

conferences: what happens off the agenda?

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Interaction among participants is important in evaluating some Extension-sponsored conferences. Interaction may be crucial, for example, when a free exchange of perceptions, ideas, and possibilities helps conference participants deal with their back-home problems.

In these instances, conference planners need information to assess the extent to which a conference actually fostered interaction. But a difficulty is the task of systematically collecting interaction data.

We tried a graphic technique to collect these kinds of data and the results seemed useful enough to share the method with you.

We tested the technique at a 4-day conference in Portland, Oregon, in June, 1979. Conference goers were 200 professionals who work with teenage parents. Each day the conference featured a particular theme and attracted a different mix of people from primarily four occupations—education, social work, public health, and medicine.

Interaction Objectives

The planning committee designed the conference to encourage interaction. Specifically, the planners wanted the participants:

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1. To interact across occupations.
2. To interact with others at levels that were more intense than just a casual, remote acquaintance.
3. As the conference progressed through the four days, to interact with more people even more intensely.

These intentions served as criteria on which we evaluated this aspect of the conference.

Graphic Technique

First, to identify their occupations, participants checked a multiple-choice question in which each occupation was represented by a letter. Second, respondents wrote the letter of their occupation in the center circle of the graphic shown below. Third, they recalled the people with whom they had interacted that day in ways that were important to them as professionals working with teen parents. Lastly, they wrote the letter of each person's occupation in an outer circle at a distance from the center circle that represented whether the interaction was "close" or "distant."

Figure 1 shows, for example, that the conference participant was a teacher (a), and that the teacher interacted closely with a nurse (b), and distantly with a physician (d).

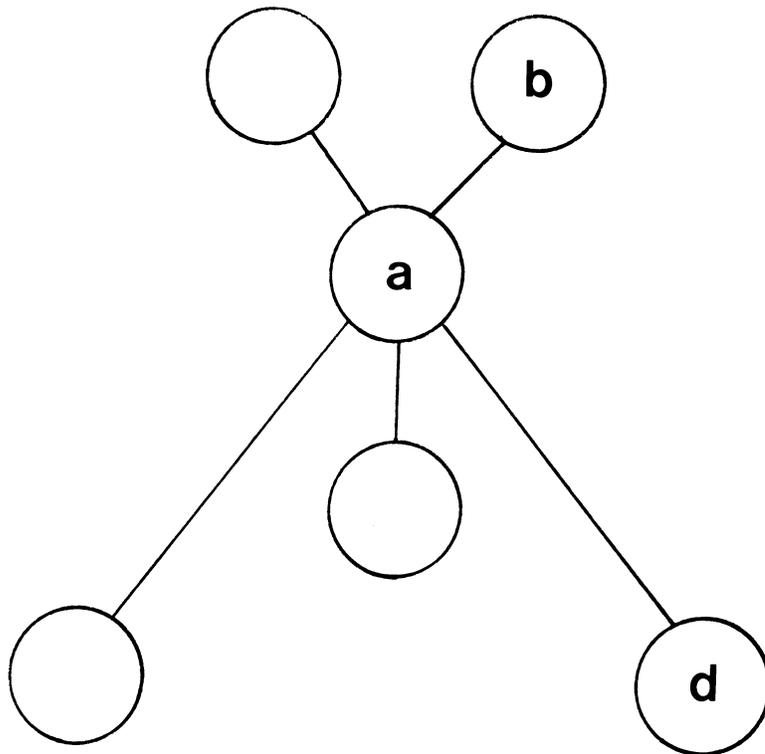


Figure 1. Graphic showing interactions.

We asked conference participants to answer these and other questions every afternoon. We'd printed each day's feedback form on a different colored paper and put the packet of forms in the conference folders picked up at registration.

Tabulation

To tabulate responses, we set up a matrix for each day, with occupations down the side and across the top. Two people—a reader and a recorder—tallied the responses. A tally was made in the box representing that intersection when, for example, a teacher had recorded a close interaction with a nurse and distant interaction with a physician (see Table 1).

Table 1. Matrix for tabulating interactions.

Occupation of respondent	Occupations of persons interacted with							
	a. Teacher		b. Nurse		c. Social worker		d. Physician	
	Close	Distant	Close	Distant	Close	Distant	Close	Distant
a. Teacher			1					1
b. Nurse								
c. Social worker								
d. Physician								

Findings

We found that the average number of interactions with people outside their own occupations increased steadily through the conference—from 3.7 on the first day to 4.7 on the last day. We also observed that the level of intensity increased. On the first day, an average of 2.4 interactions were close; on the last day, about 3.2.

Conclusions

This evaluation technique told us:

1. Who was involved in the interactions.
2. The intensity of interactions.
3. That the number and intensity of interactions increased as the conference proceeded.

These conclusions applied to all four occupational groups.

Evaluation of Technique

First, almost all registrants who volunteered to turn in a daily feedback form (from 31 to 75 respondents) completed this interaction question.

Second, the tabulation of the responses was straightforward. We had little difficulty identifying a respondent's occupation and interactions with people in other occupations.

Third, the technique wasn't close-ended. Some respondents added other occupations and circles.

Fourth, respondents used only the circles they needed to describe the interactions that were important to them.

Finally, respondents seemed to readily distinguish close from distant interactions. An indication was the length of the lines some respondents drew to depict the interactions in addition to those shown on the original graphic.

The technique relied on the respondents recalling people with whom they interacted that day. It also depended on the respondents recalling those interactions that were important and whether the interaction was close or distant. The professionals concerned with teen parents who attended this conference appeared able and, for the most part, willing to supply that information.

The technique gave the planning committee evidence to evaluate the conference on the basis of several indicators of interaction.

Adaptations of Technique

Here are some possible graphic technique adaptations:

1. Assessing interactions across age groups or geographic areas may be important and could be included, instead of occupations.
2. Changes in interaction could be traced among individuals rather than among groups.



3. Evaluators could print only one ring of satellite circles, if information about close and distant interactions isn't needed.
4. It could be completed daily, more frequently, or less often—depending on the evaluator's purpose.
5. It could distinguish people who registered for the whole conference from "drop-ins."

If we in Extension plan educational programs to enhance interpersonal interactions, then we can systematically collect, from the participants themselves, useful information to gauge our success.

Summary

Interpersonal interactions are complex. They happen with lots of people; some are important and some aren't. Some are intense and others remote. Some are with like-minded colleagues and others aren't. They happen at different times.

If we in Extension plan educational programs to enhance interpersonal interactions, then we can systematically collect, from the participants themselves, useful information to gauge our success.

The graphic technique illustrated here suggests one way that seems to warrant further adaptation and use.

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