

Identifying Critical Thinking Styles to Enhance Volunteer Development

Abstract

Diversity in learning options can increase efficacy of volunteer development systems. The University of Florida Critical Thinking Inventory (UFCTI) is designed to explicate an individual's critical thinking style based upon a continuum from Seeking Information to Engagement. Static and interpretive materials are best used with individuals of a Seeking Information style, while interactive elements are better suited for those preferring Engagement. Extension educators should consider measuring volunteer critical thinking styles using the UFCTI and then aligning programs with the needs of their learners. This article describes potential benefits and uses for the instrument and its relevancy to volunteerism in Extension.

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Introduction

Volunteers play increasingly important roles within many Extension programs and are integral to Extension's success (Cassill, Culp, Hettmansperger, Stillwell, & Sublett, 2012). Without proper training and development, volunteers will not have the capacity to be successful in their role. As distance education becomes more prevalent, methods such as online training modules are widely endorsed. However, this assumes that all volunteers receive equal benefit from one type of training technique. A more successful approach to Extension volunteer training would be to identify volunteers' critical thinking styles and subsequently tailor training and assignments to meet their particular needs. Volunteers who are assigned training and tasks that meet their needs are more satisfied in their overall experience and more likely to remain involved in the program (Terry, Pracht, Fogarty, Pehlke, & Barnett, 2013). A simple and reliable method is needed to learn about volunteers' personal inclinations in order to help ensure placement in adequate training environments.

The University of Florida Critical Thinking Inventory

The University of Florida Critical Thinking Inventory (UFCTI), developed by Lamm and Irani (2011), has been established as an accurate assessment of the continuum of critical thinking styles. Critical thinking style does not denote that an individual is a good or bad critical thinker. Rather, critical thinking style is a measurement of how an individual chooses to use his or her critical thinking skills

in order to learn and think about a topic (Lamm, 2015). The UFCTI measures these cognitive tendencies on a continuum ranging from Engagement to Seeking Information. After a concise 20-item inventory, the UFCTI analyzes an individual's responses and provides a score. Each participant is assigned an overall critical thinking style score that runs along a continuum from Engagement to Seeking Information (Lamm & Irani, 2011).

The Critical Thinking Style Continuum

"Seekers" actively pursue information, preferring to take a meticulously researched approach to their decision-making (Lamm & Irani, 2011). These individuals are often highly attuned to their own biases and go to great lengths to investigate all angles of a topic. Seekers desire to know the truth about a subject, even if that truth conflicts with their own beliefs. On the opposite side of the spectrum, "Engagers" benefit from interactive communication and thrive on open discussion within group settings (Lamm & Irani, 2011). They are confident in their beliefs and do not hesitate to share their opinions with others. Engagers rely on opportunities to use their reasoning skills and must connect with a topic in order to process information. Although some participants will be labeled as a Seeker or Engager, others will fall somewhere in the middle of the scale. These participants demonstrate characteristics of both categories and possess a mixture of the two styles.

Application of Critical Thinking Styles

Comparison of the two critical thinking styles allows for a clear delineation of the educational needs for both Engagers and Seekers, out of which corresponding methods for volunteer development opportunities are revealed. Programs that cater to a Seeker's critical thinking style would facilitate the direct delivery of information through lectures, video tutorials, or take-home resources. Introspective activities, such as reflective writing or mind mapping, appeal to a Seeker's reflective preference. Seekers tend to be individuals who prefer to use static resources to gain information, such as books, journal articles, Web pages, or pamphlets. Online training programs should incorporate video lectures or tutorials to more effectively involve Seekers. On the other hand, Engagers need interaction with others, making debate and forums the most effective tools for their learning environments. Workshops featuring hands-on experience and real-world application of concepts, such as role-play scenarios or demonstrations, would benefit Engagers. Within the context of online learning, Engagers would thrive on the open discussion of information on social media or online forums (Table 1).

Table 1.

Comparison of Critical Thinking Styles and Best Practices in Volunteer Training

Critical Thinking Style	Qualities of Style	Recommendations for Activities that Engage by Style
Seeking Information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn all sides of a topic • Investigative approach to learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate lectures or video tutorials • Make take-home resources

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer static resources for information • Aware of own personal biases • Attempt to make objective decisions 	<p>available</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Include reflective activities, like mind mapping and journal writing • Use memory games or have participants create presentations
Engagement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Need interaction with the concept • Communicate ideas effectively and thrive on group discussion • Prefer interactive resources for information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have workshops featuring hands on experiences, such as a Skillathon • Play games and incorporate active projects, like charades • Encourage debate and group discussion through the use of the Socratic method • Use social media as an online forum for communication and learning

Use of UFCTI in Extension Volunteer Training

By understanding the critical thinking style of an individual, Extension educators can begin to recognize their volunteers' strengths and help direct them toward programs that include delivery methods that appeal to their critical thinking style. Results from the UFCTI can be used by Extension educators to ensure that volunteers are attending appropriate trainings and receive compatible roles in the program. Additionally, Extension administrators can encourage volunteers to choose training methods most appropriate to their critical thinking style. For example, an individual may be interested in a training that is offered both in person and online. If administrators are aware that an individual is an Engager, they may suggest that particular volunteer attend the training in person. The in-person training would allow Engager more opportunity to interact with others and share reasoning and ideas. On the other hand, if the individual were a Seeker, the administrators could suggest online training may be more beneficial because of the direct nature of knowledge transfer. By tailoring training regiments to the individual volunteer, Extension administrators can help ensure volunteers are taking optimum advantage of opportunities and resources offered to them.

Summary

It is of critical importance that Extension educators carefully review and evaluate the effectiveness of volunteer training and development. One of the most frequent reasons for discontinuing volunteer service is lack of adequate training (Wymer & Starnes, 2001). The UFCTI could be a valuable tool to be used during the development of volunteer training programs to ensure the programs are applicable and include activities that engage all types of learners and thinkers. Application of the UFCTI to Extension programs, specifically in regards to volunteer orientation and training processes, would facilitate educational success by enhancing volunteer motivation and retention of programmatic information. Using a critical thinking style approach could lead to an overall increase in volunteer satisfaction and retention. Research measuring the benefits of the identification of volunteers' critical thinking styles would assist in determining the impact of the UFCTI in the context of Extension program utilization. The UFCTI can be accessed at: <http://www.ufcti.com>. Through this website you can learn more about critical thinking, the UFCTI and its uses as well as get certified through an online training program that will allow you to administer and use this tool.

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