

Education for Sustainability in Clarence Valley Councils: Action Research, Learning and Mentoring Project

Summary

The focus for this project was the 'Clarence Valley Council's Stormwater Improvement Strategy' with the funding provided by NSW Government from the 4th round of the Stormwater Trust Grants Scheme.

This project involved participants from three regional councils through an iterative process of Action Research, Learning and Mentoring. Over a one year period seven Council officers participated in workshops to build their capacity in designing, developing and evaluating community education programs. Of these participants four were also supported through the more intensive mentoring process to further develop their skills and facilitate the transfer of learning into practice within their workplace environment.

Aim

The aim of this project was to improve the quality of community education initiatives. This was done through building the capacity of Council Project Leaders involved in the education component of the 'Clarence Valley Council's Stormwater Improvement Strategy' to develop, deliver and assess the effectiveness of community education, engagement and training Programs.

Funding

The project was funded by the NSW Government as part of the Stage 4 Stormwater Trust Grants. It was conceived and facilitated by Ass Prof Daniella Tilbury and Lynn Bowdler, Graduate School of the Environment, Macquarie University (MU).

Grafton City Council contracted MU to deliver the project which involved participants from three Councils: Grafton City Council, Pristine Waters Shire Council and McLean Shire Council.

Timeframe

June 2002 through to June 2003

Rationale

This action research and mentoring project was developed in direct response to a need identified by the NSW EPA and the council officers involved in stormwater education. An evaluation of the state-wide Urban Stormwater Education Program (EPA 2001) recommended the provision of **support** and **mentoring** for council officers involved in the development, planning, delivery and evaluation of stormwater education programs. This need was specifically highlighted by those officers responsible for these programs.

The intention of the project was that the action research, learning and mentoring would build education capacity and increase the sustainability of stormwater education initiatives once the Stormwater Trust Grants ceased.



Description



The project consisted of:

- Cross-council workshops and working group meetings (one two day workshop and two cross Council half-day workshops)
- Three individual mentoring visits for each council
- Tailored follow-up mentoring support by email and telephone

Workshops

The workshops sought to encourage a collaborative approach across councils, identify good practice in design, delivery and evaluation of education programs and to establish a framework to guide this development across the Clarence Valley Councils. The workshops involved a varied combination of presentations and participatory learning activities. Through a process of reflection and discussion these workshops allowed participants to explore the following aspects and their relationship to their own workplace context:

- Existing experiences in stormwater education
- Key principles of action learning and reflection
- Key Success factors in community education
- Evaluation of community education
- Targeting community education programs
- Power structures and conflict
- Best practice in project management
- Workshop/activity design and facilitation
- Practical tools for community engagement
- Mapping project achievements

The delivery of the project also included:

- The development of an 'Action Research & Learning Resource Book' which includes case studies and experiences in community education in stormwater projects, tools and techniques used by local councils to engage communities and reading related to action learning and reflection.
- The identification of the components of good practice in stormwater education programs
- A framework to guide work in the design, delivery and evaluation of education programs
- An evaluation report on the action research, learning and mentoring project



Mentoring

The mentoring process consisted of 3 workplace mentoring visits for each of the four council members who were selected as mentorees, with email and telephone support provided between visits. At the start of the process each mentoree was asked to develop a mentoring plan that then formed the focus of the mentoring process. At the end of each workplace visit mentorees were asked to update their mentoring plan with an action list.

The role of the mentor was to provide support to the mentoree in the development and implementation of their education project. This was achieved through a number of techniques – acting as a sounding board for issues as they arose, asking critically reflective questions as appropriate, ensuring confidentiality at all times, providing ideas and input as necessary and providing additional resources as requested.



Process / Activities / Methods

The project methodology involved an iterative process of action research, learning and mentoring to provide support to the Council officers and encourage reflection and learning from experience.

Action Research and Action Learning

Action Research can be defined as a process which involves **planning, reflection and change**. It is a form of **critical reflective inquiry** which engages practitioners in participative problem-solving. It can be a powerful form of **professional and program development** which in some cases also leads to organisational change. Action research when combined with action learning, brings together a group of people to **critically reflect** upon professional knowledge and help each other to **learn from their experience** (Tilbury and Bowdler 2002). The **improvement of practice** is the ultimate goal. The process generally requires at least one facilitator and/or mentor who assist the participants in learning from their experience. The facilitators' role in this project was also to stimulate new and innovative ideas by familiarising participants with a number of educational tools and processes.

Mentoring

The mentor is a person external to the organisation, who facilitates the process of reflection and **supports individual** participants in carrying out their planned actions within the workplace. Mentoring is an important component of the process, as it focuses on **individual professional needs** and supports participants in their **own workplace context**.

Evaluation

Formative evaluations were undertaken throughout the project in order to ensure that the project was addressing the needs of the participants. All feedback received from the workshops and mentoring sessions was used to develop the subsequent stages of the project.

Summative evaluation was undertaken at the end of the final workshop that encouraged reflection on the entire process and provided feedback on the value and applicability of the process to participants' professional contexts.

Outcomes

The evaluation of the project identified the following outcomes for participants:

- Increased the capacity of participants to design and develop community education programs, through the acquisition of new skills, tools and approaches as well as increased confidence and motivation
- Increased project planning and management skills
- Development of a framework for the design and delivery of community education programs
- Increased cross Council communication through sharing and reflection on experiences in community education
- An appreciation of the value of action research, learning and mentoring processes as a tool for professional development within Council

Overall the evaluations from the project have been very positive with both facilitators and participants enjoying the process. Participant evaluations indicate that the use of action research, learning and mentoring is a valuable and effective tool for use within Council to build capacity of council officers.

With the support of senior management as having a significant impact on the success of the project in delivering its outcomes participants suggested the need for a process to specifically target senior management. The aim of this would be to raise awareness and allow for them to develop a deeper understanding of benefits and opportunities afforded by this process.



Critical Success Factors

This project highlighted that this process should be targeted at Council employees who have autonomy in managing projects. For it to be most effective it is critical that participants have the support of their managers and have a specific education project on which they are working.

Action research, learning and mentoring are innovative processes to be used within Council and as such a common language to describe and explain the process is most likely not established. This factor needs to be considered in the project planning, for example a briefing workshop for all involved in the project conception and development would allow for the demonstration of action learning principles and a clear understanding of the opportunities.

A key barrier identified by the participants was lack of time and resources available especially within small regional councils.

Project Team

Daniella Tilbury, Project Director and Workshop Leader
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A NSW Government initiative



