



Review

Towards a new paradigm for rural extensionists' in-service training

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ABSTRACT

Changes in the conceptions of extension and rural innovation, as well as the persistence of diffusionist extension approaches, require rethinking training strategies for rural extensionists. Drawing upon conceptual insights pertaining to the theory of action, the social learning theory, and the communities of practice framework, in this paper, current training and educational strategies for extensionists will be critically reflected upon, lessons learnt will be extracted, and proposals will be generated. Amongst them, the need for expanding and reframing what we understand 'training extensionists' to be, overcoming the traditional transfer-of-knowledge approach, focusing on the reflection on the reflection on practice process, supporting the horizontal exchange of knowledge and experiences, and facilitating the development of extensionist communities of practice, are highlighted. Finally, it is argued that there is a need for advancing the conceptual discussion, systematizing innovative training practices, and researching trainings for extensionists and their impact.

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1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the conception of rural extension (RE) has changed enormously and increased in its complexity (Leeuwis, 2004; Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011; Sæther, 2010), which requires rethinking and updating contents and strategies for training rural extensionists (Christoplos et al., 2012; Kahan, 2007; Sulaiman, 2012). Thus, in this paper, we will reflect upon rural extensionists' in-service training processes from a critical and complex perspective, contributing to the articulation of a transdisciplinary theoretical framework in order to address them.

Three changes in the conception of RE may be highlighted. The first is from approaches aimed at a linear and hierarchical transference of technologies to horizontal, interactive and participatory ones (Knickel et al., 2009; Landini, 2016). Second, from approaches centered on the practitioner-farmer relationship, to others of a territorial or interinstitutional character (Aguirre, 2012; Klerkx et al., 2012; Moschitz et al., 2015; Selis, 2012). And third, from a conception of innovation attached to the diffusion of predefined technologies, to innovation as a non-preestablished co-construction that occurs in the interaction between social actors with different experiences, types of knowledge, and capabilities (Leeuwis and Aarts, 2011; Sæther, 2010; Wauters and Mathijs, 2013).

In consequence, we assist a process of multiplication and diversification of the types of knowledge, competences and even attitudes that extensionists need in order to do their job effectively (Aguirre, 2012; Landini, 2013; Sulaiman and Davis, 2012), even when most of them have backgrounds in agricultural sciences (Landini and Bianqui, 2014a). Thus, it is to be expected that, over the last years, numerous authors and institutions have highlighted the importance of educating and training extensionists in order to work within the current extension paradigms (Ardila, 2010; Preissing et al., 2014).

A second element that leads to rethinking extensionists' training is the persistence of institutions and practitioners that use diffusionist assumptions in order to understand their practice (Chowdhury et al., 2014; De Leis et al., 2012; Faure et al., 2013; Landini, 2012a, 2015; Landini and Bianqui, 2014b; Minh et al., 2010; Pavón, 2014; Turiján et al., 2012). Thus, the challenge of creating training strategies aimed not only at developing knowledge and capabilities for RE, but also at undoing the diffusionist approach that a technical education impresses upon practitioners and even RE institutions emerges (Landini et al., 2009; Bocchicchio, 2013). In consequence, there is a broadening of factors to rethink, given they do not only include the development of new types of knowledge and competences, but also the process of learning through reframing, including complex subjective changes (Landini et al., 2013a; Rogers, 1996), which are intertwined with extensionists' identities as well as with more ample socio-institutional frameworks attached to them.

Hence, changes are needed in extensionists' training regarding three issues. Firstly, the expansion of the technical-productive knowledge needed to fulfill their job, depending on the context of action (Ragasa et al., 2015). Secondly, a diversification of the types of contents to be considered, including now not only technical knowledge but also other types that stem from an array of areas such as commercialization, marketing and agribusiness (Christoplos et al., 2012; Méndez, 2006; Ragasa et al., 2015; Sulaiman and Davis, 2012); group work and bonding with farmers (Cuevas et al., 2014; Landini, 2007; Swanson, 2010); participation and facilitation of social processes (Christoplos et al., 2012; Leeuwis, 2004; Ortiz, 2009; Thornton and Cimadevilla,

2010); and communication methods (Christoplos et al., 2012; Cuevas et al., 2014; Mulder, 2012), among others, all of which is an invitation to think of RE in terms of interdisciplinarity (Carballo, 2002). And thirdly, the development of reflective capacities (Bocchicchio, 2013) and of critical analysis of their own conceptions and practices (Cerf et al., 2011; Landini et al., 2013a) with regards to their conceptions of RE and professional identities.

However, despite the clear importance of extensionists' education and training (Kahan, 2007; Ragasa et al., 2015; Ryan et al., 2012), current training programs, at least in Latin America, "do not seem to be solid enough to train extensionists in the needed capabilities to face the challenges raised" (Aguirre, 2012, p. 46). Even worse, not only do these training programs appear to be solid enough to tackle the needs that emerge from practice, but they also tend to reproduce traditional training models that focus on the diffusion of contents and not on the development of capabilities to manage complexity (Rogers, 1996).

Undoubtedly, there are publications that address the issue with certain detail, such as the systematization of training experiences carried out by FAO (Kahan, 2007), or the analysis of competences and training needs conducted by Bocchicchio (2013) and Landini (2013). Also academic works on the evaluation of alternative training strategies can be found, such as the participatory, internet-based strategy implemented by the University of Caldas in Colombia (Parra and Méndez, 2005) or the reflexive training conducted in Paraguay with practitioners of the Ministry of Agriculture and Husbandry (Landini et al., 2013a). Nonetheless, it is clear that the available scientific literature on the topic is still scarce and disperse, in contrast with the multiplicity of papers on topics such as training for farmers, or learning and innovation processes that occur in the articulation between different social actors, amongst others. At the same time, it also draws attention the lack of consideration paid to current developments within the area of education and learning for rural development and innovation, such as social learning (Morgan, 2011; Moschitz et al., 2015) or communities of practice, in order to address the issue of extensionists' training. Thus, as was argued previously, in this paper we will reflect on extensionists' training processes from a critical and complex perspective, contributing to the construction of a transdisciplinary theoretical framework that allows us to think about them in the context of the institutional and social frames wherein extension practices take place.

2. Knowledge, learning and the limitations of traditional trainings for extensionists

Before addressing training processes for rural extensionists, the concepts of 'knowledge' and 'learning' will be discussed, in order to generate a solid base for the analysis.

2.1. The notions of 'knowledge' and 'learning'

The concepts of 'knowledge' and 'learning' have diverse meanings depending on the perspective used to address them. In order to organize this diversity, different conceptual contrasts will be presented and unfolded.

In general terms, a first distinction refers to the contrast between behavioral and constructivist theories. Behaviorism understands teaching and learning processes in terms of the transference of knowledge from experts to apprentices, assuming that the latter are passive subjects in the process of learning (Boghossian, 2006). In RE, the behaviorist approach supports

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