Using a Hybrid Approach for a Leadership Cohort Program

Abstract

Because information technology continues to change rapidly, Extension is challenged with learning and using technology appropriately. We assert Extension cannot shy away from the challenges but must embrace technology because audiences and external forces demand it. A hybrid, or blended, format of a leadership cohort program was offered to public health employees in Minnesota. The rationale was to address: shrinking budgets, learners' desire for reduced time away from work, and both learners' and educators' desire for reduced travel time. Choosing this novel approach increased Extension's outreach. Here I summarize the benefits of a hybrid leadership program offering in Minnesota.

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Introduction

Piloting a hybrid approach to leadership cohort programming in Minnesota provided valuable benefits to the participants. It also challenged educators to rethink traditional program delivery methods and stretch their technology skill development.

Building social capital is always a primary goal of leadership development programming. Because of this importance, a hybrid—or blended—approach is a great way to combine the benefits of face-to-face contact with the flexibility and cost saving benefits of online programming.

Approaches to Online Teaching

Examples from around the nation indicate how Extension has explored online delivery:

Cornell Cooperative Extension (CCE) took advantage of a grant in 2007 to test online approaches to Extension education. Moodle was used as the course management system. CCE said using technology to reach audiences that historically relied on face-to-face delivery reflected the changing nature of Extension work and Extension constituents (Applebee, Martens, & Treadwell, 2009).

A national authority on distance learning predicts that 98% of higher education offerings will be

online by 2020. This does not mean an end to face-to-face classes; instead, higher education will use technology to "operate in the new 21st Century fiscal reality due to shrinking state and Federal monies available" (Draves, 2012).

North Carolina Cooperative Extension cites reduced budgets, reduced staffing, increased geographic boundaries for Extension educators, and new client demographics as motivators to explore online delivery in adult education (Rich, Komar, Schilling, Tomas, Carleo, & Colucci, 2011).

The American Society for Training and Development indicates blended teaching frees the instructor to become the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage" (King, 1993). Basic content can be moved online, while face-to-face sessions can be used more efficiently to practice skills, collaborate with others, and build relationships.

Course Design

University of Minnesota Extension offered Leadership Academy for Public Health, a leadership cohort, in two regions of the state. The program included three 6-hour face-to-face sessions, two 90-minute synchronous, and four asynchronous webinars for a total of 26 contact hours. We selected this hybrid, or blended, delivery method to address:

- Shrinking budgets,

- Learners' desire for reduced time away from work, and

- Both learners' and educators' desire for reduced travel time.

The target audience was public health employees. The pilot program consisted of 21 participants in the first offering and 23 in the second. An attractive motivator was the Certificate of Completion for hours of participation, applicable toward public health licensure requirements.

Student feedback indicated the hybrid structure, the program fee, and savings in time and travel contributed greatly to program interest and participation. The pilot program calculated a cost savings of more than $25,000 alone in students' reduced time away from work and travel time.

Technology included an Adobe-based Web conferencing system with multiple features for full engagement of participants during synchronous (real-time) sessions. We used the Moodle content management system. We posted PowerPoint presentations, handouts, and readings on the Moodle site, and we used a discussion forum to engage participants in talking with other students and in posting responses to class assignments.

Program Evaluation Findings

Several evaluation methods were used to identify benefits derived from this hybrid offering. Retrospective pre-post survey items compared educational outcomes of the hybrid program with face-to-face offerings. Process-related feedback was gathered using a focused conversation and a follow-up survey 6 months after the last session. We also asked: "What worked?"; "What did not?"; and "Would you have enrolled had the course been offered only in face-to-face format?"

Key findings include:

- Cognitive learning was comparable in the hybrid groups compared to other leadership cohorts offered through University of Minnesota Extension (Post-Survey, 2009, 2011).

- Participants frequently cited savings in time, cost, and travel as a benefit.

- Participants frequently cited Moodle, webcasts, and engaging in online surveys, polls, and online activities as new learning.

- Challenges for participants included staying focused during webinars and getting used to the online approach.

- 75 percent of participants said that if the cohort been offered totally face-to-face they would not have enrolled due to time and cost.

Opportunities for Extension Educators

Extension educators facilitating hybrid, or blended, courses are advised to take the following steps:

- Acquire new skills. Use new technologies and techniques to keep participants engaged, because eye contact and body language are not visible during online learning.

- Take advantage of new tools. Learn as much as possible about available technology systems, and take full advantage of their capabilities.

- Address technology concerns. Prepare for technology problems by having a Plan B. Also provide a quick reference guide for participants and opportunities for participants to test their systems and play with the technology in advance.

- Reallocate time. Invest plenty of time "upfront" in creating and adapting lessons to the online format. The payoff comes later in reduced travel time, as well as creation of an initial template that requires only updating for future courses—rather than "reinventing the wheel" each time a course is offered.

- Engage with students online. Stay engaged at least weekly in online discussions to give feedback and encourage participants to converse with one another online in order to build relationships.

- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle. Create a library to share the pre-recorded webinars with colleagues. This better leverages staff strengths and expertise, as well as saves time in course development.

- Finally, the biggest takeaway for educators is it's not about you. Remember, the course is for the students. As an educator, you are the "guide on the side" rather than the "sage on the stage." You must allow time for participants to learn from one another.

Summary

The 21st Century requires using technology in all aspects of our lives. Higher education is no exception. Extension can no longer continue to provide programming in the historical format of meeting face-to-face with all audiences. Using a hybrid approach in adult education is cost effective in terms of time, energy, and expenses relative to revenue, expands the audience base; leads to comparable cognitive learning results compared with total face-to-face offerings, and challenges seasoned educators to learn new skills and step outside their comfort zone to meet the needs of learners today.

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