Engaging Farmers in the Teaching-learning Process: New Directions for “Cultivating Success”

Cinda Williams and Ariel Agenbroad
• Farmer driven program since its inception.

• Farmers serve as key partners in all aspects:
  – leadership team
  – advisory board
  – instructors, mentors
  – tour hosts.
Engaging farmers to meet goals

GOAL
Increase opportunities for and facilitate success of farmer-to-farmer learning.

RESPONSE
Seek farmer input to develop learning opportunities that work.
Researching on-farm education

Western SARE Research and Education grant in 2006: “Using farmer-rancher input to develop and implement experiential education opportunities for beginning farmers and ranchers”

1. Identify and evaluate other programs
2. Assess relevance of our current model
3. Provide and evaluate experiential learning opportunities
4. Develop capacity for offering experiential learning
What we did...

1. Conducted preliminary research, focus groups
2. Conducted survey; analyzed data
3. Implemented, documented, evaluated on-farm learning
4. Held program orientation/training for farmers
New & Experienced Farmer Survey (ID & WA)

- 412 producers provided valuable information
- Identified new program directions
- Determined small farm topics of interest
- Identified preferred scheduling, formats
- Assessed level of interest of experienced farmers in leading on-farm workshops or trainings
- Identified barriers/incentives for participation
### Educational topics of most interest to farmers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Topics</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Soil building</td>
<td>64.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weed and pest management</td>
<td>64.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sustainability, holistic management</td>
<td>45.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic production methods</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irrigation systems, water management</td>
<td>34.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value-added topics</td>
<td>31.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business management</td>
<td>28.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways to network with other farmers</td>
<td>27.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities and equipment</td>
<td>26.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Livestock management</td>
<td>25.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm planning</td>
<td>23.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Amount of farming education needed for beginning farmers

- Don’t need any education: 12%
- Less than 100 hours: 9%
- 100 - 200 hours: 6%
- 400 - 800 hours: 11%
- One to two years: 20%
- More than two years: 42%
Preference for on-farm learning

- Most of it (75%) - 48%
- About half of it (50%) - 32%
- Some of it (25%) - 9%
- All of it (100%) - 10%
- None of it - 1%
### Preferred schedule to make on-farm learning possible

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scheduling Format</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Weekend class or activity (one day only)</td>
<td>38.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Periodic visits throughout the farming season</td>
<td>22.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attend specific farm events (e.g. calving, harvest)</td>
<td>12.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive weekend workshop (2-3 days)</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summer internship</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Short-term internship on a farm (2-4 weeks)</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Preferred methods to learn from other farmers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Formats</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Visit other farms and have mentor visit my farm</td>
<td>28.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm tours or farm walks</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phone calls or emails</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shadow or work with experienced farmers</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farm mentor visits my farm</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal farmer- to farmer gatherings (grange model)</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do experienced farmers prefer to teach?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Educational Formats</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm tours or farm walks</td>
<td>46.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On-farm workshops</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal one-on-one visits</td>
<td>35.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answering questions by phone or email</td>
<td>26.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class presentations</td>
<td>25.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprenticeships</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Practical findings of interest

- 87% believed farmer-to-farmer learning useful or extremely useful
- 72% likely to participate
- 86% of experienced farmers would consider teaching new farmers
- Farmers self-selected themselves as “experienced” after farming 10 + years
Offering On-Farm learning

• Program partners used results to develop and present eight on-farm experiential learning opportunities

• Events documented & assessed
  – post workshop interviews of producers
  – on-line surveys of participants.
On-farm learning formats

- Pasture Walk
- Lambing School Workshop
- Farmer-Mentorship
- Organic Gardening Workshop Series
- Hoophouse Construction Workshop
- Intensive week-long course taught on farm
- On-Farm Practicum
- Academic Internship
Case studies provide new insights and lessons learned.
How farmers benefit offering on-farm education

“Alternate source of income”
“Potential source of labor”
“Giving back/foster link with community”
“Help new farmers build future food system”
“Personal rewards helping others grow/be successful”
Farmers share lessons learned for others who offer on-farm events

“Give thought to why you want to do this”

“Allow preparation time”

“Start with a cohesive structured plan”

“Assess the knowledge base and experience level of student”

“Provide demonstration type skills”

“Make yourself available as long-term mentor”
Participant benefits

“Liked the team atmosphere”

“Information learned is applied directly in the field”

“Received a lot of one-on-one attention”

“Self directed, interesting projects”

“Flexibility to coordinate work schedules and other obligations”
Participant challenges

“Intense experiences overwhelming for those new to farming”

“Short time frame makes it hard to absorb information”

“Are University farms a realistic portrait of a working farm?”

“Intermittent scheduling might provide fragmented learning”
On-farm education participant learning outcomes

- 90% feel workshop ‘extremely’ or ‘very’ effective in helping learn information/skills
- 100% better able to perform tasks practiced
- 100% will adopt practices learned
- 87% better prepared to manage own farm
- 94% indicated information learned helped them save money or be more efficient
Our recommendations

- Work with farmers to develop effective participatory workshops
- Take on logistical preparation for events for some farmers
- Provide opportunities for participants to engage in open discussions
- Pay farmer-mentors and instructors for their time to teach new farmers
Resources for more information

- **Cultivating Success: Surveying the Needs of Small Farm Producers in Idaho and Washington**
- **Enhancing Farmer to Farmer Education in the Inland Northwest: Case Studies of On-Farm Experiential Education**

Cultivating Success web site
[www.cultivatingsuccess.org](http://www.cultivatingsuccess.org)