

preface

Ideas for Using this Book

BY SCOTT J. PETERS AND MICHAEL W. DUTTWEILER

For the past few years, we have been experimenting with an approach to staff development in extension education that is centered on the development and discussion of “practitioner profiles.”¹ Practitioner profiles, simply put, are first-person accounts of what educators do, feel, and experience in specific examples of their work (what we call “practice stories”), crafted from the transcripts of tape-recorded interviews. A good practitioner profile can help us to see and understand the shape and significance of an educator’s real work, in all its wonderful messiness and complexity. By “real” work, we mean the work that educators actually do, rather than the neat and tidy descriptions of what they are supposed to do that are typically found in position descriptions.

This book is a collection of practitioner profiles that graduate students at Cornell University developed of extension educators working for Cornell University Cooperative Extension in New York City. Our goal in sharing these profiles is to provide extension educators and administrators, as well as interested students, with an engaging, inspiring, and substantive resource for stimulating individual and collective reflection, learning, growth and change. In this preface, we’d like to suggest a few ideas for how the profiles contained in this book might be used, along with some of the possible learning outcomes their use might generate.

Even casual review of the profes-

sional development literature makes it clear that instructors and participants alike are seeking innovative, practice-based approaches that create job-relevant learning.² We believe that first-person practitioner profiles are highly adaptable and effective teaching tools that offer exciting opportunities to promote such learning. These profiles can be used as the basis for either individual or group reflection and learning activities. Individuals might review profile excerpts as part of recruitment materials or during orientation to a new role to gain a fuller sense of the work of community-based extension education. Established educators might review fully developed practitioner profiles as a means for gaining insight on their own work and extend that even further by creating their own profiles as a reflection aid.

From our experience, we believe that the use of profiles in collaborative learning settings offers even greater potential for learning. Profiles might be infused in technical training to promote exploration of how technical content translates to specific local contexts and to illustrate the varied ways educators employ such content in their work. Guided “practice circles” could be established in which educators review

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and discuss profiles — and eventually contribute profiles of their own — with the purposes of greater role awareness and practice improvement. Over time, there is opportunity for team or even system-level learning as a body of profiles is developed and employed to promote current understanding of the true work and competency needs throughout the organization.

In our work at Cornell, we have used profiles as readings for graduate courses and staff development workshops. In these settings, we have found that profiles are powerful tools for shedding light on innovative practices and methods in adult and extension education, and for stimulating critical reflection on the ethical and political dimensions of such work. But just as importantly, we have found that profiles can also be used as tools for helping students and educators glimpse the larger meanings and significance of non-formal, community-based educational work. In this regard, profiles serve not as “how to do it” blueprints or roadmaps, but as meaningful stories that offer considerable inspirational value.

The ways to use profiles are not limited to what we have suggested and tried ourselves. We have only begun learning about how we can learn from them. We encourage you to experiment, and we invite you to share with us what you have learned. You are likely to find that you will read the same story differently at different times and in different contexts; we did. Often, we found ourselves putting a profile aside thinking it didn’t have much to teach,

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only to take another look at some other time and see all sorts of things we didn't see before. Or we would listen to someone else's response and see an aspect of the story that had been hidden before.

Learning outcomes made possible through creative use of practice stories range from modest, individual insights to a fundamental review of organization mission and direction. Possible learnings include:

- Improved recognition of the breadth and depth of roles assumed by extension educators
- Increased awareness among prospective and new employees of the range of knowledge and skills required to create successful extension programs
- Improved ability to understand the basis of and lessons from one's own practice
- Appreciation for the influences of personal bias and learning style on program involvements and methods choices
- Analysis of the situational strengths and limitations of methods preferred by educators and improved identification of opportunities for improvement
- Greater appreciation for the context-sensitive nature of extension programming
- Illustration of the interdependence of formal and non-formal extension methods
- Improved understanding of the roles of power and influence in program efforts
- Improved ability to articulate requisite knowledge, skills, and program philosophy for recruitment and professional development purposes

- Better understanding of the richness of the "real work" of local extension programming
- Opportunity to reflect fundamentally on the priority outcomes of extension work and better articulate the benefits it generates at the individual, team, and system levels

We hope that you will find this book to be helpful in stimulating reflection and learning. We also hope that it will inspire and encourage you to create your own profiles to add to the growing body of profiles from which we can all learn. In the appendix, you'll find guidelines for developing your own profiles.

There's one final point we'd like to make. As the essay that follows this preface shows, the profiles included in this book help to reveal the essence of extension education as it is practiced in the urban context of New York City. But despite their urban focus and context, we are convinced that educators in all settings will find something in these profiles to learn from and relate to. We invite you to read them and see for yourselves.

Endnotes

¹ Practitioner profiles are a research tool developed by John Forester, a professor in Cornell's Department of City and Regional Planning, that aims to illuminate "theory – through the lived experiences of [practitioners]." They are described in more depth in his book, *The Deliberative Practitioner: Encouraging Participatory Planning Processes* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999).

² Mott, V.F. (2002). The Development of Professional Expertise in the Workplace. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* No. 86 (Summer 2000) pp. 23-31.