
A LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH TO SOCIAL SKILLS FOR TECHNICAL FORESTERS

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INTRODUCTION

The need for 're-orientation' courses for traditionally trained foresters is evident in recent forestry writing. It is discussed both by policy makers and forestry practitioners. However, more is written on the need for re-orientation training than on the method of achieving it. This paper aims to assist those who may be involved in such training. It is based on the experience of organising and teaching on the annual 3 month short course, Rural Extension for Foresters at the University of Reading, UK and similar teaching at RECOFTC (Regional Community Forestry Training Center) at Kasetsart University, Bangkok, Thailand. The learner centred approach uses a participative style of learning as an addition to direct teaching by the trainer. The trainer's role is to facilitate learning in a variety of ways and, to an extent, act as a role model demonstrating several communication skills that foresters may decide to experiment with themselves in their rural development forestry work.

WHAT NEW SKILLS DO FORESTERS NEED?

Foresters will always need their professional forestry expertise, although specialisms within this may change over time. Agroforestry and the growing of trees partly for non timber forestry products are examples of this. However, it is their changed relationships with the public which is the new element of their work. Originally qualified to deal with trees, foresters increasingly find they are expected to deal mainly with people. This demands good communication skills – of listening and understanding – as well as just giving out knowledge and advice. Often the communication is with groups of people rather than individuals. Negotiations may be with less educated rural people (including the landless, women and other less powerful groups), not only with fellow professionals who speak the same educated language.

Foresters therefore need to develop the skills of approaching such people – potential tree growers – understanding their situation and helping them to meet their varied needs within their farming systems. In doing this very different work, foresters may sometimes have to put on one side some of the precise technical rules in which they were originally trained.

THE CHALLENGE OF ADAPTING TO THE NEW ROLE

As their new work develops, most foresters realise the need for more confidence and extra skills in working alongside rural people. This realisation of the personal demands of rural development forestry can be worrying if no support or retraining is offered. This needs to be acknowledged by managers, as does individuals' ability to adapt. For many professionals, these changes come to them in middle age when they are comfortably experienced and knowledgeable in their work and acknowledged as such by the younger generation of staff. With a certain amount of seniority through position, age and skill, it can be very hard to face new expectations from the higher ranks of the Department or Project in a relatively untried method of working. Few people welcome a radical change in their work. No one wants to fail and lose face or risk a secure job. This paper goes on to look at ways to help such foresters adapt their ways of working through retraining.

THE ELEMENTS OF THE NEW WAY OF WORKING

The first stage of any new behaviour is an awareness of a need for change. It may be greeted with caution by some foresters, but changed relationships with rural people are generally being recognised as necessary for the new approach to forestry. Following this awareness-raising, there are four different elements (types) of learning, or change, which will have to take place. Careful training can help with these.

- ! **Knowledge** This is information which can be learned and is held at an intellectual level. Examples are: knowing the best tree species for local agroforestry needs, being aware what prevents good communication, knowing the legal regulations on growing and harvesting trees on private land.
- ! **Understanding** the reason why things are the way they are. For example, why less powerful people may not be able to speak their minds at a community meeting, why villagers may be reluctant to plant trees on their private land or why some staff are better listeners than others. We work with more conviction when we understand the reason for what we are asked to do.
- ! **Skills** By this is meant the ability to actually do something, appropriate social behaviour or practical action. In technical skills this could be learning the skill of pruning trees to produce a continuous amount of poles or increased supply of fodder leaves. A social skill to be improved by training may be that of negotiating with a group, or working effectively in a team with the local agricultural extension worker and village leader.
- ! **Attitude** This means the way one views a situation. A changed attitude is not something that can be taught. Each person has to decide their views for themselves. However, in training, learners can be given the chance to see well known situations from a new angle or helped to think about the real effect of their own actions on others.

Often all four elements of learning have to take place in order for a sustained and effective change in working practice. An example may help. In rural development forestry, it is important to find out the tree requirements of different sections of local people in order for the forester to advise on a management plan. For a traditionally trained forester, more used to growing single variety plantations or policing the government forest, such patient enquiry work demands very different behaviour. An awareness of the need to behave differently must come first. Knowledge of the village groupings and power structures will be vital. Understanding is needed on why to approach different categories of rural people in different ways to avoid offence and get reliable information from them. Skills in managing village meetings and writing a simple management plan in consultation with local people will be needed. Somewhat different technical forestry skills may be required to produce locally preferred forest products. All this will demand an attitude of respect for local people and their existing knowledge, open-mindedness and patience on the part of the forester.

DIFFERENT LEARNING METHODS FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES

How does this affect the way that foresters can be trained in these new elements of their work? Just as there are a variety of communication methods and skills to be employed by foresters in their work, so there should be variety in learning methods, particularly on a training course or workshop.

In everyday life we learn in many different ways: by watching and copying, by practising, asking questions and discussing and hearing the wisdom of older people. We listen to those who have different experiences, and sometimes learn from experts, through reading or hearing them talk. Different learning methods suit different elements of what is to be learned and different people. A method which helps in acquiring new knowledge or information may not add to real understanding or make the learner any more confident at perfecting the new skill.

This means that the traditional lecture/note-writing/exam method may be appropriate for passing on some knowledge/information. However, it can be supplemented by structured class or group discussions, case studies to analyze, demonstrations and visits. In some situations a short training video can be used to stimulate discussion. In this way new knowledge is not just learned but debated for its value and appropriateness to the individual field situation of each forester. Individuals can add their own experiences, thus adding to the pool of knowledge and gaining confidence by contributing their own wisdom.

New skills in rural development forestry need to be both seen and practised. Technical skills may be tried out in the field, assisting with setting up a small scale tree nursery, for example. Communication skills, such as non formal teaching or negotiating can perhaps be tried out with colleagues in a short classroom role play (informal drama). This gives learners the chance to experiment with a new style of communication. Confidence is increased through practising in a friendly learning environment with colleagues and fellow learners.

Learning techniques to promote greater understanding and insight involve more than just giving information. Understanding involves not only knowledge but judgement and belief. Sharing of opinions in group discussion, with the trainer/facilitator deliberately bringing in the suggestions of all the class members, can lead to a real broadening of everyone's experience – including the trainers. Role plays in which learners actually experience how it feels to be a farmer on the receiving end of forestry advice can also be a powerful tool.

Using the various learning methods mentioned above often leads to a new confidence in foresters' ability to try and work in different ways. A classroom atmosphere of debate and enquiry encourages people to review, for themselves, their own beliefs and methods. It is helpful if the facilitator is also available for informal individual discussion. Questioning a long established way of working can be painful and the prospect of change can bring anxiety as well as excitement.

The trainer as a facilitator

In order to develop these varied styles of learning, the trainer is more than a one-way transmitter of 'expert' information as is often the case in traditional learning settings. The trainer's role is to facilitate learning by whichever methods are appropriate. It is a varied, and in many ways a more demanding task. It is learner centred rather than teacher centred. This has two important implications.

The first implication is that the trainer's relationship with the learners changes. By acknowledging their work experience and inviting their contributions to the group, the social distance between the trainers and learners is lessened. This requires a certain confidence on the part of the trainer, who cannot rely on the power of being seen as the only 'expert' in the class. The trainer must be able to handle, and enjoy debate and questioning as part of learning. For many foresters, this style of learning will be new and strange. There is not the security of having a trainer who, supposedly, has all the knowledge to deliver to them as passive recipients, so they only need to learn it and repeat it at exam time. Active learning on their part is also more demanding: to analyze, contribute, risk experimenting and plan their own future action. At the beginning of a training course, the trainer must explain carefully why different learning methods will be used and allow for regular discussion on this. There can be surprise and resistance to these strange methods at first. However, in my experience, most of the participants do get used to them within a few days. Individuals appreciate the variety, the feeling that they are really gaining something practically useful and quite frequently even say they are enjoying the learning. Another bonus for the learners is gaining extra confidence from the respect with which their experience is treated. Bringing out individuals' areas of expertise for all to share means that their colleagues can consult them as necessary. Class members can become 'resource people' in their own right.

The second implication of using various learner centred methods is the care needed by the facilitator in preparing for a session. Traditional lecturing is primarily concerned with the information content. Facilitating is equally concerned with the process of how the group is helped to learn. What needs do the learners have: for skills, understanding, information? How are these best met? How to involve everyone? How to benefit by the experience of group members? How to achieve variety in learning method and in 'pace'? When to include an exercise which will be fun as well as instructive? A variety of approaches could include teacher-centred, group and individual learning. Adopting situation specific learning approaches requires planning, sometimes visual aids and equipment for exercises and careful timing in these more flexible sessions. At first some class members may comment, "We are doing all the work." However, a good session requires the following from a trainer: careful preparation, skilful facilitating and then evaluation afterwards, to improve it next time. The more learners actively participate in a carefully structured session, the more they gain from it.

THE VALUE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING FOR EXTENSION WORKERS

Training for rural development foresters emphasises two-way communication skills, both with individuals and groups. The process of learning in the class itself is an excellent way to experience and practise these skills. Just as the trainer aims to facilitate learning within the group and participation by members, so also the foresters hope to enable farmers to try new methods. If the foresters on a course can experience, enjoy and find useful new ways of learning, they are more likely to believe in them as potential tools in their own work. The participative principles of respecting knowledge and skills from within the group, being a good listener, including quieter members, debating issues, dealing with conflict and making learning enjoyable can be practised in the classroom and later have their place in the field.

The learning about communication skills may at first be unconscious: a feeling amongst participants about classes or exercises being relevant, understandable, interesting or boring. Later, open discussion about the learning methods will raise awareness about the facilitating skills used

and their effect. The learners need to understand that they can gain not only from the class content, but also from the process of how learning is taking place.

One inevitable result of this spotlight on learning methods is that the group becomes very aware of the standard of teaching skills they come across. Many, if not all, the members begin to like contributing their knowledge and debating issues. It can then put a certain pressure on other staff members to allow participation by learners.

MAKING THE NEW LEARNING RELEVANT

For course participants to remain interested, the new learning must be relevant. For those that pay the training bills, it must also produce positive results. There are strategies that trainers can use for this at different stages of a course or workshop.

At the start of training, participants can be asked to list what they are hoping to gain from the course. This helps them, as individuals, to concentrate on what they hope to achieve and can help commitment to the learning process. It also gives trainers some direct information on participants' real needs. Hopefully, many of these can be incorporated into the training one way or another: by group discussion, individual reading or direct teaching. These lists may also be useful in planning the next training.

During the training there are various ways for the trainer to enable the foresters to make the links between learning in the classroom and their own extension work. Group discussion of prepared case studies – common problems that foresters meet in their work – allows everyone to contribute their experience and suggestions. This sharing of experience on particular topics is often found to be of great practical help. Even in more formal teaching, time can be allowed for some general class discussion on the issue, with examples or comments from different members. This can help people understand and the subject to 'live' in their minds after the session. Alternatively, after the trainer's talk, people can be asked to get into pairs and briefly discuss together a related experience from their own work. This has the benefit of adding variety to the teaching and making the session more learner-centred.

Monitoring of a course continues throughout. This may be formal, by questionnaires or planned discussion, or informal by the trainer being sensitive to the interest in a class and the comments afterwards. How soon before the end of a session participants start to look at their watches, and whether some people stay behind for extra lively discussion with the trainer are quite good indicators. The formal evaluation at the end of a course can usefully cover the topics taught and the variety of learning methods used. It is not good enough for the trainer to **assume** which were most helpful.

There is another exercise which can be used at the end of a training course. It can be helpful to participants, and their employers, if they have to decide what topics and learning methods have been most useful to them for their work and how they will apply the new learning. This helps them bridge the gap between the detached life of a training course and the hard realities of day to day forestry work. Life will be busy on their return to the many demands of work. At least when they are asked, "How did you benefit from the course?" they will already have done some thinking.

HOW DOES THIS BENEFIT THE TRAINER?

Although these learner centred methods place a greater burden on the trainer to plan sessions carefully and sometimes to cope with initial resistance from participants to the unexpected learning methods, there are also many benefits for the trainer/facilitator.

Most trainers want to know that they are meeting the real needs of their learners – as well as covering the topics required by their employers. If the participants have not only attended, but understood and end up convinced and confident and even eager to try out new ways of working, the trainer has a real feeling of job satisfaction. This learning style encourages dialogue with the learners, inside and outside the class, so there is considerable feedback.

In terms of new knowledge and strategies for approaching problems, everyone gains by sharing. The trainers are constantly updating their own information and can draw on many years of forestry experience within the group to supplement their own.

The trainer's job will always be intensive, demanding and responsible. However, being familiar with many strategies to aid learning does add variety to the task. It is beneficial to the participating foresters if they take some responsibility for their own learning – and it relieves the trainer from the demands of non-stop direct teaching. There is no reason why teaching and learning should not be interesting, enjoyable, and on occasions fun, for everyone involved. The most rewarding feedback I have received was from a course member, with limited English, who wrote just 3 words on her course evaluation form, "Participate, enjoy, learn."

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