

Social learning & Peer-to-peer exchanges

for outreach and extension program development

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What is social learning?

Social learning refers to learning that happens when peers from similar or difference backgrounds exchange knowledge and create new understandings based on their exchange. Social learning happens in both structured and unstructured environments. As an emerging model for outreach programs, formalized peer-to-peer education programs create spaces for farmers or foresters to deliver information or host discussions with their peers. Organizational support or facilitation is often provided by extension professionals or program staff. Social learning also happens within personal relationships and among professional networks.

How it works:

- Peers *participate in setting the agenda* or conversation topics
- Peers learn about how their own *knowledge and interests are linked* to others' knowledge
- Peers *learn about an issue* under discussion
- Peers *develop relationships*

Outcomes of social learning:

- Management changes¹ and improved decision making²
- A growing awareness of human-environment interactions²
- Trust building & better relationships²
- Improved problem-solving capacities for participants²

Social learning between individuals:

When peers exchange information about management, the conversation often focuses on identifying differences in scale or context, and similarities between sites. This information helps them link new knowledge to how it can be applied to their own farm or forest³. Some learning that happens between peers is evidence-based, and emphasizes the attributes of the practice itself. For others, learning from a peer is grounded in understanding how to fit into an identity shared by a peer group. Groups that have been traditionally underserved by outreach efforts are often characterized as being identity-based learners⁴.

Social learning in networks:

Social networks and organizations play an important role in influencing management choices by farmers and foresters, and have the potential to enhance adaptive decision making.

- Farmers and foresters learn readily through social networks^{5,1} and often prefer to learn from and validate knowledge within their peer networks^{6,7}.
- Peer learning within communities and across networks generates a social multiplier effect which can significantly impact management decisions⁸.
- Farmer participation in a network with collective identity impacts their actions to conform with their identified group⁹. This network phenomenon relies upon mechanisms of social learning and social identity and has a higher impact where bonding and identity sharing is high¹.
- Existing formal and informal networks are poised to leverage peer learning to motivate adoption of resilient farm management strategies.

Social learning at a systems level:

In some natural resource management contexts, social learning has been described as a phenomenon involving institutional and structural changes that move larger social-ecological systems toward more sustainable trajectories¹⁰. In recent decades, natural resource based communities facing complex ecological challenges have used highly structured social learning programming to increase adaptive capacity at community and individual scales.



Building social learning into outreach programs for farmers and foresters

Guiding principles for program design:

Many programs have built social learning into their outreach strategies. Trends which appear across the body of literature include:

- Information is delivered by peers, preferably opinion leaders
- New ideas are discussed and debated among peers
- Programs are iterative, and occur with repetition
- Facilitators create neutral spaces for intentional interaction and discussion
- Trust building & social bonding are cultivated
- Good facilitation skills are critical to project success, as is project management.
- Community or individual capacity-building goals drive most of these projects.
- Informational content is driven by participant concerns and questions

Popular models for engagement:

- Workshops led by farmers or foresters
- Peer-to-peer mentoring programs
- Monthly focus groups with trained facilitators
- Workshops featuring panels of farmers or foresters
- Roundtable discussion series

How can social learning and peer-to-peer exchange enhance communication about complex topics?

Social learning can be leveraged in outreach programs to address challenges on complex, uncertain and politically charged topics like climate change adaptation.

- Discussion among peers can improve basic characteristics of the information on adaptive management, fitting it into the unique challenges of a production context and site conditions.
- The discussion becomes framed to local concerns and impacts of extreme weather, which may or may not be linked to climate change projections.
- The delivery of the information by a peer, particularly a well-regarded peer, can positively influence the way it is received.
- Discussion and participation engage people in problem-solving behaviors and supports behavior changes through active learning.

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