

Providing Training and Support for Volunteers Who Teach

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INTRODUCTION

Many volunteer organizations use volunteers as educators who help youth or older adults gain knowledge or skills. These volunteers need training and educational materials to assist them in their educator role. While there are guidelines for training volunteers (for example, Stenzel and Feeney, 1968; McAlea, 1980, and Isley and Niemi, 1981) and studies emphasizing the importance of training (Cook, Kiernan and Ott, 1986; Hass, 1979; Smith and Bigler, 1985; and Henderson, 1981), there has been little research conducted related to training volunteers as educators or how best to provide materials and support as they plan and conduct educational projects. Even 4-H (the largest youth organization in the US, which relies on 600,000 volunteer leaders to serve about 5 million members) has collected little systematic data on this issue. Part of the reason for this is that volunteer leader training for the 4-H club and the 4-H project leader is variable from state to state, and even from county to county in some states.

This lack of information leaves volunteer administrators with questions such as: what materials do volunteer leaders find most useful for facilitating educational projects? What content and formats are preferred? To whom do volunteer leaders turn for assistance? What are their sources of information, and how do they prefer to receive training and assistance and what are the barriers which keep volunteers from receiving adequate training? This article explores these questions and offers

some suggestions based on a study of 4-H volunteer leaders in Washington State and a review of literature related to principles of adult learning.

APPROACH

There has been increasing research in recent years related to how adults learn. Much of this information is directly relevant to assisting volunteer leaders who help others learn. We briefly review relevant findings which offer a basis for developing guidelines for training and supporting volunteer leaders. These findings are then combined with the results of a survey of 220 randomly selected volunteer 4-H leaders in Washington State. Based on the findings from these two sources we present a set of guidelines to guide training and development of materials for volunteer leaders who teach others.

ADULT LEARNING

Research related to adult learning has progressed to the point where there is general agreement on some aspects of how and why adults learn. We reviewed the writings and research of several well-known adult educators, including Apps, 1988; Boyce, 1986, Brookfield, 1990; Brundage and Mackeracher, 1980; Coolican, 1974 and 1975; Cross, 1981; Houle, 1961; Knowles, 1975, 1978 and 1980; Knox, 1977 and 1986; Long, 1983, Mezirow, 1981; Penland, 1979; Rachel, 1983; and Tough, 1967 and 1971. Based on research reported by these writers we identified the following principles:

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1. Adults learn best when they are actively involved in the content, design, and evaluation of the learning process.
2. Learning is promoted when new information can be related to the adult's past experiences, current skills and roles, and future aspirations.
3. Adults are motivated to learn for many reasons, but learning is often secondary to family, job, and community commitments.
4. Adults have individual learning styles and preferences which must be considered in designing effective educational programs.
5. While adults enter educational programs at different levels of readiness, most can move from dependence on a teacher toward independent self-directed learning.
6. The more highly motivated the learner, the more effective are self-directed approaches to learning.
7. Almost all adults are involved in some self-directed learning activities, citing learning style, pace and time factors, and a desire to be in control of their own learning as reasons for this learning mode.
8. Adults pursuing self-directed learning projects utilize other people and books or other printed material as resources for learning.
9. Most adults can effectively teach others based on their personal life experiences, skills and education, but teaching skills can be greatly enhanced through training, support and appropriate teaching materials.
10. Adult learners are sensitive to failure and tend to learn best when they are in a safe, trusting and supportive environment.

TEACHING MATERIALS FOR VOLUNTEERS

While the above principles can be helpful in developing guidelines for training, there is very little information available related to the development of teaching materials for use by volunteers. There are some general guidelines for use of written

materials for adult learning. For example, Knox, 1986, Joseph, 1981, and Brockett, 1984, suggest that printed materials should: (1) be well organized; (2) help the learner relate new ideas to past experiences; (3) be clearly written using familiar words, short sentences, active verbs, clear headings, short paragraphs and adequate white space; and (4) address the reader directly. These suggestions, however, offer little help in understanding what types of materials volunteers prefer to use as they lead projects designed to help others learn.

VOLUNTEER 4-H LEADERS' PREFERENCES

A sample of 220 4-H volunteer leaders in Washington state was surveyed to determine their practices and preferences regarding training and support (including materials) for teaching. The goal was to determine: (1) what information sources they use to lead a 4-H project, (2) which information sources they found most useful, and (3) the types of training they received and the training methods they preferred for learning about teaching.

VOLUNTEER CHARACTERISTICS

Before presenting our findings related to these goals it is important to share some of the characteristics of the volunteers we surveyed. Data from this study may relate to other volunteer programs to the extent that those programs utilize volunteers with similar characteristics. The volunteers we surveyed had the following characteristics:

- *Gender*: 84% were female, 16% were male.
- *Work*: 76% work outside the home (64% of these work full time).
- *Age*: 25% are under 36 years old, 54% are 36–45 years old, and 21% are over 45 years old.
- *Experience as a 4-H leader*: 15% had less than one year of experience, 33% had 1–3 years, 21% had 4–6 years, and 31% had over 6 years of experience.

- *Occupation:* 15% were educators, 7% were skilled workers, 23% were housewives, 15% were office workers, 15% were semi-skilled workers, 10% were business people, 11% were professionals, and 4% were farmers.
- *Education or leadership training:* 30% had a bachelor of education degree, 16% had another bachelor's degree, 28% attended some college, 26% participated in workshops only (no college).

These characteristics reflect profiles of volunteers found by other researchers in that our respondents were well educated, had a range of experience as volunteers, were middle class, covered a range of age groups, and had a higher percentage of women.

INFORMATION SOURCES USED

The volunteers rated materials developed for one of five project areas with which they were most involved as 4-H leaders. The project areas were: (1) horse projects, (2) livestock projects, (3) family living projects, (4) small animal projects, and (5) all other projects. They were asked how often they used various sources of information to lead their particular 4-H project. They rated each source on a five-point Likert scale where 1 = never and 5 = often. For ease of reporting, ratings of 1 or 2 are listed as "seldom," ratings of 3 are listed as "sometimes" and ratings of 4 or 5 are listed as "often." Table I summarizes the overall results showing the percent-

ages in each category and the mean score ratings.

It is interesting to note that respondents used their own experience more often than any other source of information. A relatively high percentage of volunteer leaders used member manuals, leader guides and optional member materials only "seldom" or "sometimes." Reasons given were that many of these materials, especially in the horse and livestock project areas, were outdated. Only use of member manuals and films varied significantly among the five project areas. Based on written comments, family living and small animal member manuals were used more frequently because of more up-to-date information and better format.

MOST USEFUL INFORMATION SOURCE

Leaders were asked to indicate how useful various information sources were in conducting a club or project meeting. They rated each source on a 5-point Likert scale where 1 = "not useful" and 5 = "very useful." For ease of reporting, ratings of 1 or 2 are listed as "not useful," ratings of 3 are listed as "somewhat useful," and ratings of 4 or 5 are listed as "very useful." Table II summarizes the percentages in each category and the mean scores.

Respondents indicate that resource people not employed by Cooperative Extension (4-H's sponsoring organization) were

Table I: Sources of Information Used to Lead 4-H Projects

<i>Information Source</i>	How Often Used? (percent)			<i>Mean*</i>
	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	
My Own Experience	3	11	87	4.4
Member Manual	17	26	57	3.6
Leaders Guide	31	25	44	3.3
Resource People	38	23	40	3.0
Optional Member Materials	39	29	32	2.9
Library Resource Books	59	17	24	2.4
Films, Videotapes, etc.	61	21	18	2.2

*Mean based on a 5-point scale where 1 = never and 5 = often

Table II: Usefulness of Information Sources for 4-H Projects

<i>Information Source</i>	Usefulness (percent)			<i>Mean*</i>
	<i>Not Useful</i>	<i>Somewhat Useful</i>	<i>Very Useful</i>	
Resource People (outside Extension)	5	14	78	4.29
Member Manual	8	22	65	4.01
Extension Bulletin	13	19	57	4.01
Extension Personnel	14	21	54	3.96
Optional Member Materials	15	27	43	3.85
Leader Guide	15	25	53	3.80

*Mean based on a 5-point scale where 1 = not useful and 5 = very useful

the most useful information sources with 92% rating them as "somewhat" or "very useful." Other sources were ranked fairly evenly in usefulness with 78% to 87% rating these sources as "somewhat" or "very useful." These ratings are somewhat puzzling since over one-third indicated they did not use leader guides, resource people, or optional member materials (see Table I). These findings support Coolican's (1974 and 1975) and Penland's (1979) findings on self-directed learning which show that self-directed learners rely on their own skills and prefer to use people such as friends as their primary outside information source. Reading is the second choice for obtaining information for self-directed learners.

The lower ratings for optional member publications and leader's guides and comments from respondents indicate a need to evaluate these materials for currency of information, usefulness, readability, and format. To better understand what makes materials useful to leaders, they were asked to rate content and format they found most helpful in member manuals, leader guides and optional member publications. Following are the highest-rated items with the percentage rating each as "somewhat helpful" or "very helpful" in parentheses: basic information (94%), goals and objectives for project (88%), project ideas (87%), step-by-step lesson guides (84%), ideas for meetings (84%), and activity guides (82%).

TRAINING METHODS

The final goal was to assess methods used to train the 4-H volunteer leaders and determine the methods 4-H leaders preferred for leader training. The respondents indicated on a 5-point Likert scale how often they received training through various methods. A rating of 1 indicated a method was never used and a rating of 5 indicated a method was often used. For ease of reporting a rating of 1 or 2 is listed as "seldom," a rating of 3 is listed as "sometimes," and a rating of 4 or 5 is listed as "often." Table III shows percentages of each category and the percentage of leaders rating each as the preferred method.

The 4-H leaders indicated that booklets and pamphlets were used most often for their training (84% received training through this method "sometimes" or "often"). The other methods were used less frequently. When asked which method was most preferred only 11% selected books and pamphlets. Most respondents preferred clinics and workshops (27%), over one-on-one sessions with other leaders (18%), and training in professional groups on subject areas such as with breed associations (14%). Training through college classes or workshops was the least popular choice.

Training methods are important not only in getting needed information to the volunteer leader effectively, but also in simply reaching the volunteer leader. That is, many volunteers might not be able to attend training which requires time away

Table III: Frequency of Leader Training Methods

Training Method	% Trained by Method			
	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>Sometimes</i>	<i>Often</i>	<i>Prefer</i>
Booklets or Pamphlets	16	29	55	11
Clinics or Workshops	34	21	45	27
1-1 With Other Leaders	29	30	41	18
Professional Groups	43	24	34	14
Videotapes or Films	53	26	21	8
Leader Training	58	26	15	9
College Class/Workshop	72	15	27	3
Classes With 4-H Faculty	72	18	11	9

from home and work. Of those we surveyed, 45% had no leader training. Over 52% had no training specific to the 4-H projects they led and 75% had less than five hours of training. In the written comments the leaders cited transportation, family and work conflicts as the primary reasons why they don't attend leader training. The leaders felt that training is very important to help them learn a variety of things related to leading a 4-H project.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the literature review and our survey of volunteer leaders we recommend the following in providing training and materials for volunteers who teach.

1. Training is needed and desired by volunteer leaders. While adult volunteers have much to offer based on their training and life experiences, their skill in teaching others can be enhanced by appropriate training and support.
2. Volunteer leaders appear to share the characteristics of self-directed learners. They prefer training in one-to-one or small group settings. They most often seek out accessible friends or acquaintances as resources for needed information. This suggests that volunteer administrators consider building networks of accessible resource people which volunteers can seek out when information or assistance is needed. Another option is to set up mentoring systems.
3. Because volunteers have different levels of training and experience and be-

cause they vary in their learning styles, it is important to offer a variety of training and support approaches.

4. While volunteers appear to prefer direct contact with trainers or information providers, there is a need to provide good reference and support materials which they can use in planning and teaching others. Volunteers we surveyed used materials when they were available and when the materials were well-organized and up-to-date.
5. Training programs need to be planned in collaboration with the volunteers. Like all adults, volunteers learn better when they are actively involved in the content, design, and evaluation of the training. This ensures the training is directly relevant to their needs. It also ensures that the content and format are compatible with volunteers' learning styles and that they are accessible and timely.
6. In general it is essential to develop a cooperative collegial atmosphere for training and support. Volunteers need to operate in a trusting environment where they feel like equal partners in a shared goal. Such an environment can help volunteers move from learners who feel dependent on trainers to more self-directed learners.
7. As with the group we surveyed, many volunteer organizations have some turnover in volunteers resulting in fairly high numbers of volunteers with little or no experience. This suggests the need for developing at least some aspects of training which are reusable and cost effective. In doing this it is essential, however, to make certain that the methods

or materials do, indeed, meet the needs of each successive group being trained.

In summary, training and support of volunteers who teach others is critical to effective volunteer programs. While there are, obviously, no recipes which guarantee success, we believe that volunteer administrators who follow these guidelines are moving in the right direction.

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