Development Strategies for Online Volunteer Training Modules: A Team Approach

Abstract

Volunteers are central to the delivery of 4-H programs, and providing quality, relevant training is key to volunteer success. Online, asynchronous modules are an enhancement to a training delivery menu for adult volunteers, providing consistent, accessible options traditionally delivered primarily face to face. This article describes how Minnesota 4-H focuses on a team approach to the intentional instructional design process used to develop interactive and engaging asynchronous training modules for adult volunteers. The roles and responsibilities of the team members are described along with how this method expedites module development, increases quality, and minimizes costs.

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Introduction

Research with Extension audiences indicates the importance of offering volunteer training in a variety of forms (Hoover & Conner, 2001; Fox, Hebert, Martin, & Bairnsfather, 2009). While educational opportunities in face-to-face formats are the traditional teaching methods, online options are important when volunteer time becomes harder to access, programs expand, budgets dwindle, and there is less staff time available for training. Advancements in technology yield more training choices, including asynchronous online training modules (Kaslon, Lodl, & Greve, 2005). In Minnesota Extension's Center for Youth Development, online asynchronous modules are considered a part of a comprehensive volunteer training program that also includes face-to-face meetings, one-on-one training with staff or volunteer mentors, and other distance learning techniques. The modules provide consistent, high-quality training for 4-H volunteers across the state, leading to clarity of responsibilities, a better understanding of program content, and ultimately a better program for 4-H youth.

There are many benefits to online learning for a volunteer. Adult learners note that ease of use, asynchronous access, and an attractive appearance are key to quality online training modules (Lin & Gregor, 2006). Kaslon, Lodle, and Greve (2005) demonstrate that volunteers are accepting of online learning as a method for gaining new skills, and they appreciate the convenience. When materials

are engaging and interactive, learners are attentive, apply the information to their work, and feel a part of a learning community (Ingram, 2005). Yet the development of these resources can be costly and time consuming when consultants and development teams must be hired. Using internal staff to develop online resources is an option; however, to produce a quality product, attention must be given to both the preparation of staff to develop materials for online delivery and to a development process that guides online development.

An intentional design and development process is key to the expedient implementation of a high-quality interactive training product for delivery via distance technology. The process used to facilitate the development of asynchronous online modules for youth development volunteers focuses on two parts of the ADDIE (Assess, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) Model, specifically the design and develop steps (Tzanis, 2002). This article outlines the design and development strategies used by Minnesota's Extension Center for Youth Development to bring volunteer training modules from concept to reality in a short period of time and with minimal costs.

Online Module Development

To facilitate the design and development of online modules, the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development applies Boettcher and Conrad's (2004) team approach strategy for online module development. While the strategy is designed for online course development, it was revised and tailored to better facilitate the development of single topic, asynchronous modules for volunteers in specific roles, such as 4-H project leader, club leader, etc. This section describes how the team approach is used with the ADDIE Model (Tzanis, 2002) to guide online module development in Minnesota. Module development can be achieved within a 6-month time frame and brings topics from concept to a digitally delivered product volunteers can access anytime, anywhere.

Assessment

In May 2011, University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development staff, representing leadership and educator roles, participated in a comprehensive 4-H Volunteer Training Planning Retreat to identify online volunteer training topics. A set of criteria was agreed upon to facilitate the process of determining topics for online module development. These criteria included: 1) a large number of volunteers would be impacted or involved, 2) a high level of risk to the organization if volunteers are not trained on that content, 3) the potential impact on quality experiences for young people, and 4) the content is an important part of training that is ongoing and sustainable over time.

The intent of asynchronous, online modules for the Minnesota adult volunteer is that they address ongoing needs and can be used to supplement or enhance face-to-face trainings in a consistent manner across the state. After identifying a list of topics, priorities were given to those that most strongly met the criteria, and educators with high content knowledge in those areas were identified to work on them. Module design and development began at the completion of the assessment.

Design and Development

Team Member Roles

The development process employs a strategy that uses the talents and expertise of team members who support the design and development of the learning environment (Boettcher & Conrad, 2004). Each team member fills a specific role with responsibilities that focus on their talents and expertise. The identified roles include a project manager/educational designer (PM/ED), two to three content experts, and an evaluation specialist. Other educational technology staff and consultants are brought into the development process as needed.

The PM/EDs are youth development staff who have statewide responsibility in the area of distance learning technology. In Extension's Center for Youth Development, an investment has been made in the time, resources, and expertise of two individuals in order to move priority distance learning projects forward. This includes the planning and facilitation of the entire development process. The PM/ED's coordinate project tasks and help content experts focus on their expertise to ensure that a quality module is completed on time and within budget. As educational designers, they provide the overall blueprint for the learning environment. This includes developing instructional strategies that engage the learner and provide opportunities for interaction, selecting and using media tools, and ensuring the learning objectives are met through the content.

Content experts are drawn from youth development staff across the state and include key decision makers for topics related to Extension and university policies (e.g., youth safety policies, financial management practices). Content experts are identified because of their knowledge, expertise, and experience with the identified topic. Overall responsibility for determining the goals and learning objectives, content development, and framework for the module rests with those in this role.

An Extension specialist in educational technology works with the PM/EDs to offer resources, suggestions for improving the process, and direction to outside contractors, such as videographers, photographers, and actors, who offer expertise in areas outside of the PM/EDs experience. An Extension evaluation specialist also works with the overall process to facilitate the development of an evaluation that is used with all modules.

Development Team Schedule

Module development begins with a 3-day retreat that is planned and facilitated by the PM/ED's. The agenda includes an introduction to the model and tools used for module design and development Work on these tools leads to the establishment of team norms, learning objectives, a presentation outline, and a storyboard on which the module design is built. The intent of the retreat is that a large portion of the content experts' work, including the identification of learning objectives, content, and overall module framework, is completed at the retreat. Editing content, scripting, and suggestions for design as it relates to the content become their primary responsibilities in the months to follow.

While content experts spend a large portion of their development time at the retreat, the PM/EDs spend the next 6 months carrying out the team's framework. Subsequent meetings are held via distance technology to further advance and refine content, including visuals, audio, and video

scripts. In terms of design and development, the PM/ED regularly convenes the team and pushes for clarity and flow in material as it relates to the learning objectives, while simultaneously designing interactions for learner engagement. Project management responsibilities include the coordination and contracting of actors, video shoots, photography, and recording audio, as well as initiating a review process and publishing the final presentation.

Implementation

Before modules are made available to volunteers, an online orientation is held for regional and county 4-H staff on the intended audience for and content and intent of the module. Modules are then available via the state's 4-H enrollment system, 4HOnline, where staff encourage volunteers to both access and track their own progress through the modules. Modules are also kept in a staff portal site for access and review by Minnesota staff and volunteer specialists from other states. (Contact the authors for access.)

Evaluation

An evaluation plan, led by an Extension evaluation specialist, is in place to assess the degree to which the learning objectives are met, the level of engagement the volunteer feels while participating in the training, and how the volunteer plans to apply the information to direct work with young people. This includes a survey immediately after the completion of the training and a 3-6 month follow-up survey. An evaluation team will lead these efforts and share implications for future module development with the state volunteer systems team.

Engagement in Asynchronous Learning

Engagement and interaction in an online learning experience can be developed and measured in three areas: 1) keeping the learner's attention on tasks and activities, 2) facilitating deeper learning through opportunities to apply the material to their own work, and 3) ensuring that the learner feels a part of a learning community (Ingram, 2005). However, it can be challenging to develop asynchronous, online modules that offer a quality learning experiences that achieve this level of learning. The PM/EDs intentionally implement strategies in the module design process to achieve these three areas of engagement which have been previously used in synchronous, cohort courses to create a more engaging and interactive learning experience (Robideau & Vogel, 2011).

Keeping the learner's attention can be difficult in asynchronous learning. Therefore, it is important to develop a learning environment where learners not only complete the module, but also avoid distraction. One strategy used to keep learner attention is designing an interesting, vibrant module environment for the visual and audio learner using techniques that include narration, photographs, and video. Interactive screens in the module also keep attention, requiring the learner to manipulate the learning environment by actively participating or completing an activity before the presentation advances. As each module takes shape, it is the goal of the PM/ED's that volunteers be engaged with the material.

Facilitating deeper learning through application requires that intentional strategies be built into the

modules to facilitate each volunteer's application of material to their work with youth. One way to accomplish this is to introduce a concept and then demonstrate how it is applied in the volunteer experience. For example, when introducing a concept such as how the "Experiential Learning Model" is used in a 4-H project meeting, volunteers control the pace of the presentation by clicking an interactive diagram for more information on key topics. They gather information and see how it plays out in one project. Then, volunteers are asked to identify how the model will be applied in the project area they are leading. Also, clear learning objectives are communicated at the beginning of the presentation, content development is built around them, and volunteers are reminded at the end of how the material relates and is applied to their volunteer roles.

Ensuring learners feel part of a learning community may be the most difficult to achieve in asynchronous modules. The Minnesota modules begin with a video introduction with two people (actors) who welcome the volunteer to the presentation, introduce them to the material, and thank them for participating; this simulates what facilitators in a face-to-face class would do as participants walk in the door. These two "presenters" also narrate the rest of the presentation to help the volunteer continue to feel welcome and a part of the learning experience. Volunteers are also reminded throughout the presentation that they may call their local 4-H staff at any time for more conversation or to pose questions about the material; this helps to alleviate feelings of isolation that can happen in an asynchronous learning experience. In addition, the online asynchronous modules are described to volunteers and staff as a part of a larger educational training delivery plan that includes live face-to-face meetings, webinars and other synchronous opportunities.
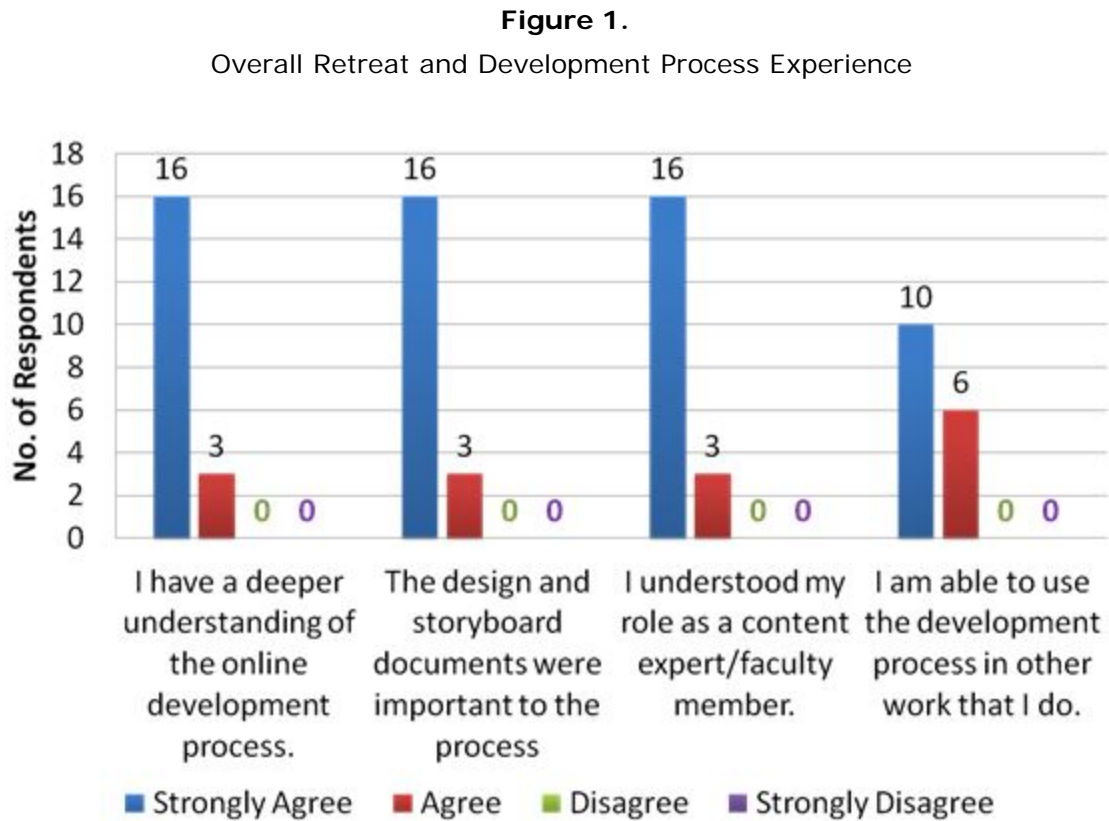
The Design Team Experience

Eight development teams, comprised of one PM/ED and two-three content experts, have experienced this process. A follow-up evaluation was administered to content experts to gain insight about their experiences at the writing retreat and the overall development process. It is evident from responses that the development process not only resulted in online module completion, but also in an increased understanding of online development for the content experts, which increases staff capacity for future projects. According to the 19 content experts (95% return rate), their participation deepened their understanding of an online development process. They saw the importance of the design and storyboard documents; felt their role as a content expert was clearly understood; and agreed that they will use the development process in other work that they do. It was also noted that participants felt the intentional method was a valuable use of internal resources. One team member commented, "I found the process to be exceedingly helpful… After participating in the retreat I can see the value of the process and can articulate that value to other staff as an important investment of time."

All of the respondents strongly agreed with the statement "I have a deeper understanding of the online development process as a result of my involvement in the retreat," and 80% strongly agreed and 15% agreed with the statement "I am able to use the development process in other work that I do." Qualitative comments supported this:

"I have used what I learned in this process with other development work I have done in creating a webinar learning experience."

"Yes, it helped me in completing some other online recorded instruction."

Figure 1 shows the results of four questions that asked the content experts to rate their experiences with the retreat and overall development process.

Figure 1.

Overall Retreat and Development Process Experience

The content experts were also asked how effective it was to begin the development process in a face-to-face, multi-day retreat format. Reactions supported this, including:

"Being face to face for a period of time was a useful strategy. Being able to walk through components of online learning was more effective for me and concepts are more easily learned when I can ask questions of the facilitators."

"The face to face part really strengthens my creativity."

"It was good to intentionally focus consecutive time together with co-workers involved in the development of our online product. There was energy and instant feedback that provided fuel for the work."

Recommendations and Implications

Have a Clear Design Process

Have a clear design process, and use proven tools for educational design. Following a needs

assessment, using a predetermined design model ensures that development stays focused on the identified need. Although there are multiple design models, the project described here used a team approach within the design and development steps of the ADDIE Model.

Use Current Staff

Use current staff to build capacity and decrease costs. An investment in staff with distance learning responsibilities, training, and software facilitates the success of module development. Non-profit organizations, such as Extension, should not overlook staff who may not have all of the distance technology skills but would be interested in developing and improving their abilities. It has been valuable to have PM/EDs with content background and expertise (youth development/adult learning) in addition to an understanding of design and development in online learning. This has lessened the disconnect between content experts and educational designers with no background in the material.

Delineate Staff Roles

Delineate roles for staff, and make time commitments clear. The team approach, with specific roles, has facilitated the design and development of online modules in a successful, timely fashion. Also, team members respond positively to the clear expectations of their contribution. Although people on the team may have the talents for multiple roles, this approach focuses their contribution on the specific project. Preparing team members ahead of time for the commitment needed for this process helps staff with full workloads dedicate time to a writing project. Another benefit to organizations is the increase in staff's capacity to work with and understand distance learning development.

Allow Adequate Time Early in the Process

Allow adequate time early in the process. Adequate time for a retreat allows content experts to make significant progress on a module presentation. In this project, a 2-day writing retreat brought development to a "tipping point," but the teams had significant work to accomplish after they left. However, adding a third day in subsequent retreats provided more time for teams to move content to a point where design could begin in earnest. Content experts indicate that the writing retreat helps concentrate the majority of their writing and development time for the project into those specific days, leaving reviewing, editing, and minimal writing in the subsequent months.

Connect Content and Outcomes with Interactive Learning

Connect learning content and outcomes with interactive learning. Intentional strategies to engage the learner in asynchronous module development will facilitate deeper learning, keep the learner's attention, and foster the feeling of being a part of a learning environment for the adult learner. Ensuring that the learner is an active participant while viewing the presentation will make him or her more likely to not only hear the information, but remember and apply it.

Future Considerations

Internet-based trainings create a roadblock for volunteers without high-speed Internet. This needs to be given more attention. While volunteers do have access to modules through their local Extension

offices or library computers, developers will begin looking at mobile delivery that could circumvent computer-based learning for volunteers with mobile technology. Early evaluations indicate positive results. However, the ADDIE process is an ongoing cycle and calls for continuous assessment and redesign to achieve improved usage.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the process used to design and develop online asynchronous training modules for 4-H adult volunteers. The ADDIE (Assess, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) Model continues with the implementation and evaluation components (Tzanis, 2002). Module evaluation by intended audiences will help guide future development and implementation.

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