

# WHAT HAS PEER EDUCATION GOT TO DO WITH A SLIPPERY FISH?

## How to use peer education for sustainability

Grahame Collier<sup>1</sup> and Lynn Webber<sup>2</sup>

T Issues Consultancy<sup>1</sup> and the Department of Environment and Conservation NSW<sup>2</sup>

Although the term "peer education" may not be explicitly used, a number of programs in NSW use the process of peers learning sustainability through sharing knowledge and experience as a primary adult education method. This is common in community-based programs such as Landcare, Bushcare and the Earthworks Program, a community waste reduction program delivered by local government and the adult community education sector. Peer education is also used in capacity building programs for environmental educators, drawing on the expertise of professional networks to promote mutual learning.

This paper introduces a recently developed "how to" guide for peer education, *Getting a Handle on a Slippery Fish*. The underlying theoretical concepts and objectives of peer education are presented to provide a conceptual framework and mechanisms for effective peer education practice. Useful advice and guidance about how to structure, support and deliver peer education programs to optimise spin-off effect from its delivery is discussed. A case study is included to provide an example of a peer education approach to the design, delivery and evaluation of an environmental educators' skillshare workshop.

The intent of the paper is to enhance understanding about the "slippery fish" of peer education and how to use it effectively in promoting enhanced community wide sustainability outcomes through environmental education

### ◆ What is Peer Education?

***Peer education is an educational approach that involves identifying, training and supporting members of a given group to pass on accurate information to others with similar characteristics, where the desired outcome is that peer support and the culture of the target group is utilised to effect and sustain the change of behaviour***“ (page 3, 1st para. 'How to Use PE...)

*Education is any process or activity that engages people in learning by sharing and developing knowledge, skills and attitudes. Education can occur through formal and non-formal processes. Non-formal education includes learning through a range of activities including community participation, information and communication [including mass media], entertainment and recreation, extension and awareness-raising programs, experiential learning programs, skills training, on-the-job training and development and short course and personal development*

activities. These may be delivered by government agencies, non-government organization, and industry at a community and individual level. Formal education can occur through the curriculums of pre-schools, primary and secondary schools, vocational education and training institutions and universities.” (page 3, para.4, ‘How to use PE...’)

One of the difficulties in understanding peer education is getting clear about the range of approaches that people view as peer education. (page 3, para 5)

There are 3 main strands - **peer influence**, **peer participation** and **peer teaching**. It is acknowledged that the difference between each of these aspects is indistinct, or even cloudy (page 3, para. 5)

Peer Education involves identifying, training and supporting members of a given group to pass on accurate information to others with similar characteristics, where the desired outcome is that peer support and the culture of the group is utilised to effect and sustain a change of behaviour. Page 6, para. 2, ‘Understanding and Using...’

“.....Peer education is a fancy term for an everyday occurrence - namely communication between friends, colleagues and like minded people leading to some form of education (change in knowledge skills, attitudes or behaviour).” (Carpenter, 1996 cited in Parkin and McKeganey, 2000) Page 6, para 6 ‘Understanding and Using....’

The term peer education and therefore peer educator is not used to describe many projects that have peer support or peer education characteristics.

“..... we use terms such as **mentoring**, **co-learning**, **action planning**, **participatory learning and action**” (Sue Lennox, OzGreen) Page 14, para 1 nd 2 ‘understanding and Using...’

## ◆ When is Peer Education Appropriate?

### ◆ Peer Education in the Sustainability Sector

You will find that a peer education approach is most relevant when:

- it is difficult to ‘access’ individuals or a particular group about an issue or problem

(It would seem that this is because it can effectively gain access to the target groups in ways that more traditional education approaches cannot page 2, para 1)

- ‘face-to-face’ or more personalised approaches are needed

-the target individuals (the peers) are more likely to be influenced by people they perceive to be culturally or socially credible

Access means reaching people

Access also means ensuring that people will listen, believe and respond when you reach them.

Peer education works best when you can identify and describe a specific target population. Page 3, #5 ‘How to...’

There is ample evidence of the effectiveness (of peer education) in health promotion and in justice settings *page 2 para 1, though the extent to which its use extends to learning for sustainability is less clear page 2, para 2*  
*If peer education is to be promoted as an approach within the learning for sustainability sector, it must be acknowledged that the approach is resource-intensive page 2, para 4*

a number programs in NSW use the process of peers learning sustainability through sharing knowledge and experience as a primary adult education method. This is common in community-based programs such as Landcare, Bushcare and the Earthworks Program, a community waste reduction program delivered by local government and the adult community education sector. Peer education is also used in capacity building programs for environmental educators, drawing on the expertise of professional networks to promote mutual learning. *From the abstract*

It is likely that peer education in the sustainability sector can be

- Location based (Bushcare)
- Institution based – for example, all students in a particular school
- Workplace bases (Fishcare Volunteer Program)
- Ethnic-, cultural – or other group based (Ethnic Communities Sustainable Living Project) *page 4, para 3*

I will be presenting a case study .....

### ◆ When is Peer Education Not Appropriate?

There are some circumstances however where peer education may not be the most appropriate approach. You should avoid peer education when one or more of the following circumstances apply.

- A substantial amount of highly technical knowledge needs to be communicated as a part of the program. Peers are not well suited to high level knowledge based programs. Too much training and monitoring is generally required.
- There are few obvious peers willing to engage in the program as educators. The success of the program is based upon the competence and willingness of those who are to be the educators. There are danger signs for peer education if high quality people cannot be found.
- Access to the audience is simple and can be provided more cost and outcome effectively by other means of education/communication.
- A single simple message needs to be communicated to people willing to take it on. In this case a much more cost and energy efficient approach can be used.
- A very large and diverse population needs to be reached. Peer education approaches are not useful in this circumstance because it is difficult for peers to work with diverse groups. *Page 4, para 4 'How to...'*

## ◆ Implementing Peer Education

The key principles of peer education identified below have been generated and collated from the range of sources in this study and from the authors' own experience in the delivery and management of peer education programs. At its heart, and expressed as principles, peer education involves

- Collaborative Learning
- Commonality
- Social Engagement
- Community Development
- Sharing Experiences
- Access to accurate, credible expertise/information
- Methods that are seen as less threatening than other forms of education
- Face-to-face activity, communication, demonstration and human interaction supported by printed other material
- Working one-on-one with people
- Support, continuity and recognition
- Credibility, trust, support
- Peer ownership of the issue and acceptance of responsibility as part of the solution
- Action

*Page 5 #6*

Peer education is based on these understandings. It uses peers to talk with peers. You can use peer education when you:

- Establish a structure that recognises access as an issue
- Believe that a face to face approach is most appropriate
- Require an educative experience that ultimately aims to shift people's behaviour *page 4, para 2*

## Mechanics of ...

The mechanics or 'how to' of peer education varies depending on the different peer education approaches described in Appendix 1 [Table 3]. The degree of structure or formality of the peer education approach will determine the key elements in designing your project. As a general rule programs at the peer influence end of the spectrum will require less extensive planning and ongoing resource support than those involving peer teaching.

Planning, implementing and evaluating a peer education project has many elements common to other community education or community development programs. Where peer education approaches differ, it is often on the level of emphasis and dependence that they give to the role of the peer educator. This is because peer education essentially relies on people (the peer educators and the peers) rather than materials. The priority or focus in determining 'how to' do the

project must therefore be on identifying, training and supporting those people. How to identify and retain peer educators is a crucial consideration in the design and administration of the project. For many volunteers, flexibility, recognition and support will be the key. [Page 5 #7](#)

## The Four Phases

**What is the problem?** An issue or problem is identified internally by peers or externally by experts.

Peer Education is identified as a possible approach.

The curriculum or educational material is developed.

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**Who are the Peer Educators?** Peer Educators are:

- selected or identified and trained.

The education material is modified.

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**Program is delivered**

Peer educators:

-outreach to the target group

-educate

-support and

-influence their peers.

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**The issue and program is monitored.**

The approach is evaluated and modified as indicated through the evaluation. [Table, page 6](#)