegetable.”

Sub-themes

All focus group participants agreed that the process from production to consumption was the most important part of a food system. A few participants also addressed other components as part of the food system. For example, Fg B Participant 9 added post-consumer products to the food system, saying, “I think you do need to add waste in there as well, what do we do with the waste at the end.” Fg B Participant 1 Fg B Participant 1 mentioned research. “I was thinking also about the research side of the food system and how we can improve the food system. We can do research on, you know, how to improve or reduce waste and things like that so I would see that as another component of the food system.”

Some participants compared the U.S. and Italian food systems directly. According to Fg A Participant 2, “the example here in Italy of things being smaller, done on a smaller scale, with a higher quality, and a greater appreciation for the food itself has made an impression on me relative to the way we handle food in the United States.”

Another participant, Fg B Participant 8, commented, “What I also thought was interesting was Lorenzo said that the Italians want to have locally produced food if they can, Italian food if nothing else, and seasonal food. And that they aren’t expecting to find tomatoes in the winter time whereas, I think, Americans are so completely separated from the production side of their food that they don’t know what seasonality is.”

Participants were then asked to define the term “local food.” Results showed three main themes as follows:

Primary Theme #1: Local Food is Food in My State

Many of the participants defined local food as food within the state in which they live. Fg A Participant 4 indicated, “[local food to me is] probably anything that’s grown in my state. To me, that’s local. My state is my local.” Fg B Participant 7 indicated she would look for the state logo for the guidance of local, “I look for the [*State Produced Food*] little logo, it helps me make

decisions.” Fg A Participant 1 shared, “I would consider the state local, like strawberries or the fruit, but I still consider that local.”

Primary Theme #2: Local Food is Food Within Specific Distance from My Location

Some participants indicated food from a specific distance, such as 50 miles or 400 miles, radiated out from their location as their definition of local food. Fg C Participant 10 mentioned a widely used local definition,

According to [state] definition, it's about 400 miles from where you eat it.” Fg C Participant 8 defined local food as 100 miles from where she lived. Fg B Participant 11 said, “I'd define it [local food] as anything grown within 50 miles of your location.

Fg A Participant 5 preferred an even closer distance for his definition of local food; he said, “I would say local food is food that is produced in where you live. To put a parameter on it, I would say within 20 miles of where you live.”

Primary Theme #3: Local Food Definition is Relative.

A few participants indicated their definition of local food is not constrained to a specific area or a specific distance, but is relative to the season and type of products. For example, Fg A Participant 2 said,

I would define it [local food] as within a region of a country, of the state, or maybe like in the Southeast or something like that.” Fg B Participant 3 said, “I'd rather support our local growers within 50 miles. But then, if it's not there, then I want fresh from [state], and then I want the United States. Even for dog food or for dog biscuits, I want something grown in the United States, if I can get it.

Similarly, Fg B Participant 9 said, “it [local food] is a relative term to me, because I could consider five miles from me local or a thousand miles from me local. So, I think it really comes down to what's in season, more than anything.”

Objective 2: Compare and contrast how expert (state and county extension faculty) participants define food system and local food as compared to non-expert (non-extension general consumers) participants.

To analyze this objective, themes and subthemes were compared across the three focus group sessions to identify where there were shared perspectives and also where there were differences. Results indicated that, in general, participants in all three groups had similar definitions of the terms food system and local food; however, the experts provided much more detailed descriptions and rationales in their answers than did the non-experts.

For the definition of a food system, participants from both expert focus groups and the non-expert focus group mentioned the process, from the production to the consumption. It is noticeable that the expert participants provided more detail as to the elements of a food system, in addition to the production and consumption process, such as post-consumption products, food safety, distribution channels, and research.

Both expert and non-experts also had very similar definitions of local food. Specifically, both expert and non-experts mentioned the state where they live as the way in which they determined if a food was local. Both expert and non-experts also mentioned specific distances. One non-expert participant, Fg A Participant 2, suggested her definition of local food was not a specific area, but can range from “a region of a country, of a state, or the southeast.” Expert participants provided more rationales and justification for the relativity of the concept of local

food. Two good examples of expert rationales along these lines came from Fg C Participant 1 and Fg C Participant 2.

Fg C Participant 1 said.

Most of the people have a feeling that if it is grown locally, for some reason, it is healthier, less pesticide use, and, you know, anti-GMO, they got this whole thing that they feel that I'm getting, because I got it from Joe the farmer next door.

Fg C Participant 2 said: "I'd like to think that local food is handled less so therefore, less bruising and less food safety concerns, less people who handle it the less cross-contamination."

Objective 3. Identify participants' intent to adopt aspects of what they learned into their educational programs and personal eating patterns.

Participants from the two expert focus groups were asked about their intent to adopt aspects of what they learned on the trip to enhance their educational programming. Results showed one primary theme and several related subthemes.

Primary Theme #1: Cooking Class

A few expert participants mentioned cooking classes. Fg B Participant 5 said, "We [Fg B Participant 4, Fg C Participant 5, and Fg B Participant 5] were talking about having a bread class with some of our adults and youth, but to bring back the STEM [Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics] part of bread making." Fg B Participant 7 mentioned a cooking class and how it could benefit low-income populations,

[We can] teach those cooking skills that our families don't have anymore, how to stretch their food dollar as part of those cooking skills so that they can make healthy nutritious meals on a budget, possibly within their SNAP [Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program that "offers nutrition assistance to millions of eligible, low-income individuals and families and provides economic benefits to communities"] budget, so I think it's definitely an important part of our FCS [Family Consumer Sciences] program.

Fg B Participant 9 expanded on the cooking classes theme to connect it to a description of her collaboration across extension program areas.

....as the Hort. [Horticulture] Agent one of the things that I've done is to collaborate with our FCS Agent and bring in some of the local chefs We're teaching them about how to grow herbs and talking about how to grow them properly. Then we have a demonstration with the chef and FCS on how to cook and stretch the dollar and to make the healthy meals and everything. It's a very good opportunity when you start talking about food systems, you can bring in all the different programmatic areas. (agreement heard)

Primary Theme #2: Other Educational Activities

Other educational activities the expert participants mentioned included farm tours and making agricultural products visually appealing. Fg B Participant 1 Fg B Participant 1 said, "I would like to take my students on a farm tour." Fg B Participant 3 supported Fg B Participant 1's idea and said, "there are a lot of people that do some outstanding farm tours across the state and you'll see a lot of different kinds of agriculture. So, I'm sure any county here would welcome you and your students." Fg C Participant 3 would like to transfer the knowledge about wine and olive oil she learned from this trip to consumers,

I want to do like the olive oil [project] and maybe a wine sommelier teaching homeowners or consumers the difference of each, what to pair with each. I'm trying to

put a family consumer science spin in with the commercial portion of it and then give selections.

Participants from all three focus groups were asked about their intent to adopt aspects of what they learned on the trip within their personal eating patterns. Both expert and non-experts indicated their intent to change their personal eating patterns based on their experiences. Two primary themes emerged from the focus group discussions, i.e. eating and cooking differently, and enjoying meals more slowly.

Primary Theme #1: Eating and Cooking Differently

Expert participants Fg C Participant 2 and Fg B Participant 7, and lay participant Fg A Participant 4 mentioned they would like to eat and cook differently. Fg B Participant 7 said, “I’m going to use more olive oil.” Fg A Participant 4 had similar comments,

[I would] probably be a little more adventurous on preparing things and reaching out, like, I haven’t eaten chicory...ever (laughs), but I’ve eaten plenty here and it has been tasty. I like olive oil. I think I’ll incorporate olive oil more into what I cook.”

Fg C Participant 2 said,

From a consumer point, personal point of view, I want to be more conscious about buying foods in season fresh, and hosting more dinner parties at my house where we have more conversation and company together, sharing the food and just the whole experience.

Primary Theme #2: Enjoying meals more slowly

A few participants indicated how much they enjoyed eating meals more slowly, as they had experienced in Italy and indicated their desire to do the same after they return home. Fg A Participant 4 said,

Look at being different, and even slowing down the eating process because at home we eat way too fast and don’t enjoy what we’re eating, let alone really get the health benefits of it probably, so that’s what I hope to do.

Fg A Participant 3 said similarly, “I want to eat like this all the time. Even when I get back home, you can’t. The breakfast, the two-hour lunches.”

Discussion

This study sought to explore how participants involved in an experiential learning based international professional development experience focused around food systems defined the terms “food system” and “local food”, as well as their intent to adapt aspects of what they learned into their personal and professional lives.

Results of the study showed that participants, i.e. extension educators in two of the three focus groups and non-experts in one of the focus groups, defined food systems related terms similarly. The extension educators added more detailed description and justified their thoughts with more of a rationale for why they thought the way they did. A key implication from this finding is that there may be a general level of knowledge among most people about what the terms food system and local food convey. The extension educators in this study, due to the nature of their work and their expertise, may have thought more about what the terms mean, how they are being used and even how this knowledge might relate to their own current and future work.

Further, both expert and non-experts correlated their definitions of local food with a geographical location. For some participants, this was specifically focused around a state or a certain number of miles, while for others, the geographical location was relative, encompassing an understanding that a specific local definition meant that local food might not always be available, due to seasonality.

Finally, the immersive experience of exploring an Italian food system was effective in terms of stimulating participants' intent to adopt some of what they learned, both professionally and personally. From a professional development standpoint, this meant implementing specific educational activities, like cooking classes, and thinking about collaborations across extension program areas as a way of illustrating the systems aspect of a food system approach. From a personal standpoint, participants' intent extended to wanting to cook more, entertain more, and use products that were demonstrated to them in Italy, such as olive oil, in their cooking. Interestingly, participants also hoped to adopt what they perceived of as a slower way of eating and enjoying meals, as they perceived the Italians they met did.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Studies like this are interesting, in that they capture evolving trends in agriculture and the extension service itself. A decade ago, few people knew what a food system was; local food was just beginning to be seen by consumers as something desirable, that might be worth going out of their way to purchase (Pirog, Miller, Way, Hazekamp, & Kim, 2014). Extension programming in food systems and local food, once very limited in nature, has been growing (Qu, Roper, & Rumble, 2014). The interest of extension educators in becoming engaged in food systems work has grown as well (Qu et al, 2014). Going forward, the extension service is likely to be increasingly more involved in providing science based information on sustainable local food systems. To do that well, extension needs innovative approaches to professional development that will equip extension educators with the knowledge and skills they need to be the trusted source of information and education regarding food systems and local food.

After spending ten days in Italy together, participants were able to see the need for a multidisciplinary approach to food systems programming. Indeed, some collaboration was already taking place. What we can conclude from this was that potentially an immersive experience could be transformative, fostering many opportunities for collaboration through sustained interaction that would not have occurred otherwise. Results from his study showed that this immersive experience could potentially serve as a catalyst or tipping point to stimulate collaborative activity, and as such could be considered as an effective technique to upgrade and upskill extension professionals seeking to work in nontraditional program areas.

Limitations of this study include the fact that the study focused on participants from one immersive experience, and is therefore a snapshot in time in terms of their perceptions. Further, focus group methodology is formative in nature. As qualitative research, the finding from this study are not generalizable to other scenarios. Future studies should focus on multiple groups and experiences and use of these findings to develop instrumentation that could be used in more quantitative studies. A follow-up study of group members looking at whether they were able to convert their behavioral intentions into actions would also be intriguing.

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Geolocation Information

Florida, United States (U.S.), Puglia, Basilicata, and Campania in Southern Italy

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