



EXTENSIONNET

NEWSLETTER OF THE AUSTRALASIA-PACIFIC
EXTENSION NETWORK (INC)

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From the Chair

Terry Makin

The new committee of management of APEN is working well and will help to further progress our network, APEN. It is taking time to set up the working groups and for people to begin to work together but I believe these groups have the potential to make a significant impact for APEN and its effectiveness. It is through these groups that we can add our expertise, knowledge and energy to progress those issues that we as members think are important. Please pass on ideas, comments, information that will help to improve our profession and network to either the convenors, or through Rosemary at the Secretariat.

With several elections taking place in Australia recently, the rate of change in extension will continue unabated. This rate of change means that it is imperative that we, as professionals, continue to improve our skills and knowledge. We need to learn to adapt and understand change if we are to assist and facilitate the learning of the people we work with, enabling them to adjust more easily to a rapidly changing and more complex environment.

Programs and directions coming out of DPI, Canberra, are becoming more directed towards an integrated approach to environmental, community, and regional development. It is the "think global, act local" approach. This approach aligns with what APEN is about and we will be communicating with DPIE to ensure that they are aware of our network's value in this area.

Finally, as I reflect at the end of my 10 year term as a Director on the Dairy Industry's R & D Corporation, it is very apparent that the D in R & D is now

much more valued as being the key to industry development and profitability. There is also growing awareness that we cannot just concern ourselves with productivity, but that we must take account of all of the parts of the system if we are to have social and environmentally sustainable communities and industries. More and more agencies are initiating programs that are collaborative and participative in nature to give clients ownership and programs that are relevant to their needs. This means that we need people with the skills and knowledge to initiate and facilitate the process of the development of these programs. We also need ways to share our experience and knowledge with each other to save continually reinventing the wheel. This is a key purpose for APEN.

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Editor's Desk

Dale Williams

Dear members, ExtensionNet is in a stage of transition, particularly in terms of its production. We now have a range of themes to pursue during 1996. We have sufficient material for several E/N's. We have a production schedule and someone to keep us to its timing. We also have a number of issues being explored, particularly those relating to the emerging constituency of APEN and the role and shape of E/N in response to that.

This February-March issue on participatory extension methods of extension is late and we apologise for that. We have sufficient material for the April-May issue on 'Extension for Sustainable Rural Communities' to come out next month. The Riverina Chapter are putting together a regional perspective for June-July that includes diverse and interesting articles that cross a variety of themes. The August-September issue will concentrate on 'Intellectual Frameworks for Extension'. I anticipate 'Power, Participation and Extension' will be October-November's theme and will explore extension issues related to gender, ethnicity, culture, etc. We invite submissions for this important issue. Contact me if you have an inquiry.

We want E/N to be inclusive, rather than exclusive. E/N, in some manner, will include all material sent to us to date. However, this may become problematic in the future and we alert readers to that emerging difficulty. We have current cost restrictions on E/N's size.

We are looking at alternatives to enable more lengthy, critically reflective articles. This may take the form of a

sponsored insert or an enlarged E/N supported by new sponsorship.

Please let us know if you know a sponsor who could help.

E/N has been shaped by its history of people in agricultural extension, tertiary education and landcare who provided much of the early impetus behind APEN's inception. Yet its future can be shaped to capture the early vision of a more diverse membership around the facilitation of social change. At this stage the context is rural, in terms of the sustainable and integrated development of rural people, communities and environments in the Australasia-Pacific area. So E/N wishes to embrace a widening constituency. Perhaps this could include increasing membership among farmers; primary and public healthcare workers; individual, group, community and regional forms of enterprise management; rural counselling and consultancy; community learning, support and action groups; etc. The planned themes for ExtensionNet over the next couple of years will carefully explore being more inclusive of such people, given our connectedness and all we have to offer each other's learning. Please see editorial matters as ones for dialogue. The Editorial Committee values your feedback and suggestions.

FORUM REPORTS on their way to attendees...

Theme - Participatory Extension Methods

Elwin Turnbull

As extension agents whether it be as an educator, in commerce or government service or in community development, a key point is that we are working within a human systems framework to achieve our ends. Sir Geoffrey Vickers the author of "Human Systems are Different" forcefully argues that the key attribute of successful human endeavours is the discourse that is created between the participants. Other authors use different terms to describe the dynamics of discussion and interaction between people which lead to the dual goals of personal learning and community competency for action. The articles included in this edition shed light on the means of facilitating individual and group learning through participatory extension methods.

In the first article Graeme Gibson has described the technique of Study Circles as a way of promoting individual and community understanding of issues. His article describes the kits which are available gratis from the AAACE. Groups are the context for all social

For sale to other members at \$12.50, non-members \$15 (incl postage).

INTERNATIONAL COURSE IN
RURAL EXTENSION
WAGENINGEN
10 JUNE TO 20 JULY 1996

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discourse and in the second E/N article from John McKinlay (a "groupie" from way back) we can see some hard data about the key variables in successful task groups. The traditional approach to land management policy has been very legalistic and top down. The story from Glen Gale of experiences in South Australia shows clearly that participative approaches are a valid alternative. In his case study they have led to ongoing catchment management activities in the Mount Lofty ranges. In third world situations participatory extension methods are well under way. Ann Hickey has described an experience in Cambodia of positive actions coming from participative extension methods in a truly desperate situation. In this case the activities are "hands on" demonstration and cooperative projects - no chance of criticism of "talk fests" in this development project. Another contribution by Ann is a list of evaluation references which can help us all in designing ways of validly assessing our efforts.

Study Circles for Adult Learning - Without a Teacher or a Text Book

Graeme Gibson and Meg Bishop

The Australian Association for Adult and Community Education (AAACE) and the Murray-Darling Basin Commission have joined forces to produce a series of study circles on natural resource issues. The first of these on the issues of Blue-Green Algae was released in late 1995. The second on the issue of Dryland Salinity is expected to be available from July 1996. The kits are intended to be appropriate throughout Australia - they are not limited to the Murray-Darling Basin - and they are not limited in appeal to rural groups. Capturing the interest of urban groups has in fact been a major focus of these study circles.

What is a Study Circle

A typical study circle is a group of 5 - 15 people, who meet three to six times to discuss and learn about an issue of concern to them. Discussions last around two hours and are facilitated by a group leader whose role is to assist in lively but focussed discussion. The leader is not expected to be a teacher or subject expert. The group may meet at someone's home, a community meeting room or some other convenient place.

What is the Kit?

The study circle kit is not prescriptive. It is not a text or a curriculum, but a set of stimulus and resource material to frame and support group discussion. Issues within the subject are divided into manageable portions and participants are provided with written resource material. Video, audio and graphic support material may also be included. Participants are encouraged to collect additional local material.

How does it work?

The study circle kit can be thought of as a tourist map which takes people on a journey. Along the way there are lots of interesting and challenging things to explore, or places to visit. But if the group had been there before, or feels something will not be of interest, they can continue on. Often the group will back-track to re-visit an issue.

The essence of the study circle is free discussion and exploration in a democratic atmosphere where all views are valid. Participants will bring a good deal of their own knowledge, opinions and attitudes. Study circles and small group discussions have long been recognised as an effective method of learning. They are particularly useful for dealing with difficult social and political issues and strengthening the skills necessary for community participation.

The study circle approach does not aim for experts, but informed decision makers who are able to take effective and constructive action. Groups meet on their own turf, their own terms and in non-threatening peer related settings.

Who uses them?

People who participate typically come from 2 areas:

- those who meet under some other umbrella, such as Landcare or catchment groups, work; social or church groups and;
- those who regularly do an adult education course, maybe landscape gardening last term, a foreign language next year.

But are they effective?

Feedback and evaluation from groups who have completed study circles shows this to be a satisfying way of learning. Outcomes from groups who have used the Blue - green Algae kit include the following :

- Participants have been able to intensively question their individual day to day actions and make some changes, including the detergents they use and waste down the drain.
- Groups (from both urban and rural areas) have sought further information from authorities. This has led to a sense of empowerment among participants who have felt confident to ask knowledgeable and sometimes probing questions.
- Urban groups have made contact with rural groups or individuals who are more directly affected by the Blue-green Algae. These (urban) groups had not previously been in contact with the rural groups.
- Participants have been able to share their new understanding of the issue with other groups and individuals in a variety of settings. This includes presentations at meetings and discussion with friends and workmates.
- Groups have successfully "localised" the kit by obtaining local resource material, inviting local guest speakers and going on local field trips.

The study circle kits are endorsed and fully supported by the International Council for Adult Education. They are available for group use free of charge , although an evaluation form should be completed and returned. For more information or to register a group and receive a study circle kit contact – AAACE, PO Box 308, Jamison Centre, ACT 2614. Fax 06 251 7935 Phone 06 251 7933.

Effectiveness of Task Groups

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Three years ago I completed a research project looking at the factors influencing the effectiveness of task groups. This project was part of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Business at La Trobe University.

The conclusions are relevant to groups in general as well as task groups, so should be of interest to APEN members.

Method and Results

A questionnaire with a list of 75 statements which could be used to describe a task group was sent to the members of 26 groups. Members were

