

IT'S A LIVING THING: Education for Sustainability Professional Development Program

Summary

The 'It's a Living Thing' (ILT) Professional Development Program consisted of a series of workshops and workplace support aimed at improving practice in *education for sustainability* across a range of sectors in NSW.

The program, which was funded by the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA), was led by Macquarie University and delivered jointly with Australian Association for Environmental Education, NSW and the Nature Conservation Council of NSW.

This initiative recognises not only the key role education plays as a tool for initiating and facilitating change towards sustainability but also its complexity. It therefore provided a program with the depth and range of opportunities necessary for people to reflect upon their experience, learn from others as well as plan and take action to improve their practice.

The program reached out to over 125 people. It consisted of (a) two sets of two day workshops for each participant and (b) follow-up workplace mentoring for a selected number of participants.

The evaluation confirmed initial feedback from participants that the workshops were relevant to the needs of the target group (environmental professionals working with education). It also documented outcomes including:

- a change in participants' understanding of education for sustainability;
- impetus, structure and tools for implementing education for sustainability
- increased skills to promote and deliver education programs for sustainability

Follow up with participants (3 months after workshop) has documented how participants are implementing workshop learning in their own programs.

Aim

The aim of the program was to increase the capacity of NSW educators to develop and deliver education for sustainability through community education initiatives.

Ultimately, the initiative aimed to increase the community's knowledge, motivation and ability to engage with sustainability in NSW.



Stakeholders



This program was funded by the NSW EPA and delivered through a partnership between the Graduate School of the Environment, Macquarie University, the Australian Association for Environmental Education, NSW and the Nature Conservation Council for NSW.

Participants came from a range of different employment backgrounds, including local councils, state government departments, NGOs, higher education institutions, private consultancy firms as well as business and industry.



Timeframe



Workshops were conducted from April 2003 through to July 2003 and the mentoring component was completed in November 2003.



Rationale



In Australia, the National Action Plan *'Environmental Education for a Sustainable Future'* provides a framework for education for sustainability activities within Australia.



More specifically, the NSW Government's Environmental Education Plan *'Learning for Sustainability'* (2002), produced by the Council on Environmental Education, has established a number of key outcomes, which are based on needs and priorities identified by professional educators across NSW. These outcomes include *enhanced training and professional development for those developing and delivering environmental education and increased, active and informed participation by NSW people in creating a sustainable future.*



Achieving sustainability is the responsibility of the whole community and broad based community education programs are an integral part of ensuring that stakeholders have the capacity to take up this responsibility.



Description



The project consisted of two distinct parts: **workshops and workplace mentoring.**

Workshops

The Workshops consisted of two by 2 day participatory and highly interactive workshops. These were held in 4 different locations around NSW. There was a maximum of 35 participants in each series of workshops which were held in Hornsby, Penrith, Coffs Harbour and Sutherland.



The program drew upon an accredited and highly respected course at Macquarie University's Graduate School of the Environment – GSE 827 'Education for Sustainability'. Participants who attended the workshops were given the opportunity to articulate this program into further undergraduate or postgraduate study.

Within the workshop participants were asked to consider the often fuzzy concept of sustainability by envisioning their sustainable future and then to deconstruct this vision with fellow participants. Participants were encouraged to reflect critically on their own perspectives and assumptions about sustainability and education as a process of change towards sustainability. After this they began to grapple with the concept of Education for Sustainability (EfS), identifying key components arising out of international and national best practice and considering what these mean for their own community education programs. Participants were encouraged to reflect on how EfS differs from Environmental Education, to investigate a number of tools for engaging people actively in sustainability issues and to identify how their existing programs can be reoriented towards education for sustainability.

Workplace Mentoring

The ILT workplace mentoring component is a structured program offered to a number of participants who have completed the ILT workshops.

Mentoring supports participants who strive to apply the course learning to a practical education program they currently manage. Its key purpose is to:

- build the capacity of the person in the workplace or community environment to implement change to their educational programs
- maximise the impact of the learning by offering support to participants in their workplaces or community environments.

Following each ILT workshop, up to 5 participants (from each workshop delivery) have the opportunity to participate in the workplace mentoring program*. Each group of 5, have been mentored over a 6-month period by the same mentor. Mentoring participants needed to commit to a structured program consisting of:

- Two Workplace Visits (2-3hr session between mentor and mentorees)
- Two Focus Groups (between mentor and all mentorees)
- Tailored mentoring support (via email and phone)

* For further detail please refer to the ILT Mentoring Summary.

Outcomes

The following program outcomes were highlighted through the evaluation:

- Developed among educators an enhanced understanding of sustainable development and management.
- Increased the knowledge and skills of educators about ways to effectively deliver and integrate their programs into the context of sustainable living.



- Developed the skills of educators to interpret sustainability for a diverse range of communities
- Increased the skills of educators to promote and deliver education programs about sustainability
- Promoted examples of good practice in sustainable living



Critical Success Factors

The participant's feedback and evaluation of the program identified a number of critical success factors:

- careful selection of participants ensured that a range of community educators participated in the course;
- the selection criteria also allowed for easy identification of key multipliers - increasing the impact of the program in NSW;
- the course structure enabled participants to immerse themselves in EFS issues, whilst providing a week between sessions for reflection;
- providing online support and advice enabled collaborative learning to take place during the life of the program;
- the course practised what it preached; it implemented the principles of EFS including participation and action, values clarification and critical reflection; and
- formative and summative evaluation during the life of the program was critical to its success.



Project Team

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