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Effective Learning for Women

"Though not a perfect replacement for in-person learning, these virtual gatherings are providing a lifeline for many women who are feeling a bit isolated right now. We've started to see that these gatherings can be an antidote to that isolation, a salve for the open wounds between struggling farmers and the agencies meant to support them, and a necessary infusion of interdisciplinary learning to drive the resilience our farmers will need."

-Caitlin Joseph, American Farmland Trust

Benefits of Women-Centered Spaces

One of the reasons to create women-focused and women-only events, virtual or otherwise, is to establish a comfortable space for women-identifying individuals to find and access resources, information, and networks that they typically don't have easy access to in the agricultural services world. This effort is less about excluding men and more about defining a space for women to learn from one another and gain confidence. Many women who have participated in women-focused events report being able to find their voice in a space created *for* them. This can allow them to show up more fully than in spaces that tend to be male dominated in mainstream agricultural virtual and in-person events. One of the challenges we can face with this approach is feedback from men who are spouses or farming partners who may feel excluded from the conversation. However, when we can clearly describe the benefits of creating an intentional space for women in agriculture, most get on board with the idea. With the increase in actual numbers *and* growing recognition of women farmland owners and farmers, these women-oriented spaces are likely to be both more accepted and, in some cases, less necessary as women take on new leadership roles in agriculture.

When the situation warrants women-oriented programming, it is critical to integrate best practices for adult education oriented towards creating meaningful learning experiences for women farmers, ranchers, and landowners.

In their 2012 *Sustainable Agriculture through Sustainable Learning: Improving educational outcomes with best practices for adult learning – A Guide for Educators*,



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Sandy Bell and Janet McAllister⁶ identify five best practices for adult learning that have particular relevance to programs for education oriented to farm and ranch audiences:

These are:

1. Provide a safe, non-judgmental environment for learning.
2. Identify learners' assumptions and beliefs about topics (and themselves).
3. Link the content to learners' prior experience by providing opportunities for discussion and making connections to prior experience, future goals, questioning assumptions, etc.
4. Let learners work together to experiment and solve *genuine* problems through hands-on activities.
5. Give learners choice in content, process, and outcomes.

We hope you can take some time to review the guide⁶. It provides many easy-to-digest insights into the brain science of adult learning, strategies to help educators design successful programs, and a slew of practical suggestions for operationalizing these best practices before, during, and after events.

Providing a safe, non-judgmental online learning environment. As Bell and McAllister⁶ point out, learners are most receptive when they feel safe, both physically and emotionally. When people feel threatened, it can often shut down their ability to receive and process

"The networking and conversations amongst participants and resource providers has been even more open than in person. We have had smaller groups and they are from all areas of the country so perhaps that extra bit of anonymity is encouraging. I have always heard that it doesn't matter how many people you have at an event as long as you have the right people. The women who have participated have definitely been the right women. They come from every type or background: farm owners, operators, absentee, organic, conventional, beginning - everything. However, they still wanted to help each other, encourage each other, and listened to each other. In four years of Learning Circles, the virtual sessions have been the most rewarding."

- Ashley Brucker, American Farmland Trust

⁶ Bell, S., McAllister, J. Sustainable Agriculture through Sustainable Learning: Improving educational outcomes with best practices for adult learning. (2012). *Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research & Education (SARE)*. Retrieved from: <https://northeast.sare.org/wp-content/uploads/SustainableAgriculturethroughSustainableLearningGuideforEducators.pdf>



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information, whereas the emotions of joy and pleasant surprise prime the brain to receive and process new information. For these same reasons, it may be appropriate to consider getting even more specific with your targeted audience to develop affinity groups for women who share other intersecting identities such as race, ethnicity, language, and/or non-binary gender expression. Zaretta L. Hammond's book *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*⁷ explores these issues in regard to K-12 students, but much of the neurological patterns can support designing effective learning for adults, as well.

When it comes to online learning for women, some participants may be very familiar and comfortable with functioning in online environments. Others may experience anxiety over their technical proficiency or having to speak in front of a large group of people that they don't know and can't read well because of the reduction/skewing of nonverbal cues in a virtual environment. Also keep in mind that farm women are often juggling a range of farm, family, and off-farm work responsibilities, and that there may be things happening in the home or on the farm that could be distracting them from full participation.

⁷ Hammond, Z. (2014). *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students*. Corwin. Retrieved from: <https://crtandthebrain.com/book/>