

Lesson 9: **Using a Skillathon for Experiential Learning**

Life Skills and Skillathons

4-H defines the optimum development of each young person. These skills will permit youth to successfully and satisfyingly cope with everyday life. Skillathon activities help enhance each of the five major categories of life skills. These categories include: subject matter knowledge, self-awareness, decision-making, social interaction and physical skills.

What Is a 4-H Skillathon?

A Skillathon is a method of involving youth and their parents in challenging, non-competitive, learn-by-doing activities. This method of helping 4-Hers develop both personal and project skills is designed as a series of mini-learning stations with an assistant at each station. The participants rotate from station to station attempting to perform the tasks they are given. The assistant allows all team members to test their knowledge and ability before giving them any hints. This technique is referred to in 4-H as learning by doing, but 4-Hers are supported by the assistant when they falter.

Not only does a skillathon work well during a project meeting, it is also effective at a club meeting, get acquainted gathering, or recognition day. It is an excellent way to involve several project groups at once on the program. By asking various project groups to set up one or two learn-by-doing stations, the entire club can be actively involved at the same time. In addition, project groups and their leaders will gain recognition.

What Will Youth Accomplish Through a Skillathon?

1. They will evaluate their ability to solve the challenge/s presented by the task.
2. They will learn to work together as members of a team.
3. They will discover for themselves what they need to know to do the activity.
4. They will receive recognition for their efforts.

What is the Responsibility of the Station Assistant?

It is challenging and rewarding to assist at one of the skillathon stations. The extent to which the participants develop

project skills and life skills depends largely on how successfully the station assistant works with them. It will be important that assistants:

- Become familiar with the topic and any available project materials, supplies and training aids related to the topic.
- Compile a list of questions to ask each team.
- Set up the station to include a stand up situation, task sign and necessary supplies.
- Allow the team members to discover for themselves how to accomplish the task rather than telling or showing them how.

What are the Steps in Facilitating the Learning Situation for Each Team?

1. Divide the participants into teams of two to four members.
2. Set up the station and make supplies available to the teams.
3. Provide the participants with a realistic situation and task that will encourage a response.
4. Step back and allow the members time.
5. Respond to participants questions with questions so the answers are generated from the participants.
6. Listen carefully to the answers and presentations.
7. Accept the group's solutions.
8. Ask questions to help them build on what they presented. Ask questions that might lead members to a better or more correct solution.
9. Acknowledge and reinforce efforts with positive responses.
10. Review the process and highlight appropriate solutions.
11. When all teams have experienced all stations, review the experience and solicit ideas for conducting this activity at another meeting.
12. Following the Skillathon, ask the station assistants to review the major problems at their station and offer their solutions to each, take an inventory, and pack up all equipment and materials.

What are the Steps in Planning the Skillathon?

1. Decide on the stations wanted. Consider time and resources available.
2. Create a realistic situation and task for each station.
3. Decide on the equipment or supplies needed at each station.
4. Decide who will be in charge of each station.
5. Delegate responsibility for gathering supplies.
6. Ask someone to be in charge of dividing the group into teams of two to four.
7. Ask that same person to assign each team to a workstation, and explain the process of rotating from station to station every 10 minutes.



Skillathon Guidelines

Set up the situation

- Give a broad overview of what will happen.
- Provide further instruction in small segments, as the group progresses.
- Always keep the learning goal and objectives in mind.

Facilitate the process

- Maintain a supportive atmosphere, be aware of learners' feelings and reactions.
- Give everyone something to do at all times.
- Become involved whenever possible, but keep an eye on time.
- Let the group members assist with the process.
- Write directions for the group on an overhead or flip chart.
- Be sure all groups are on time and on task. Left on their own, one group will inevitably be completing an exercise while another group is still clarifying the task.

Facilitate learning

- Turn whatever happens into a learning experience.
- Avoid discussions that are “too deep” or that lead the group too far off target.
- In the learning cycle make the steps clear and complete.

Because of the learn-by-doing nature of 4-H projects, any single project or a combination of projects could be used to put together a successful skillathon. Normally, 6 to 10 stations make up a skillathon. However, fewer or more stations could be used depending upon the purpose and size of the group. When using combinations of projects, choose projects that have some relation to each other. Signs at each station plus the awarding of ribbons and certificates to all of the participants add to the fun.

Things to Avoid

Over Instructing

Giving too much detail.
Excessive telling (versus listening or sharing).
Pressuring people to participate.

Negotiating the Design

Arguing over interpretations of what happened.
Changing what will happen to meet the needs of one or a few of the group members.



Playing Psychological Games

- Ridiculing individuals.
- Deceiving people.
- Interpreting an individual's behavior.

Overloading

- Generating more data than can be discussed thoroughly.
- Repeating an activity until it works.
- Overanalyzing data.

Ending Without Closure

- Leaving with unresolved tasks.
- Leaving applications to chance.



Adapted from:

- Pfeiffer and James, *The 1980 and 1986 Annual Handbooks for Group Facilitators*, University Associates, Inc.
- *Experiential Learning in 4-H Project Experiences*, Thomas D. Zurcher, Ph.D., Center for 4-H Youth Development, University of Minnesota
- *Training Trainers to Teach*, Cooperative Extension 4-H System
- Max Miller, State 4-H Youth Specialist, University of Missouri, Columbia, Missouri
University of Illinois