Upstarts T3: An Asynchronous and Cohort-based Entrepreneurship Train-the-Trainer Program

Surin Kim
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, surin@unl.edu

Maria Rosario T. de Guzman
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, mguzman2@unl.edu

Kieu-Anh Do
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, kado@unl.edu

Irene Padasas
University of California, iopadasas@ucanr.edu

Claire Nicholas
University of Oklahoma, cbnicholas@ou.edu

See next page for additional authors

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Authors
Surin Kim, Maria Rosario T. de Guzman, Kieu-Anh Do, Irene Padasas, Claire Nicholas, Olivia Kennedy, Anna Erdmann, and Andy Larson

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Upstarts T3: An Asynchronous and Cohort-based Entrepreneurship Train-the-Trainer Program

S URIN KIM¹, MARIA ROSARIO T. DE GUZMAN¹, KIEU-ANH DO¹, IRENE PADASAS², CLAIRE NICHOLAS³, OLIVIA KENNEDY¹, ANNA ERDMANN¹, AND ANDY LARSON⁴

AUTHORS: ¹University of Nebraska-Lincoln. ²University of California. ³University of Oklahoma. ⁴Eden Prairie Schools.

ABSTRACT. 4-H academics responded to the Covid pandemic by rapidly adapting CDC and other resources for virtual delivery. A statewide epidemiology project was taught to 48 youth with the goal of minimizing fears and confusion, increasing prevention measures, leveraging current topics for education, and bolstering the social-emotional health of youth participants. Results indicated that youth enjoyed the project and adopted behaviors to reduce the spread of infectious diseases, such as increased mask-wearing.

INTRODUCTION

UpStarts is a community-based youth program that promotes social connections and positive development through entrepreneurship experiences. In this reverse-mentoring program, high school youth engage in the entrepreneurship process by developing solutions for real-world challenges faced by local businesses and organizations. In this paper, we describe the train-the-trainer program for educators interested in becoming facilitators of UpStarts. This training for educators was initially a three-day intensive face-to-face experience, but creators revised the program during the COVID-19 pandemic and delivered it remotely using an asynchronous, cohort-based approach.

UPSTARTS: YOUTH PROGRAM BACKGROUND AND DESCRIPTION

There is substantial evidence that entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship education play critical roles in youth development (Geldhof et al., 2014; Urbano et al., 2019). In general, entrepreneurship experiences for youth show promising results; however, there may be a lack of programs designed to address students in specific contexts. For example, entrepreneurship education programs wherein youth develop and implement businesses are valuable in providing hands-on experiences. However, these programs may be less feasible in rural settings that face a lower concentration of potential direct markets (Kim et al., 2018).

In UpStarts, youth partner with local business owners to solve authentic challenges faced by these businesses. The program uses methodologies designed for problem-solving and growth-oriented business models (e.g., Lean Startup Method, Design Thinking), tailoring them to the needs of the local community. UpStarts does not necessarily walk youth through the steps of starting their own businesses. Instead, the program focuses on fostering “entrepreneurial mindsets”—that is, the ability and propensity to find, understand, and capitalize on opportunities (Bosman & Fernhaber, 2018). The program aims to help youth learn about business development and entrepreneurship in their own communities and to foster a sense of connection between business owners and youth. Youth participants undergo five sections within the program: Launch Day, Customer Discovery, Market Research, Solution Design and Development, and Pitch Day. UpStarts has been implemented in 12 cities and towns, with 12 cohorts of 150+ youth each from 16 high schools in Nebraska and Wyoming. Details of the program can be found here: http://upstartsacademy.com/
UPSTARTS T3: TRAIN-THE-TRAINER

In early 2020, organizers developed the first UpStarts train-the-trainer (T3) program as a 3-day in-person event meant to prepare potential facilitators to implement the UpStarts youth program by providing youth program content, theoretical grounding, and guidance on delivery.

With the onset of the COVID pandemic, organizers canceled the in-person training and developed online alternatives. After an intensive review of the curriculum and consultations with stakeholders and local Extension educators, the training team transitioned the UpStarts T3 program to its new design and platform.

The training team considered several factors when redesigning UpStarts T3, such as the utilization of a cohort approach to develop a support group to aid participants in completing course content and for future implementation (Drago-Severson et al., 2001; McCarthy et al., 2005; Wathington et al., 2010); a truncated version of the training to minimize “fatigue” from online trainings and communications; and an asynchronous design to accommodate learners’ varying schedules. The new UpStarts T3 program was a two-week program presented via Google Classroom. The training content included the UpStarts youth program overview and its theoretical grounding (e.g., reverse mentoring, Youth-Adult Partnership model, Lean Start-up, and Design Thinking methodology), youth’s learning journey in UpStarts curriculum, and resources provided to implement the UpStarts program.

The training modules walk participants through the UpStarts curriculum using informational videos, interactive questions, and self-check discussion forums that facilitate reflections on the module content and activities. The UpStarts T3 program also includes modules with hands-on assignments to simulate youth learners’ experiences in the program, as well as tips and best practices for implementation. We started and ended the training with two optional one-hour events: a “launch” meeting to welcome participants and a closing wrap-up event. Participants were highly encouraged but not required to attend these live events. The training program itself takes approximately seven hours of individual, self-paced work. Participants had two weeks to complete the program.

UPSTARTS T3 PROGRAM PILOT LAUNCH

We viewed the first educator cohort (n=9) as a pilot for the training program. The educator cohort included seven Extension educators and two educators from other partner organizations (e.g., the university’s entrepreneurship center). We minimized the number of participants in order to test the program and gather detailed feedback. The small group also allowed the team to provide more hands-on support. Six participants completed the program and one requested additional time. Participants reported high levels of satisfaction regarding the ease of completing the training, the quality of information presented, and the materials and resources provided to implement the program (total average evaluation rating of 4.2 out of 5). Some noted technical difficulties in accessing Google Classroom despite initial technical support provided by the UpStarts team. Although participants expressed a preference for a face-to-face experience, most noted that the virtual and asynchronous delivery provided the flexibility that they needed in the context of the COVID pandemic and their schedules as Extension professionals. Two educators followed up with the UpStarts team immediately after completing the training to plan implementation of the UpStarts youth program in their communities. Generally, participants reported a high sense of efficacy and preparation to deliver the program after the training (average evaluation rating of 4.5 out of 5).

CONCLUSIONS

UpStarts T3 is becoming a promising training program that can be delivered in a remote, asynchronous, and cohort-based way. Although developed in response to the COVID pandemic, participants’ feedback indicates that for some learners, remote delivery may still be ideal after the pandemic ends. The UpStarts team is continuing to explore delivery methods for both the youth program and the T3 training component to maximize the program’s reach.

REFERENCES

Upstarts T3


