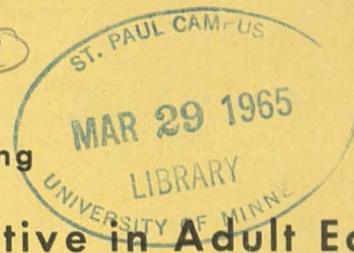


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 Communications

BULLETIN... ③ Principles of Learning

Make Communications Effective in Adult Education

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As an adult educator - whether you are a county extension worker, librarian, social worker, or staff member serving a voluntary organization--you use group and mass methods to extend your efforts.

As an educator, your job is change. The changes sought concern skills, knowledge, understanding, attitudes, and even motivation. A change may be an attitude toward books, the adoption of a new practice, the understanding of public affairs, knowledge of certain sciences, or development of new techniques.

Creating change calls for effective communications and teaching. Your audience can leave. Age laws or classroom requirements do not exist for adult groups. Learning and communication principles can help make your work effective; this bulletin summarizes some of them. It is primarily concerned with informal adult education through mass media, meetings, conferences, educational seminars, etc.--and with voluntary audiences.

First, however, let's review Schramm's (8) four points about messages. A message should:

1. Be defined and delivered in such a way as to gain the student's attention.
2. Use words or symbols that refer to the receiver's experience--they must be clear to those involved in the communication.
3. Arouse needs in the receiver--motivation now enters the picture.
4. Suggest ways to meet these needs in a manner appropriate: (1) to the receiver's group situation, (2) to the time he is moved to respond, and (3) to his pattern of attitudes.

Educators have developed many principles of learning (or communications). Some are widely accepted; others are not. Some principles accepted by most leaders in the field follow:

1. An Individual's Response to a Message is the Function of His Whole Personality

Even a small change affects the entire person so his emotions can interfere with receiving a message.

His self-image, the image he has of himself, is important in his personality. It may be the

most important single individual difference among learners--more important than intelligence, training, or background.

Every message directed his way, whether person-to-person or through mass media, runs into this self-image. He asks: "How does this affect me? Will it debase me? Will it enable me to gain power or prestige or security?" So you can not simply present material to him--you are calling for modification of his self-image.

Furthermore, the learner brings with him his own pattern of aims, social habits, values, and other attributes. So consider these in your approach--remember the old admonition: "Know your audience."

2. Motivation is Important to Learning and Communication

Man's needs must be considered and they must be considered from the learner's point of view as well as the educator's. Among the many principles of motivation in education are:

● The motivated learner learns more readily than the unmotivated learner. But what motivates--what appeals might you direct to him? How can you use these appeals in mass media as well as through direct communication?

Rewards and punishments--good grades and failures--so common in formal education are missing in the more informal efforts of adult educators. But there are other goals, incentives, and needs that you should recognize and use.

Wilkening and Johnson (9) studied goals that affected farmers' decisions to adopt new farm practices. In these studies, "profit" was the dominant goal. Next came "ease and convenience," followed closely by "quality or standard of resources or products." Of less importance, yet significant, were the goals concerned with "keeping up with the best farmers" and "relationships with others."

These findings emphasize that the concept of the "economic man" does not explain many actions. The authors felt that in many decisions profit was secondary to conformity, prestige, and relationships with other persons.

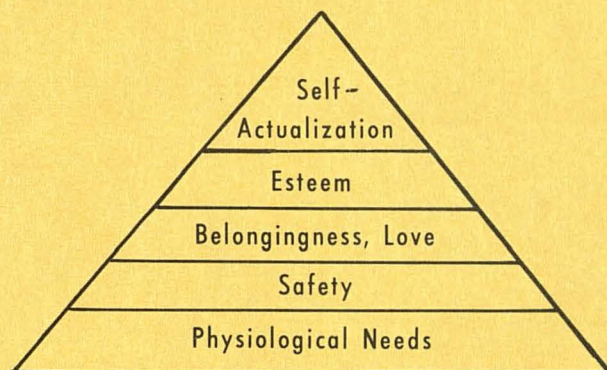
S. A. Engene and his University of Minnesota colleagues informally studied a group of southern Minnesota farmers. They found that the goals of these farmers were, in descending order, to:

- provide a home environment that meets the family's spiritual needs.
- provide security.
- promote enjoyment and development of self and family.
- obtain a high level income.
- earn and hold the admiration of neighbors and associates.
- contribute to the advancement of the community, state, or nation.

Of course, these goals cannot be separated. All motives are interwoven. For example, income may be a means to a better home environment to some people. To others, it may be a means to recognition, security, or some other need.

Havighurst and Orr (3) made a study in a large metropolitan area. They decided that the programs which would most effectively meet the expressed needs of urban middle-class people over 40 would, in descending order, center on: (1) work, (2) leisure, (3) homemaking, landscaping, and related areas, (4) parenthood and family relationships, (5) citizenship, (6) cooperating with institutions, (7) church work, and (8) club and association work.

Maslow (6) looked at motivation from another point of view--as a hierarchy of needs. At the bottom are such needs as food, clothing, water, and sex. Once these physiological needs are satisfied, the person seeks security and safety. After these are met, he seeks to belong--to become part of a group and feel accepted and loved. Then, he wants prestige, achievement, and status. And, finally, he seeks "self-actualization"--the feeling that he is making the best possible use of his own competencies.



Others have expressed these "motives" in various ways. One early writer in the field, sociologist W. I. Thomas, said that man's desires revolve around: (1) security, (2) new experience, (3) recognition, and (4) response.

H. T. Longstaff, University of Minnesota psychologist, looking at the advertising aspects of motivation, listed man's desires as: food and drink, comfort, freedom from fear, superiority, social approval, companionship of the opposite sex, welfare of loved ones, and long life.

Although you may disagree with some of these

views and classifications, you probably recognize that your efforts and appeals will be more fruitful if they meet the "needs" of your audience.

● Motivation can be too intensive. Over-motivated persons do not learn as well as people motivated to the optimum degree. We all know that the excited, overmotivated child can not control his feelings enough to respond fully to the teaching situation. The adult educator who works on messages dealing with defense, safety, and cigarette smoking faces a related danger. Too often he uses intense scare-type appeals.

A major network once decided to dramatize the disastrous effects of careless and drunken driving. It launched an all-out effort over a holiday period, hoping that there would be fewer accidents if people were made aware of the dangers. But instead of scaring people, these messages made them feel safer. They thought: "This applies to the other fellow. I'm not a careless driver. I can control myself after a few drinks."

● Purposes and goals must be clear and meaningful to the learner. For example, the adult educator cooperating in a community development program may overlook this fact in his enthusiasm for his brand of change. Although he sees the need, he fails to convey it or he conveys it in such a way that the learner establishes a block to change.

3. The Group's Influence Affects the Learner

The individual's opinions, attitudes, habits, and values are developed and maintained within a group. In the classroom situation, students as well as teachers establish a certain level of achievement. Then the pressure of the group may prevail. But, too often, adult educators forget that norms or standards established by groups may block or further the acceptance of their message. In either case, you must consider them.

Each individual has his own "reference groups" that affect his thinking. Sometimes you direct messages at an old defended area, but the communications usually won't bring change unless they are accompanied by equally significant changes in the surrounding situation. Sometimes your messages may concern a new area where the norms and ideas are indefinite or weakly held. In either case, the message must be chosen, attended to, accepted, and pass the censorship of group norms.

Norms may also be established by the mass media and educational institutions through which the message passes. Often our own established norms, standards, and ideas stand in the way of education and communication.

4. Opinion Leaders and Influential People are Involved in Message Response

An old idea in education stressed the influence of friends or others in bringing about change. If Johnny Jones has influence in a group, his acceptance of an idea helps insure its acceptance by the group.

Lazerfeld and Katz (5) found that the same idea applied to mass media in their important two-step or multiple-step flow of information concept. They showed that a mass media message may have the greatest influence on an opinion leader reading the message. He, in turn, may influence a second person who may influence a third, etc.

Robert Merton (7) pointed out that there are two types of influential people--local and cosmopolitan. Local influential people have their roots in the community, participate widely in community activities, and have gradually worked themselves up to their position. Cosmopolitan influential people are newer in the community, have a narrower range of friends, and have power because of their special skills and knowledge. Each has his place in influencing the acceptance of a new idea.

The local influential person has a following because he understands; the cosmopolitan because he knows. The local is close to the people; the cosmopolitan keeps his social distance. The local has general influence; the cosmopolitan may have a stronger but narrower influence on one particular area.

Katz and Lazerfeld also measured the impact of mass media on marketing, fashions, public issues, and choice of motion pictures. Again, they found that personal influence of specific leaders brought about bigger changes than the direct impact of the mass media. However, these leaders probably were influenced by the mass media messages.

The importance of opinion leaders has been long established in extension work in rural communities. Influential people must be listened to and considered when planning and carrying out adult education programs.

5. Source of Communication is Important to Learning

A teacher who has his student's respect ordinarily is effective in his teaching. Connecting a message with a recognized authority has long been used in advertising, adult education, promotion, and political pressure. But Hovland, et al., (4) pointed to a "sleeper" effect--the audience disassociates the source from the message after a while. As a result, it then may be influenced by a strong message from an unreliable or unacceptable source.

Specialized sources become important in communications, as also pointed out by Lazerfeld in his study of the 1940 election. He found, for example, that the Farm Journal had a greater effect on voting habits than did some better known general magazines. The Farm Journal was a specialized, influential, and accepted opinion leader to a certain group.

6. Face-to-face Communication is Usually Most Effective

This fact presents a dilemma for the adult educator who uses the printed page, TV, and radio.

Yet, it also presents a challenge that you, by using other principles of learning, can meet.

7. Active Participation Increases Learning

Obviously, the larger or more distant the group, the more difficult is active participation. Mass media, of course, operate at a disadvantage. Nevertheless, many adult educators have devised means to allow the reader or listener or viewer to participate. Simple self-administered tests, special readings, and discussion groups are a few such devices. At other times, educators who have person-to-person contact use mass media material to supplement their own messages.

8. The Individual Chooses Messages He Believes Will Reward Him

Motivation is an important factor and educators and communication researchers have developed many concepts concerning it. Here is Schramm's fraction of selection:

$$\frac{\text{Expected reward}}{\text{Expected effort}}$$

This important fraction has real meaning to you in your use of mass methods. You need to make the reward clear. Moreover, you will find greater selection of your message if you cut down on the learner's anticipated effort--by using concise writing, interesting and effective speech, simple and understandable movies and books, etc. Then he is more likely to accept or at least attend to your message.

Closely related to this fraction of selection idea are the psychological concepts of selective exposure, selective perception, and selective retention.

Selective exposure means that the learner exposes himself to messages he feels will coincide with his beliefs or will benefit him.

Selective perception means that the learner sees that part of the message which is most meaningful to him or will most closely coincide with his background and understanding. So two persons can hear the same message or see the same thing yet perceive these entirely differently.

Selective retention means that the learner, even though exposed, remembers things that most nearly coincide with his own beliefs and ideas.

9. Educational Level is a Good Predictor of Communication Behavior

The higher the person's educational level, the more influenced he is by printed media. Also, the better educated person is most likely to check the message and evaluate its accuracy. This fact was demonstrated with the famous Orson Welles radio play, "War of the Worlds," in the late 1930's.

This play caused more than a million people to believe that the earth had been invaded by Mars-- even though it was clearly announced that it was a play. Later studies indicated that better educated persons were not deceived.

A wealth of information has been assembled on the educational level of people--their reading ability, their listening ability, and their general communications skill. To overlook and overshoot the level of these abilities may result in poor communications. The educational message may never be received, to say nothing of being accepted.

10. Specifics can be Learned More Easily than Generalizations or Abstractions

This principle, long held by educators for person-to-person communications, is even more true for communications through mass media.

11. No Single Device Serves All Instructional Purposes

A variety of methods is usually more effective than a single method. Adult educators sometimes forget this principle in their devotion to a single method or media. Effective educators often use visuals, discussions, and other aids to supplement their lectures in classroom appearances. This idea of many methods also may be true for some teaching efforts through mass media.

But before becoming too enamored by this idea, remember that efficiency as well as effectiveness is involved. Sometimes, some effectiveness must be sacrificed to achieve efficiency if you have limited resources available.

12. The Learner Must be Ready

Not only must the learner be ready, but also you must start at the learner's level. Psychiatrist Erik Erikson (1) and educator Robert Havighurst (2), in his idea of developmental stages, pointed out that man, at certain stages in his life, is especially ready to learn specific things. Learning is less effective if forced too far in advance of these stages or induced too late. So, readiness for certain messages may be high in young adulthood but not in middle age.

However, this principle does not mean that you should not attempt to help people move to new levels of learning. Furthermore, people often don't realize their needs until they have had experience with a particular situation.

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These are only a few of the principles of learning (communications) important to you as an adult educator. First, look at yourself as a source, then at your message, then at the channels for transmitting the message, and finally--and perhaps most important--at the learner.

Remember that the receiver is an individual with weaknesses and strengths; that he is a creature of his society who is sometimes dominated by the norms of that society; that he has his own private needs and motives; and that he needs to participate and be involved in an educational process.

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