

### A Research Project

The attached seminar paper, by Lori Berget entitled, Agriculture Education – Who Cares? (Improving Communications between Parents – Students and the Ag Education Department), when completed, is to be submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Wisconsin-Platteville in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science in Education Degree, for which 3 credits shall be allowed, is hereby

Approved \_\_\_\_Mark Zidon\_\_\_\_\_Date: \_\_September 22, 2017\_\_\_\_\_

# AGRICULTURE EDUCATION – WHO CARES?

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A Research Project

Presented to

The Graduate Faculty

University of Wisconsin-Platteville

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In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirement for the Degree

Masters of Science

in

Education

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by

Lori Berget

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Special thanks is extended to all of the other Agricultural Education Instructors in Wisconsin, whom have helped shape the successful classrooms throughout the state, and who continually strive to create better communications between all of the stakeholders and their own respective departments. Their continued efforts, along with support from the Department of Public Instruction help make Agriculture Education what it is today in the state of Wisconsin.

ABSTRACT

WHO CARES?

RESEARCH PROJECT

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Under the Supervision of

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The purpose of this research project was to determine the impact of creating a website for the Agricultural Education program in a small, rural Wisconsin public school, to see if it would have a positive impact on communications between students and staff, staff and parents, staff and staff. A brief overview of literature on the impact of communications and the success of students was conducted. Through a review of literature and actual observation, it becomes evident that communications in the school affects the success of the students and the willingness of parental support.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Who cares?” This is a profound question, especially in education today. Pamela Halsey, stated that as students age, their parents become less involved directly in school, and communication gaps start to form. As a result, misperceptions of parents’ desires for involvement exist between schools and families (Halsey 2005). My observations as a high school Agriculture Education Instructor have shown me that many teachers believe that parents are not willing to become involved in their children’s education, while many parents are not aware of opportunities for involvement.

It seems misperceptions abound when both teachers and parents believe that the other party is unwilling to engage in parent involvement. Research shows that there is great benefit to parent involvement in education. According to a study done by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory, “when parents are involved in their child’s education, no matter what their income or background, students are more likely to: be promoted, pass their classes, earn credits, attend school regularly, have better social skills, show improved behavior, adapt well to school, graduate and go on to postsecondary education (Henderson & Mapp, 2002).” When adult involvement extends to the community, even greater benefits have been identified. As stated by Henderson and Mapp, “When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more (2002).”

After launching a website in a small, rural Wisconsin school, the following feedback was obtained by a small segment of parents, students and staff with the following questions asked:

Table 1

Questions Asked	Parents (n=3)		Staff (n=3)		Community Members/Alumni (n=3)		Students (n=14)	
1. On Average, you used the website how many times during the spring semester 2014?								
Once per day	0		0		0		0	
2 or more times per week	1		0		1		5	
1 time per week	0		1		1		8	
Less than once per week	2		2		1		1	
2. Did you think the website was informational and helpful to you?	Yes=2	No=1	Yes=3	No=0	Yes=3	No=0	Yes=12	No=2
3. Do you think the website helped you stay informed about things happening in the Ag Ed Department better than not having a website?	Yes=3	No=0	Yes=3	No=0	Yes=3	No=0	Yes=13	No=1
4. Which page of the website did you find most helpful?								
Class lesson page	2		1		0		11	
FFA Page	1		2		3		2	
Blog Page	0		0		0		1	

### Statement of the Problem

In the midst of student-centered learning, infusing multiple intelligence learning styles, and creating a safe environment for our children, education has become a daily challenge. Communication promoting parent and community involvement has been documented to have a significant positive effect on students' achievements. The challenge to educators is to figure out how to bridge the communication gap. The purpose of the study documented below, attempts to answer this question.

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to determine if creating and implementing a website for the Agriculture Education Department at Black Hawk High School helped improve communications between parents, students, staff and community members, laying the groundwork for greater student benefits in the long term. The experiences documented around use of the Black Hawk

Ag Ed Webpage will serve as a “best practices” guide for future Agriculture Education instructors when creating similar department based websites.

### **Assumptions Inherent in the Study**

It was assumed that all questions asked of agricultural instructors and students were answered honestly. It was also assumed that the comments received were representative of Wisconsin schools enough to direct further research.

### **Definition of Terms**

The following definitions are consistent with the literature review. These terms were used throughout the project.

**FFA:** An inter-curricular student organization for those interested in agriculture and leadership. It is one of three components of agricultural education.

**Staff:** In this study, staff refers to the Agriculture Education Instructor(s).

**Weebly:** This is the site that the Black Hawk Ag Ed Website was created with. Weebly is a freemium website creation and Web-hosting service (Rouse, M. 1999, January. Weebly. Retrieved September 12, 2014).

**Parental Involvement:** In this study, parental involvement means knowing what the student is studying in their classes, and/or what activities their student is participating in through the FFA.

### **Delimitations of Research**

The study was limited to one Southwest, Wisconsin public school and their Agriculture Education department, for one semester of school. It was not the intention that this research would represent the population of Wisconsin Agricultural Educational departments. Rather, it was created as an example for future Agriculture Education instructors who are interested in bridging the communication gap between student, parents, community and school.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In the process of determining how to bridge the communication gap at Black Hawk High School between students, parents, community and school, a number of articles were reviewed, which provided relevant research regarding the use of technology as a delivery method. These articles addressed everything from the use of technology to improve communication to the disparities of technology accessibility and support. The reviews contained valuable insights which became the foundation of the Black Hawk High School Agriculture Education program website.

#### **Investing in Information and Communication Technology (ICT)**

According to an article published by Kozma in 2010, “information and communication technology has irreversibly changed the way people work, communicate, interact, invest, learn and spend their leisure time.” This statement is certainly true of education. Technology has not only changed the way students learn, but it has also made it easier to communicate between staff, students and staff, parents and teachers and community stakeholders.

Considering this, one way to increase communication in the Black Hawk Agriculture Education department was to create a website (one stop shop) for anyone to visit that had an interest in the agriculture curriculum, FFA Alumni, FFA, or student activities. Specifically, the website included the following: pertinent links, photos of classroom activities, opportunity to blog (asking questions, sharing concerns and comments), lesson plans, calendar of events, and make-up work for students and important contact information for the department. Prior to the website development, people communicated about the Black Hawk Agriculture Education Department using the phone, hard copy newsletters, word of mouth and notes home with

students. The new Agriculture Education Department website provided a modern approach to communicating that aligned with Kozma's research.

### **Using Technology to Empower Students**

“Young people's home use of technology suggests a rich experience involving exploratory activities, access to knowledge and the opportunity to publish their views. Curriculum reform is essential in order to maximize the potential of technology. It demands a shift away from current curriculum and pedagogy towards critical thinking and knowledge construction.” This quote, taken from *Broadening Access to the Curriculum Through Using Technology to Link Home and School: a Critical Analysis of Reforms Intended to Improve Students' Educational Attainment* by Lewin, Mavers and Somekh (2003, P.23) depicts the need for technological integration and communication for student achievement to move forward.

Utilizing the Black Hawk Agriculture Education website, students had the opportunity to explore, read and publish their views. This allowed them to take their learning further, by posting photos, contributing to blogs and showcasing their daily work to stakeholders. Links provided on the website gave students access to further learning in content areas of interest, agriculture related careers, leadership activity opportunities and virtual fieldtrips. In short, the Black Hawk Agriculture Education website empowered students to use technology to grow in a way that had never happened before.

### **Accommodating Students Facing Technological Disparities**

In a perfect world, every student would have access to the World Wide Web everywhere they go, using high speed internet, but the world is not perfect, and rural America (including South Wayne, Wisconsin – where Black Hawk School and Agriculture Education Department is located) faces its own challenges when it comes to technology. In education's quest for

integrating technology into curriculum, a study titled *The Role of Community Technology Centers in Promoting Youth Development* (London, Pastor, Servon, Rosner and Wallace, 2009), was conducted that documented the disparities in computer and internet access for low-income people (Day, Janus & Davis, 2005; Fairlie, 2007). The paper stated that “as tech-savvy young people lead the rest of society into a fully wired and mobile nation (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005), the most disadvantaged youth still have less access to computers and internet, particularly at home (London, et al, 2010).

Because a number of Black Hawk students did have limited internet capabilities at home, opportunities were given to them to use the new website during school hours in the agriculture education classroom, and during study halls in the computer lab. All students were given time at the end of agriculture class periods to use the website and work ahead if they wanted. Parents and community stakeholders without internet access did not benefit from this school time internet usage, but did continue to receive communication from the agriculture education department as they had in the past, in other forms. Connecting students in the Agriculture Education program to the website was the top priority for this endeavor, as the school policies allowed internet access to students but not to outside parties. There would have needed to have been more community internet access points available in order for parents and stakeholders without high speed internet to reap the benefit of the website. In many rural communities, the general public could access the internet at the public library, but South Wayne does not have a public library.

### **Using Technology to Enhance Teaching**

Understanding how to use technology to enhance teaching or to help students become self-conscious of assessing their own understanding of educational concepts has categorized

educators into an instruction-construction continuum. Regardless of which end of the continuum teachers are on, there are implications for the effective use of technology in teaching students. It is simply the way that the technology is utilized that differs.

At one end of the continuum are constructivist classrooms, teaching student-centered learning using technology as an aid. An example of this type of classroom includes stations where students use technology to learn various objectives of the lesson. The stations are usually stand-alone in nature and are designed for all students, regardless of their preferred learning style to participate in.

On the other end of the continuum, “best practice” teachers use pedagogical beliefs to help students learn, and technology is used to enhance those methods of instruction. Students utilize technology to progress their learning after an individual learning type has been identified (examples: creating a poster using Picasa, typing a short story using word, creating flashcards in Quizlet to learn with, etc.). Learning in “best practice” classrooms is built around the individual learning styles of students.

“Educators today are confronted with a number of alternative, often opposing, views of what technology is and the purposes it should serve within instructional settings. Although studies have shown that most teachers today recognize the importance of using technology in their classrooms (Beichner, 1993: Fulton, 1993), they often lack a clear vision of how technology can be used to support educational best practices (Roblyer, 1993). The lack of a clear vision has opened the door for all teachers to find ways that technology enhances their own classroom. For the Black Hawk Agriculture Education Department, the best use of technology was to improve communications.

## **The Need for Collaboration and Social Media Connections**

A review of the article *A Model for Building School-Family-Community Partnerships: Principles and Process* (Bryan & Henry, 2012), shows that a critical need exists for collaboration among counselors, teachers, parents and other school stakeholders (Bryan, 2005; Trusty, Mellin & Herbert, 2008). Research indicates that when a collective group of school, family, and community stakeholders work together, achievement gaps decrease (Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010; Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Holcomb - McCoy, 2010). Together, these articles support the idea of increasing communication between the stakeholders in the school and community, to improve student performance and increase parent involvement in school classes. The problem that presents itself, however, is that further research has shown that “even though support is available for students, they do not always utilize it, or do not possess the capacity to use the support devices adequately (Clarebout, Horz , Schnotz & Elen, 2010).

As older instructors in the schools often find themselves struggling to keep pace with new technologies and the students who are said to have been “born digital”, research promotes both sides of the debate that asks “Do students want technology integrated into their education?” There is mounting evidence that the actual uses of information and communication technology (ICT) by students are more limited in scope than is implied (Selwyn, 2009). According to Lohnes and Kinzer (2007), recent studies suggest that students do not expect or want to use ICT in educational settings in the same way they do at home or in the community. Actually, there is little evidence that students want more ICT integration in the classroom (McWilliam 2002). Students, according to Keen (2007), are much more interested in using ICT for social-networking purposes than for learning (Nasah, DaCosta, Kinsell & Seok 2010).

In designing the Black Hawk High School Ag Education website, some considerations were made. Since most rural school districts in our region (at the time of this research study) did not permit Facebook use, tweeting or other forms of social media into the classroom, a website was chosen as the media means of communication for the Agriculture Department. One hopeful outcome was for students and parents to integrate the site into their daily routine, increasing the communication between the student and parent, and ultimately the parent and teacher. Attaching a blog page into the website was done to increase the ability for others to communicate on that site, instead of emailing separately or calling on the phone.

One study suggests that there are different strategies guiding the development of networks, which vary as they incorporate new information and communication tools, such as mobile connectivity, blogging and multimedia content sharing (Marques, Krejci, Siqueria, Pimental & Braz 2013). That was a challenge of creating the website, finding a way to increase communication with community and staff, which was user-friendly, allowed through the firewalls in the school district, and easily edited.

### **Understanding the Communication Gap between Parents and Teachers**

Even after reviewing several articles on the importance of infusing technology into the classroom, the article entitled *Parent Involvement In Junior High Schools: A Failure to Communicate* (Halsey 2005) put the communication gap between parents and schools in easy to understand terms. The article states that teachers, parents, and students are often uncertain about how to initiate parent involvement in their schools. One difficulty in the initiation of parent involvement is that teachers and parents perceive communicative efforts differently. While teachers tend to employ institutional communicative methods, parents prefer more personal, individual invitations for involvement. Consequently, teachers and parents become discouraged

by the mismatch of communication preferences. This article helped summarize the reason for my research and the title of the paper, “Who Cares?”

### **Testing a Website: Best Practices**

While the author Glenn Stout was not directly involved with education, the premises of testing a website for user friendliness that he discusses in his article, “Testing a Website: Best Practices”, still applies to classroom and school-generated websites. The paper stated that poorly operating websites in the business world have caused consumers to stop buying at the brick and mortar stores. Paging through school websites, sometimes community members feel that the sites are not easy to navigate or they cannot find certain information on in a timely manner. According to Stout, “one can only surmise that the customers feel that if the company cannot provide a quality website, then they may not be able to sell a quality product from their stores” (Stout, 2001). Schools are in the business of selling their products or academic successes to potential consumers, and technology has opened up new doors for schools to use to advertise their strengths.

As an educator, free is always a good thing to keep in mind when using software, but building websites using free software does not always allow a lot of options. Stout’s research said that consumers also want other features in their web applications such as security, reliability and recoverability. As an instructor, it is very important to think about security and who will be accessing certain parts of the website. If a free website is used, the ability to have “secure” places for students to exchange information is not always available. “People expect that websites are secure, and are available twenty-four hours a day, seven days per week. When they are not, the business suffers (MacIntosh & Strigel, 2000) (Stout, 2001).

## **Summary**

A review of literature shows that change is inevitable in education, technology is here to stay, and finding a way to improve communications with parents while offering quality technology use is very pertinent to the future successes of students and school programs.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODS AND PROCEDURES**

“Who Cares”, the theme of this paper, digs into the thought process that one teacher was trying to make a difference in the success of her students’ by attempting to improve communications within the school district between the various entities that were directly involved with the Black Hawk Ag Ed Department. Will creating a website help open communication between parents, students, staff and community members – concerning the agriculture education program? With the creation of the website, will the educator be able to see -“who cares”- by who logs onto the website and accesses the information? Do parents find the website helpful and informative? In an attempt to research if improved communications helped the success of students in school, a survey of Black Hawk students, parents, staff and community members was conducted to determine if and how communicating through a website would improve communications between the parents, students and teachers. (See appendix A)

The surveys were given to students, their parent(s), FFA Alumni members in the community, and staff in the school district. These surveys were conducted in the spring of 2014. Obtaining data for the usage of the website was done using “Weebly.com” statistics. (See appendix B).



Black Hawk School, located in Southwest Wisconsin, is a rural school, with a student population of just over 100 students in grades 9-12. In the midst of education, there is an undertone of many changes, one of which is providing better communication between the teachers, parents, students, community members and staff. The Agriculture Education Instructor designed a web page to improve communications in the agriculture department, providing students with daily classroom structure, the parents and stakeholders with updated information about the program and the FFA, and community members were able to see photos of what education was taking place in class, in the FFA and contribute feedback to the agriculture department through a blog page.

Collecting data by interviewing Agriculture Education Instructors about their websites, and how they used them to improve communications in their respective schools was done through a survey. The survey was emailed to Wisconsin Agriculture Education Instructors via the list serve (a Department of Public Instruction service for all agriculture education instructors in Wisconsin). The survey questions that were sent to the list serve:

1. Do you have a web page that you put information on that parents can access?
2. If so, approximately how many times per week (on average) during the school year do parents access it?
3. Do you have any good suggestions for creating and/or using this type of media to communicate with parents and/or students?

Responses (appendix C) from that email were read, and specific Agriculture Education Instructors were targeted for follow-up questions. A Google survey was sent to those selected instructors, with follow-up, open-ended questions. (See appendix D)

Results of the survey helped form the website that was built by the Black Hawk Ag Ed Instructor, using weebly.com. The site included a home page, a page for each class taught in the specific school year, a FFA Community page complete with photos, and a blog page to elicit feedback from anyone in the community. The website was opened for business in the fall of 2013, and utilized by the entire student body in the Black Hawk Ag Ed Department for the entire school year. Students were able to open daily lessons, turn in assignments, view video clips and share information with other students via the web page. The site served as a central location for all things that were happening in the Black Hawk Ag Ed Department and FFA Chapter.

## Chapter IV

### SURVEY RESULTS

At Black Hawk High School, the first stop in “Who Cares” was the classroom, the Agriculture Education Department. To help facilitate the curriculum necessary to support the agriculture education department learning objectives and foster communication, a web site was created to offer easy access to curriculum materials for both students and parents. The main objective of creating the webpage: have one central location for classroom curriculum making it accessible “outside” of school, anytime of the day or night (while finding an easy way for students and/or parents to communicate with the Ag Instructor as needed).

In the fall of 2013 a Black Hawk Ag Webpage was created using Weebly as the host, and all of the classes were added to the page (each class a new page). Once class pages were added,

each week the lesson plans were typed on the corresponding class page, updated (including links to various videos, documents and posts) and student were able to access the information while at school or at home. Students were taught how to log onto the webpage, and how to navigate through it to find the essential parts to their specific curriculum. (See visuals below of the Black Hawk Ag Ed Web Site).



of “flipped” classroom sessions also recorded and linked to the page, hoping to spark an interest in “listening to lectures at home” and “participating in activities and skill sets” while in the classroom.

Creating the web page allowed the instructor and students to have a central location to find materials used in class. There were a couple



To help elevate the communication gap between the Ag Department and parents, the web page also contained a “blog” page, for parents/community members or students to make comments or ask questions. This page was monitored daily, and comments were removed if necessary.

In the graph located in appendix B, it gives a visual of the number of times that students/parents or others visited the Black Hawk Ag Page, and though there is nothing to

compare it to in the past, it sets a baseline for future efforts in communicating with parents.

Creating this page and monitoring the blogs was a very BIG step in keeping communications open between staff and students.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This “research project” was a positive experience for me, the students and the parents.

The webpage made it possible to post photos of class projects (such as making wool mittens, goat milk soap and hatching chickens). The students were able to see the growth of their chicks from day 2 to processing, and the processed chicken was served at the annual FFA Banquet in March to the FFA members, community members, parents and Alumni in attendance. Posting photos of classroom projects allowed parents, staff and community stakeholders to view what was happening in the classroom, and ask questions or leave comments on the blog page.

Increasing communications in this manner helped make the Agriculture Education program more transparent and community friendly.

The webpage could be easily changed to meet the needs of a new class or new school year. As referenced in the survey responses from Wisconsin Agriculture Educator’s (appendix C) there is a need of communication with parents and students in the schools, but that need is met in many different ways, and with some frustration from the Instructors.

The Black Hawk website was also easily removed from the web, as I no longer teach at Black Hawk High School. The site helped the new instructor understand the curriculum that was in place, and was an easy way to share links, worksheets and projects with the new instructor and students.

This project has also helped provide a better system of communications in my current position as 4-H Youth Educator, updating and creating new items for the county UW-Extension website. Communication with parents, members and community stakeholders is a much bigger business as a county educator, and having conducted research in the area of communications via a website helps explain the question “who cares”.

In the long-run, educators care about providing positive learning environments and engaging materials to students in their classrooms, while keeping in touch with the parents and community members that support the school. That is “who cares!”

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## APPENDIX A

### **Black Hawk Ag Department Website Use Survey**

\* Required

Please choose the ag class that you were a part of in the spring of 2014 \*

Please complete the short survey below to help me better understand the use of the Black Hawk Web site.

Would you say on average that you used the website during spring semester 2014 \*

- ☐ Once per day
- ☐ A couple of times per week
- ☐ Once per week
- ☐ Less than once per week

Did you think the website was informational and helpful to you? \*

- ☐ yes
- ☐ no

Do you think the website helped you stay informed about things happening in the Ag Department better than not having a website? \*

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

Which page of the website did you find most helpful? \*

- ☐ Class lesson plan page
- ☐ FFA page
- ☐ blog page

## APPENDIX B

In the graph below, it gives a visual of the number of times that students/parents or others have visited the Black Hawk Ag Page in the months August and September 2014 (the start of a new school year).



## APPENDIX C

Below are survey responses from the WI Ag Ed Instructors on the Wisconsin Ag Listserve, a service provided by the Department of Public Instruction for Agricultural Educators.

### Survey Responses from WI Ag Ed Instructors on the DPI ListServe website

Questions that were asked of the Instructors	Responses
<b>Do you have a web page that you post information on that parents can access?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*NO, but I would like to have one.</li><li>*Yes - FFA Tab on School Webpage</li><li>*Whitehall has a school district website AND a Facebook account that I use. Too many different places (ie...one for sports, one for FFA, one for FCCLA and parents had too many spots to check) Our FFA does have a separate Facebook acct.</li><li>*We have a homework page for the senior high. On the main high school page.</li><li>*I use google classroom with students, we have a face book page</li><li>*Facebook is used for FFA but not classes.</li></ul>
<b>If so, approximately how many times per week (on average) during the school year do parents access it?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*I believe it is important.</li><li>*Seldom (less than once per week) mainly because it is still under construction</li><li>* Weekly- I would say the school</li><li>*webpage/Facebook is daily, but the FFA Facebook page is probably more weekly. *Seldom for most. There are some grade assignment checkers</li></ul>
<b>Do you have any good suggestions for creating and/or using this type of media to communicate with parents and/or students?</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>*I like to have assignments and lessons and links for students and parents.</li><li>*At this time I don't, as I am still trying to figure this out myself.</li><li>*We use a text/call messaging system to contact all FFA members and parents called remind101. It works well as long as people take the time to register their cell phone numbers</li><li>*Not at this time.</li></ul>

## APPENDIX D

Google Survey sent to selected WI Ag Ed Instructors which were targeted by their responses from the initial survey (Appendix C). They were asked to answer the following open-ended questions. Results from the initial survey and these follow-up questions helped form the Black Hawk Ag Ed Website.

# WI List-serve Website Analysis

\* Required

What do you think that your website is used for the most? \*



What did you base your design on?



Please tell me what school you teach at \*

