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Asynchronous Volunteer Engagement in Online Continuing Education Using Virtual Communities

Abstract

The Wisconsin Master Gardener Program team used the Google+ Community platform to provide an engaging online discussion forum for asynchronous continuing education experiences. Applications of such a tool for volunteer online education have numerous benefits, including the capacity for asynchronous posting, ease of posting, privacy options, wide availability, and the potential for internal troubleshooting.

Keywords: online education, continuing education, volunteer development, discussion, engagement

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Introduction

Online alternatives to traditionally offered face-to-face continuing education experiences are increasingly important for the Wisconsin Master Gardener Program (MGP). In an age of reduced budgets and prevalent technology, creative methods for efficiently providing quality educational experiences are needed across Extension. It is vital that Extension increase offerings to meet the technology-driven world in order to remain viable (Diem, Hino, Martin, & Meisenbach, 2011). Virtual communities of practice for volunteers have the potential to improve the volunteer experience and increase learning (Sobrero & Craycraft, 2008). To efficiently produce online educational materials that engage adult volunteers, program developers must intentionally design training for the target audience (Robideau & Vogel, 2014).

Adult learners have distinct needs and respond well to various teaching techniques, including discussion (Ota, DiCarlo, Burts, Laird, & Gioe, 2006). Creating a sense of presence, what Lehman and Conceição (2010) define as "being there" and "being together" (p. 3), is also important to learner satisfaction in the online environment. Using the most appropriate educational tool(s) for the online learning experience addresses the needs of adult learners, promotes interaction, and enables instructors to create a sense of presence.

Initially, participation in MGP advanced training was passive, with volunteers viewing video lectures for continuing education credit. In 2016, the Wisconsin MGP team redesigned the online continuing education courses with the aim of increasing volunteer interaction to enhance the learning experience, in part through the use of discussion forums. The learning management system supported by University of Wisconsin–Extension, Desire2Learn, was deemed prohibitively complex for the needs and user comfort level of the audience traditionally served by the

MGP, which skewed toward the baby boomer and traditionalist generations (Dorn, Newberry, Bauske, & Pennisi, 2018). That circumstance eliminated the option of a ready-made course environment that included discussion forums. Selecting a widely accessible technological tool capable of hosting volunteer discussions was critical.

To that end, our team selected Google+ Community to provide master gardener volunteers (MGVs) with an online discussion forum. Participation in the activities and discussion in the Google+ Community was optional for class registrants but was recommended as a way to enhance the overall learning experience. The Google+ Community discussion forum accompanied other course content, including video lectures, readings, and activities, on a WordPress website. This article highlights the benefits and realities of using virtual communities, such as a Google+ Community, as a discussion forum for adult volunteer training in an asynchronous online course. Although Google+ Community is no longer available for consumer use, our experience with the platform can serve to inform Extension professionals' use of virtual communities in general.

Benefits

Google+ Community offered the capabilities of posting text, pictures, and links and responding to posts. Posts could be organized into categories that corresponded to specific modules in an online course. The benefits described here often matter if one is working with a group with widely varying technological abilities and comfort levels.

Asynchronous posting. Our team designed the MGP continuing education courses addressed herein to run asynchronously over 7 months. MGVs were able to access course materials and the discussion forum at different points in time, resulting in posts and responses that were made potentially months apart. The Notifications feature of Google+ Community sent email notifications to a post author if another individual responded to his or her post. Such notification provided an opportunity for the original post author to reengage with the discussion regardless of the gap in time between the original posting and the response.

Ease of posting. MGVs with differing levels of comfort in an online learning environment generated, read, and responded to posts. Individuals had access to Google support documents for step-by-step guidance.

Privacy. For some MGVs, maintaining a sense of privacy while using a publicly accessible tool was important. Our team set up the Google+ Community so that individuals asking to join had to be approved, allowing course facilitators to confirm an individual's membership in the course before admittance to the community.

Availability. A free Google+ or Gmail account was required to access a Google+ Community. Google support documents provided guidance for volunteers who needed to obtain account credentials. Sensitive information, such as a Social Security Number, was not required to obtain an account. The same log-in information could be used for future volunteer courses involving Google+ Community. The Google tools involved also were compatible with mobile devices.

Internal troubleshooting. Because log-in information was housed with the volunteer and not with a University of Wisconsin–Extension entity, the community was managed internally within the MGP office. This setup allowed MGVs to troubleshoot quickly with familiar staff, versus a separate entity, further enhancing the volunteer's sense of connection to the course and facilitators.

Tool Use

Table 1 provides an overview of community use during two different courses in two separate years. It is included

to provide Extension professionals intending to use online discussion forums for education an illustration of use relative to the Wisconsin MGP rather than a statistical comparison. The data presented are from optional course evaluations. Course content, activities, and participants varied between years. Numbers are approximate for various reasons: Counties participating as a group selected a representative to post on behalf of the group; confirming that individual accounts are consistent across 2 years is impossible; and human error occurred in the data collection resulting from limited data extraction abilities due to Google+ Community privacy constraints.

Table 1.

Google+ Community Use in the Wisconsin Master Gardener Program

Use indicator	**2016 (%)**	**2017 (%)**
Individuals who joined Google+ Community	66.9 (174/260 enrolled)	67.8 (198/292 enrolled)
Individuals who posted >1 original post	57.5	63.8
Engaged posts, defined as original posts that garnered at least one student response post; excluded posts with only instructor responses	68.2	48.8

Over two thirds of the class members joined the Google+ Community each year, indicating that a majority were able to access the technology. The difference in the percentages of engaged posts across the 2 years likely was due to differing course content and activities. For numerous activities in 2017, students were required to use the community as a place to submit their work, but those activities were not designed to elicit engagement.

Table 2 shows that responses to use of Google+ Community were mixed. However, the data shown do not include feedback from all of the Google+ Community users because completing a course evaluation was optional.

Table 2.

Volunteer Response to the Google+ Community via the Course Evaluation

Type of response	**2016 (No.)**	**2017 (No.)**
Positive response to Google+ Community use	19	24
Negative response to Google+ Community use	20	21

Comments on the course evaluation suggested that respondents most appreciated reading other MGVs' ideas and perspectives, receiving feedback, and participating in the social interaction aspect of the community. The most common complaints related to difficulty with the Notifications feature, difficulty of use in general, the high number of posts, the impersonal nature of the training, and discomfort with posting in a public forum. These complaints run counter to benefits listed in this report. Tailoring troubleshooting tools to help address these concerns may help reduce numbers of negative responses.

Conclusion

Google+ Community served as a versatile online forum for Wisconsin MGP continuing education experiences. Our team will continue to integrate other online forums into program offerings and will use the lessons learned from

our Google+ Community experience to help us continue to recruit users, support technology adoption through technology education, and encourage interaction among volunteers.

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