

## Summary of Professional Contributions and Scholarship

My first job teaching adults was not a “teaching job.” As a social worker and social work supervisor I taught foster parents techniques to manage “spirited” children, did individual and group work with clients educating them about parenting techniques, managing finances, improving communication and building relationships. I was responsible for the professional development of staff, especially teaching and coaching new social workers. I also taught student interns as a field instructor. However, my teaching was not *purposeful*; “telling” was not the same as teaching. I didn’t concern myself with my students’ motivation for learning. I considered their learning styles and preferences only in passing and I generally wasn’t able to manipulate the environment to optimize the learning experience. I believed if I presented clients and staff with solid program content, irrefutable research-based information, they would come away enlightened. Since that time, my understanding of teaching has changed significantly.

As a social work supervisor, I attended multiple trainings pertaining to measuring program outcomes. I learned about and used the Logic Model. However, inputs, activities and outputs focused on staff and community resources, and services available to the client. Achievement of long-term outcomes meant that children achieved permanency either through completion of a court order and return home or termination of parental rights and adoption; outcomes were transformational but not necessarily transformational education. Outcome evaluation was a necessary but unwelcome inclusion in grants written or an assessment of intervention services that contracted agencies provided to clients.

As an Extension educator, I have begun to realize there are a number of similarities between social work and teaching that have served as the foundation for development of my teaching style. In both disciplines, learning occurs primarily through relationships. Educators and social workers must work to build relationships by investing time to establish trust and rapport with students and clients. Both must share information about themselves, utilizing appropriate self disclosure to genuinely connect with learners establishing credibility and authenticity. Educators and social workers must honor diversity in those with whom they work. They must discover what learners already know, build upon that knowledge and help learners transfer and apply what they have learned to real life situations. They also must learn with and through interaction with students and clients. Educators and social workers must be life-long learners themselves.

As an Extension educator I have learned to embrace my social work underpinnings while I continue to learn and develop new skills. Community education encompasses many of the same tenets as social work, but I believe that teaching is more. Educators must take charge of their teaching. For me, that meant I also needed to take charge of my own learning. The place to start was my own professional development. Initially, I was overwhelmed with the variety and volume of educational opportunities open to Extension educators. As I sampled the variety I wondered how I could decide what direction my own teaching should take. There were obvious areas I knew I should not tackle like financial education where I would feel somewhat of a hypocrite! My initial impulse was to stay away from the social work issues with which I was so familiar. However, just as educators must identify what learners already know and build upon that knowledge, I discovered that I had some knowledge that was unique and valuable to families, the community and to my Extension colleagues. I was then able to map out and focus my professional development. As a result, my programming has begun to focus on at-risk populations including topics such as child abuse, juvenile justice issues and youth aging out of foster care.

Among the first lessons I learned as an Extension educator is that effective teachers adjust their materials and teaching strategies to the needs of different audiences and situations. Communicating with Your Health Care Provider, developed by the National Network for Health, was a program presented by a colleague at an Eastern District Meeting. I adapted the program for local caregivers of older adults and presented the program several times to local caregiver organizations. While audiences were “kind” on evaluations it was evident that the program didn’t have great impact on participants. Many of the participants were older adults who had a great deal of experience with health care providers and already knew much of this information. Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (POCAN) program participants, and W-2 parents were the next target audience for the program. After the first presentation to this audience, it became apparent that the literacy level of the materials was beyond the reading ability of participants. Utilizing *How to Write Low Literacy Materials*, (Miller, 2001) *Journal of Extension*, I was able to modify all program materials to reflect a 5<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. A local pediatrician reviewed the content of program materials and participated in subsequent presentations of the program. Impact with this population was significant **(Please see Exhibits 1 – 4)**. Easy to read table tents with colorful illustrations were created to extend and reinforce learning through a different modality.

Through my teaching experiences I have learned to vary presentation modes to engage participants. I generally try to include visual resources such as video or graphic images, auditory resources such as lecture, brainstorming or discussion group and kinesthetic resources like role playing or physical movement in each workshop or presentation. I have found that stimulating a variety of participants’ senses balances the experience and facilitates learning. Role playing for example, will help commit learning to long term memory by creating additional neural pathways for that piece of information in the brain. Bright colors on table tents or posters will have a more powerful effect on memory.

I often use humor to help program participants find an emotional connection to the topic. I have found that learners will not only best remember those things that engage them emotionally; they will participate in those programs that make an emotional connection with them as we recruit their participation. For example, I offer the Strengthening Families Program (SFP) locally several times a year **(Please see Exhibit 8)**. Typically, response to the program is good in the Southern Door and Sturgeon Bay areas where the largest percentage of the county population resides. It has been more difficult to provide the program in northern Door County where families are busy, more affluent and where youth are overscheduled with a variety of extracurricular activities. In addition, Northern Door families just don’t believe they have “those” kinds of problems or need that kind of help. These are upper-middle class families who have significant resources available to them. In response to that challenge, I adapted a two-hour workshop based on SFP youth sessions 5 and 6, parent session 6 and family session 6 **(Please see Exhibit 7)**. The workshop, “Keeping Out of Trouble & Keeping Friends,” was promoted as an opportunity to build protective factors in youth for preventing drug and alcohol use, and helping youth deal effectively with peer pressure, concerns that most parents generally have about their youth. This focus helped build interest in the workshop by focusing on a universal parental fear and engaging an emotional response from parents. Ten northern Door County families registered for the program.

Strong emotions can also impede learning if they are not respected and acknowledged. In June 2006, I co-facilitated a Native American adaptation of the Strengthening Families Program facilitator training in Mole Lake **(Please see Exhibit 5)**. Participants were tribal members or worked with tribal members of the Potawatomi and Sokaogon Chippewa. As a facilitator, the training proved to be both a challenge and a learning experience. The training began with a prayer/blessing by a tribal elder which lasted more than an hour, putting us significantly behind on the training agenda. The second day began with several participants upset because of the death of a co-worker the night before. We located the tribal elder who provided over an hour of

prayer/blessing. While it was a unique opportunity to experience the Native American culture including purification with sweet grass and smoking of the ceremonial pipe, we fell even further behind in our training agenda. However, it was important to meet the basic emotional needs of the group, recognize their loss and acknowledge their feelings before learning could begin. As a trainer, it was also a useful exercise in identifying what is absolutely essential to the program. With significant time constraints we were able to filter out only the most important concepts and activities to share with the group. Overall, participants rated the training 3.6 on a scale of 1 (poor) to 4 (excellent).

I have also found that creating a safe and comfortable learning environment facilitates learning. Room arrangement is an obvious example. It frequently happens that rooms are not set up as requested and as a trainer I have had to rearrange tables to allow participants to be able to see and hear the presentation, allow space for physical activities, and seating of participants that is conducive to discussion. I have used music to set the mood for a group of low-income mothers who were learning about building strong relationships and healthy families through scrap booking activities. I have used tablecloths and place settings to create a cozy atmosphere for family meals which begin each Strengthening Families Program session. Elements like light, color or music can be added to enhance the environment and stimulate learning. Sometimes, however, it pays to remove items from the environment that can cause distraction. It took two sessions of our local Strengthening Families Program this fall before we realized we could eliminate a lot of problems by removing the rolling chairs from the youth session before the program began. The results were an immediate improvement in youth attentiveness!

One of the most valuable lessons I have learned so far in my Extension career, is the ability to be flexible and adapt on the spot to the needs of program participants. There are the inevitable malfunctions, like the VCR that consumed the SFP tape during a youth session or the projector that wouldn't recognize the computer for the Communicating with Your Health Care Provider presentation. In those situations, it helps to know the material well enough to be able to proceed without those tools, adapting and varying the presentation to keep participants engaged. When participants are engaged and actively participate in a presentation, it is easy to change the direction of the presentation to support the flow of learning. Even more challenging is the recognition that program materials are just not working with a particular group. During my first presentation of Communicating With Your Health Care Provider to local caregivers, I realized the material was too simplistic for them but the program was *the program* and I completed the teaching plan as it was written. I lacked the experience, preparation, and knowledge to recognize what was working and what was not with a particular audience and adjust my presentation according to their needs.

I have learned to look for ways to be flexible and engage participants. With Caring for My Family, a program for young, unmarried mothers of infants that improves communication skills, builds relationships and encourages father involvement in the family when appropriate, I have been responsive to the existing knowledge and life experiences of the group. I have focused on topics they find relevant and addressed issues that are problematic in their lives. For example, many of the young women in the program are not married to the father of their child but they reside in the same household. They report generally good involvement of the father financially and emotionally. In the workshops, instead of focusing on ways to get dads involved, I have spent additional time discussing expectations of relationships and good communication. In response to the limited cognitive abilities of two of the moms, I have simplified some of the materials and have provided them with extra assistance as they work on activities to increase their comprehension of concepts.

“If you feed them, they will come” is a truism that has proven itself repeatedly. However, I try to do more for program participants by providing examples of good nutrition and offering healthy food

choices. Families who participate in the Strengthening Families Program are served nutritious family-style meals even though the program operates on a tight budget. During workshops, I offer brain food snacks like nuts or whole grains like popcorn. Not only do I feel better about being a good role model, healthy food energizes and supports brain function of learners and educators.

I have long understood the necessity of program evaluation to justify program funding. However, as an Extension educator, I have begun to think about evaluation as a tool to measure behavior change in individuals. I have also learned that focusing an evaluation, and planning in advance where it is headed will result in an evaluation that is useful, feasible, ethical and accurate. By deciding what I want to know first, it becomes easier to develop a program or design a survey, for example the 2006 Child Abuse and Neglect Zoomerang survey of Family Living and WNEP colleagues done recently to assess their knowledge and practice in this area. I learned several lessons in creating this survey tool. For example, instrument design is always more complex and involved than expected! Writing survey questions became a painful process of attempting to choose the correct words; writing the questions that needed to be asked, not the answers I wanted to hear. I found that the position of a question in relation to other questions was important not only in predicting how a respondent might answer but in later quantitative analysis of data such as cross tabulation. Reliability and validity concerns became evident as the survey was distributed through several list serves.

Evaluation of local programs has provided numerous challenges such as communicating value to stakeholders when participant numbers are low. In a discussion with a mentor about programs with small audiences, she observed that program impact doesn't require a large number of participants. Educators can have impact with just one individual or family. It is how we report impacts that make a difference. I have learned to tailor the outcome report to the target audience, and use the persuasive approach of situation or vision, action and results. Sometimes value is best communicated through an anecdote or the personal experience of a program participant.

I've found that program activities can also have impact in unexpected ways. As part of a methamphetamine awareness campaign, I created a display at the Sturgeon Bay Library (**Please see Exhibit 11**). During a meth workshop for youth (**Please see Exhibit 12**), one special needs student was able to answer nearly all of the meth game questions correctly. When asked how he knew so much about methamphetamine, he responded that he had examined the library display!

I was also surprised by the impact of the weekly news column I contribute to the local newspaper. In September 2006, I wrote *Heads Up to Concussions*, an article about the danger of sports related head injuries. I sent letters to all high school and middle school principals in Door County introducing the article and providing information about the free resources. After the article ran I was contacted by a sports medicine professional in the area who has been trying to call attention to this issue. Not only does he work with young athletes who have had head injuries, his own child received a concussion on the playground that went unnoticed. Following publication of the article, a high school principal contacted him to arrange training for all teachers, coaches and other staff in the district. He was thrilled to finally have access to this audience.

As I reflect on my first two years at Extension, I have been able to connect what I have learned to my personal and professional experiences and better understand how I can apply this information and build upon my expertise in child welfare. My teaching and program evaluation has become more purposeful and directed. I'm excited about what is yet to come! Pursuing additional knowledge and creating programming in child welfare topics is energizing. I look forward to continuing my own life-long learning and sharing some of my knowledge and skills with individuals, families and colleagues.