

Dr. Rebecca Nthogo Lekoko

Department of Adult Education
University of Botswana
P/Bag 0022
Gaborone, Botswana

E-mail. nthogo@hotmail.com/lekokorn@mopipi.ub.bw

Phone (267) 3552266 (W) Fax (267) 3552266 (W)

Perceived Effects of Field-Based Training in Building Responsive Partnerships for Community Development

Abstract

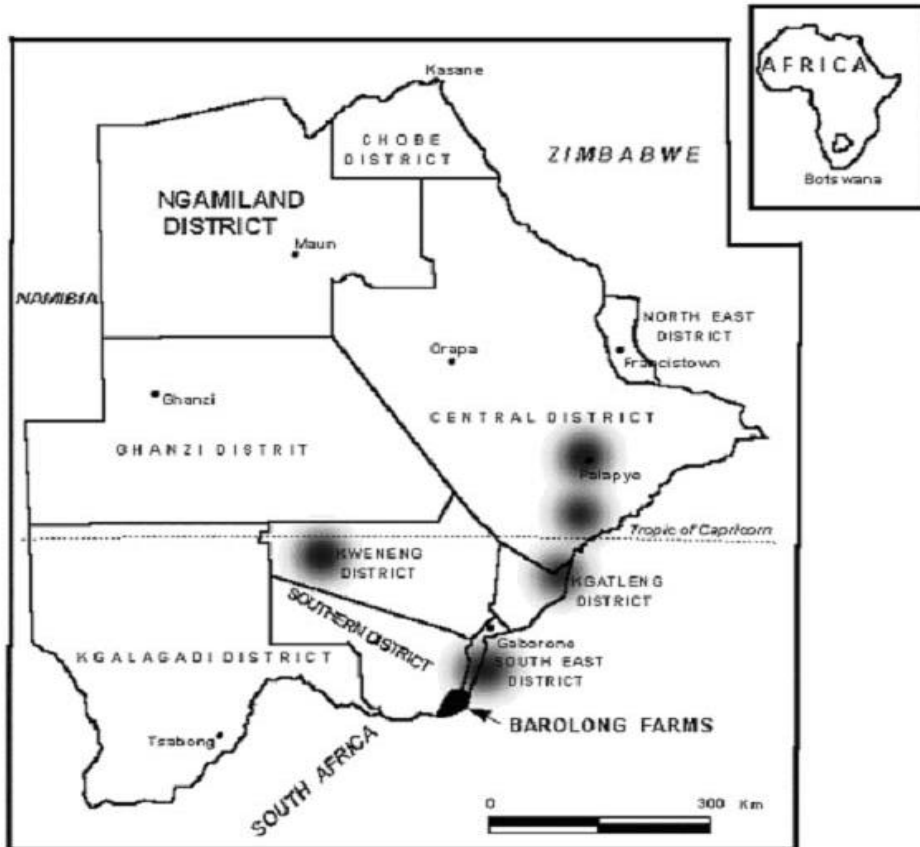
This paper is based on the findings of a study that investigated experiences of a cadre of extension agents who work with residents in the villages of Botswana. Twenty-nine community-based extension workers (CBEWs) participated in semi-structured interviews that explored their work and previous training experiences. One important aspect of this study was to find out how previous training experiences contributed to CBEWs' working relationships as partners in community development. Assessing CBEWs' previous training in the context of their actual work practices indicated that it is possible to conceive of and redesign extension training to provide learners with learning avenues and experiences that build sturdily on what they already know and can do given their work experiences, interests, and career obligations. Findings indicated that previous extension training experiences that were deeply rooted in sectoral and mono-disciplinary approaches undermined real attempts to promote the spirit of working together. According to the participants, effective working together can be backed up by a deliberate unification of CBEWs through a centrally organized training. Such training would pool extension agents from different sectors and use their experiences as rich resources for learning. From this experiential standpoint, participants suggested that structured and supervised field-based learning experiences be made integral part of their formal training. Field-based experiences would enable learners to gain new knowledge, skills, and attitudes within a wide range of learning avenues, including the social, physical, political, economic, and personal ambiances of authentic work practices.

Successful field-based learning is essentially a result of careful planning and implementation that include making efforts to establish teacher-learner rapport and trust, facilitating learners' independence and authority, securing necessary resources, placement in authentic work settings, mini-interdisciplinary group work of CBEWs with local communities, and planning for sharing and evaluation time. This paper therefore explores these essentials of field-based training from CBEWs' point of view.

Participation in this Study

A purposive sample of 29 community-based extension workers was recruited from six locations: Lobatse, Mochudi, Molepolole, Ramotswa, Mahalapye, and Palapye, indicated in the map below. There were 14 (48%) social workers; 7 (24%) cooperative officers; three (10%) agricultural officers; 3 (10%) health officers; and 2 (7%) rural area development officers (RADO). All of them were government employees.

Figure 1: Study Sites



Key
● Study Site

Rationale and Basis for Engaging in Structured Field-Based Learning Experiences

CBEWs as Field-Workers

In the context of the Botswana extension services, a CBEW is a field worker removed from operations taking place in offices (Mooka, 1994). A typical work atmosphere of such a CBEW is characterized by interactions, with other CBEWs, residents of a local

community, and community-located groups such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private sector groups, voluntary organizations, and parastatals engaged in community development.

Notably, CBEWs are from different extension sectors and they take lead roles in the provision and creation of basic social services of education, health, food, and social welfare. They provide services such as family welfare activities, destitute schemes, counseling, orphanage, and self-help projects. The nature of provision “demands that [they] work together; the tasks that [they] do link and connect”(Lekoko, 2002, p.153). Despite the necessity for them to work together, CBEWs reported challenges and problems that overawe their working together as partners, especially the social and political complexities surrounding their work as partners in community development. Authority and interventions such as political interference, illiteracy, and passive and negative attitudes complicate their working together, resulting in problems of resistance, rejection, and other tensions that defeat the spirit of working together. There are evidently strong social pressures from variety of sources calling for strong collaboration among CBEWs.

CBEWs lead roles demand that they “work together just as the body parts do” (Lekoko, 2002, p. 139); “We need to work as a solid unit [*seopasengwe*] and demonstrate that unity is strength” (Lekoko 2002, p.141), said one CBEW. A Setswana proverb, “*Kgetse ya tsie e kgonwa ke go pataganelwa*” (p. 141) captured their desire to strengthen what CBEWs described as disfunctional working relationships. The literal translation of this proverb is, “The more hands, the easier to carry a (heavy) bag of locusts.” The proverb carries the meaning of “unity is strength.” The reasonableness of their arguments for unity was ingrained in responses such as “It is not the result of financial resources that the government allocate for our work, it is the result of our effective working together that would make community development successful” (p.147). CBEWs suggested that meaningful acceptance of community development as a collective undertaking should be backed up by a deliberate unification of CBEWs through centrally organized training. Such training programs must not only illuminate the lived experiences of CBEWs as they work among themselves and with other interest groups in the villages, but also provide opportunities for CBEWs to take active roles by engaging in activities such as placements in authentic work settings, mini-interdisciplinary groupings of CBEWs with local communities, and other team-building activities. The independence and experiences of CBEWs are considered supremacy in such learning activities.

The Independence of CBEWs as Learners

CBEWs work under circumstances that are not easily amendable to strict rules. They are flexible and independent when taking initiatives and lead roles in community development activities. The concept of work for them implies being independent, thus it makes sense for them to ask for independence from teachers as controllers or conveyers of knowledge. For CBEWs, teachers are guides or facilitators. Their experiences of working independently have helped built their independent self-concept. Accordingly, such independence should be acknowledged and fostered in educational settings. They

view themselves as learners capable of taking initiatives and active roles in educational settings.

Learners exercise their independence by working independently in activities such as placements in authentic work settings and mini-interdisciplinary group work with local communities. CBEWs certainly wish facilitators to be sensitive to their learning preferences through open rules and regulations. Learners' freedom to express preferences and make choices of whom to partner with in authentic work settings is essential to successful field-based activities. The driving forces behind choices for partnering are CBEWs' work interests, preferences, and careers objectives. Learning for CBEWs is not a matter of ingesting teacher-defined decontextualized content but giving learners independence to select learning tasks that can meaningfully be explored through field-based activities.

While facilitators are expected to be sensitive to learners' learning preference by setting open rules and regulations, it is necessary to acknowledge that, a teacher is an authority in any learning situation. A teacher, for example, occupies a significance position in choosing the content of learning in accordance with the goals of training. Politically speaking, institutions have their own 'dos' and don't' and learners act upon such rules through teacher-knowledge, teacher-discretion, and teacher-authority. Learners should initiate their choices and teachers have the duty to check if such choices are consistent with the requirements for the course. Questions such as 'Do learners' choices exhibit responsibility and commitment to their work responsibilities as partners in community development? Do learners' choices reflect commitment to explore and learn new and challenging work tasks? Do learners' exhibit preparedness to learn and engage new knowledge, skills, and attitudes based particularly on prior work experiences? Do learners' choices reflect awareness of, and sensibility to training goals and resources available in the institution that houses the training? can help establish learners' active involvement in field-based activities.

Experiences as foundation for Engaging meaningfully in Field-Based Activities

CBEWs are field workers who have abundant work experiences. They get into the adult education lore of learning to build on and use their experiences as furtherance for their own learning. Therefore, as learners, CBEWs believe that the importance of experiences gained in the field under dynamic work circumstances always exceeds the fundamentals of theory-laden training. A potent contention is that "Everyone has a job and an experience, so everyone could have equal chance of sharing experiences" (Lekoko, 2002, p.175). Therefore, teachers have to provide them with learning avenues that would build sturdily on what they already know and can do given such work experiences, talents, interests, and career obligations. Field-based learning activities are ideal in providing learning avenues where learners can apply what they already know to different, new, and challenging authentic work environments and in turn generate and gain new knowledge.

Learning for CBEWs is not separable from their working conditions and experiences just as CBEWs are inseparable from their field experiences. In considering the importance of learners' experiences, we are reminded here of writers such as Linderman (1995, p. 34) who contended that "the resource of highest value in adult education is the learners' experience" (p. 34); Alan (1995, p. 27) who suggested that "the beginning of instruction [should] be made with experiences learners have"; Bergevin (1967, p. 168) who advised facilitators to "dig down in the reservoirs of experiences before resorting to text and secondary facts"; and Bondi and Wiles (1998) who emphasized that all learners are good resources for learning when realities of their lives are interwoven into the teaching-learning transaction. Knowles (1980) also encouraged facilitators to help adult learners to exploit their own experiences as resources for learning through such techniques as field projects and case studies. Kolb (1984) too, when he studied how adults learn, found that when adult learn something through their own initiative, they usually start with their concrete experiences. From engaging such prior experiences, they are in a position to generate new ideas and gain additional knowledge and skills. CBEWs too believe that they have worthwhile experiences that, interwoven in their training, would make training meaningful and potentially useful in authentic work settings (Lekoko, 2002). Meaningful and relevant use of learners' experiences can help promote learners' resourcefulness, creativity, analytic capacity, and critical thinking (Dewey, 1938, Freire, 1973, hooks, 1994).

Creating a Climate for Structured Field-based Learning

The challenge for trainers of CBEWs is to create opportunities for direct experiences in the form of placements in authentic work settings in which CBEWs "might learn best about working together and sharing [their] experiences by actually . . . making connections with people in the field" (Lekoko, 2002, p.187). This type of connection has the potential to create a culture in which training activities are publicly recognized and valued. Additionally, connecting classroom training with the world of work helps deepen learners' own learning by sharing what they do in the classroom with people in authentic work places. The challenge is to create a learning climate in which learners take classroom experiences to the field, and bring field experiences to the classroom, and in this way work responsibilities and challenges are added to the learning environments and training becomes meaningful and challenging. In order to create a collaborative environment in which learners assume responsibility for their field-based learning activities, a number of things must be in place. These are mainly teacher-learner and curricula essentials, discussed below.

Teacher-Learner Essentials

Both teachers and learners have specific roles to play in procuring, preparing for, and carrying out field-based learning activities. For the success of these learning experiences, facilitator-learner behavior congruence should prevail. For example, the facilitator should respect learners' choices, and learners must be open, free and genuine in sharing their experiences with the facilitator. Learners' self-evaluation (positive and negative)

should be considered a positive method of appraisal. As well, facilitator's evaluation of learners' progress should be conducted. Teacher-learner essentials can be created through a number of strategies, two of such strategies are discussed below.

□ **Establishing teacher-learner rapport and trust**

There is no better way of building rapport with adult learners than interacting with them and understanding and respecting their views and learning needs. Interaction with learners can be done prior to or during training sessions. For example, a "comprehensive departmental, ministerial, and service-wide consultation exercises with extension workers" can help policy-makers to understand, appreciate and truly address the actual challenges and problems of CBEWs' working together (Lekoko, p. 63). In the learning environment, facilitators can provide opportunities for learners to talk individually about their learning needs and how they expect the training to address such needs. From this sharing, facilitators can learn a great deal about learners' backgrounds, learning needs, and expectations. Understanding and respecting learners' needs is one good step towards building good rapport and trust between teacher and learners, and among learners themselves. To build rapport and trust with adults in the learning environment also requires that teacher share information indicating that he or she is approachable and open. Also, teachers would choose in-class-teaching methods that encourage interaction and relationship-building. Methods such as dramatization, role-play, and excursions can help build a close working relationships between teacher and learners and among learners. These methods are best suited to CBEWs' needs for they encourage learners to critically consider situations confronting them. They also allow teachers and learners to share authority. Such approaches are supported by writers like Brookfield (1986), hooks (1994), Freire (1973), Linderman (1995), Mezirow (1995), and Knowles (1983) who advocate for collegiality and mutuality between facilitators and learners as opposed to the traditional hierarchical relationships.

□ **Facilitating Learners' Independence and Authority**

Learners who engage in field-based learning activities are responsible for selecting and procuring their field placement with minimal supervision from the facilitators. Because students are responsible for procuring their own sites, they must persuade potential hosts on the basis of their professional expertise and authority. In other words, in soliciting placement, students must be viewed not as students but as professionals in their own right. Learners, therefore, should be helped to assume this responsibility with independence from total teachers' control; they should approach this important task as independent adult learners. CBEWs believe they can handle authority over and ownership of field-activities. They also expect to be assured that their participation is valued, respected, and worthwhile.

Curricula Essentials

□ *Preparation for Field-based Learning Activities*

In the preparation stage of practical experiences (field-based), there is need for teachers and learners to meet in a central place. A central place would provide opportunities for CBEWs from different extension departments to meet face-to-face and share their experiences in collegial and collaborative atmosphere. Sharing experiences is particularly important because it can help learners gain an understanding of what makes each one of them unique, in respect to work experiences, expertise, and interests. The sharing will also provide a picture and a sense of the diverse settings or contexts within which CBEWs work. This information may prepare learners for the complexity, variety, and dynamics of world of work they will be exposed to during field-work practices.

In addition to sharing experience, this phase concerns itself with exploration of the literature to keep learners abreast of new information and technologies employed in workplaces. Through small interdisciplinary groups and individual presentations, learners should be encouraged to evaluate perspectives from the literature in terms of their applicability and usefulness to extension services. Such evaluations are important in informing learners about different theories guiding the field.

The facilitator has a crucial role to play in phase one. He or she is responsible for producing package. This entails developing a tentative syllabus based on the resources and the constraints of the institution hosting the training (availability of transport, the library, and other resources). The syllabus would mainly address critical components of training including ways to structure and carry out field-based activities. Students and the facilitator negotiate the syllabus and the facilitator sets the stage for negotiations to be continuous based on the on-going field experiences. By the end of this phase, students should have selected their sites.

Substantive Features of Field-based training Programs

□ **Local Interest**

Facilitators in extension training are challenged to explore content areas in ways that permit intermingling of theory and field-based (local) content. CBEWs believe that there is so much happening in their communities: “We don’t need books . . . We need to talk about what is happening to us” (Lekoko, p.184). Field-based knowledge is something concrete and it makes discussion in the classroom stimulating and engaging.

A typical class in which the curriculum does not relate to local environments is perceived by CBEWs as having little value or responsiveness to challenges and problems that CBEWs are likely to encounter in real-life work situations.

Furthermore, a class devoid of local issues builds artificial learning that does not apply easily to authentic work challenges. Artificial learning, such as ‘bookish’ contexts, according to Zlotkowski’s (1996) can only approximate the complexity of real-world situations. The consensus, therefore, is that a curriculum based on direct practical experiences and knowledge would best address problems that trainees are likely to meet in their respective work environments.

□ **Placements in Authentic Work Settings**

Placements engage learners in partnership activities with other extension agents in different extension departments and other strategically positioned interested organizations. They are meant to connect formal content with the ever-changing conditions under which work responsibilities take place. High levels of involvement, interaction, dialogue, and communication inherent in such placements activities are considered essential for building effective partnership skills. Other pedagogical advantages that accrue from placements activities: are their ability to heighten trainees’ interest in learning by showing them that what they learn can have real application and effects in the lives of local communities; they make possible for direct and immediate experiences to be incorporated in the training programs; they can build a sense of unity among participants.

□ **Interdisciplinary groupings**

CBWEs perceive mini-interdisciplinary projects between them and local communities as ideal in promoting their skills to partner. Such projects will provide time for CBEWs to meet with villagers outside their formal job settings; this may help ease some tensions and conflicts reportedly existing between them. Min-interdisciplinary implies the working together of extension workers from different extension departments, for example, a CBEW working as health assistant and another working as a counselor, would work together on behalf of an HIV/AIDS victim during field work. The counselor might provide on-going support to the patient while the health assistant can offer her/his assistance too - “a team of CBEWs can organize and co-lead small groups and work on a project” (p. 189). CBEWs can organize themselves in different ways. Importantly, mini-interdisciplinary groupings will help CBEWs realize that they have different but complementary job tasks that make it necessary for them to coordinate their activities in the villages.

□ **Sharing and Evaluation Time**

Certainly, learners need to be together at times to share their field-based experiences. Learners can accomplish this sharing provided time is made available to reflect, re-think, and generate new knowledge to fit their world of work. During sharing, each learner brings knowledge and experiences from respective work sites and this might help CBEWs see the connection among them and learn from each other. Teachers, on the other hand, might relearn theories of formal training in the context of learners’ experiences; in turn, learners could relate theories they explore in class to the experiences they already have. During sharing time, a teacher actually does not only teach, but continually learns from learners (Freire, 1973).

Support Essentials for Field-based Learning Activities

Support features that are deemed necessary for the success of field-based learning activities include institutional support and reputation, sponsorship, and field receptivity.

□ **Institutional Support**

Institutional support refers to the responsiveness of the institution housing the training to the requirements of the training. For instance, for the learners to prepare and engage in field-based activities, an institution has to provide for regular and prolonged field visits to the learning sites; transport, materials, and other support services have to be in place. This observation gives strong indication that without proper and adequate institutional support, the proposed field-based training would not materialize or unfold as intended.

In addition to material support, institutional reputation is necessary in facilitating field-based activities. If a department housing training has a long and favorable reputation in extension and community services, this reputation will aid field receptivity.

□ **Field Receptivity**

Field-based training requires the availability of a variety of contexts to accommodate the diversity of interests, expertise, and career objectives of learners from diverse working environments. Since participation is voluntary, each prospective site must be persuaded of the benefits to be derived from participating in the activity. The assumption is that organizations would be receptive to learners when they perceive them as valuable contributors.

Learners are expected to jointly plan and work meaningful and fruitful with people in workplaces and local communities. In this way, learners will gain knowledge and skills from the synergy that comes when they work together with the hosting sectors and local communities.

Conclusion

It has been noted that learners who have been in the field for a significant time develop independent self-concept, confident, commitment, and competence. Such attributes make them responsive to the demands of field-based training. Such a field-based training embodies learning principles supported by a number of writers including Brookfield (1995), Freire (1973), hook (1994), Knowles (1983). In his andragogical philosophy, Knowles advocates learners' self-directedness, implying active engagement on the part of the learner. Brookfield's theory of reflective thinking also advocates for learners' self-directed activities. Mezirow's transformative perspective and hook's engaged pedagogy push for the need to incorporate learners' perspectives and insights in teaching-learning experiences. Mezirow's idea of transformative perspectives speaks to the importance of engaging learners and changing their perspectives based on their own circumstances, just

as hooks would like to see learners critically engaged in learning and becoming conscious of their own situations. Freire's problem-posing pedagogy prompts adult educators to rethink curriculum in ways that take learners not as objects of their learning but as subjects capable of acting upon their learning. Field-based training is therefore a good strategy to build learners' independent self-concept, self-direction, responsiveness, and commitment that are essential for building effective partnerships.

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