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The Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program Focuses on the Learner

Abstract

The study reported here sought to determine how California Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNE) educators are implementing learner-centered approaches. We e-mailed a brief survey to all FSNE educators in California in 2004 (n=67; 69% responded). Most educators felt they were doing "okay" or "very well" in implementing learner-centered techniques. Techniques used less successfully included ground rules, icebreakers, partner activities, and goal setting. Focus group participants (n=15) have tried learner-centered techniques, although not all are universally successful. Learner-centered education requires advanced preparation to implement successfully; educators may need to be more assertive with agencies to achieve results.

Lucia Kaiser

Nutrition Specialist
lkaiser@ucdavis.edu

Tammy McMurdo

Program Representative
tjmcmurdo@ucdavis.edu

Amy Block Joy

Nutrition Specialist
abjoy@ucdavis.edu

Department of Nutrition
University of California at Davis
Davis, California

Introduction

Learner-centered education is an approach that focuses on the learner--his/her experiences, perspectives, interests, talents, and needs--and on the best practices to motivate people and promote learning (Henson, 2003). At the core of a learner-centered approach are the following principles: 1) learning is based on experiences; 2) the characteristics of each individual learner are considered when planning experiences; 3) the learner's perceptions shape what is taught; 4) the learner's curiosity is nurtured; 5) learning is best when it involves the emotions; and 5) the learning environment is free from fear.

Learner-centered education is not a new idea. In fact, its basic principles can be traced back to early philosophers and educators in the 4th and 5th centuries BC (Hensen, 2003). Both Confucius and Socrates stressed the need to develop the individual in their teaching. In the 17th century, Englishman John Locke introduced the idea of experiential learning or learning by doing. In the 1900's, John Dewey, an American educator, embraced the idea that learning should involve problem-solving and be fun.

A large evaluation study of learner-centered education in the 1930's found the approach to contribute to greater student achievement, compared to traditional teaching methods which relied heavily on drills, memorization, and lecture. There is evidence that clientele participating in Cooperative Extension programs prefer a learner-centered over a teacher-centered approach (Simeral & Hogan, 2001). Moreover, a learner-centered approach is more likely to result in behavior change, compared to teacher-centered Extension delivery methods (Cooley, 1994).

Today, in the Food Stamp Nutrition Education Program (FSNE), nutrition educators are also discovering that their most effective teaching techniques are "learner-centered." Because individual instruction, compared to group instruction, appears to be more effective in changing nutrition behavior (Dickin, Dollahite, & Habicht, 2005), using a learner-centered approach may be a way to improve outcomes in group educational settings. In 2004, FSNE provided regional and statewide training events in California to encourage Cooperative Extension paraprofessional in that state to use more learner-centered techniques (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Learner-Centered Teaching Techniques (Norris, 2003)

Set the stage for learning—Arrive early so you can have everything ready and greet your learners as they arrive. Play music, provide nametags, and make the room attractive. Learning is enhanced where participants feel respected and safe.

Activate prior learning—Use a warm-up exercise to help people connect their experiences and knowledge to the topic.

Teach to a variety of learning styles—Include activities and teaching aids so that the learners can see, hear, and do hands-on activities as they learn.

Ask open questions—Use open questions (i.e., questions that do not have a yes/no or right/wrong answer). Open questions help the learners problem-solve and find acceptable, workable solutions. Learner-centered education provides information that is immediately useful to the learners.

Put people into partnerships—Pair-up, discuss, and share ideas to engage the learners. People learn best when they are engaged in the learning process.

Reinforce the learning—Provide a take-away message or goal setting exercise to reinforce the learning.

In an assessment conducted prior to these training events, paraprofessionals expressed some uncertainty and even concern that learner-centered education would divert their classes away from appropriate nutrition topics. After the nutrition educators shared ideas and honed their teaching skills during the regional and statewide training in spring and summer of 2004, many of these concerns may have been alleviated. We conducted the study reported here to find out how FSNE educators are implementing learner-centered education in their classrooms and the barriers they encounter.

Methods

The UC Davis Institutional Review Board exempted the protocol for this project from full Human Subjects review. We sent an 18-item survey via e-mail to all of the FSNE educators (n=67) in California in October 2004. A reminder and second e-mail were sent in December. A total of 46 people (69% of all surveyed) responded, but two were eliminated because they were not front-line educators in the program.

Of the 44 eligible respondents, 48% work with youth, 44% work with adults, and the remainder work with both

groups. At the time of the survey, all had attended at least one FSNE training on learner-centered education (35%-statewide only; 18%-regional only; and 47% both statewide and regional training). The mean years of employment in FSNE was 5.5 + 5.6 years.

For each of 12 learner-centered techniques (shown in Figure 2), the respondents self-reported how well that technique was working in their classrooms (3= very well; 2=okay; 1=not very well; 0=have not used). An overall implementation score was calculated by summing the responses across the 12 items, yielding a possible range of 0-36. Two open-ended questions were also included to determine how learners' needs were assessed and what specific challenges were encountered in implementing learner-centered techniques.

Figure 2.

Twelve Survey Items Asking, "How Well Are the Following Learner-Centered Techniques Working for You in Your FSNE Classes?"

1. Arrange the room before class to set the stage for a positive learning environment.
2. Use warm-ups or icebreakers to get people involved.
3. Meet and greet learners with a smile
4. Use ground rules to make learners feel comfortable
5. Encourage but do not force participation
6. Use open questions and wait for a response
7. Acknowledge different viewpoints
8. Answer participant questions without getting off track
9. Use partner and small group activities
10. Provide positive feedback
11. Use a variety of teaching methods to keep the energy level up in the class
12. Use goal setting with the participants to personalize the lessons
13. All responses: Very well, Okay, Not very well, I have not used this technique

To delve more into both the successes and challenges of learner-centered education, we conducted two focus groups in 2005 with FSNE educators--one in Riverside and the other in Contra Costa County in California. Of the 15 nutrition educators who attended, six worked with the youth program; seven worked with the adult program, and two worked with both programs. Average length of time employed in FSNE was 5.8 years. The sessions were audio- and videotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis of emerging themes.

Results

Results of the e-mail survey indicated that most FSNE educators felt that they were doing "okay" or "very well" in implementing different learner-centered techniques. Because we were unable to determine the validity of the survey instrument, we cannot tell to what extent respondents either over- or underestimated their implementation success. However, the techniques used less successfully included establishing ground rules; using icebreakers; using partner activities; and setting goals.

Total average implementation score for this sample was 30.3 + 4.1 (median: 30). Using analysis of variance, we did not find that degree of success in implementation varied by program (i.e., youth, adult, both--data not shown). There was a nonsignificant tendency for employees who have worked for FSNE longer to have lower implementation scores ($r = -0.16$, NS). A more detailed, validated instrument might be needed to determine whether longer-term employees are having more difficulty adopting new teaching techniques, compared to recently hired staff. In response to the open-ended questions, about one-third reported challenges in dealing with inadequate space and/or time constraints. Some of the following quotes capture the problems in these two areas:

- "I struggle with group activities because it is impossible in a soup kitchen setting."
- "Requires more prep time and transport of props."
- "Time is always a factor. Often participants are late or agencies do not prepare students for the teaching

event (sometimes students are not aware I am coming)."

- "Classes have gone overtime. This method really opens up trust and communication between participants and me. They all seem to want to participate on a more personal level."

Some of the challenges also involve group management skills:

- "Partner and small group activities are hard to control."
- "Many open-ended questions take us off topic or skip ahead and I find it difficult to get back on track. I find it difficult to use a variety of teaching methods."
- "I frequently work with groups where many people speak different languages in the same workshop. Working with mixed languages (English-Spanish) and having them interact with each other [is a challenge]. Translating and using time wisely in that activity is a challenge."

Participants in both focus groups expressed the viewpoint that nutrition educators have a lot of advanced preparation to do and may need to be more assertive with schools and agencies to achieve results from learner-centered education. Many comments reflect that educators have tried some new techniques introduced in the FSNE regional and statewide workshops and found them to be successful (Table 1). However, not all innovations have worked in every situation. For example, some participants, particularly those who are in homeless shelters or domestic violence situations, may not want to make eye contact or engage in group discussions. Educators proposed a few ways to reach out to these participants in their classes:

- "Bring colored paper and pens to give them something else creative to do."
- "A food demonstration is a good way to get people together, assign them each a different task."
- "Try to talk with them at break time."

Table 1.

Some Examples from the Focus Groups of What Works and Why (n=15)

Technique	Why/How It Works
Set stage by playing music	"Since our training, I started adding music. It has really been interesting in terms of adding energy and getting people to talk a little bit more"
Use icebreakers/open questions	"I've tried an icebreaker or even just a question in budgeting type classes--'what do you love to spend your money on?' Have them open up to each other rather than to me." "I started incorporating making name tags...with their favorite vegetable or their favorite subject they teach...it was kind of a cue for me for assessment"
Make a list of topics and stay on track	"It's always a good idea to keep a running list of topics that don't connect to what I am talking about at the time. But I let them know this is something we are going to cover in one way or another. I write it down."
Help participants set goals	"I will just ask them before they leave a group for a check out...name one thing you learned today that you are going to do over the next week. I call those WOWs--within one week. The next week ...at the warm-up I ask, 'Does anyone want to share their WOW they worked on this week?'"

One of the key points that educators emphasized for success in working with teachers and other adults is to

provide information that is immediately useful. With teachers, that might be as simple as providing a single lesson plan at an outreach meeting. A quote from one of the FSNE educators in the focus groups illustrates the importance of learner-centered education:

There was this gal in one of my programs. It was a one time thing and I thought I'd never see her again. She wanted a list of food pantries in the area. I told her, 'Make sure I have your address on the list and I'll send it to you.' I went back to my office...something told me she needed that list *now*. I made a copy and put it in the mail. A year later, I saw her in a residential treatment program. She asked if I remembered her...She said, 'that day you came and fed me... I hadn't eaten in 4 days. You sent me that list and it kept me from starving.' Now, if that isn't a success and makes this job worthwhile, nothing will.

Conclusions

Learner-centered education requires advanced preparation to implement successfully. In working with low-income, ethnically diverse communities, extension educators often face challenges in using learner-centered approaches and may need to be more assertive with agencies in arranging space and assessing participant needs to achieve results. Staff training, at the statewide and regional level, should focus on ways to overcome these and other challenges and extend the learner-centered approach to all programs. At statewide events, we have used poster sessions and small round table discussions to facilitate sharing and problem-solving on specific challenges. In smaller regional trainings, the educators have presented segments of their lessons and receive group feedback from the group on their techniques. For new staff and those teaching classes in isolated areas, we are developing a training kit, including video segments of best practices in actual classrooms and tools (such as example open questions and ice breakers) that were requested by the educators in our focus groups.

We have found that our FSNE paraprofessional staff are creative, enthusiastic, and sensitive to the needs of others. Thus, our best trainers are our educators themselves. Extension specialists and educators across the nation should be encouraged to continue sharing their experiences, evaluation instruments, and training ideas related to learner-centered education so that together we can improve our nutrition programs targeting low-income audiences.

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