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## **Can Blogging Benefit Staff & Youth in 4-H Camp Programs?**

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**Abstract:** An "Edublog", is an educational weblog used by people with a stake in education. This article examines the usage of edublogging in three different 4-H camp programs to create relationships, promote trust, create new conversations, and filter and disseminate knowledge amongst adult and teen camp staff, and middle school aged campers.

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### **Introduction**

Wikipedia defines "edublog" as "a **blog** written by someone with a stake in **education**." A blog (a contraction of the term "Web log") is a **Web site** with regular entries commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. "Blog" can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog. Examples of blogs used in Extension include blogs used for: volunteer/staff training, sharing Extension technology information, and updating research and evaluation findings on Extension studies.

Oregon 4-H faculty found blogs to be a productive tool to provide educational content to technology savvy learners. Three youth camp programs used a combination of blogs and other delivery modes to reach learners in three distinct age groups. According to Coates (2004), Weblogs in Extension offer the potential to promote trust, create new conversations, and filter and disseminate knowledge. It was with this in mind, that the idea of using social media within these three programs was born.

1. A Facebook page with blog capabilities was used to prepare college age and young adult staff for a State 4-H Science camp.
2. High School youth participated in a combination of face-to face and blog experiences to prepare for a county camp.
3. Youth campers at the State 4-H Science Camp used a blog to show their families what was happening at camp.

Coates (2004) stated, "Weblogs, more than any other network application, are about interaction and networking at an individual level." Extension programs seek to create relationships with clientele that support educational content delivery. Blogs fit this parameter.

## **Youth Camp Blogging Applications**

### **Camp Staff on Facebook**

The State 4-H Science Camp is a program taking place at Oregon State University annually in August. College age staff and adults are hired in May but do not report to work until July.

Given this circumstance, the use of Facebook, a free access social networking website, was implemented. Three goals were established for the use of Facebook:

1. To provide a means to connect staff members to begin to build a cohesive team.
2. To foster ownership of the program to discourage staff from dropping out before camp started.
3. To build youth development program leadership skills.

In addition to using Facebook, the staff training consists of the American Camp Association's on line course, Camp is for the Camper, and 3 days of face-to-face training.

After camp, staff were asked if they felt the Facebook page had helped them feel confident coming to counselor training and leading campers. Several staff noted that although "get to know you" questions were provided on Facebook, they felt uncomfortable communicating with people they did not know. Their previous experience on Facebook had been with people they designated as "friends." While several of the staff found the camper situation discussions helpful, others said they were too new to the camp program to feel they could contribute to the discussion.

### **County Camp Counselor Training Blog**

For a county camp, 17 high school students participated in a counselor training blog using a combination of face-to-face trainings and online blog projects.

Counselor trainers identified topics they wanted to cover during training. Scenarios were provided on

common camp issues (e.g., bullying, "missing home syndrome," etc.). Trainees shared comments with each other and the moderator via the blog. Blog sessions were designed to be completed before each face-to-face training. Each face-to-face training provided follow up on the blog topics.

As part of the counselor selection process, the 4-H agent moderator tracked blog comments of counselor trainees and how they responded to different scenarios.

However, only 65% of trainees completed the training assignments on the blog. Counselors stated that they viewed working on the blog as just one more "homework assignment."

An end of program evaluation of the counselors showed mixed reviews of the new combined training method.

- 84% said that reading other's responses helped them think about how they would best respond.
  
- 70% agreed that it was useful to share ideas.
  
- 76% said they did not think it was a good way to stay connected to their fellow trainees.

One Generation Y girl commented, "Blogs are so 2004!" This perception reflects teens' preference for the immediate gratification of instant messaging via text or Web. There's no instant gratification with a blog. Teens prefer to "multi-channel," layering communications like texting, instant messaging, and social networking Web sites.

## Youth Camper Blogs

The state 4-H Science camp is a 12-day resident program for youth entering grades 6-8. Campers are not allowed access to personal cell phones or email. However, one of the camp's goals is to introduce the use of appropriate technology. Campers attend 8 hours of lessons in a university computer lab learning to use PowerPoint, Excel, the camp blog, and the 4-H Corroboree Across the Seas science Web site. Campers use the Corroboree site blog after camp to continue science lessons. The daily camp blog chronicled the campers' experiences <[blogs.oregonstate.edu/bhssc](http://blogs.oregonstate.edu/bhssc)> with posts by campers and pictures and video produced by staff.

Campers' friends and family at home could also reply to the daily blog posts. All camper and non-camper posts were reviewed by a moderator before they went live on the site. Table 1 shows campers' self-reported pre- and post- camp rating of their skills using the blogs. The skill gains are statistically significant.

**Table 1.**  
Science Campers Pre- and Post- Camp Skills

|                                | Mean Pre | Mean Post | SME | t      | df | Sig  |
|--------------------------------|----------|-----------|-----|--------|----|------|
| Skills in Computers: Camp-blog | 2.44     | 4.20      | .19 | -9.45  | 44 | .000 |
| Skills in Computers:           | 1.49     | 4.11      | .19 | -13.70 | 44 | .000 |

|                    |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| Corroboree Website |  |  |  |  |  |  |
|--------------------|--|--|--|--|--|--|

## Discussion

Of the three programs presented here, the greatest success was with the youngest audience, who had the least previous experience with social media. The directors involved believe the blogs did add value for staff and campers in these programs. The importance of using social media communication tools to reach and work with youth and young adults cannot be undervalued (Bovitz, 2007). Extension educators need to use these new media to effectively engage Extension learners.

However, as we embark on the use of new technology, we must keep basic educational principals in mind. While Pew Research (2007) shows that 93% of teens use the Internet and social digital media, this may not directly translate to a positive learning environment. Of the eight currently identified Multiple Intelligences (Gardner, 1993), only verbal-linguistic, the ability to use and understand words and how they fit together, supports blogging as an educational medium. Edublogging can add value for Extension education programming by providing interaction and networking at the individual level.

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