

# Education for Sustainability in Cooks River Local Councils: Action Learning and Mentoring in Stormwater Community Education

## Summary

The intention of this project is to increase the value and impact of stormwater education initiatives through building the capacity of Council Project Leaders. The focus for this project was the *Cooks River Foreshores Riverbank Restoration & Education Project* and the *Newtown, Enmore and Erskinville Environmental Improvement Program* with the funding provided by NSW Government from the 4th round of the Stormwater Trust Grants Scheme.

This project took participants from four local councils through an iterative process of Action Learning and Mentoring. Over a one year period twelve Council officers were involved 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 and effectiveness of community education projects associated with Stormwater issues. This was done through a process which built the capacity of Council Project Leaders involved in the *Cooks River Foreshores Riverbank Restoration & Education Project* and the *Newtown, Enmore and Erskinville Environmental Improvement Program* to develop, deliver and assess the effectiveness of community education, participation and training Programs.

## Stakeholders

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

Strathfield and Marrickville Councils contracted MU to deliver the project which involved participants from four Councils: Marrickville, Strathfield, Canterbury and South Sydney.

## Timeframe

September 2002 through to June 2003

## Rationale

This action learning 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 process of action learning and mentoring would build the capacity of the participants such that it would increase the sustainability of stormwater education initiatives once the Stormwater Trust Grants cease.

## Description



The project consisted of:

- Cross-council workshops and working group meetings (One two day workshop and four cross Council half-day workshops)
- Four Individual Mentoring visits for each council
- Tailored follow-up Mentoring support by email and telephone

## Workshops

The workshops involved a varied combination of presentations and participatory learning activities. These workshops allowed participants to explore the following areas and the 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 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 learning and mentoring project



## ***Mentoring***

The mentoring process consisted of 4 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 learning and mentoring to provide support to the Council officers and encourage reflection and learning from experience.

### ***Action Learning***

Action Learning can be defined as a process in which a group of people come together 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. It is often a process targeted at manager and used across organisation that have similar interests (Dick 1997) and is designed to build capacity using a form of self-evaluation and reflection. It assumes that **learning is best accomplished in the company of others**. 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 were 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:

- Challenged and questioned participants current practice in community education
- 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 issues-management skills
- Better understanding of effectiveness in community education programs
- Increased their ability and confidence to facilitate small group sessions
- An appreciation of the value of collaborative learning
- Development of a framework for the design and delivery of community education programs
- An appreciation of the value of action learning and mentoring processes as a tool for professional development within Council
- An increased appreciation of the need for senior management support for community education processes



## Critical Success Factors

This project highlighted that using this type of approach for professional development 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 learning and mentoring is an innovative process 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.

## Project Team

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