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Online Leader Training for 4-H Volunteers: A Case Study of Action Research

Lisa Kaslon

University of Nebraska, kaslon2@unl.edu

Kathleen Lodl

University of Nebraska, klod1@unl.edu

Vickie Greve

University of Nebraska, vgreve@unl.edu



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Online Leader Training for 4-H Volunteers: A Case Study of Action Research

Abstract

4-H Volunteers Leaders recognize the importance of training and the need for continual education about the 4-H program. The challenge is to use the most innovative teaching tools to reach them. Online instruction is valuable in that it provides the medium and method for training more consistently, more regularly and at any time or place. In order to test the feasibility of online training for 4-H Volunteer Leaders, an Action Research Study was conducted. Results of the study showed that an online training is an acceptable method for training 4-H Volunteer Leaders.

Lisa Kaslon

Extension Educator
lkaslon2@unl.edu

Kathleen Lodl

Extension 4-H Youth Development Specialist
klod1@unl.edu

Vickie Greve

Extension 4-H Youth Development Specialist
vgreve1@unl.edu

University of Nebraska
Lincoln, Nebraska

Introduction

Research has shown that people respond better to any job they are given if they feel they understand the job and have been trained to do the job (Hoover & Connor, 2001). This same concept applies to volunteers, as is noted by Wilson (1976). Without guidance, volunteers can waiver from satisfactorily completing their job task and feel frustrated.

Volunteer Leaders play a critical role in the 4-H program. When 4-H leaders are trained and take responsibility for conducting the program, the whole 4-H program is enhanced and improved (Richard & Verma, 1984). In designing an effective training process, the needs of the volunteer and the 4-H program are better served.

Background

A number of different volunteer development models exist. In each of these, volunteer education plays an integral role. For example, the ISOTURE (Identification, Selection, Orientation, Training, Utilization, Recognizing and Evaluating) Model of Volunteer Development (Boyce, 1971; Dolan, 1969) identifies orientation and training as two key components to volunteer development. The 4-H Volunteer Leadership Development Program (Kwarteng, Smith, & Miller, 1988) lists training as one of its six components, and the Volunteer Management Cycle (Lawson & Lawson, 1987) has eight components with orientation, training, support, and maintenance being critical.

Research shows that this volunteer training does have an impact. Rauner (1980) found that when Volunteer Leaders are trained as to the overall size and scope of the program, their skills are enhanced and they are able to better share that information with others. They become more

effective volunteers. Research also indicates that in order for volunteer training to be successful, it must be effective.

Naylor (1973) found that poor or inadequate training could actually harm the organization. Volunteers will be less productive, leading to the loss of volunteers and even an unhealthy image of the organization by others. For these reasons, it is critical for the 4-H program to continually examine its volunteer training practices and involve the ultimate users in its methods.

4-H Volunteer Leaders are trained in diverse ways. In many instances, Cooperative Extension staff conducts face-to-face training in the counties they serve. However, as volunteer time becomes harder to access, programs expand, and budgets dwindle, alternate methods of volunteer development must be explored. Advancements in technology yield more training choices, such as an online training program.

According to Draves (2000), online learning is a growing medium of instruction in schools as well as with volunteers. It offers participants the opportunity to learn during their peak learning times, to study at their own pace, to focus on specific content areas, to test themselves daily, to have access to more information and resources, and to interact more with the teacher and classmates. It is anticipated that these features of online training would be beneficial to 4-H Volunteer Leaders.

The study described here used an Action Research Model to develop an online training program for 4-H Volunteer Leaders. As part of the Action Research, it also examined Volunteer Leader perceptions as to the usability of online training and the most usable components.

Methodology

Action research is a methodology that has the dual aims of action and research. The intent is to bring about program change through a systematic, reflective, inquiry process (Dick, 2001b).

Action research tends to be cyclical, participative, qualitative, and reflective (Dick, 2001a). As a result, the rationale for using action research was to be able to develop the online training as a part of the study. Action research allowed cycles to happen in which participants were included in decision-making that affected the development of the project.

The Action Research Model used to direct the study included three rounds of data collection based on participants' experience with the online training program. The program, designed in the University of Nebraska's course management system, Blackboard, is a password-protected system, which allows only enrolled users access. Ten modules were developed for the training. They include interactive features such as a discussion board, chat, and quizzing. The self-paced modules can be completed in order or can be worked through randomly, depending on the Volunteer Leader's needs. All of the modules include lessons as well as a section of resources, forms, and handouts.

For each round, data were collected via focus groups. Participants for the study were selected by 4-H staff to represent 4-H Volunteer Leaders from across Nebraska. Three 4-H Volunteer Leaders were selected from each of Nebraska Cooperative Extension's five state programming districts for a total of 15 Volunteer Leaders. Five of these Volunteer Leaders, one per district, participated in each of the three Rounds. For the purposes of the study, Volunteer Leaders needed minimal Web knowledge or the willingness to learn to use the Web.

Data was collected via conference call focus groups for each Round. Use of telephone phone bridges allowed statewide volunteer participation. Prior to Round 1, participants were given questions and asked to think about the answers. Prior to Rounds 2 and 3, participants were given basic instructions and asked to navigate through the 4-H Online Volunteer Leader Training Web site and comment on its usability. During each Round, participants were encouraged to contact the primary researcher regarding any technological issues.

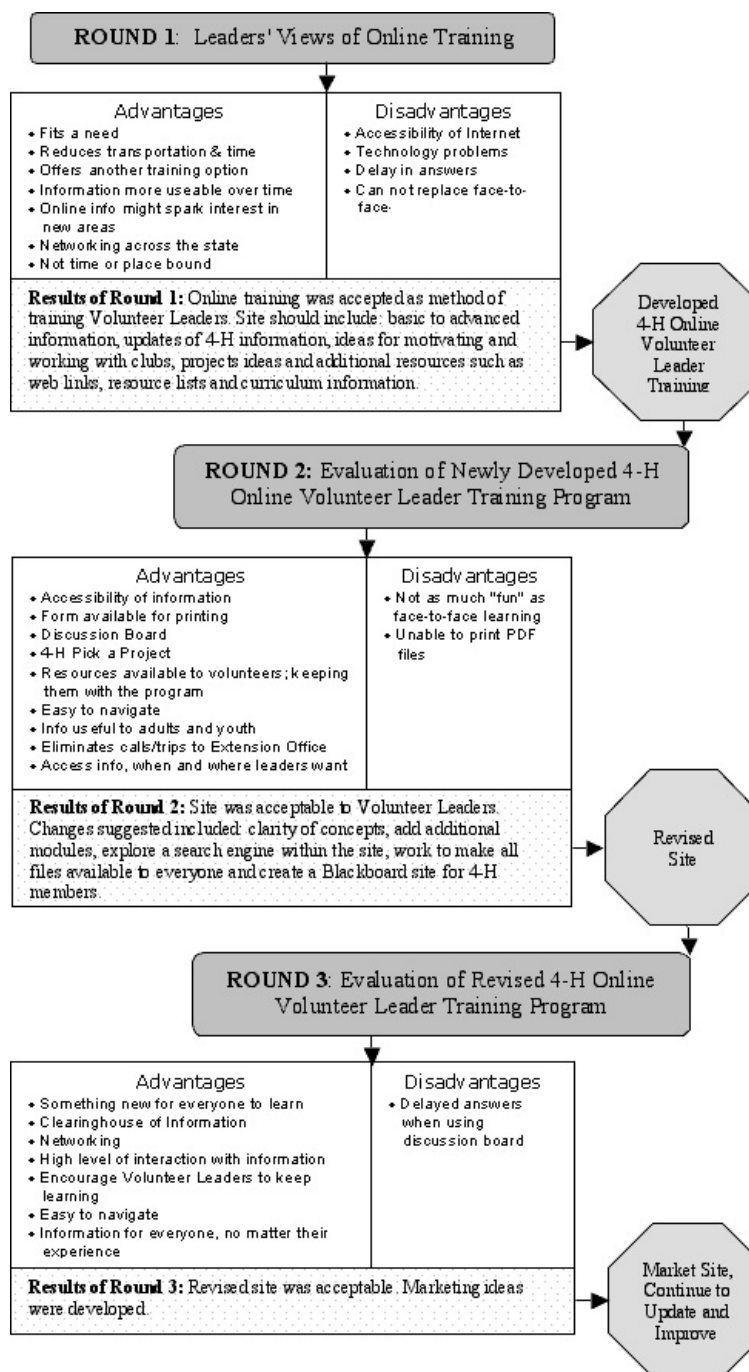
Data gathered from the focus group interviews were examined for examples of agreement or disagreement. Questions raised were also compiled. Themes for each focus group were determined and analyzed. Changes were made based on suggestions between each focus group to allow them to build upon one another and add to the overall goal of developing the strongest online training program possible.

Findings

The Volunteer Leaders in the study represented a vast age range: six were between the ages of 30-40, eight were between 40-50 years of age, and one leader was 50-60 years old. Thirteen of the respondents were female, and two were male. All of the Volunteer Leaders in the study were currently working with the 4-H program. Their years of experience as a 4-H Volunteer Leader ranged from 2 years to 40 years, with a mean of 7 years. All of the participating Volunteer Leaders had prior training experience in the 4-H program. This experience ranged from one to as many as 25 face-to-face training sessions, with an average of five sessions. The response rate for the study was 93%. Figure 1 presents the Action Research Model and results of each round of data collection.

Figure 1.

Schematic Diagram of Action Research Model from 4-H Online Volunteer Leader Training Program



Round 1

Round 1 of the research addressed the first Key Issue: *Is online training an acceptable method of training for 4-H Volunteer Leaders?* From the data collected the following conclusions were drawn:

- Online training is an acceptable method for training 4-H Volunteer Leaders,
- Online training is a usable way for 4-H Volunteer Leaders to gain information, and
- Online training is favored to face-to-face training by participants in the study.

As a result of these findings, the 4-H Online Volunteer Leader Training Program was developed. Based on components of face-to-face trainings and volunteer handbooks, nine modules were developed for use in the training, subject to approval from the Volunteer Leaders testing the site. Topics ranged from "What is 4-H?" to "Community Service" to "4-H Policies." The self-paced modules could be completed in order or could be worked through randomly, depending on the Volunteer Leader's needs. All of the modules include lessons as well as a section of resources, forms, and handouts for the Volunteer Leaders' use. All the forms were made accessible for printing for easy use at club meetings.

Round 2

The second Key Issue was addressed in Round 2: *Is the 4-H Online Volunteer Leader Training Program useful and easily understood by Volunteer Leaders?* Volunteer Leaders participating in Round 2 were asked to navigate through the Web site before participating in their focus groups.

Website navigation by Volunteer Leaders participating in Round 2 was measured by number of "hits" on the site by each participant. Hits ranged from 38 to 92 with a mean of 63.6. Results indicated:

- Online training has features that make it exciting for 4-H Volunteer Leaders,
- Online training provides consistency in the training that takes place across the Nebraska, and
- Online training provides a training option for volunteers if no other training option is offered.

Based on the responses of Round 2 participants, the site was modified, and Round 3 participants were asked for their feedback. The number of hits before Round 3 was between 78 and 205, with a mean of 127 per participant.

Round 3

The Key Issue in Round 3 addressed the overall evaluation of the 4-H Volunteer Leader Online Training Program, including the content, context, and usefulness of the site. The data showed both strengths and weaknesses of online training.

Strengths included:

- Better access to more information when it is needed,
- Providing information in a way that is not time or place bound,
- Reduction in travel time that would be necessary for face-to-face meetings, and
- More discussion and networking by Volunteer Leaders across the state.

Weaknesses of the 4-H Volunteer Leader Online Training Program included:

- Accessibility issues related to technology, especially in more remote areas of the state;
- Delayed answers to questions that were asked by Volunteer Leaders; and
- Online training not being as personal as face-to-face training.

In addition, the data from Round 3 showed that providing a wealth of information in an online course is important. Even if one person does not find it useful, others might.

Discussion and Conclusions

Results of this study showed that Volunteer Leaders are accepting of online training as a method for gaining new skills. This is consistent with past research (Cook, Kiernan, & Ott, 1986; Scherfey, Hiller, MacDuff, & Mack, 2000) that indicates 4-H Volunteer Leaders want other options of training in addition to county face-to-face meetings.

Volunteer Leaders in the study indicated excitement for technology and a willingness to explore learning via this method of distance education. It was interesting to note that Volunteer Leaders stated they were already using the Web to find their own resources for 4-H, so using the Web as a medium of instruction was not uncomfortable to them. While this is noteworthy, this finding may be specific to this study, because the criteria for participant selection was Web knowledge or the willingness to learn.

The Volunteer Leaders in the study felt it was easier and more useful to pull information off the Web than to go to the Extension Office. This is supported by research that shows online learning as removing physical and time constraints for the learners (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999). An Extension Office visit requires the Volunteer Leader to observe the regular office hours. Often, these hours may not be convenient for the Volunteer Leader. Online learning removes this barrier.

Past work shows that online learning can create a dynamic like no other and that the synergy produced through online learning takes on new meaning (University of Illinois's Online Network, 2001). This research was supported by the Volunteer Leaders in the study, who were excited and motivated about their experience while navigating through the 4-H Online Volunteer Leader Training. It was interesting to note that participants felt that the online training offered high levels of interaction even though there was not an online discussion board provided. This may mean that the level of interaction they were seeking was with the information and not necessarily with other people.

Volunteer Leaders felt that the online training would allow all Volunteer Leaders across the state access to the same material, some of which they had never seen before. For example, *4-H Pick-a-Project*, a Nebraska 4-H publication that lists all of the projects available through 4-H, had not ever been seen by several of the Volunteer Leaders participating in the study. This resource is annually available in hard copy through the local Extension Office. Volunteer Leaders were delighted to find this "new" resource online. It is possible that they had seen this piece before, but online education allowed them to see this traditional resource in a new way and in a more useful timeframe that

gave it more meaning.

Volunteer Leaders commented that online training that was accessible during their leisure time would be helpful, because some of them had never experienced training of any kind. These statements were interesting in that one of the criteria local Cooperative Extension staff had used to choose them for this study was their prior face-to-face training experience.

After more discussion, all Volunteer Leaders agreed that they may have had at least one face-to-face training experience, but it was a struggle for them to remember it. In contrast, all the county staff attested that the Volunteer Leaders from their county participating in the study had experienced face-to-face training in their county. This perception of what training means to Volunteer Leaders versus what it means to staff is worthy of further research.

Data collected in the study supports the strengths of online learning identified by past research on online learning and adult education (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999; Draves, 2000; Halsne & Gatta, 2002; Moore, 1989; Song, 1998; University of Illinois's Online Network, 2001; Willis, 1993). Over and over again, Volunteer Leaders attested that the freedom of directing their own learning, when they wanted, from where they wanted was ideal. For participants in the study, the strengths and advantages of online learning overwhelmingly outweighed the disadvantages and weaknesses.

While the results of the study overwhelmingly support online training for Volunteer Leaders, face-to-face training is still preferred by some respondents. This is consistent with past research that shows online learning might not meet the needs of everyone and can be used to complement other methods of learning (Boettcher & Conrad, 1999; Draves, 2001).

Recommendations and Future Research

The study overwhelmingly supports the pursuit of online training for 4-H Volunteer Leaders. In addition, it reaffirms the need to involve clientele, in this case Volunteer Leaders, in the program development process. Action Research was an effective tool for this process and could be used in other situations.

The study was limited by the fact that there was not a random selection of participants. Instead, county staff were asked to select Volunteer Leaders who had experienced face-to-face training in the past. Those who were selected already had a strong interest in the 4-H program and were willing to spend time strengthening their skills. In addition, when asked about their training experience, many of the participants did not think they had attended a face-to-face training. These discrepancies may have limited some comparisons of face-to-face training to the online training because the perceptions of what training is seems to be different between county staff and Volunteer Leaders. Additional research with an expanded sample could provide meaningful information.

As online volunteer training becomes more accessible, it would prove worthwhile to make comparisons between face-to-face training and the online training program. This comparison could determine what topics would be best covered in a face-to-face training and vice versa.

Results of the study show that online training is a valid way of reaching 4-H Volunteer Leaders. The experience of developing and implementing online leader training for a volunteer organization built on a traditional face-to-face training model brings synergy and new opportunities to Nebraska Cooperative Extension. It is one example of how we can better meet the needs of those we serve.

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