In An Information/Communication Age, Is Traditional Extension Methodology Endangered or Extinct?

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Introduction
Electronic technology has given us the ability to assemble, analyze, transmit, and receive vast amounts of information. Perhaps no one could have foreseen the speed with which new information and communication technology would change the way people acquire information. Extension specialists and agents have begun to take advantage of these new technologies for delivering educational information to clients. Clients increasingly are capable of accessing that information and have come to expect the instant response that technology can provide.

Purpose and Methods
Given the vast quantity and potential quality of information that can be made immediately available to clients, what are the effects on what we view as traditional extension educational methods? Are these methods becoming insignificant or even worthless? Are they endangered, or are they already extinct? What is the Impact of all of these new educational technologies? The purpose of this study was to respond to these and other questions, from what could be ascertained from literature and studies done on this topic. For this purpose more than 50 studies conducted in developed and developing countries, from 1986 to 2002 were gathered and in-depth analysis was carried out to investigate responses to the mentioned research inquiries.

Major Points and Lessons Learned
Extension’s rural agricultural clients are moving quickly into the information/communication age. A recent study by the National Agricultural Statistics Service (1999) shows that computer access on farms is growing rapidly, especially on large commercial farms. From 1997 to 1999, the percent of all farms with computer access increased from 38 to 47%, and among commercial farms (sales of $100 000 or more), computer access increased from 60 to 68%. Although cost and accessibility of telecommunication are inhibiting factors, farm Internet access more than doubled during that 2-yr. time period (from 20 to 43% among commercial farms). Several studies have investigated the relative usefulness of various extension education methods and tools, and the findings indicated that the most common way users came into contact with extension was through written materials. Several studies have compared various traditional extension educational methods and tools. Demonstration plots/field, field days, and farm visits were rated first, second, third, and fourth respectively, in usefulness to farmers. However, satellite-downlinked educational programs are being used to reach more producers in New York, Pennsylvania, Michigan, Minnesota, Quebec, and elsewhere.

Educational Importance
Traditional extension teaching methods that have evolved during the last 200 years are still important today. Many new communication and information technologies have emerged in the past two decades. Most of these technologies, are not new methods but, rather, provide new tools to expand the reach of traditional methods, often at a reduced cost. Users of extension educational programs generally still prefer individualized access to needed specialized assistance to help them deal with unique complex problems.
Extension workers see face to face individualized methods as helping to keep them current on farming issues. Farm visits, office visits, and personal communication will continue to be significant extension methods. Traditional extension methods are neither extinct nor necessarily endangered. Technology can provide new tools to enhance delivery of extension programs. These tools have potential to reduce costs and help in reaching new audiences within resources constraints. However, the basic set of extension methods will continue to be the framework that can support a wide variety of new technological tools. The success of extension educational programs will depend on selection of the proper methods for specific program needs and tools that will make those methods more effective and efficient.