

Role of environmental education in creating vibrant and sustainable communities - Living Smart as a case study

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BIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

Communities that are vibrant, sustainable and creative are more likely to attract future residents and additional visitors as well as enhance the lives of those already living in the community. Sustainable communities are viewed as those that achieve real reductions in the ecological footprint of each person and have strong linkages within and across the community that support development and creation of vibrant streets, neighbourhoods and regions. In response to the increasing need to reduce our footprint and facilitate community development within Fremantle, the “Living Smart - for a sustainable community” program was developed. The innovative approach to the Living Smart program involved a collaborative partnership between the City of Fremantle, The Meeting Place and Murdoch University as well as community, Regional Council and State Government input into the design of the program and Federal Government funding.

The aim of the Living Smart program is to show participants what sustainability means in the context of their lifestyle and their community, as well as demonstrate how they can take action to contribute to sustainability within their own local community. Evaluation of the program during the first pilot found that 95% of the participants felt more a part of the community and 80% increased their sense of wellbeing from undertaking the program. Actions taken during the course of the program have been sustained by the participants and many still play an active role in discussing and supporting Living Smart. Living Smart demonstrates that community based education programs have an important role to play in creating vibrant and sustainable communities that have multiple environmental, social and economic benefits.

INTRODUCTION

Communities that are vibrant, sustainable and creative are more likely to attract future residents and additional visitors as well as enhance the lives of those already living in the community. A number of factors contribute to the creation of vibrant and sustainable communities including social capital, suitable infrastructure, building design, subdivision layout, community facilities and welfare provision meeting the needs of the community. Social capital is particularly important in the functioning of communities since it is social capital that allows people to collectively establish networks, norms, social trust and facilitate co-operation and co-ordination for mutual benefit (Cox, 1995).

The elements of social systems which increase social capital are mainly based on interactions. They involve space, time, opportunities, precedent and the valuing of processes. In particular, communities need the opportunities to interact with a reasonably broad spread of people and to build up a level of trust through positive rather than negative experiences. Communities also need time to engage in satisfactory processes of discussion to acknowledge the input of others and to develop outcomes which reflect inputs (Cox, 1995).

Environmental education provides a unique opportunity to increase social capital as well as achieve effective resource management, sustainability and community development. In its broadest sense, environmental education encompasses awareness raising, acquiring new perspectives, values, knowledge and skills and formal and informal processes that lead to changed behaviour in support of the principle of sustainability. Furthermore, environmental education seeking to incorporate environmental goals into mainstream society, valuing and linking other social and economic objectives and informing and empowering citizens (Department of Environment and Heritage, 2004) has the greatest potential to increase social capital leading towards the creation of vibrant and sustainable communities.

Living Smart, a community education program focussing on community development and sustainable living, adds another dimension to the creation of vibrant, sustainable and creative communities by empowering residents through environmental education to change their behaviour and engage in activities and programs that benefit the environment, the local community and the local economy. The City of Fremantle, The Meeting Place Community Centre, Murdoch University and the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council have formed a unique partnership to deliver the innovative Living Smart program for the residents of Fremantle, achieving success in sustainability and community development. This paper outlines the Living Smart program as a case study that has delivered successful outcomes including changing participant behaviours towards sustainability and community development due to its unique features including the use of goal setting as a technique to change behaviour.

LIVING SMART – A CASE STUDY ON ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

Environmental education – a new perspective

Contributing to sustainability will require considerable lifestyle and behavioural changes from both individuals and communities. Individuals require not only awareness and understanding but also skills and motivation to take action (Gayford 1996, Sheehy and Dingle 2003). To date, a majority of environmental education programs have focused on providing information (McKenzie-Mohr 2000, Sheehy and Dingle 2003). It has long been assumed that by increasing a person's awareness of environmental issues and thereby improving their environmental attitudes, the appropriate course of action in terms of personal behaviour would become obvious and would be followed (Gayford 1996, Sheehy and Dingle 2003). It is now widely recognised that this linear model of knowledge, attitude and behaviour does not occur and that a successful environmental education program must do more than simply provide people with information and expect them to change (Dorricott and Dingle 1999, Finger 1994, Geller 1981, Sheehy and Dingle 2003).

Environmental education, therefore, must be designed and implemented in a unique manner consistent with each community's needs and expectations in order to be successful. Living Smart is an example of a unique environmental education program in that it combines goal setting as a behaviour change technique and a thorough evaluation and improvement process to modify and improve the program. It also diverges from the standard format of delivery in that participant interactions and capacity building play an important role in the program in order to facilitate community development and social capital enhancement.

Goal Setting and Environmental Education

Goal setting is a concept that is now widely accepted in society and has been proven in many fields as a successful strategy for increasing motivation and sustaining effort (Sheehy and Dingle, 2003). Goal setting is a cognitive theory of motivation based on the premise that people have specific goals that they want to achieve (Yearta et al. 1995, Sheehy and Dingle 2003). It makes the assumption that human behaviour is purposeful and that goals direct and sustain an individual's behaviour towards achieving the goal. Therefore, goals act as an immediate regulator of behaviour (Martin and Manning 1995, Sheehy and Dingle 2003). It follows that if goals regulate behaviour then goal setting could be used as a strategy for changing behaviour. In fact the beneficial effects of setting goals for improving performance is one of the most robust and replicable findings in psychological research (Locke et al. 1981, Sheehy and Dingle 2003). A review of the goal setting literature found that in 90% of studies, well set goals lead to greater performance than 'do your best' goals and no goals (Locke et al. 1981, Sheehy and Dingle 2003). As an example, within a program designed to increase dietary fibre consumption, participants who set goals consumed 91% more fibre than participants who did not set goals (Schnoll and Zimmerman 2001, Sheehy and Dingle 2003).

Living Smart tests goal setting as a behaviour change technique to determine whether or not goals increase the adoption of sustainable behaviours through increased motivation, commitment and direction. To determine the effectiveness of the goal setting technique and the program overall, evaluation was undertaken before and after the program using questionnaires, feedback forms and control groups with quantitative and qualitative analysis. Questionnaires were completed before and after the program and included scales used to assess knowledge, attitudes and behaviour (Sheehy and Dingle, 2003).

Collaborative Partners

The collaborative partners for the Living Smart program include the City of Fremantle, The Meeting Place Community Centre, Murdoch University and the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council. The partners have developed the Living Smart program to meet a host of needs and expectations including the need to deliver environmental education programs aimed at sustainable resource consumption within the community and to reduce greenhouse gas emissions within the community as part of commitment to the Cities for Climate Protection Program (CCP), the need to evaluate community education programs that use goal setting as a technique to change behaviour and to facilitate, encourage and nurture community development and sustainability within Fremantle.

Taking the idea and making it a reality

Following a presentation by the City of Port Philip on their “Sustainable Living at Home” project in May 2002 at the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives Seminar for the Cities for Climate Protection program, The Meeting Place identified a need for a similar program in the Fremantle community. The Meeting Place then approached the City of Fremantle to determine possible opportunities for delivering a similar program, designed specifically for the Fremantle community. At the same time, Lucy Sheehy, a PhD student from Murdoch University also approached the City of Fremantle to be involved in a household program aimed at testing different techniques for environmental education and behaviour change.

The Meeting Place Community Centre, Murdoch University and the City of Fremantle jointly agreed that while a similar approach to the Sustainable Living at Home project would be taken, the program would be designed specifically for the Fremantle community. The topics addressed were also expanded to include all facets of sustainable living. In order to facilitate actual behaviour change the technique of goal setting was also incorporated into the program and taught as a life skill, making Living Smart unique as an environmental education program. The Southern Metropolitan Regional Council joined the Living Smart Steering Committee in November 2002 to extend Living Smart to residents in the region to assist in meeting the regional goal of residential greenhouse abatement as outlined in Regional Community Greenhouse Strategic Plan.

Consultation

In order to meet the expectations and needs of the Fremantle community, a series of information sessions were held at The Meeting Place in October 2002 to introduce the concept of the Living Smart program and to seek feedback from those attending on the kind of topics and information they would like to be covered in the program, when and at what time the program should be held and other factors which might affect the delivery of the program. A draft Living Smart booklet was then prepared incorporating community feedback and sent to key State Government agencies including the Department of Environment (formerly Department of Environmental Protection and Water and Rivers Commission), Department of Planning and Infrastructure, Water Corporation, Western Power, Alinta Gas and the Sustainability Policy Unit of the Department for the Premier and Cabinet as well as other interested Environmental Officers in Local Government for comment and feedback to ensure a consistent approach to addressing sustainability issues from the State to the Local level.

All of the feedback, expectations and needs from the community, State agencies and the collaborative partners culminated in the development of the Living Smart program covering 12 sustainability topics.

Program

The Living Smart program is a community environmental education project that aims to increase awareness of sustainability issues and to provide the community with the knowledge and skills to take action to improve the sustainability of their homes and their community. An important aspect of the Living Smart program is the inbuilt evaluation process designed to allow the collaborative partners to ensure the program is effective and suited to community needs, identify

ways in which the program could be improved and provide valuable information for research at Murdoch University.

The Living Smart topics have been chosen to encompass all facets of leading a sustainable life and include:

- The Living Smart Program - Introduction to the program
- Thinking Smart, Being Smart - Goal setting for Life
- Simple Smart Living - Sustainability and Lifestyles
- Waste Smart - Managing waste better
- Water Smart - Conserving Water for the future
- Smart Gardens for Biodiversity - Creature Friendly and Native Gardens
- Smart Gardens for Productivity - Organic gardens that produce
- Power Smart - Saving energy and greenhouse gases
- Move Smart - Environmentally friendly travel
- Health Smart You - Looking after yourself as well as the environment
- Health Smart Home - Creating a healthy chemical free home
- Community Smart - Making a difference in your community

The Living Smart program was piloted in February 2003, as a seven-week lecture series at The Meeting Place. Field trips to the Regional Resource Recovery Centre, Booyeembara Park, Environment House and Sustaining Settlements Community Garden Centre were also included in the program.

The evaluation results from the first pilot demonstrate that the Living Smart program is effective at increasing the number and frequency of the participant's sustainable actions at home as well as their environmental knowledge. The key achievements realised by the participants of the Living Smart program in February 2003 were that:

- 68% of participants said that the program changed the way they think about lifestyle/ environmental issues.
- 50% of the participants felt that what they had learnt in the program would influence them for a very long time.
- 41% said it would influence them forever.
- 91% of participants felt more a part of the community as a result of attending the Living Smart program at The Meeting Place.
- 95% increased their knowledge of community resources and services.
- 82% increased their sense of well being.

Testimonials from the February 2003 pilot participants included

“The most positive thing about the course was all the people involved and the energy created – gave me a great sense of positive community and that change is possible on a larger scale.”

“I got a lot more out of it than I anticipated especially the concept of goal setting.”

"I found the course to be extremely empowering. I enjoyed the dynamics and diversity of the group"

"Being in this group around other people that feel the same as I do gives me motivation"

"Living Smart for me was a really good insight into everyday ways that ordinary people can make changes in their lives and in turn change the environment"

"For me it was about fine-tuning what we are doing around the home and the more we do it, the more it enriches our lives"

"The fact that we were all encouraged to participate made it far more enjoyable and informative"

"In the time given to talk to others in the group I learnt some effective ways to improve that I hadn't thought of"

"The most positive thing about the program was group dynamics, positive people and exchange of ideas"

The program was effective in increasing participants knowledge of environmental issues, increasing their number and frequency of sustainable behaviours and in increasing their sense of community and wellbeing. Improving environmental behaviour is the most challenging aspect of any environmental education program and Living Smart demonstrates that with the right combination of factors, environmental education programs can facilitate community development, enhance and increase social capital and ultimately, sustainability within communities.

The Living Smart is now mid-way through the second trial. As part of the continual improvement process, Living Smart Pilot 2 has been modified to incorporate feedback from participants of the first trial, workshops to facilitate discussion and skills and techniques for participants to fully engage in the program via the learning circle method. The partners are also working on Living Smart Pilots 3 and 4 which focus on workshops only and lectures only to evaluate the different styles of delivering community education programs.

Other key improvements in the delivery of Living Smart since the first pilot include:

- Increase in the length of the program to allow for workshops, social gatherings and discussion amongst the participants in order to facilitate interaction and community development.
- Support for participants to lead, mentor and facilitate future Living Smart programs.
- Greater focus on goal setting including the establishment of group goals for water and power reductions.
- Providing the option of workshops in participant's homes and directly share experiences.
- Emphasis on skills and techniques in leading effective group discussion for all participants.

Comments so far from the participants of Living Smart Pilot 2 include:

“We value neighbourhood groups in allowing connections to be made and so enabling us to undertake activities together both during the course and post Living Smart”

“Love the small groups and working together on the program.”

“It is great to now know some of the people in my neighbourhood”

“The small discussion groups are providing us with much needed coaching and experience in managing and participating in group discussions and action planning. This is an extremely valuable life skill.”

Towards the future for Living Smart

Living Smart Pilots 3 and 4 focus on the lecture only and workshop only delivery styles and collectively the pilot programs will allow the Steering Committee to evaluate the most successful form of delivering the program in a range of contexts, venues and methods. The evaluation results for the three pilots will be available in late 2004 and with the results of the first pilot, will direct the development of the Living Smart Kit.

It is intended that Living Smart will become available to any person, group or organisation to use and apply as they see fit. The Living Smart Kit will be an all inclusive kit with supporting resource material to allow for the effective use and application of the program by any person, group or organisation including guides for presenters, facilitators, group members and the Living Smart Action Booklet. Living Smart as a starting point, will be taken to the other member Councils by the Southern Metropolitan Regional Council commencing January 2005 and available to others, thereafter via a website and hardcopy. “Train the trainer” sessions will also be organised to assist other organisations or persons facilitate and present Living Smart in their own community or organisation. Our vision is to help others where we can to introduce, facilitate and support Living Smart to create vibrant and sustainable communities.

CONCLUSION

Environmental education that incorporates new and exciting techniques to change behaviour such as goal setting has the potential to raise social capital and support the creation of vibrant and sustainable communities. Living Smart, as a unique environmental education program incorporating the diverse and complimentary skills and knowledge of the collaborative partners, demonstrates that behaviour change can occur which contributes to sustainability and the enhancement and increase in social capital within communities thus leading towards the creation of vibrant and sustainable communities.

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