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Distance Education Via Television: Some Reflections After Four Years

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Abstract

Four years of televising a university course for delivery to an audience of agricultural producers provides some reflections on the feasibility of combining traditional classroom instruction with in-depth extension educational programs. There are a sizable number of active agricultural producers who are eager to study academic topics in greater depth than could be obtained in traditional workshops or seminars. It seems possible to overcome many obstacles that earlier suggested distance education via television was not feasible from an administrative, budgetary or client acceptance point of view. The results seem worth the effort, with the providing institution benefiting from increased national recognition.

Key Words: distance education, extension education, off-campus education, television

For the past eight semesters, I have offered one of my agricultural marketing classes to students outside the classroom via live television. This class, *Agricultural Marketing & Entrepreneurship*, thus serves two audiences -- traditional campus students and non-traditional students. The majority of these off-campus students take the class to become more proficient in applying advanced marketing techniques in their businesses or professions.

Most of these off-campus students are actively engaged in farm or ranch production. A minority are active in related fields such as agricultural banking, elevator management, or employed in various USDA agencies. Some of the off-campus students are enrolled in Community Colleges, or other educational institutions. A few of the off-campus students who are not enrolled in educational institutions take the course for academic credit, primarily, I believe, for self discipline.

A typical semester would have about 100 students in the Lincoln, Nebraska classroom and about 500 watching on television -- located primarily in the Plains, Midwest, or the Southeast.

What follows are some of my observations, reflections and tentative conclusions on combining extension education and traditional classroom instruction.

The television students seem to be highly motivated and willing to spend considerable time in intensive study of a tightly focused topic -- in this case, marketing techniques that reduce price risk. During my 30 odd years at Nebraska, I have conducted numerous off-campus extension programs and workshops. Unfortunately, a two-hour program on marketing techniques after an open bar and a steak dinner leaves the audience, and the instructor, less than fully satisfied.

Compared to the attendees at those workshops, the television students seem to have a larger fraction of women, seem younger, have more years of college education, manage larger operations, and are more willing to alter their management practices.

I was surprised at the tenacity the off-campus students have for obtaining a comprehensive

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understanding of the material. It is not unusual for one-fifth of this semester's off-campus students to be students of a previous semester's class. When visiting with these repeaters, I am told they need to feel *very* comfortable with the advanced marketing techniques before fundamentally altering traditional marketing practices. More than once I have been told, "For your on-campus students, a mistake lowers their grade, for us a mistake could impact our financial viability."

Reflections: It's a fun group to work with. The questions and thoughts they bring to the classroom enhance the learning experience of the on-campus students, keep me abreast of rapidly changing marketing conditions across the nation, plus offering opportunities for stimulating conversations and gratis meals when traveling.

Combining extension and traditional teaching duties into a single activity can create administrative and turf problems. Some, perhaps most, institutions have separate extension and teaching administrators. Each administrator, of course, is held accountable for programs and budgets in their area. In turn, each administrator requests similar accountability for those staff and faculty that have some fraction of their appointment assigned to them. Administrators may have problems when trying to account, budget, evaluate or suggest changes to an activity that is not purely teaching or extension. When a traditional on-campus class is also delivered to an off-campus audience, a fundamental question is raised, i.e., "Whose program is it -- teaching or extension? Worse yet, when a teaching-extension program of one state is also delivered to other states, the loyalty of the clientele to a single institution may be diluted -- which can add a spatial dimension to the problems of administrators.

Reflections: Four years ago, administrative problems associated with a combined teaching-extension program occupied a noticeable fraction of my time, as well as the executive producer's time. Now there is a growing awareness, sometimes reluctantly, that *education is education* and that modern technology permits education from diverse geographical sources to be readily available to clientele. In short, there is a growing realization that it's now a global economy with global

informational sources. I leave to others what implications this has for geographical areas of specialization and the obvious corollary that a single educational institution might not need to be all things to all people.

Often overlooked is the technical and subject-matter support team required for a distance educational effort. In my case, a talented technical team lets me focus on lectures rather than worry about the myriad of technical details involved with a live broadcast on satellite and local cable, plus taping copies for library use and national mail distribution. I find that off-campus students are often reluctant to ask questions (via an 800 telephone number) during class, yet want to verify their comprehension of the material before application to their situation. I have doubled the number of my Teaching Assistants (TAs) to accommodate this need. Each semester the TAs spend many hours visiting with students (again via an 800 number) from across the nation -- often learning as much in the process as the callers learn from them.

It is surprising to some that both my television director and TAs are undergraduate students. I find these students to be highly motivated in making the operation a success, and I am mindful that the experience will be duly noted by others when reading their *Vitās*.

Reflections: First-time television instructors often act as if they are the most important member of the production team. A smoother production results if each team member is given noticeable credit for their efforts. Another bit of advice to those contemplating distance education -- triple the class preparation time. Even after teaching agricultural marketing for over 30 years, I still find it takes a solid three hours preparation for each hour in a TV class setting.

The costs of delivering a distance educational program are formidable. For my marketing class, budgets (in-kind or out-of-pocket) must cover: an executive producer; video and audio engineers; a television director; 45 hours of satellite time; tape duplication and mailing; promotional efforts; 800 telephone charges; and wages for the TAs.

For the first two semesters, the out-of-pocket expenses were underwritten by AG*SAT, the 30-some state consortium for distance education. Ensuing semesters saw a reduction in AG*SAT support until all production costs have been borne by IANR for the past two years. Even after consolidation of some technical and TA duties, the out-of-pocket expenses are typically around \$17,000 per semester. We have tried to cover these costs by \$10 surcharges on the textbooks, requesting off-campus students to contribute \$100 per viewing site¹, charging \$400 for a semester's worth of tapes for those who request them, and recovery of tuition for those off-campus students earning academic credit for the course.

In truth, we have never "broken-even." Last semester's (Fall 1994) deficit grew to around \$2,000, which was reluctantly covered by IANR administrators. While it might seem solely self-serving, I have argued these deficits might be covered in part by the enhanced national reputation of IANR. I have also argued that IANR might attract additional students because of the televised class, and there is some evidence this has taken place. Understandably, in times of increasing budget stress, these arguments are becoming less persuasive.

This semester (Spring 1995) we are trying something different. Extensive surveys indicate that perhaps one-half of our off-campus students frequently tape the class (broadcast at 9:00 a.m. CT) for later viewing. This semester we will continue to provide live feeds to local cable networks since they carry the program *gratis* as a public service on their community educational channel. For other viewers (which is most of the agricultural producers) we will tape the class and weekly mail the Monday, Wednesday and Friday lectures.

For \$450 they get the tapes, the textbook, 800 access to the TAs, and copies of the exams

during the week they were given to the on-campus students. In addition, there will be three two-hour live broadcasts during the evening devoted entirely to answering their questions. As of January 1, 1995, about \$17,000 has been collected in these advanced registrations. Our plan is to make money this semester, repay our debt to IANR administrators, and use any surplus to fund an extensive promotion of a live satellite broadcast of the class during the fall semester of 1995. With extensive promotion it is hoped there will be sufficient participants to cover the full cost of a live national broadcast.

Reflections: Financing distance educational efforts is expensive. Cost recovery is difficult and requires new thinking when distance education is directed primarily to a traditional extension audience. Given the current political environment, I believe many agricultural producers understand that "user fees" are necessary if they are to continue receiving intensive off-campus educational programs.

Tentative conclusions: For the instructor, distance education is exciting, a broadening experience, but very time consuming. Distance education raises fundamental questions concerning traditional roles and territorial boundaries of extension and teaching programs. Distance education might hasten further specialization of educational institutions. Distance education is expensive and, especially for traditional extension clientele, requires a rethinking of funding sources. Finally, I am convinced there is a growing segment of agricultural producers that have been frustrated by the lack of intensive off-campus educational offerings from land-grant institutions. In some cases, these producers can be serviced through distance educational programs which, in turn, may result in increased political support by this clientele for the providing institution.

Endnotes

1. The signal from the satellite is unscrambled. We estimate payment from about only one-fourth of the viewers. Scrambling of educational television signals seems impracticable from a technical point of view.