

## HALTER: : Using HorseQuest as a Training Tool

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**Abstract:** *Youth organizations, such as 4-H, need dedicated, knowledgeable adult volunteer leaders. Oftentimes, adults are intimidated to work with youth, either because of questionable understanding of youngsters or due to limited subject knowledge. This is particularly true with volunteers for youth horse organizations. The eXtension HorseQuest CoP (Community of Practice) recognized the need to improve the comfort level and competence of youth horse organization volunteers. Members of the CoP created HALTER, the Horse Adult Leader Training and Education Resource, to address both the youth development training aspects as well as the horse knowledge needs of adult volunteers working with youth organizations.*

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## Introduction

eXtension is an online resource offering information about many current topics. The first Community of Practice (CoP) launched from eXtension in 2006, HorseQuest, offers free, interactive, peer-reviewed resources on many equine-related topics at <http://www.extension.org/horses>. Not only technical information about horses is available, but also helpful insights for volunteers working with youngsters interested in horses.

According to Draves (2000), online learning is a growing medium of instruction. Time and location constraints limit formal training for many learners, and online training can circumvent these issues (Tennessen, PonTell, Romine, & Motheral, 1997). Further, online learners can learn during their peak learning times, study at their own pace, and focus on specific content areas (Kaslon, Lodi, & Greve, 2005). HorseQuest capitalizes on these advantages and uses a multitude of online teaching strategies, including webcasts, learning lessons, electronic newsletters, video streaming, and the eXHorses YouTube channel. Using a variety of strategies for delivering content is supported by the findings of surveys of 4-H youth development volunteers. The volunteers indicated that a variety of delivery modes is important to their training satisfaction (Fox, Hebert, Martin, & Bairnsfather, 2009).

HALTER (Horse Adult Leader Training and Education Resource) is an online training tool made available through eXtension's HorseQuest CoP. HALTER provides equine technical information, as well as youth development training to make online interactive teaching and learning effective. The URL for HALTER is <http://www.extension.org/pages/22176/horsequest-learning-lesson:-horse-adult-leader-training-and-educational-resource>.

## Program Description

The HorseQuest team has worked diligently to create a rich set of highly discoverable online resources. They continually collaborate and innovate on various delivery methods, a hallmark of successful teaching (Fox, Hebert, Martin, & Bairnsfather, 2009).

It is important to promote lifelong learning by giving people opportunities to build on their knowledge and skills. Youth development organizations, such as 4-H, provide volunteer training in various ways. Expanding programs with dwindling budgets requires exploring alternative ways to do volunteer training (Kaslon, Lodi, & Greve, 2005). In 2007, the HorseQuest CoP identified the need for an online training program for adult horse volunteers working with youth. A team of both horse and 4-H subject matter specialists from throughout the country started the planning process. It was logical to use existing CoP resources, such as lessons and other horse-specific publications. New resources about youth development were created.

Before proceeding with development, the team conducted an online survey among many youth horse organizations to determine the type of program adult horse leaders needed (Waite, Wilson, Heyboer, & Greene, 2011). Approximately 295 online surveys were completed. Survey responses showed that horse adult leaders were interested in an online program, with 98% showing some type of interest and 89% indicating they would be interested in a course including completion levels. Their interest in multi-level- training, with feedback and recognition for completion at each level is consistent with previous findings by Wise and Ezell, 2003.

Using information gathered from the online survey and input from university Extension personnel, HALTER was created. HALTER is a series of online curriculum materials that includes learning modules, video clips, links to resources, and interaction opportunities among leaders. The progressive series of lessons is designed to offer equine science information, engaging student activities, and techniques to foster positive youth development. The intended audience is adult horse leaders who work with youth and horses.

HALTER Level 1 was pilot tested in 2008. Based on feedback from the pilot test group, adjustments were made, and the tool was publicly launched through the HorseQuest CoP in August, 2009. Using information gleaned from participants in HALTER Level 1, HALTER Levels 2-4 have now been developed and launched. Each level provides specific technical horse information and youth development resources. In order for participants to successfully earn a certificate of completion for each level, they must finish each lesson included in that level. In addition, they must achieve a minimum of 80% proficiency on each quiz included at the end of each learning lesson.

## Program Evaluation

At the conclusion of each learning lesson, all participants are requested to provide feedback about each HALTER lesson. As of October 2012, more than 65% of the respondents indicated they were club leaders. This suggests that the training program is reaching the intended audience, youth horse organization adult leaders.

The amount that respondents felt they learned from Level 1 is shown in Table 1. Note that 8% of the respondents knew little to nothing about lesson topics prior to using HALTER. In addition, all learners felt they moved to the High or Very High knowledge level about the lesson topic after viewing it. Participants felt more confident about their understanding of the lesson content, once they used HALTER.

**Table 1.**

Respondents Rating of Lesson Topic Knowledge Level 1

| <b>Knowledge About Lesson Content</b> | <b>Prior to Viewing Lesson (% of respondents)</b> | <b>After Viewing Lesson (% of respondents)</b> |
|---------------------------------------|---|--|
| None                                  | 4   | 0  |
| Low                                   | 4   | 0  |
| Medium                                | 33  | 0  |
| High                                  | 35  | 44   |
| Very High                             | 23  | 56   |

Approximately 98% of participants responding to the survey for levels 1 through 4 said that the training had helped them to generate new ideas for working with youth and horses. More than 75% indicated they were very likely to recommend the HALTER training site to other horse leaders. As of October 2012, a total of 423 people have registered for Levels 1-4, and 193 participants have earned Certificates of Completion. More than 40% of the registrants in each level completed the level, as of October 2012. Additional people register and complete each level each month.

## Conclusions and Implications

HALTER is a resource to 4-H and other youth horse programs across the country. Similar to eXtension, HALTER is a relatively new resource, and interest is building. Team members need to find creative ways to market the tool in challenging budgetary times. Beginning in 2012, social media has been explored as a means of promoting this valuable program. A growing number of participants are indicating they learned about the training through social media. This and other approaches hold promise as marketing methods. There is potential for

thousands of individuals to use this resource and to learn new skills. Additional evaluation data will be collected as more learners complete lessons.

Since new issues arise regularly with youth development work, the group of professionals working with the HALTER aspect of eXtension HorseQuest recognized the need and provided adult horse leaders the information they requested. This group will continually examine the needs of those adult volunteers working with horses and youth. They will enhance information as needs assessments merit, guiding users to new information, techniques, and research. The levels-based approach used in HALTER may work well for other eXtension CoPs training adult volunteers as well.

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