

# *Increasing Use of Teleteaching*

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THE TELEPHONE seems to be coming of age as a teaching technique in Cooperative Extension work in the United States. Whether it will take its place along with 16 mm films, magnetic tapes, and publications or will itself be replaced by an even newer medium remains to be seen.

In Minnesota, the number of extension groups reached by this method increased from seven in 1968 to about 500 in 1972. Wisconsin, Illinois, North Dakota, and Missouri, to name but a few, have also experienced an increase in the use of telephones for doing extension teaching. In Minnesota, we will use telelecture in about a quarter of the specialist assisted meetings that extension will conduct this year.

## *Party Line Really Communicated*

Two generations ago the party line had a place in keeping the neighbors informed about what was going on around them. Communications research has since told us that learning from one's neighbors isn't so bad after all. In fact, it comes second in ranking the common teaching methods according to effectiveness in certain situations. In reality, that's what teleteaching is—listening to a speaker at one end and several neighbors along the line.

Specific hookups of the telephones on party lines vary greatly from state to state. We use the standard conference call placed by a central operator in Minnesota. We may be connected with from one to 12 groups around the state in this way. Wisconsin uses a system of dedicated lines which are available 24 hours a day. Other states use so called "Government Service" lines and

still others use "WATS" lines. These are just mechanical differences. Basically, the teleteaching is about the same.

### *Time and Money Saver*

We tried to point out early in our use of the telephone that tele-teaching would save travel costs and specialists' time. It was hard to capture these savings in cash, however. In 1972, with 500 meetings being conducted by this method, it is becoming clear that extension is saving money as well as valuable time of the specialist staff. This system of communicating is meeting with favor by our administrators. Reaching a county group by tele-lecture is less costly than having a specialist drive to the county. The cost can be divided into three parts—installation of equipment, monthly rental, and line charges. Line charges vary by distance, length of call, and time of day. Last year the line charges averaged less than \$15 a meeting and other charges were somewhat less than that. And, of course, specialist time involved is only a fraction of what it would take to drive to a meeting. Costs of preparing slide sets, overhead transparencies, and other visuals may be quite high if a large number of groups are scheduled at the same time or so close together that the visuals cannot be shared. If a technician at the originating point is needed, his time should also be added to the costs.

### *Varied Subject Matter Offered*

Offerings on this year's programs include 51 different subject matter areas—just about everything that extension does by traditional methods. Typical subjects are water quality, DHI records, landscaping, fashion in dress, horse science, swine nutrition, the 4-H photography project, drug abuse, and laundry equipment.

In May or June county extension staffs select the subjects they want next year and suggest dates. Then a program leader in the state office matches specialists with the subjects and puts a time schedule together. After this is done, visuals are prepared for each meeting with the specialist and visual aids section of our Department of Information and Agricultural Journalism. Color slides are used most often. Overhead transparencies, swatches of cloth, and other samples of actual materials are also

used frequently. Visuals are sent out to participating counties a week before the meeting.

The importance of having county agents select subjects that fit their own programs cannot be overemphasized. Agents are not urged to accept any program unless they want it. It has been equally important to support the specialists' lectures with visuals in every meeting. We make no pretense that telelecture is as good as being at the meeting in person. However, it does take information to many counties that would not get it in any other way. Use of the telelecture is almost a mandate to the specialist that he do a good job of organizing and presenting his material including visuals.

We've found that the presenter should not talk more than 20 minutes without a break for questions, local discussion, or just a stand-up period. It's usually better to have a change of pace every 12 or 15 minutes. Sometimes this can be accomplished by having a guest lecturer or by calling on one of the county groups for a contribution.

### *Equal to in-Person Meeting*

A study conducted by Dr. B. Joseph Conlin last year in several presentations on DHIA records indicated almost identical results when he met with the groups in person and when he used telelecture. This was based on a series of pretests and post-tests which he gave to each of the groups, and measured achievement on the tests.

Using the telephone as a teaching method as we do in Minnesota is a team effort. First, a program leader must work with county staffs and schedule the subjects. Next, visuals must be planned with the specialists and produced in time for their meetings. An artist and photographer are important at this point. Then the visuals must be produced, mailed out, checked in, and mailed out again when needed. An experienced technician is a key person, too, in handling details of the equipment in the originating studio.

Teleteaching has several advantages over other methods:

1. It makes available highly experienced resource people who otherwise couldn't get to the meetings.
2. Staff schedules are easier to keep because of the smaller amount of time needed.

3. Telelectures can originate at any place. A lecturer usually can present his material from wherever he happens to be.
4. Travel costs of speakers are cut drastically.
5. The conference type presentation allows each group to hear questions from other groups and learn from this interchange.

### *Consider Disadvantages, Too*

There are some disadvantages, too:

1. Person-to-person contact is lost.
2. Occasionally there are mechanical difficulties, although as technical experience increases, these should be cut to a minimum.
3. If the telelecture equipment is not used much, cost per meeting can be high. Economy is based partly on number of uses per installation.
4. Cost of preparing visual materials can be high if not well planned.

We have much yet to learn about using the telephone as a new dimension in extension work. Based on our past four years of experience, we think our total effectiveness has increased because of this particular teaching method. We think the telephone will continue to be an important teaching tool.