Kari Robideau:

Hello there. Welcome to the podcast, Cohort Learning Takes a Front Yard Approach. My name is Kari Robideau and I'm an extension educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Thank you for listening to this podcast. And thank you to Amber Shanahan, my colleague extension educator, also with the Center for Youth Development. Amber thanks for joining me today.

Amber Shanahan:

Thank you so much Kari for having me.

Kari Robideau:

Well, this is your second time on a podcast with me. You were a guest on episode two where we talked about the 10 essential elements of cross-age teaching and at that time you shared information with us about the youth teaching youth program and I believe we're going to touch on that again today as we think about how adults learn together and this front yard approach.

Amber Shanahan:

Yes, that was my very first podcast and so I'm excited to have a second chance at doing it again. The youth teaching youth program it's a cross-age teaching program. It's something that I'm very passionate about and so it was really fun to have the opportunity to share some of our programming ideas in this way.

Kari Robideau:

Well, and for those who didn't hear that podcast and are listening now, I invite you to go back to episode two. However, for those who weren't on or maybe don't remember you as well, will you tell us a little bit about yourself and then really hone in on that interest you have in this cohort-based learning for adults.

Amber Shanahan:

Yeah. I am an extension educator, as you mentioned, with the University of Minnesota's Center for Youth Development. I'm based in Farmington, Minnesota. In my role I wear two hats. One is focused on cross-age teaching, which was mentioned earlier and you can revisit with the episode two of this podcast. The other hat that I wear is around staff and professional development for our 4-H staff.

Amber Shanahan:

The interest in cohorts and how they support positive learning environments for adult learners really came to me after having my own really successful cohort experience through the University of Minnesota's Humphrey School. I really loved learning alongside peers and gaining insight from their experiences and having the ability to use their experiences in my own work. And through that I recognize how crucial these connections are for professionals, especially professionals that are working in an organization like 4-H. A lot of times we have county-based staff who are maybe feeling a little bit isolated in separate county offices and so I recognized that cohort learning would be a really great way to bring training and learning opportunities to my colleagues statewide.

Kari Robideau:

Now for those who listen in on these podcasts, they know that I often ask my colleagues who have written a blog post to expand on that and share with us in their own words so we can hear from them directly their thoughts on their particular topic. This one too is written on a one of our Youth Development Insight blogs. This particular topic caught my eye because anytime I see cohort-based learning and that community-based and exactly what you just talked about, I'm very interested in that adult learning aspect that I think we sometimes forget to do that we have a lot to learn from each other. And when we can create a community of learners, that's always the best situation.

Kari Robideau:

I'm interested in how you discuss that benefit of that face-to-face experience and what the in-person cohort looks like for the adult learner.

Amber Shanahan:

Yeah, so let me preface this response with the fact that I am a lover of all learning opportunities both face-to-face and online and everything in between. But the reason why this blog, why you said it maybe struck your fancy was because I talked about front yard learning. The reason why I named this Front Yard Learning, because I happened to be reading an article in the Star Tribune, which is one of our local twin cities' newspapers, and it discussed how there's a resurgence of front yard patios in St. Louis Park, which is a neighborhood here in the area and people were talking about how they were bringing their chairs out in the front yard rather than the backyard and it created a whole new sense of community.

Amber Shanahan:

I really gravitated towards this idea as an educator because as an adult learner and as an educator myself, we really rely on online trainings as our education go-to because of the convenience, which is incredible. But when you are online you hide behind your computer screen sometimes. Sometimes you can be really engaged and sometimes you don't have to be, which is also really nice, but you often miss out on those crucial face-to-face connections. Even some of the more informal parts about having a face-to-face training, like eating lunch together and actually sharing a physical space, going for walks during your break, it all has the potential to lead to greater connections with colleagues and peers.

Amber Shanahan:

I just really liked the idea about thinking about cohort learning and face-to-face learning as an opportunity to build a connection, a front yard connection rather than being in your backyard with a fence, and both places are beautiful and you just need them for different reasons sometimes.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah and that's what I loved about your connection there and I would say metaphor. But it is so similar because I could be in the house on my computer, on a social network and communicating with people there. However that is rich as well, like you're saying, but getting out in your front yard and getting face-to-face with people, there's a deeper learning there that can happen face-to-face that we just can't get in online learning environments. So I really appreciated your reading that article and then bringing that to, hey, adult learning environments, although online learning is convenient and can be less expensive, it's so important to keep us in these cohort-based environments.

Kari Robideau:

As we continue this, let's back up a moment maybe and talk about cohort-based learning. I'm going to let you explain what you mean by that, what the definition of that and how does that look in an adult learning environment.

Amber Shanahan:

Yeah. The way that I define cohort learning, it's beyond just regular face-to-face learning, which we know can happen in a variety of different ways, but when you have a cohort it's continuous connections with the same individuals over a period of time. And one of the purposes is to really have a shared learning space where individuals can be supported and challenged by the group. And so of course, whenever anybody's involved in a learning opportunity, there's an expectation that there will be individual growth. But the point of having a cohort is that members are equally concerned with supporting and offering reflective space for their peers. And so asking those challenging questions and really wanting to get feedback and insight from those people that you start to build a connection with over time.

Amber Shanahan:

Beyond just the typical learning objectives of a training cohort, there's also a lot of community building that happens. It's really a space for fostering creativity, and again, just encouraging your peers. There's obviously a space again, for maybe a onetime shot face-to-face learning opportunity or a time when you are connecting with somebody for a lunch and learn and it's just over an hour. But when we talk about cohorts we're really talking about not only the training that's embedded in the actual learning experience, but the relationships that are built along the way. And those are, especially for mid-level people in their careers, professionals, those are really important because it helps you build connection with your colleagues and it helps you learn from others.

Kari Robideau:

You have been involved here at the university with a program that specifically looks at this kind of learning. Tell us how that has been going.

Amber Shanahan:

Of course I am talking up cohorts because I am very invested in my own cohort that I'm leading here at the University of Minnesota's Center for Youth Development. I took my experience from the Humphrey School and worked with a colleague to embed a similar model with 4-H program coordinators who have been on staff for over six months but not quite two years. We have created a model called The Youth Development Learn and Lead Cohort. It's an extension of the onboarding process, kind of a long-term onboarding process, if you will. It lasts for eight months. It's a hybrid model, so it includes both online meetings and face-to-face meetings. There's also a balance of training and action learning.

Amber Shanahan:

What I mean by that is that we have specific topics that we discuss every month when we meet, but then we've also asked individuals to focus on an action learning project, which is, it's an issue or a topic that the staff person is uniquely positioned to support and grow from, and we ask them to take what they've learned from their trainings and apply it to their action learning project. The action learning project is twofold. It's not only just an opportunity for them to apply their learning to and write a

specific goal for their county work, but it also lends itself really nicely to this cohort aspect where individuals are networking with each other and they're asking each other for advice.

Amber Shanahan:

We invest time during the schedule to embed intentional networking activities and time for individuals to get support from their colleagues towards their action learning project. That is a way for us to practice this cohort model with some really intentional specific opportunities to ask for support from colleagues.

Amber Shanahan:

So we're helping to build that community ... we're holding the hand of that community building. But it's been really successful thus far and we get really fantastic results at the end, not only just because we have these really cool projects that individuals work on for eight months, but because when we do evidence collecting towards the end, we find that people have built relationships with the individuals in this cohort. They're asking them for advice beyond the length of the cohort and they continue to connect with these individuals.

Amber Shanahan:

We know that that's powerful just in and of itself, especially again with the organization that we work in, there tends to be a lot of isolation and it's really important that we are building connections and a system of support.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah. So that isolation, because in Extension we have program coordinators scattered throughout the state and you're bringing together coordinators who are in different counties that wouldn't connect with each otherwise.

Amber Shanahan:

Exactly.

Kari Robideau:

Yeah. You've touched on, I think a couple of the benefits that adults can get out of this kind of learning environment, but if you wouldn't mind, let's go deeper into that. What can an adult learner expect to get out of this kind of learning environment opposed to some of the other types of teaching and learning environments that we've talked about?

Amber Shanahan:

Yeah, so just in general, if you're out there thinking that you want to start your own cohort, there's a couple of things that typically help to make the learning experience really strong for the individuals. You typically want at least 12 participants but no more than 25. That's a really great range to ensure that people are connecting with each other and they're not getting lost in the crowd.

Amber Shanahan:

Also when you have a cohort, the members should be willing to share their experiences and be open to feedback and have a common purpose as the basis for their collaboration. You're not going to get what

you need out of a cohort if you intend to join the meetings but then not share or not share your experiences or not provide feedback. It will just not end up being the same type of powerful experience.

Amber Shanahan:

We also ensure that we embed the experiential learning model into our process because we want to make sure that we include time for really critical reflection and a space for application of knowledge, which is again how we've used the action learning project in our own cohort.

Amber Shanahan:

The cohort experience is really about the group and empowering those individuals to empower each other. So there's an expectation that people are growing individually but they're also growing as a team and that's really, really important.

Kari Robideau:

One of the other things that struck me in your blog post, and I just want us to touch on it in a moment, because all of us as youth workers, you had mentioned in your blog that we cultivate this kind of learning for the kids we work with all the time, but we're not always as good as adult learners at doing it for ourselves. Just your comment on that it really does model healthy peer relations for youth observers.

Amber Shanahan:

Yeah. We often ask youth to step outside of their comfort zone as an opportunity for them to gain experiences and build relationships with other youth and adults. Youth are just like adults; they would probably find working from a computer at home more convenient for them. Sometimes they want to leave the house but sometimes they don't want to. But as adults we know that having face-to-face interaction for those youth is really important. It's an important part of their growth and their development.

Amber Shanahan:

I guess my comment in the blog was, "Who's to say that that isn't just as valid and valuable for adults?" There's definitely a space for online learning. We have a lot of things on our plates as adult learners and so there is a time and a place for online learning, there's a time and a place when things need to be convenient. It's also really important for us to step outside of our own comfort zone in order for us to grow. It's important that when we recognize how important hybrid learning can be and how important face-to-face learning can be to ensure that we're having really meaningful experiences and again, building a greater community within our field and with our colleagues and peers.

Kari Robideau:

Well Amber, thank you. As we wrap up this podcast, I want to thank you for sharing this idea of this front yard approach to teaching and maybe encouraging all of us who are listening to this podcast and maybe have gone online to read the blog post, will now also engage a few colleagues in a conversation about this and consider ways that we can all continue to build or add more of if you don't have enough of right now that community learning in your own adult learning experiences, professional development, and that we're always bettering ourselves as we continue to work with youth. So thank you for sharing with me today.

Amber Shanahan:

Well, thank you very much for having me again, Kari.

Kari Robideau:

As we bring this podcast to an end, know that this conversation doesn't have to end. As I said, grab a colleague and talk with them. But you can also find us online at ww.extension.umn.edu/youth. You can find research training and events that we offer there both in person and online, and please do check out our Minnesota 4-H program if you haven't already.

Kari Robideau:

The Youth Development Insight blog that Amber has had a number of entries in, we have highlighted a couple of her blog posts, but she is an active writer on there. I do invite you to go online, comment on her research and the programs that she's working with as well as our other colleagues.

Kari Robideau:

That is going to wrap up our podcast for today. I'm with Amber Shanahan. My name is Kari Robideau from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.