

Adding a "Youth Flavor" to Extension's Programs

Abstract

Youths not only participate in Extension services but also can be equipped as facilitators to extend information about a critical topic to new audiences. Our interdisciplinary team of Extension professionals created a program to equip youths as peer educators, increase youths' awareness and understanding of a new topic (local foods), promote youths' positive development, and establish a model for involving teens in existing Extension programs. Other Extension professionals can use the program's model, amending the topic area as needed, to promote positive youth development outcomes while engaging youths in helping with Extension's mission.

Keywords: [teens as teachers](#), [peer education](#), [local foods](#), [youth development](#), [value added](#)

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Youths: Participants and Facilitators of Extension Programs

Extension primarily engages youths through 4-H youth development programs. Yet 4-H professionals should not be the only Extension employees concerned with developing future members of society. For example, family and consumer sciences (FCS) professionals should be concerned with influencing youths' budding attitudes as they will become future consumers. Agriculture and natural resources (ANR) professionals should be concerned with youths' motivations to pursue agricultural careers.

To engage young people in their programming, Extension professionals can add a "youth flavor" through peer education. Peer education increases the organization's capacity to reach additional audiences while developing 21st-century workforce skills in youths (Cochran, Catchpole, Arnett, & Ferrari, 2010; Groff, 1992). Specifically, youths can be equipped to be facilitators who expand the reach of Extension, in a way similar to how volunteers are trained as master gardeners to respond to the needs of community gardeners (Gibby, Scheer, Collman, Pinyuh, & Fitzgerald, 2008). Essentially, Extension professionals can take inspiration from and build on past Extension programs that have involved youths in peer education. Topics for such education have included safe driving (Cropper, 1999), healthful living (Arnold et al., 2016; Ripberger, Devitt, & Gore, 2009), and animal sciences (Smith, Meehan, Enfield, George, & Young, 2004). Through involvement in peer education, youths acquire new knowledge and skills, benefit from being challenged, contribute to their communities, and demonstrate personal growth (Lee & Murdock, 2001).

Example of Adding a "Youth Flavor" to Extension Programming

We were members of a team of four Extension professionals representing ANR, FCS, and 4-H who convened to brainstorm ways in which youths could both benefit from and participate in Ohio State University Extension's Local Foods program, which did not have an approach for engaging Ohio youths. Our team designed the program described in this article using a peer education, or teens-as-teachers, model to increase interest in local foods among Ohio youths. Nine 4-H teens from across the state were recruited to serve on a teen advisory committee. These committee members recommended ideas to our team for activities they felt would be engaging and effective for increasing interest in local foods among their peers. The teen advisory committee members also trained fellow youths to become peer educators on the lessons they helped create.

Table 1 provides more detail on the activities and outputs of the program. Additionally, an explanation of the local foods awareness and training event identified in Table 1 is presented in Table 2.

Table 1.

Activities and Outputs Associated with Adding a "Youth Flavor" to an Extension Local Foods Program

Program activity	Outputs of program activity
1. Team of four Extension professionals (ANR, FCS, and 4-H) recruited a teen advisory committee.	1a. Nine teens volunteered to serve on the committee, through which they learned about local foods, prepared a locally sourced meal, and brainstormed ideas for lesson plans.
2. Extension professionals drafted lesson plans, reviewed the plans with the teen advisory committee, and published the lessons.	2b. Ideas from the teen advisory committee were written into four lesson plans. A fifth lesson, from an existing curriculum, was also reformatted and added to the curriculum.
3. Extension professionals and teen advisory committee hosted a 9-hr local foods awareness and training event that incorporated service learning.	3a. 25 4-H youths gathered to be trained as peer educators on the topic of local foods. ^a
4. Extension professionals and teen advisory committee hosted a second, 4-hr local foods awareness and training event.	4a. 11 new 4-H youths and four returning teen advisory committee members attended a shortened event in order to involve youths unable to attend the first event.
5. Extension professionals and teen advisory committee participated in conference call check-ins regarding how program was progressing.	5a. Extension professionals hosted a conference call a few weeks after the trainings. 5b. Peer educators called in to share their progress and successes, ask questions, and request additional support.
6. Youth peer educators facilitated local foods lessons for peers in their home communities and collected	6a. 36 peer educators self-reported presenting to at least 241 youths in their communities. 6b. Youth attendees completed a short survey

evaluation data.

about the peer educators' presentations, and the peer educators completed a postteaching evaluation form for analysis.

Note. ANR = agriculture and natural resources. FCS = family and consumer sciences.
aA more detailed agenda of this training is presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Agenda of the Local Foods Awareness and Training Event Associated with Adding a "Youth Flavor" to an Extension Local Foods Program

Agenda item	Explanation
Visit to a local farm market	Market owners discussed market operations, their customers, marketing techniques, and business decisions.
Picking of green beans and purchasing of produce	Youths picked fresh green beans, many for the first time, and purchased produce from the market to cook at a local charity.
Preparation of lunch and dinner for families at a local charity	Youths participated in a service-learning activity by preparing free meals for families staying at the Ronald McDonald House Charity from produce they picked and purchased.
Presentation about local foods and instruction on curriculum	Family and consumer science Extension professional on team presented information about local foods; teen advisory committee members instructed youths on the lessons in a rotation.
Compilation of supply kits and distribution of curriculum	Local suppliers donated foodstuffs, which were compiled into kits along with copies of the curriculum and distributed to the youths.
Evaluation of the event through a survey	Youths reported on awareness of local foods and likelihood of seeking out local foods. They also reported on their confidence to teach the material learned to their peers.
Interview with teen advisory committee	Extension professionals interviewed the teen advisory committee as a group to collect qualitative feedback about the program.

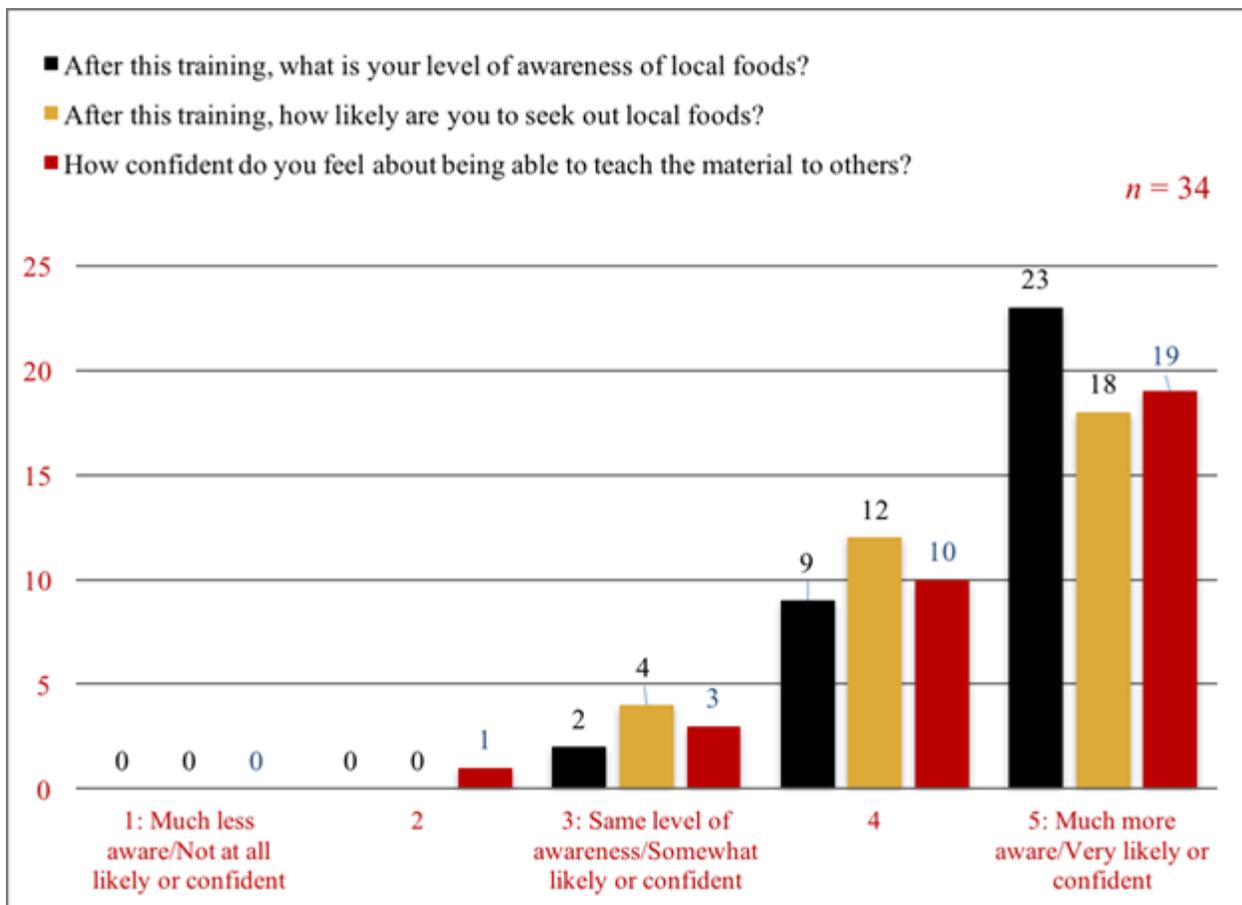
Outcomes and Impacts

The youths trained as peer educators during the two events indicated through the training-program survey that they were more aware of and willing to seek out local foods and were confident in their ability to teach the

material to others (see Figure 1). Teaching confidence data were collected at the conclusion of the training and compared with confidence data collected again after youths had presented one of the lessons in their communities. Data from 13 peer educators were collected and compared. Peer educators reported a slight increase in their confidence to teach after teaching a lesson as compared to after the training. On average, teaching confidence levels increased by 0.23 on a scale of 1–5, with 1 being *not at all confident* and 5 being *very confident*.

Figure 1.

Selected Questions and Peer Educator Responses from Postprogram Surveys



Qualitative data also were collected and analyzed. General themes included peer educators' acknowledging their weaknesses and proposing ways of enhancing future presentations.

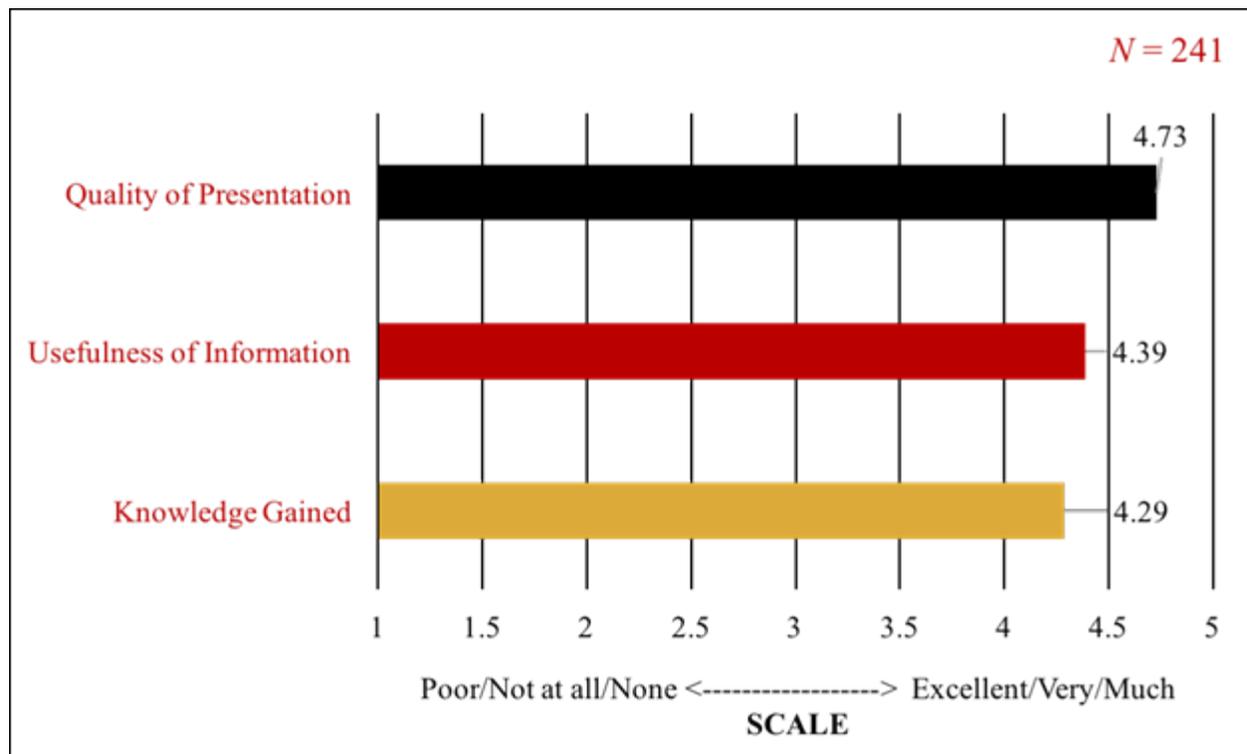
Additional qualitative data collected through interviews with the teen advisory committee revealed that participation in the program could be associated with positive youth development characteristics such as support, empowerment, and constructive use of time (Search Institute, 2007). Teens said they

- felt valued and took ownership because adults consulted them,
- felt that their opinions mattered, and
- desired to be more involved, especially with writing lesson plans.

Finally, youths attending the peer educators' presentations in their communities were asked to rate the peer

educators' teaching skills. Attending youths rated the presentations highly with regard to quality, usefulness, and knowledge gained (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.
Results from Survey of Youths Attending Peer Educators' Workshops



Conclusion

Youths' self-reported increases in awareness of and willingness to seek out local foods through involvement in the program indicate positive momentum toward the potentially longer term outcome of youths' purchasing more local foods as they mature. Awareness and interest are the first two steps in Kotler and Armstrong's (2010) AIETA adoption model, which postulates that consumers generally move through five stages in the process of adopting and regularly using new products (i.e., awareness, interest, evaluation, trial, and adoption). The results reported here also support the findings that teens can be effective teachers and that youths respond well to messages from peers who are similar in age (Lee & Murdock, 2001).

Involving youths in Extension's program delivery promotes their positive development while influencing their attitudes. Youths' increased confidence, as reported in this article, is an indicator of their mastering skills related to communication and self-esteem—life skills 4-H seeks to develop in youths (Hendricks, 1996). The effects of educational programming delivered by Extension to youths are prolonged as youths mature. Youths participating in our program mentioned that they have as much interaction with other youths as their county educators do and acknowledged that they want to help in carrying out Extension's mission.

Extension professionals elsewhere can use the format of the program we implemented to involve youths in various scenarios by merely adjusting the topic accordingly. Links for downloading the lessons are available at <https://localfoods.osu.edu/adding-youth-flavor-extensions-signature-programs>. We recommend that the following adjustments be made if a similar program is to be conducted:

- Engage a community development professional to have representation from all Extension program areas.
- Coordinate regional trainings, rather than have only statewide trainings, to increase participation and impact.
- Devise a sustainability plan for the supply kits. The supply kits were critical assets for helping disseminate concepts but were costly.
- Consider formalizing the network of peer educators, such as by creating a Facebook group, to encourage collaboration and sharing of best practices.

Youths represent an additional avenue through which Extension can expand its reach. The structure of the program described here enabled our team of four Extension professionals to more efficiently extend information about a critical topic to a new audience by giving it a "youth flavor."

Acknowledgments

The program identified in this article was funded by a 2015 Ohio State University Extension Innovative Grant and the Patricia Kunz Brundige Youth Development Fund for Positive Youth Development Research.

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