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4-H Network News
<http://4-hnews.blogspot.com>

Abstract

The 4-H Forestry Program in western Washington runs an after-school project called Network News, targeting rural middle- and high-schoolers in a largely poor, rural area on the Olympic peninsula. Participants are taught digital video and other technological competencies while providing content for an online news program covering local, state and national events. 4-H Network News has received local, national, and international attention for the work accomplished by the students. The interviews with users and staff indicated students not only gained technology skills and self-confidence through the program, but also became more involved in their community as they covered local events.

Background

4-H Network News, part of the 4-H Afterschool Forestry Program in Port Hadlock, Washington, is described by coordinators as "a youth-run Internet multi-media club." The goal of this program is to help teens from this remote rural area develop the technical and communication skills to launch them into a broader cultural context and lead them to feel a wider sense of belonging, so they will be socially and intellectually ready to transition into college. As a community technology center (CTC), it offers 11 computers at its headquarters (including 3 computers in its staff offices) all outfitted with FinalCut Pro for editing digital video. Students are also trained on what staff describes as "Hollywood standard, low-end prosumer" grade digital video cameras. Students involved with Network News collaborate with the local newspaper, The Port Townsend & Jefferson County Leader, which posts the 4-H video productions on their online news site.

4-H is the "youth arm" of the nationwide land-grant university system (land-grant universities are federally-subsidized institutions that support higher education opportunities throughout rural America). It is the largest youth organization in the country; with 7 million members, it is twice as big as the next largest youth organization (Boys & Girls Club of America). It has partnered with Washington State University (WSU), a land-grant institution that allows the Network News program to operate out of the WSU Jefferson County Extension and WSU Learning Center on the North Olympic Peninsula.

The 4-H Afterschool Forestry Program employs two instructors and one part-time student assistant. Seven adult volunteers also help out on a regular basis. As of last year, there were 40 students involved in various aspects of the program. Some visit once or twice per week during the school year.

It was made possible through funds from Title III of the Secure Rural Schools Act of 2000. However, the provision only pays for after-school programs that are forestry-related, so the 4-H coordinator faces the challenge of ensuring the program meets that requirement. As she pointed

out, the U.S. Forest Service has career strands for photographers and videographers, so any program that teaches youth these skills can be considered “forestry-related.” 4-H Network News reports also focus on forestry-related stories. Recently, the 4-H program has been able to generate some of its own funding through the work of students in areas of sustainable agriculture, trail-building, noxious weed control, and oyster propagation and harvesting. These teen works programs will serve as models for future activities for the 4-H Network News club.

Data Collection

Data was collected through interviews with two staff members—the 4-H coordinator, and the WSU Learning Center coordinator—via a conference call in July of 2007. Follow-up interviews with both staff members were conducted at the Port Hadlock site the following week. Several CTC users were also interviewed in a focus group format.

4-H Network News is set up as an after-school program, and also runs summer technology camps in June and August. Since data collection occurred during the week before the 4-H county fair, only three users were available to participate in the focus group. Additionally, the remote location of the CTC made it difficult for researchers to coordinate visits because of the amount of travel time required; although it would have been ideal to observe the facility while it was actively being used, that proved impossible.

Interviews

Staff Interviews

According to the coordinator of the 4-H program, poverty, drugs, and alcohol abuse are common in this area. She is intimately aware of these problems, having worked with several local kids who were removed from their homes. Amidst this tumultuous social environment, she sees the goal of 4-H as building the students' confidence and leadership ability by teaching them technology skills. She says, "We're looking at leadership through different strands, and technology is one of them...we tell the kids, 'you are the hope in your communities.'"

The coordinators strive to give teens an opportunity to take on various roles in the production of a news program – videography, film editing, photography, reporting, etc. Each student is required to spend some time working in each of the roles to get a wide variety of experiences. Although students do most of the work themselves, they also had help from about 10 volunteer community technicians who initially helped get the show online.

One of the earliest examples of their work was modeled after an online news show called Rocketboom (<http://www.rocketboom.com>). The students chose a newspaper article about a local issue, read from the article, filmed some “b-roll” footage, and then provided commentary. One student read the reading and commentary on camera, while another did the camera work. Over time, the teens began going to community events and conducting interviews.

The 4H-Network News program’s coverage of the selection of Washington State capitol's Christmas tree in 2006 got the attention of the regional U.S. Forest Service on the Olympic

Peninsula. National attention has helped raise more local, state and national support for the 4-H Network News project, which the 4-H coordinator and the WSU Learning Center coordinator both hope will turn into additional revenue streams. This news piece can be viewed at <http://capitolchristmastree2006.blogspot.com>.

Other projects 4-H Network News has been involved with include online news reporting for the US Forest Service and the Washington State Governor's Office, as well as partnerships with: the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Northwest Area Foundation, the National 4-H Council, the Washington State University Center to Bridge the Digital Divide, Kiwanis, the Port Hadlock Chamber of Commerce, Rotary International, and various news organizations in Seattle. They have covered events such as Folklife, the Capitol Hill Block Party, and Bite of Seattle.

The 4-H coordinator recounted work 4-H has done work with international groups, such as hosting a handful of teens from Rwanda who engaged in a short, intensive course on using technology led by students in the 4-H program. The Rwandan teens went back to their home country to spread the knowledge they gained, creating a networking infrastructure within their community and making their issues and needs more visible through the Internet. Additionally, a representative from the Taiwanese Ministry of Education recently paid the program a visit to learn more about 4-H Network News in order to help develop similar programs in rural areas of Taiwan.

The 4-H coordinator says one of the biggest contributing factors to the success of the 4-H Network News is the fact that she is actively engaged in shaping each 4-H cohort. It helps that she was a former school principal and knows the community well. She specifically targets youths that she thinks will be a good match for the program, aiming for an equal number of boys and girls and reaching out to racially diverse students.

She contacts the parents first, talking to them about the activities and the skills that participants will develop. She feels that the nationally recognized 4-H name is a big reason for the parents' enthusiasm. They know that their kids will have good experiences and, very importantly, will be safe and taken care of. Once she has gained the parents' support she then contacts the youth.

Another factor in the success of the program is the willingness of volunteers to contribute their time. They help out by monitoring the computer lab, and sometimes stay late while the students are working on projects. The CTC staff say they try to be flexible in allowing the volunteers to contribute their time according to what works with their schedules, so that everyone can be accommodated.

As evidence of the difference the program has made for these teens, the 4-H coordinator related a story about some of the Network News kids who attended an academically-focused high school summer camp at Washington State University, called Cougar Quest. The students' experiences at this camp allowed them to see that the technology skills they had developed through 4-H Network News were just as good, if not better, than those of students from more affluent areas. The 4-H coordinator says this has helped them feel more confident about their abilities, and she feels the added confidence will encourage them to continue with their education.

From what she has observed, the 4-H coordinator feels the teens' involvement with the program also has an impact on their families. She says the kids love to share what they have learned, often helping family members with work with computers at home. Additionally, parents who might not otherwise be inclined to use computers are encouraged to go online to see what their children have been working on with Network News. She mentions that parents and family members often come to her wanting physical copies of the web stories because they do not know how to find them online. In these cases, she usually sits down with the family members at a computer, shows them how to access the group's web page and invites them to ask their students for more assistance, beginning a conversation about technology and the Internet in the home.

Students have also engaged in other technology-related projects that have benefited the community. In one project, the students made Blogger accounts and web pages for more than 200 local businesses. Though the 4-H coordinator admits that little has been done with these web pages so far, she sees potential in creating a new revenue stream for the program with these pages by having businesses pay the youth stipends to maintain the sites.

On a more abstract level, the 4-H coordinator sees the activities of the students encouraging community cohesion while building technological infrastructure. She feels the students are "giving voice to positive messages and under-represented voices" in the community by placing particular focus on youth, rural community members and racial minorities in their stories. The 4-H coordinator also points out that the students themselves become a story as they are working on their news projects, which arouses community pride while exposing areas in which communication technologies can be used to build further community networks.

Despite the program's successes, the 4-H coordinator says there are a few factors that have made it difficult for some students to participate. One of these is a lack of time; because they live in a small community, the youths become involved with many different after-school programs as they move into high school, such as cheerleading and football. This makes it harder to schedule time for 4-H Network News.

Another difficulty to overcome was perception: when 4-H Network News started, area kids apparently thought that it was "uncool." The 4-H coordinator worked to change this by actively recruiting teens that others perceived as "cool" to become involved in the video program. Once the program gained acceptance and popularity, it was opened up to more students. She says that the initial year of social engineering with the six "cool" students was crucial in building up a solid reputation with teens, and that the program could not have been as successful or popular without having done this.

The 4-H coordinator says that, for some of the students, the distance that they have to travel to get to the center is a major barrier. It is a 45-minute drive for some students, and they are not always able to get transportation. The center has been able to mitigate this problem somewhat through the purchase of a retired van from the Jefferson County Transit department, which was sold to 4-H for \$1. They have been able to use this van to transport students to and from the WSU Learning Center site.

There were also a few problems due to local government regulations. Specifically, 4-H initially was not allowed to use government funds to purchase snacks for the youth in the after-school program, since county regulations do not allow it. This was a problem, since the kids were coming straight from school and were hungry. However, after some discussion with the county staff, 4-H was able to get an exception to this rule.

The county also questioned the amount of money that was being spent on equipment for the program, particularly when it came to purchasing the expensive cameras. The county did not understand how buying cameras could possibly meet the requirement of being forestry-related. Once they saw how successful the program was, however, resistance melted away. These cameras are also available to lend to adults and schools in the community when they are not in use by 4-H Network News.

When asked about the future of the CTC, the 4-H coordinator and WSU Learning Center coordinator report some new programs on the horizon. They plan to shift into environmental learning mode by hosting eco-tours. They explain that tourism is a growing economic force in the area, and the Center hopes to gain new sources of revenue by tapping into that, having 4-H youth lead visitors on eco-tours through the surrounding wilderness. They are also looking into edu-tourism -- that is, tourism meant to educate rather than simply entertain. They might teach tourists about how the shellfish industry or how watersheds work.

Focus Group Interviews

Three participants in the 4-H Network News project at the Learning Center were interviewed in a focus group. Two of them, who used the aliases "Sue" and "John McCain," were members of the project's first cohort, having entered the program when they were both in 7th grade. Now 16 years old and entering 11th grade, both of them remain active with 4-H Network News. The third, "Student X," is 14 and entering the 9th grade. At the time of the interview, he had just completed his first year with the 4-H Network News project.

They say the 4-H coordinator had actively recruited all three of them. John McCain had been involved with a program called Yipee, which is where his parents met the 4-H coordinator. The 4-H coordinator later called John McCain's mother and convinced her that he should join 4-H Network News. Student X had been involved with raising rabbits in the 4-H program the year before and was brought to 4-H Network News, again, by the coordinator contacting his parents.

Sue, who has no siblings in the home and lives with her mother and father, indicated that her household has a computer, but they only have dial-up Internet access. She also says the computer they have at home is her mother's work computer, so she has limited access to it. She says she likes to come to the WSU Learning Center to use the high-speed Internet connection when possible. In her case, transportation is not a problem because she rides with her mother, who as it happens is the program coordinator.

John McCain, his mother and father, and two brothers aged 8 and 10, have a computer and high-speed Internet access at home. Student X has had a computer and DSL Internet access in his home for two years, although he does not like sharing it with his 9-year-old sister, mother and

father. When he tells us about his computer and DSL access, he seems proud of it, adding that his family "didn't even have electricity or running water" until he was four years old.

Sue says she comes to the WSU Learning Center frequently to do homework and photography, among other things. John has been coming every Wednesday and Thursday during the school year, but does not usually come to the WSU Learning Center during the summer months. He plans to start coming once a week after school, starting next fall. Student X only comes to the WSU Learning Center sporadically during the summer, but more regularly during the school year, due to his involvement with 4-H Network News.

When asked what drew them to the WSU Learning Center, the students all reported that a major factor was that the coordinator had talked to them and their parents about the program. The parents and students alike appreciate the fact that they learn technical skills by participating. Sue feels this is important because "a lot of jobs that are opening up are going to be with computers."

She also expressed that the WSU Learning Center has been important to her in other ways. She says, "I've gained a network with other people who have the same interests." She also told us about an experience she had last year in which her instructor accompanied them on a trip to Seattle. This instructor had made a connection with someone from the Seattle-based newspaper, *The Stranger*. They got the chance to meet and interview members of music bands and the staff of *The Stranger*, an opportunity that Sue found very exciting.

Sue says that she helps her father use their computer at home and, in particular, helps him order the things he wants to purchase through the Internet. She also says she uses her computer skills to talk to her friends in Thailand. She was able to apply the photography skills she learned in the program to enter her photographs into the Jefferson County Fair, using the computers in the 4-H building.

John McCain says he has learned video editing, web design, HTML, CSS, Javascript and other computer applications. He has learned how to set up a home network and was able to apply his video editing skills to help the high school set up a graduation ceremony slide show. He seems reluctant to "brag" about his skills, but we later learn from the 4-H coordinator that John McCain also used GPS/GIS technology to map the location of noxious weeds in the national forest while working with the Noxious Weeds Eradication Program. He has had fun in the program, saying, "We've had some good times." He also feels "the future is working with computers and technology...this is the age of computers and you need to know about computers." He mentioned that his siblings are not as interested in computers as he is.

Student X says he has learned to edit videos using a Mac application called FinalCut, a digital editing suite used by professional Hollywood editors, and has also learned how to use HTML and edit digital photographs. He likes coming to the WSU Learning Center because of the people he has met and the skills he has learned, and also because it is close enough to his house to walk or ride his bike. He also thinks having a firm grasp on how technology works will be essential in the future. "Even in the grocery stores, they're not going to have checkers. They're going to have computers." At home, he helps his parents by showing them how to drop photographs from their digital camera's memory card into a computer file. He says that the one thing he cannot do,

which his parents can, is make a spreadsheet using a computer application. He mentioned that his younger sister is not interested in computers.

The only thing that the students reported as making it difficult to come to the WSU Learning Center more often was finding the time for it. For John McCain, who lives farther away, this included the added time it takes to get to and from the WSU Learning Center. The students were asked directly if there were any negative social impressions of participating in 4-H, but they assured us that there were not. Apparently the 4-H coordinator efforts making 4-H cool have been successful.

The kids did not report any additional programs they would like the center to have, although Student X mentioned that he would like to be able to have more interaction with other people his age. They all reported that the adults involved with the program were supportive, not just in connection with teaching the technology, but in general.

Sue is interested in photography and would like to attend an arts university after high school. Student X says he would like to work in the field of music or technology after he finishes school. He plays the drums, trumpet, guitar and bass. John is not sure what direction he will take after he graduates, but he says he would like to continue his education. They all said they have recommended the program to friends and family, and would continue using the WSU Learning Center next year.

Analysis/Conclusion

It is clear from the interviews that the program is a success. The question is, what has made it successful? Certainly, the heavy personal involvement of the staff has helped, as have the 4-H coordinator's persistent recruitment efforts. The fact that she was a former principal in one of the local school districts means that she already knew many of the parents in the area and was able to use this to the program's advantage. She made repeated phone calls to parents and students, "pestering" them to get involved with the program, and more importantly, to keep them involved over the years. This seems to be a contributing factor in the ongoing success of the program.

The students involved in 4-H are offered a variety of experiences which help build their sense of civic responsibility and self-worth, while also equipping them with valuable technology skills far beyond what would normally be developed in high school. This occurs in a supportive environment in which a strong value is placed on higher education and academic success. Additionally, they (and other members of the community) are given access to a well-equipped computing center that places an emphasis on economic development and communication technology.

The CTC staff wants to make sure the teens in their area receive a solid base of instruction and practical experience working with technology. They note that because these students live in a rural area, they tend to internalize the notion that they would not be capable of successfully completing college. It is for this reason that the staff is particularly concerned with finding ways to show the children they are capable of succeeding when competing with their urban and suburban peers. One of the ways they do this is by teaching the students computer and digital

video skills, and another is by giving them the opportunity to compare what they've learned with what their peers know -- as in the case of Cougar Quest.

Both the 4-H coordinator and the WSU Learning Center coordinator feel that their collaboration could be used as a model for other organizations -- locally, nationally and internationally. Indeed, the international attention that they have already received speaks volumes about their success, and the benefits that have been felt not only by the direct participants but radiating throughout the community suggest that, properly implemented, similar programs could enjoy success around the world. The focus within Jefferson County 4-H is on maintaining a sense of purpose, rather than getting "too widgety" -- not getting hung up on individual, specific projects or technologies but keeping a clear mission of providing a safe place for kids to explore technology and the way that it can be used to connect them to the world. They want these teens to see themselves as active players in life, not just cogs in the wheel of bureaucracy. By thinking big, they have been able to do more with the resources at their disposal, as well as secure new revenue streams from diverse sources to keep their vision moving forward.