

# Using the Web to Train and Support Teen Volunteers: An Initial Assessment of the North Carolina TRY-IT! (Teens Reaching Youth through Innovative Teams) Program

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The use of technology to encourage, support and manage volunteerism and/or volunteer programs has been discussed in the published literature only during the past 15 years. Cravens (1998) was the first to suggest that "Virtual volunteering enables anyone to contribute time and expertise to nonprofits...and other organizations that utilize volunteer services without ever leaving home or office" (p. 2). According to the author, "Virtual volunteering is not a replacement for face-to-face volunteering. Instead, it expands existing volunteer resources, augments an organization's off-line activities, and offers another way for someone to help support an organization and give back to the community" (p. 3). In later articles she concluded that "Volunteer managers are already under increasing pressure to integrate technology into their work, and that pressure is only going to increase" (Cravens, 1999, p. 61), and emphasized the enormous potential of virtual volunteering in human service organizations (Craven, 2000).

Burt and Taylor (2000) discussed the potentials for information and communication technologies to drastically reshape the manner in which voluntary organizations do business. According to the authors, "Embedded within electronic networks is the potential to reshape organizations internally, reconfigure relationships across networks of

organizations, and redefine relationships with individual citizens" (pp. 131-132). Safrit and Merrill (2002) discussed the potential for new technologies to broaden volunteer opportunities. "New distance learning techniques via the Internet can revolutionize training, off-site volunteer supervision and ongoing support" (p. 20). However, they concluded, "This exciting new dimension to volunteerism will require careful monitoring and research in the months ahead to assess volunteer satisfaction as well as client impact" (p. 21). However, Saidel and Cour (2003) noted, "While research has been conducted on technology and work in the private and public sectors, there are few studies detailing the effect of technology on work in the voluntary sector and scant literature to guide systematic investigation" (p. 6).

Similarly, during the past decade, an increasing focus of volunteer management literature has been devoted to better engaging youth, and particularly teens, as volunteers. Smith and Haverkamp (1991) described an innovative community program in which high-risk teens served as volunteers by teaching younger latchkey youth in Nevada. Steinbach (1992) discussed special considerations that managers of volunteers must consider when working with teen volunteers, including making the volunteer opportunity easily

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accessible to teens (since transportation and time of day may be barriers); fostering teens' imaginations through volunteerism; and offering both long-term and short-term (i.e., episodic) volunteer opportunities for teens. Kleon, King and Wingerter (1996) concluded that "[Teens] are willing to take leadership through volunteerism to improve the quality of life in their communities. ... Special efforts must be made to prepare adults for the teen volunteering, as well as to prepare teens to volunteer in an adult volunteer environment" (p. 41).

Safrit, Scheer and King (2001) discussed teen volunteerism within the larger context of the entire human life span. They noted that "Teens are more willing to...seek greater responsibility in deciding what volunteer projects to conduct. Volunteer opportunities can enhance the teen's career exploration, provide an opportunity to learn about themselves, and be included as a part of building a strong college application or job resume" (p. 19). Safrit (2002) described what he termed the *Four Es* of working with teens: empathy, engagement, enrichment and empowerment. According to the author, "Effectively empowering teens requires a nonprofit organizational culture that values the contributions of teens, and our own personal commitment to bringing that culture to life" (p. 25).

Junck (2004) identified aspects of successful youth-service learning programs that connect the individual teen to a volunteer program, and subsequently to the larger community. They included focusing upon a true community problem rather than a volunteer organization issue; being student-driven based upon teamwork; and incorporating student reflection into the program design, with adult mentors available to support the students' efforts. Finally, Safrit, Gliem and Gliem (2004) compared reasons for, as well as barriers to, volunteering among pre- and early-teen youth in public school grades 5 to 8, and senior teens in grades 9 to 12. Barriers identified for both grade levels included low personal interest in the volunteer activity, a weak connectedness to volunteerism overall, and personal challenges related to personal, familial and school time commitments.

Reasons identified for both grade levels included pressure to volunteer from adults and peers, encouragement by adults to volunteer, altruistic reasons, and spiritual reasons. The authors concluded that "the most effective infrastructure for youth volunteerism and community service may be through youth-adult partnerships, i.e., youth and adults working together as equal peers to address through volunteerism the serious challenges facing their communities" (p. 39).

## THE NORTH CAROLINA 4-H TRY-IT! PROGRAM

North Carolina 4-H Youth Development is the youth-focused program of the Cooperative Extension Service. In 4-H, community-based youth development professionals manage adult and youth volunteers who guide experientially-based educational programs for youth ages 5 to 18. The NC 4-H Teens Reaching Youth (TRY) program was developed initially in 1986 (Groff, 1992) and sought to (a) improve teen self-esteem and life skills, including leadership; (b) enable teens to realize maximal personal growth and understanding; (c) empower teens to make a difference in the lives of others (especially younger youth) through teaching opportunities; and (d) empower teens to contribute to the common good through volunteerism and service. In TRY, teams of teen volunteers, coached by an adult volunteer, taught 4-H subject matter to younger youth.

In 2002, the authors developed Teens Reaching Youth through Innovative Teams (TRY-IT!) as the next generation of the original TRY program. TRY-IT! utilizes innovative Web-based learning modules to strengthen and expand community-based teen volunteerism and service through effective teen-adult partnerships. Still focusing upon the original TRY objectives, TRY-IT! also seeks to (a) foster and support effective teen-adult partnerships throughout project development, implementation, and dissemination; (b) expand teens' opportunities and abilities to develop leadership skills through volunteerism and service; (c) utilize interactive Web-based resource modules (available 24/7) to support teens and adults in developing effective part-

nerships in addressing community issues; and (d) strengthen participants' personal and interpersonal leadership skills through active volunteerism and community service by teaching younger youth. Project collaborators include the Department of 4-H Youth Development at NCSU and National 4-H Council in Chevy Chase, Maryland.

TRY-IT! will eventually include twenty-six 45-minute interactive Web-based modules in three focus areas: (a) building effective and sustained teen-adult partnerships (seven modules); (b) developing effective experiential teaching and planning skills (nine modules); and (c) strengthening individual and shared leadership (10 modules). Additionally, a future section will support adult volunteers serving as coaches of TRY-IT! teams. The TRY-IT! modules are online resources that teen and adult TRY-IT! team members access to build subject matter knowledge and skills addressing leadership, effective teaching and learning, and teen-adult partnerships. The modules are designed to prepare TRY-IT! team members for a required in-depth, face-to-face weekend training retreat, as well as to support, motivate, and expose them to further in-depth topics following the retreat.

The content of each TRY-IT! module was developed by a six to eight member writing team composed of youth and adult volunteers and Extension professionals, working in partnership as Subject Matter Experts (SMEs). The project's Instructional Designer coached the teams in writing learner-focused content effectively integrated with effective Web design and IT systems, based on the contemporary literature (Heide & Henderson, 1994; Jukes, Dosaj, & Macdonald, 2000; Kruse & Keil, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Schreiber & Berge, 1998). Writing teams identified various distance technologies (e.g., animation, streaming video, self-assessed feedback loops, etc.) within individual modules to maximize appeal to teen audiences, promote active learner engagement, and maximize learner retention of module content.

There is practically no published literature addressing virtual volunteerism, or the use of information technologies and distance learning strategies, among teens. Mincemoyer

(2003) investigated the use of the Internet to support adult 4-H volunteers in Pennsylvania and concluded,

*There are many benefits for volunteers and the extension organization to Internet distribution of resources [sic]. 4-H volunteers are willing to use this new technology to receive curriculum resources ... Providing curricula and resources on the Internet via a volunteer Web site not only allows the volunteer to access the resource or publication on demand, but also provides an opportunity ... to provide links for volunteers and youth to learn more about their topic of interest (p. 34).*

However, applied research is needed to assess teens' interest in and use of Web-enhanced curricula and resources that encourage them to volunteer, while also providing required training and support resources 24/7 in an interactive and engaging format. According to the Independent Sector (2001), "So far there is little research that reveals how technology has and will continue to change the dynamics of civil society and the nonprofit sector" (p. 1).

## PURPOSE AND METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this exploratory study was to assess teen volunteers' attitudes regarding three pilot educational Web-based modules from the North Carolina 4-H TRY-IT! program. The researchers developed a quantitative methodology using a written questionnaire to collect data (de Vaus, 1996). The questionnaire was developed from Web-based learning constructs suggested by Jukes, Dosaj and Macdonald (2000) as well as Hall's (1997) eight criteria for evaluating Web-based training (Table 1).

The questionnaire consisted of two sections. Section I included 35 items using a ten-point Likert-type scale (ranging from 1 = *totally disagree* to 10 = *totally agree*) to measure respondent attitudes toward each of the eight criteria. Section II included five additional items collecting data on three selected respondent personal characteristics. The

researchers established the instrument's face validity using a panel of national distance learning experts in Cooperative Extension and/or youth development, and modified the instrument slightly based upon input from the panel of experts.

The researchers collected data from convenience samples of teen 4-H members (all between the ages of 13 and 18) on two separate occasions. The first sample comprised 67 teen 4-H members attending the 2003 State 4-H Congress held on the campus of North Carolina State University July 21-25, who were from a mixture of rural and non-rural North Carolina counties. These data were collected during two workshops conducted by the project's Instructional Designer. The second sample consisted of 30 teen 4-H members from rural counties who had been recruited by their county 4-H professionals to participate in a weekend TRY-IT! retreat held at an eastern NC 4-H educational center. The researchers collected these data from the project's co-directors on the final day of the retreat. All data collection followed procedures suggested by Kraut (1996), McNabb (2002), and Rea and Parker (1997). The researchers entered all data into a personal computer and calculated descriptive statistics to satisfy the research objectives. Cronbach's

alphas for the holistic instrument and its respective eight constructs were calculated as overall (.92), content (.61), instructional design (.65), interactivity (.63), navigation (.64), motivation (.78), media use (.72), evaluation (.63), and aesthetics (.74). Nunally (1976) stated that for purposes of exploratory research, Cronbach alphas of .50 or greater as measures of internal consistency are indicative of a reliable instrument.

## FINDINGS

On both occasions, participants evaluated each construct of the modules as above average (Table 2). For teen leaders' initial exposure to the modules during the 2003 NC 4-H Congress, individual construct mean scores varied from a minimum of 7.51 for "aesthetics" (on a measured range of 2-10), to a maximum of 20.45 for "motivation" (on a measured range of 8-30). For the teen volunteers' weekend training, based upon their more extensive self-directed work with the modules, individual construct mean scores ranged from a minimum of 7.44 for aesthetics (on a measured range of 4-10), to a maximum of 19.93 for motivation (on a measured range of 13-27). Mean scores for each respective construct were well above the corresponding median range point.

**TABLE 1**  
Eight criteria (Hall, 1997) used to develop the research instrument

Criterion	Operational Definition (Hall, 1997)	Number of Questionnaire Items
Content	Does the program include the right amount and quality of information?	5
Instructional Design	Is the program designed in such a way that users will actually learn?	5
Interactivity	Are learners engaged through the opportunity for their input?	4
Navigation	Can learners determine their own course through the program? Is there a course map available? Is there an appropriate use of icons and/or clear labels so users don't have to read excessively to determine program options?	4
Motivational Components	Does the program engage the user through novelty, humor, game elements, testing, adventure, unique content, surprise elements, etc.?	6
Use of Media	Does the program employ video, animation, music, sound effects, and special visual effects? Is the gratuitous use of these media avoided?	4
Evaluation	Is there some type of evaluation? Is mastery of each section's content required before proceeding to later sections? Are section quizzes used? Is there a "final exam"?	5
Aesthetics	Is the program attractive and appealing to the eye and ear?	2

TABLE 2

Measures of central tendency and variance for three pilot tested TRY-IT! modules

Construct	Possible Range	Median Score	NC 4-H Congress (n = 67)		TRY-IT Retreat (n = 30)	
			Measured Range	Mean (std. dev.)	Measured Range	Mean (std. dev.)
Content	0 – 25	12.50	13 – 25	20.03 (3.1)	13 – 25	19.85 (3.1)
Instructional Design	0 – 25	12.50	10 – 25	18.45 (3.4)	11 – 23	17.32 (3.0)
Interactivity	0 – 20	10.00	7 – 20	15.13 (2.8)	8 – 20	16.39 (2.7)
Navigation	0 – 20	10.00	9 – 20	16.21 (2.9)	4 – 20	13.38 (4.0)
Motivation	0 – 30	15.00	8 – 30	20.45 (4.8)	13 – 27	19.93 (3.6)
Media Use	0 – 20	10.00	7 – 20	15.29 (3.3)	8 – 17	13.15 (1.9)
Evaluation	0 – 25	12.50	11 – 25	18.22 (3.4)	9 – 25	19.12 (3.9)
Aesthetics	0 – 10	5.00	2 – 10	7.51 (1.9)	4 – 10	7.44 (1.7)

## CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Due to the exploratory nature of the study, the reader is cautioned about generalizations of the study findings beyond the NC teen 4-H member participants.

The three TRY-IT! modules assessed in this study appear to be well designed according to the distance education literature, and well received by the 4-H teen members who have piloted them. Each of the eight construct mean scores was greater than the construct's median score.

Based upon the study findings for the constructs of content, motivation, interactivity, and evaluation, the TRY-IT! modules investigated would appear to demonstrate Reksten's (2000) advice that Web-based instruction for youth "should first and foremost address the student processes and skills that are transferable and that will develop independent thinking" (p. x). Safrit and Jones (2003) emphasized the importance of incorporating such independent, critical thinking development into volunteer training curricula. "As non-formal ambassadors and representatives of nonprofit organizations and programs, it is imperative that volunteers be challenged to learn 'how to think' rather than just 'what to think.' They must develop the personal capacities to make critical decisions regarding their actions on behalf of the organization" (p. 17). Each TRY-IT! module begins by guiding the teen volunteer in connecting the module focus to her or his prior life experi-

ences before introducing the new training content to be addressed. Teen volunteers are subsequently allowed to safely practice the new content presented by the module at their own pace through structured interactive Web-based exercises and activities. Finally, the teen volunteer is challenged to assess her or his own learning through the use of guided reflection sheets, and to apply the knowledge to broader aspects of personal, school, and community life.

The study findings support Ellis, Wagner, and Longmire's (1999) critical components for learner-centered instruction in Web-based training, which emphasizes that learning does not occur in a societal vacuum, but rather must build upon past experience, connect learning to real-life situations, and both challenge learners and provide them with positive reinforcement. The findings emphasize Bielawski and Metcalf's (2003) benefits of blended *eLearning* defined as "a blend of instructor-led training with some type of online learning activity" (p. xvii). The benefits include providing Web-enhanced training that is personalized, interactive, just-in-time, current, and user-centric. While the authors would argue that these five training attributes are just as applicable to any volunteer-focused training, they are critically applicable to training teen volunteers who are highly computer-literate and internet-savvy.

More important, the current modules provide, for teens as volunteers, critical subject

matter resources that are interwoven into a motivational and fun delivery system based upon best practices and contemporary research in distance education, technology-enhanced teaching and learning, youth-adult partnerships, teen volunteerism, and community-based youth development. The use of Web-enhanced technologies in the TRY-IT! program modules is not intended as a panacea for attracting, motivating, and retaining teens as volunteers. Rather, the technologies are intended to enhance and reinforce three critical aspects (Morino Institute, 2001) of both Web-based training and teen volunteerism: (a) an emphasis on active learning through community involvement (as compared to passive acceptance of the status quo); (b) opportunities that focus upon cooperative or collaborative action (rather than individual, isolated volunteer and learning efforts); and (c) connecting teen volunteers to trained, caring adult volunteers who serve as coaches and guides (rather than undisputable experts).

While both technological and organizational culture challenges remain to be addressed, the potential of TRY-IT! as a Web-enhanced model for supporting teens as volunteers is enormous. In the profession of volunteer administration, we are fast realizing that a "community" of volunteers may be supported successfully either by face-to-face contact or in cyberspace. The "connections" that hold such communities together may be sustained through not only direct interactions, but also Internet and Web interfaces as well. Challenges regarding computer hardware and software availability and Internet accessibility are rapidly being overcome through more powerful yet affordable technological products and services. According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), "Electronic pedagogy [teaching and learning] is not about fancy software packages or simple course conversion. It is about developing the skills involved with community building among a group of learners so as to maximize the benefits and potential that this medium holds" (p. 159).

The last remaining challenge may well be the attitudes and beliefs that managers of volunteers and adolescent program developers

have regarding the necessary focus and nature of our beliefs about teens as contributing volunteer citizens, and the mutually respectful relationships we forge with them. After all, as Zedlin, Camino, Calvert, and Ivey (2002) concluded,

*Opportunities for both youth and adults to contribute to their communities through volunteer work are likely to build connections that support youth development. Relationships and beliefs are self-reinforcing and reciprocal. Program organizers [i.e., managers of volunteers] have an important role in getting them started (p. 11).*

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