Research Without Borders: Methodological Reflections on the Use of Information Technologies for Qualitative Studies in Extension

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Abstract
The Mexican GGAVATT (Livestock Groups for Technology Validation and Transference) is an Extension model characterized by the voluntary participation of farmers and the use of participatory methods. It was developed in Veracruz, Mexico at the end of the 1970s by researchers from the INIFAP (National Institute of Forestry, Agriculture and Livestock Research) with the purpose of increasing animal production and productivity through the adoption of technologies generated in the research centers (INIFAP & SAGARPA, 2003). Almost every state in Mexico and some Central American countries have adopted the GGAVATT model (Mora Alfaro, 2002; Roman Ponce, 2001), and some of these groups have been operating for more than 15 years. The GGAVATT represents today the best communication channel with farmers in many regions of Mexico. Each group has an advisor (Extensionist) who provides them with information, training, keeps track of their progress, and participates in the evaluation process.

To understand how the agricultural advisors conceptualize the GGAVATT program, and the different discourses and social constructions embedded in this understanding, a qualitative study was conducted during the spring of 2006. The data was collected through focus group interviews. At the time of data collection, the participants were located in Veracruz, Mexico and the principal investigator and moderator of the group was in an American university. The experience took place through videoconference, using Polycom equipment.

This poster presents the voices of the researchers that share their experiences in this study and how the use of this technology improved or worsened the effectiveness of the data collection method. Issues like power, turn-taking, and non-verbal communication are addressed in relation with the use of the Polycom technology for interviewing. Some methodological and epistemological considerations are offered for reflection.

The value of the use of qualitative methods to gain new and deeper knowledge of the effects of social programs (as the ones related with agricultural and rural Extension) has been widely acknowledged in the literature. This study shows some of the possibilities that technology offers to conduct this type of research across geographical boundaries.

Keywords: Qualitative methodologies, information technology, Extension in Mexico, internationalization of Extension, focus groups