

Exchange of experiences and horizontal learning among extension agents: Neglected source of knowledge for practice

Intercambio de experiencias y aprendizaje horizontal entre extensionistas: Fuente invisibilizada de conocimientos para la práctica

Fernando Landini 

Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (CONICET) // Universidad de la Cuenca del Plata, Argentina
(landini_fer@hotmail.com)

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Background

Rural extension agents conduct a highly complex practice, which makes it essential that they have a broad set of theoretical knowledge and practical skills to fulfill their role. At a conceptual level, learning can be categorized into three types: formal, non-formal and informal. Some authors pointed out that there is a tendency to reduce learning to formal and non-formal types, which leads to making invisible the fundamental role that non-formal learning plays in job performance. This limitation is also observed in the literature on the training of rural extension agents.

Aims

This paper analyzes how and in what contexts rural extension agents from six Latin American countries exchange experiences and learn horizontally among peers.

Method & procedures

We implemented a qualitative study supported by a constructivist epistemology. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with extension agents from Argentina, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, Guatemala and Uruguay (in total, 68 individuals and 18 group interviews). Most interviewees worked in the public sector. Participating countries and institutions were selected because of their ease of access (convenience sampling). The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Informed consent was obtained prior to them. Interview texts were analyzed in a flexible way with the support of the Atlas.ti software based on thematic axes.

Results & discussion

The results show that extension agents exchange knowledge, experiences, and jointly develop strategies to solve the challenges of their practice in multiple situations. Four specific interaction dynamics were identified: questions to colleagues, exchanges in planning meetings, dialogue in informal spaces, and analysis of their own practice during postgraduate studies. We highlight the existence of both, learning related to specific issues and learning that question the way of approaching practice, and the existence of exchanges between peers based on a logic of diversity of opinions and preferences, in contrast to a criterion of truth. On the other hand, we observed that there are different factors that facilitate and obstruct horizontal learning among extension agents. These factors exist at different levels: the institutional framework, the organization of extension work and the characteristics and attitudes of the actors. Results reconfirm the conclusions of authors in the field of informal work learning, who recognize the importance of horizontal learning among peers. At the same time, the results contrast with the vast majority of works on extension training, which focus on formal and non-formal education. Along the same lines, the results invite us to stop thinking exclusively in terms of teaching and training extension workers (as these concepts focus on the subject who teaches), and instead, to think in terms of learning processes, as the latter acknowledge that learning can take place without someone teaching. Additionally, the results also show that the knowledge used by extension workers to perform

their role is not only abstract in nature. Indeed, we observed that a relevant part of the knowledge they use corresponds to tacit knowledge, located in material contexts and specific social relationships. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that the results also show that the processes of dialogue, consultation and reflection among peers occur beyond the lack of institutional support, which reconfirms that these processes have their own dynamics and organization. We identified four types of dynamics of exchange of knowledge and experiences among extension agents. This result shows that the exchange and creation of knowledge in the dialogue between extension agents can take very different forms, all of them attached to daily practices. Possibly, this association with everyday life makes it difficult to make its importance visible. Nonetheless, the evidence of its omnipresence highlights its value.

Conclusion

The exchange of knowledge and the informal learning processes that take place among peers play a fundamental role in the development of professional competences related to extension practice. It is essential that institutions recognize and support these processes.

Keywords: communities of practice, informal learning, professional practice, rural extension

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