

Leadership begins at home

Free interactive, online leadership courses are helping women in remote areas to develop a wide variety of projects.

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What do wooden cows, a Lego farmer and a high-quality driving simulator have in common? Each of these unique projects are being developed by some of the 200 graduates of a free online leadership course being run by the National Rural Women's Coalition.

Begun in 2011, the e-Leaders Program uses the Blackboard Collaborate virtual classroom technology adopted by the School of the Air and many Australian universities. It enables all 20 participants of each course to interact live with the other members and the guest speaker, wherever they are. "Everyone in the room can speak to each other through a microphone, so it's the next best thing to being face-to-face," says program coordinator Kerryn Suttor.

Kerryn, an occasional OUTBACK contributor, lives in St George, Qld, and says the courses are designed for rural women, with the 1.5-hour webinars

held once a week, over six weeks or so. "Sessions are held in the evening, so it doesn't matter if someone works on a farm, or is struggling to mind kids, or hold down a job – no matter where they are, as long as they have an internet connection they can participate."

There are 2–4 courses a year, and each one has a slightly different bent, depending on needs and funding. For example, one last year had a focus on sustainability; another on social media. Kerryn says the first e-Leaders program was a general leadership course and topics included dealing with different personality types and building community capacity. "It went really well and we just continue to access funding where we can, and access grants," she says.

Each woman on the program has to bring a project to the course that they want to start or improve. Their projects have to involve some form of knowledge transfer, such as talking to a Landcare

group or school. For example, one of the most recent graduates, Aimee Snowden of Tocumwal, NSW, had developed quite a following for her social media character, The Lego Farmer, and wanted to work out how to capitalise on that. "The course helped me to shape my program and continue it," Aimee says. "I learnt how to write a press release and get it out, how to apply for funding, etc."

Aimee's Lego Farmer now resides under the name Little Brick Pastoral and she is developing resources to educate children about agriculture – and crop farming in particular. She took Little Brick Pastoral into Australia's biggest Lego exhibition in Melbourne, showing some 27,000 people the progress of oats from germination to Anzac biscuit. "It takes agriculture into a space that it normally wouldn't be," she says.

Aimee says the e-Leaders courses are very well organised. "The speakers were invaluable and really generous with



A herd of wooden cow cut-outs, decorated by primary school classes, at the Alice Springs Show; Aimee Snowden with the Lego Farmer.

their time. They'd say, 'Send us your press releases to check before you send them out', she says. "I got a lot from all of them. I wrote a heap of notes and know I'm going to refer to them often."

Another recent graduate, Nicole Hayes of Undoolya station, NT, is the president of Centralian Beef Breeders Association. Her project was to give 1-metre wooden cow cut-outs to primary school classes in the Alice Springs area that they could decorate to show where food comes from. Although her project was already up and running, she found the e-Leaders webinars helpful in making her more organised and systematic in assessing and developing the idea further. "It just got it more structured and organised. I

could do more of the SWOT analysis – identifying weaknesses and strengths and threats. That approach helps us with our own business, too," Nicole says. "It was a really good experience and it wasn't too labour intensive."

Nicole says the program also helped her understand more about herself and her own leadership style. "What sort of personality I have and what sort of personality other people have to you, and how to work with them to get better outcomes."

Many of the women say they benefit from the contacts and networking that the courses provide. Kerryn says some participants regularly get together long after the course has finished. "They realise that they're not very far from each other

in a district, or sometimes they'll even go interstate to visit each other," she says.

Kerryn says 30 different speakers have participated since the program began, and says she loves being able to "beam industry's best presenters into the homes of rural women with no travel or down-time".

"It makes it worthwhile when I hear that someone living five hours from town on a remote station in the Northern Territory can still tune in to the sessions and access important professional development."

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