

**Global Learning Reflection: Evaluating the International Blog Posts of the Virginia  
Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) Program**

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### **Introduction**

Global leaders in agriculture require skills and knowledge in international economic development, globalization, culture in agriculture, and worldwide agricultural networks to address diverse, interconnected, and complex global issues (Bruening & Shao, 2005; Kaufman, Rateau, Carter, & Strickland, 2012). Integrating international experiences in agricultural programs provides capacity for participants to serve as global leaders (Jones & Bjelland, 2004). The Virginia Agriculture Leaders Obtaining Results (VALOR) program incorporates an international seminar to provide these experiences to fellows. VALOR also includes blogging as a reflective process for fellows to share observations and insights based on seminar experiences.

For agricultural leadership programs situated within Cooperative Extension, it is essential to conduct rigorous evaluations to demonstrate program value for continued funding (e.g. Lamm, Carter, & Lamm, 2016). Bush, Corkins, Seibel, and Elliott-Engel (2017) conducted an evaluation of the VALOR program, which utilized a stratified sample to examine reflections on competency and capacity development through required post-seminar blogging. Within this study, qualitatively coded passages from blog posts pertaining to the international seminar detailed experiences, but lacked meaningful reflection. In alignment with priority five of the American Association for Agricultural Education National Research Agenda, *Efficient and Effective Agricultural Education Programs* (Thoron, Myers, & Barrick, 2016), this study utilized an all-inclusive approach to explore VALOR fellows' reflections during blog entries on their experiences during the international component of the program.

### **Conceptual Framework**

For international experiences, experiential learning is a common pedagogy for actively engaging participants (Montrose, 2015). Adult learners prefer experiential learning opportunities, which incorporate reflective processes to enhance learning (Lamm et al., 2011). Reflective activities improve conceptual reasoning, critical thinking, and writing and speaking abilities (Dallimore, Hertenstein, & Platt, 2008; Hamann, Pollock, & Wilson, 2012). Group and individual reflection such as journaling or blogging, are activities often employed within leadership programs to challenge participants to synthesize experiences (Allen & Hartman, 2008). When engaged in reflective learning, adults are able to expand their capacity through the integration of novel experiences (Densten & Gray, 2001).

### **Methodology**

The researchers designed a study to explore what VALOR fellows conceptually reflect on during the international component of the program on the VALOR designated blog site, managed by fellows and staff. The researchers collected all blogs which discussed the international component of VALOR for analysis. The sample included 34 total blog entries ( $N=34$ ) from 17 fellows ( $N=17$ ) from cohort one and two of the VALOR program. The research team used an iterative process to examine the blog posts, beginning with a superficial examination of extract passages, which discussed competency and/or capacity development (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The researchers then coded each extracted passage utilizing pre-set codes, which were the result of an iterative, open-coding process in a previous study on blog reflections within the VALOR program (Bush et al., 2017). The pre-set codes included expanded thinking with change and self-

awareness as subthemes; competencies; and interconnectedness with networking and affiliations as subthemes. The researchers quantified and transformed responses into nominal values (Chi, 1997).

### **Results**

Overall, the sample included 64.7% ( $n=11$ ) of fellows ( $N=17$ ) and 38.2% ( $n=13$ ) of blog posts ( $N=34$ ) for coding. The remaining blog posts detailed the experience rather than providing a reflection upon the experience. Fifty-eight percent of fellows ( $n=10$ ) and 35% of blog posts ( $n=12$ ) included passages pertaining to expanded thinking. From these blog posts, five fellows discussed aspects of change with three fellows demonstrating increased self-awareness. Two fellows (12%) discussed interconnectedness within their blog posts. One of the posts discussed networking, while both incorporated affiliations. None of the fellows mentioned competency development within their blog posts.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

International blog posts from the VALOR program lacked substantial reflection. The international blogs focused predominantly on physical components of the scheduled activities. Details provided an overview of the seminar experience, but showed little-to-no evidence of personal growth through expanded thinking, interconnectedness, and/or competency development. VALOR aims to improve leadership and communication skills, increase awareness of diversity and relationships, and improve self-awareness within agriculture industries and stakeholders. The blog posts provided little to no evidence of this development or capacity for global leadership.

Although blogging is recognized as a platform for reflection (Chu, Chan, & Tiwari, 2012), Douthit, Schaake, Hay McCammant, Grieger, & Bormann (2015) proposed blogging to be integrated with other learning and reflective mechanisms to bolster developmental outcomes. The findings of this study also indicate a need for program curriculum to be infused with content and skill development relating to reflective thinking practices. It is recommended for fellows to engage in reflective blogging with an emphasis on making meaningful connections between their current work and newly acquired international experiences, applications, and knowledge.

Program curriculum for VALOR and other adult programs with international components should be tailored to incorporate discourse (Jones & Bjelland, 2004), frameworks (Roberts, Conner, & Jones, 2013), and mechanisms to better prepare fellows for international thinking and learning both within agriculture and leadership settings. It is recommended for fellows to engage in pre-reflection, guided group and individual reflection during the experience, and post-reflection to increase capacity development during the international seminar. Pre-reflection provides a space for thoughtful consideration of expectations associated within the learning experience and bridges thinking about the experience and learning from the experience (Jones & Bjelland, 2004). Guided reflections could aid novice fellows in processing of the experience (Roberts et al., 2013). Because learners have different levels of knowledge and learning styles, Roberts et al. (2013) proposes opportunities for both individual reflection and collaborative debriefing as a best practice during international experiences within any adult program. Post-reflection should also be implemented to provide a space for fellows to connect goals and expectations set within the pre-reflection following the culmination of the experience.

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