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Using Digital Classrooms to Conduct 4-H Club Meetings

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Abstract: *Using computer technology and digital classrooms to conduct 4-H Club meetings is an efficient way to continue delivering quality 4-H programming during times of limited resources and staff. Nineteen Junior and Senior 4-H'ers participated*

in seven digital classroom workshops using the Wimba Classroom application. These digital classroom sessions were designed to improve Project Achievement development and increase competition scores. Eighteen of the nineteen 4-H participants increased Project Achievement scores by approximately 11%. Seven hours of travel time and 26 hours of instruction time were saved by utilizing digital classroom technology in a 3-month period.

Introduction

The phrase, "do more with less" is becoming increasingly more common in Extension. With the changing economic climate, Extension faces the challenge of delivering quality programming with fewer Extension personnel. Hiring freezes and budget cuts have burdened county Extension faculty and forced them to continue to deliver additional 4-H programming with limited staff. With budget decisions being made based on program output and outcome evaluation data, showing impact in the community is vital to the long-term sustainability of Extension and of 4-H programs in particular. Creative ways are needed to deliver programming to more youth with fewer resources. Using digital meeting rooms such as Horizon Wimba, Skype, and ooVoo to deliver 4-H programming is one way to alleviate some of the time and resource pressures felt by Extension personnel.

Computer technology has become pervasive in our society and is of obvious interest to youth for communication and social networking purposes. According to Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, and Zickuhr (2010), 66% of Internet users between the ages of 12 and 17 go online for news and political information, and 73% of wired American teens now use social networking websites. However, little research has been done on the use of media by youth (Alpizar, 2010). Digital technology for learning is an effective tool used by universities to conduct online courses for Extension professionals. In one study, nearly three-fourths of Extension agents expressed an interest in pursuing additional education at a distance (Edwards, McLucas, Briers, & Rohs, 2004).

In addition to being an effective teaching tool, computer technology can also help make 4-H club meetings more productive and parent-friendly. By meeting virtually, parents forgo the added burden of traveling to a county Extension office or school, and youth are encouraged to engage with the technology to interact with their Extension agent, adult volunteers, and peers. Using digital meeting rooms can even improve teamwork and brainstorming skills among 4-H'ers (Greenburg & Nilssen, 2008).

In Chatham County, Georgia, 4-H'ers and Extension staff participated in workshops and trainings using a Wimba virtual classroom in an attempt to increase Project Achievement scores. Project Achievement consists of two parts: portfolios and illustrated talks. By using digital classrooms, many 4-H'ers could develop a project at once, saving valuable time for Extension staff. Parents were invited to sit-in on the classroom discussions to give them a better understanding of the process and an ability to assist their child in project development.

Digital Classroom Participants

All Junior and Senior 4-H'ers were encouraged to participate in the digital classroom sessions. Nineteen youth actively participated in the launch of the digital club meetings, which lasted approximately an hour and a half. After a tutorial about the digital classroom application, 4-H'ers participated in a series of seven workshops focused on improving project development. As 4-H'ers began to understand the applicable nature of the technology, they were given opportunities to lead discussions and brainstorming sessions. This helped build skills in communication and leadership.

Digital Classroom Session Topics

- Portfolio Writing (4 meetings)
- Demonstration Brainstorming Sessions (3 meetings)
- Winner's Workshop for State Congress (1 meeting)
- Wildlife Judging Team Training (1 meeting)
- Executive Board Meetings (2 meetings)

Digital Club Meeting Approach

1. A preliminary meeting was held with 4-H'ers and their parents to introduce them to the technology. Instructions for digital classroom application use and scheduled classroom times were distributed.
2. Nineteen Junior and Senior 4-H'ers logged on for the first digital portfolio writing workshop in November of 2010. A PowerPoint® presentation, discussions, and a question-and-answer session were included. The meeting lasted approximately an hour and a half.

3. 4-H'ers and their parents were invited to give input to make the workshops more effective as a teaching tool. This was facilitated by informal discussions and a Google Docs questionnaire. Over the months leading up to District Project Achievement, seven online workshops were held to prepare competitors. Workshops were interrelated and 4-H'ers facilitated many of these meetings.
4. To gather input on the effectiveness of the digital classroom meetings and whether improvements were needed, participants were invited to complete a questionnaire. A Google document was created and sent to all participants and their parents, requesting their feedback on the meetings.

Preliminary Findings

Nineteen Junior and Senior 4-H'ers participated in program delivery through digital classroom technology in order to improve their Project Achievement scores and participation in other 4-H programs. Eighteen of the 19 digital classroom participants increased their average Project Achievement scores from the previous year by 11%. In addition, seven participants had scores high enough to advance to the State Congress competition, an increase from the previous year of 350%. For Extension staff, an estimated 7 hours of travel time and 26 hours of instruction time were saved by utilizing digital classroom technology in a three month period.

Using Digital Classrooms in Your Program

The authors offer these recommendations to those considering program delivery through digital classrooms.

- Contact your home institution to see what technology is available for you to use at the university level. Consider consulting with parents about their home Internet connection speed and sharing this with your institution's information technology staff.
- Research the many educational software applications available, and choose the one that is right for your situation based on cost, ease of use, and features. Many applications offer whiteboard, audio, and video technology. The authors found Wimba Classroom/Elluminate Live to work best for youth and their home Internet connection speed.

- Create instructional materials using PowerPoint® or Word® documents, and make these available to participants—youth and adults. These materials can be updated and used year after year to save even more time. Consider involving youth in the development of these resources to enhance their ownership in the program.
- Evaluate your digital classroom experiences to see where improvements can be made. Consider consulting with your state's Extension evaluation specialist for input on how to measure outputs (e.g., number of youth served) and outcomes (e.g., enhanced communication skills in participating youth). The authors found informal discussions with participants and Google document questionnaires to work best at garnering feedback.
- Consider involving community stakeholders in your online discussions or even inviting someone from another county or state to participate. There are no time or location limitations with this technology!

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