

Community participation in environmental sampling

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Introduction

We need to be clear why participation is important and what makes for effective participation. As a colleague said: “Participation is not something you do”. If it is to be effective then it must be seen to be more than just ticking the boxes before you do what you were going to do anyway. You want to build relationships that support trust; that will want to make things work even when you don’t get the best outcomes (remembering that a good decision does not always result in a good outcome) and will ensure that stakeholders will be participants not opponents.

Most of us believe things that we “know” to be true. These beliefs are often without substance but despite this are not necessarily amenable to reason. They are held emotionally rather than intellectually so reason is a threat in a deeper way than just criticizing a particular position. Paradoxically most of us have also been educated in the reductionist paradigm of traditional science so we believe (!?) that reason must lead to correction and change in views. We are caught in our own “catch 22” of unreason about reason.

Public participation, therefore, needs to go beyond “us” instructing “them” about what is “right” and tut-tutting when “they” still get it “wrong”. Participation is about relationships; it is also about being creative and flexible to build and maintain those relationships. The old saying: “*You can’t steer a ship unless it is moving*” is a useful reminder about the dynamics of change compared to the idealism of theory.

What is participation?

Dockstator (1990) notes "Public participation -- public involvement -- public consultation. What's the difference? As the activities generally associated with these terms and the terms themselves have become popularized, they have lost '...any real precision in meaning' (Kavanagh 1972:121)". However, attempts have been made to distinguish between them. For example, public participation and involvement have been closely associated in their definitions to mean "providing an opportunity for the public to take part in a process in a structured manner" (Homenuck 1988). This is a broad definition and has been contrasted with public consultation which may be defined as a "two-way discussion between a decision-making body and the public about solving a problem or choosing a solution" (Homenuck 1988). A more detailed definition of public consultation is:

...a systematic, interactive process in which citizens and the relevant agency or body:

- exchange information about a proposed project, program, policy, law or other initiative, and the background issues surrounding the initiative;
- talk things over, share ideas, and discuss alternative solutions;
- identify areas of agreement and disagreement among the interested parties so they can be taken into account in the final decision;
- attempt to arrive at the best possible solution that all parties can live with (Maynes 1989:3).

Contrastingly, Arnstein (1969) places "consultation" on an individual "rung" of her "ladder of citizen participation", defining the term as a specific type of citizen participation and one that, if used alone, does not ensure that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account in a decision-making process. Arnstein differentiates "consultation" from "participation" by using the latter as an umbrella term for involving the public in decision-making and planning processes, consultation being just one approach to doing so.

The context of Arnstein's ladder is government-initiated participation programs. Speigel (1968), on the other hand, broadens the definition of public participation to include all forms of public action. This includes "organized attempts to influence policy, volunteer work for charitable foundations, and taking part in a riot" (Speigel 1968:xiv). Emond (1975:783) expands this definition further to include litigation and "giving someone his day in court."

Degrees of involvement.

Arnstein described the Ladder of Participation as a simple categorisation of consultation and participation:

Degrees of citizen power

- citizen control
- delegated power
- partnership

Degrees of tokenism

- placation

- consultation
- informing

Degrees of non-participation

- therapy
- manipulation

How might you make participation real?

From the EPA Stormwater Web site

A community education program can take many different forms – but all successful programs rely on the same principles of planning and strategy. The document *What we need is a community education project* (EPA 1997) outlines in detail how education is planned, implemented and evaluated. It is essential reading for all those wishing to conduct high quality education programs. The material below aims at assisting those in local government and the community to make their local program more successful. Asking yourself some basic preliminary questions can make a world of difference to the effectiveness of your campaign. Such as:

- Who is our audience?
- Who are we trying to reach?
- What attitudes and behaviours are we trying to address, what are our messages?
- When is the best time to conduct education/communication activities?
- Why is it important to the community to improve stormwater?
- How can we use our time and resources most effectively to get our message out?

The following tips are important for you to consider when putting your program together. They answer the basic questions above – and provide more insight into making sure your education activities are effective and successful.

Objective

What do you want your program to achieve? It needs a clear purpose. For example, do you want to:

- Create awareness about the problem of stormwater pollution?
- Enhance people's knowledge, understanding and skills to improve stormwater quality?
- Influence people's values or attitudes towards stormwater pollution
- Encourage people to adopt specific behaviours that contribute to cleaner stormwater?

- Consider the result of your communication and education activities. What do you want the outcome to be?
- What do you want people in your community to know or do afterwards?

Audience

- Be very clear about who is your audience. Deciding who is your audience will have an important impact on the avenues of communication you might use, and also how you present your message.
- Since everyone in NSW is potentially affected by and contributes to stormwater pollution, it is important to focus key messages on specific target audiences. Already you are working with some refinement of this process, for example, relating to the people in a particular catchment.
- However, you should also consider how to target specific audience groups. These might include local industry and businesses, schools, gardening enthusiasts, surfers and other recreation groups, local environment organisations. (It is useful to find out how your stakeholders receive their information and what networks and contacts they have which would be useful to you).
- By analysing the most prevalent behaviours that pollute stormwater in your area you will be able to focus your resources to concentrate on the main problems.

Timing

- Consider timing – it can potentially have a big impact on the effectiveness of your program. For example, deciding to launch a communications initiative on a day when there are other big events or announcements expected – such as the federal budget, or the Melbourne Cup or a local event - will lessen your chances of maximising coverage of your campaign.
- Also consider the time constraints and deadlines of local media you hope to engage in your campaign. If a newspaper is published on a Wednesday, then holding an event on a Tuesday afternoon is very bad timing if you want to guarantee good media coverage.
- Similarly, holding an event on the Wednesday itself in this scenario is also bad timing. The newspaper can't report it until the following week – by which time the editor might consider your event "old news" or no longer newsworthy.

Resources & value adding

- What materials are you planning to produce? Are these appropriate for your target group? Are they at the correct reading age? Consider all the resources and avenues you can use to make your campaign reach the maximum number of people.

- Can you engage the local media and local interest groups at the same time to get your message across? Do you have a budget for advertising to promote your message above and beyond media and stakeholder work?
- Are there other agencies you can look to for support? In this instance, local councils are being encouraged to draw on support from the State Government by using material from the Drain is Just for Rain campaign.
- Can you enlist the support of local businesses? (For example, Thrifty Link will provide paint / refreshments and generate media releases supporting your campaign. Call Bob White, NSW Group Business Manager for details on (02) 9389 0716.)

Effective communication

Deciding what education tools you are going to use for your program is one thing. The next step is to think about what makes those tools effective. For example:

- What avenues of communication are the best to employ to reach your community?
- The average newsroom gets bombarded with media releases all day long. What will make them read yours? What will make them print yours?
- What can you do to make sure the message that comes out in the newspaper is the message you wanted people to hear?
- How can you make people remember your message?

Here are some more helpful tips on making your communications strategic and effective.

- Communication/education needs to have the WIIFM factor (What's in it for ME?) so your audience understands how they will benefit from reducing stormwater pollution.
- Localise your program – give it a truly local focus. People care about what's happening in their own backyards. (For example, give details about locations where work is being undertaken, what local areas of the environment are effected, which local people involved).
- You can't rely on one-off communication – it has little chance of creating any lasting effect. You need to plan to get the messages to your target audience as consistently and as often as possible.
- Conduct regular activities and issue regular stories to keep the issue of stormwater pollution in the public eye.
- Keep your media releases simple and keep them to one at a time. Simple, straightforward language is much more powerful than complicated messages that are hard to remember. The Drain is Just for Rain is a good example of a message that is very simple and very effective.
- Don't be afraid to repeat your key messages to make sure the audience hears it and eventually understands. Drum it in.

- Make your stories timely. If it's winter, then the effects of stormwater pollution on swimmers is not the most effective angle. Make your communication relevant to what people are doing at the time.
- Use current council activities and information to generate public interest in the issue of stormwater pollution. For example, data about the amount of pollution being trapped in local devices or the results of a business survey make for good stories, and new opportunities to get your message out.
- Use local success stories to highlight the solutions to stormwater pollution.
- Identify local events or initiatives that can be used for your advantage. Promoting good litter management at the annual show may provide the opportunity to raise the stormwater issue.
- Try to find something novel that will grab people's attention (see examples of other council activities).
- Think in pictures as well as words. Newspapers love stories that have interesting visual images as well as an interesting message. Offer photographs, or set up opportunities for photographs.
- Understand that the media is made up of advertising content and editorial content. Advertising is paid for. Editorial comprises the information of the day or week that the editor considers the most newsworthy. Making your communications sound newsworthy is therefore important to maximise your coverage at the least cost.
- Remember that education does not just mean schools – it's considering the impact of the whole community on stormwater, and what the community might do to reduce this impact.
- Use messages and images that complement what is being done at a state level (the Drain is Just for Rain) and by other councils.
- Try to leverage the most out of everything you do. For example, when stencilling drains, coincide that work with a school project, or get the local progress association to stencil its own area.
- Use complementary communication techniques. Simply stencilling drains will not stop stormwater pollution – look at simultaneous posters and flyers and media work.
- Make sure internal communication is OK and that there are no other council activities that could compromise or clash with your program.

Action Learning and Action Research

An alternative strategy to traditional “consultation” is that of Action Learning (AL) and Action Research (AR). The origins of Action Learning was in organizational development and change but has been extended to other settings, leading to “participatory” AL and AR which has a wider reach.

Originally AL was mostly used across different organisations. That is, the participants typically came from different situations, where each of them was involved in different

activities and faced individual problems. Most commonly the participants have been managers, though this is not essential. The current practice more often now is to set up an action learning program within one organisation. It is not unusual for a team to consist of people with a common task or problem.

We see that there are possibilities for both approaches to improved environment management in a local government setting:

- Across different organisations for situations such as stormwater management and total catchment management where more than one council as well as other agencies might be involved, and
- Project focused initiatives within a single council area, such as plans of management for particular areas or specific projects for environmental improvement.

Introduction

[Summarised from **Action learning and action research** and **Action Learning for Individual and Organizational Development**. Additional background material includes **The essential principles of action learning** and **Learning action learning**.]

Reg Revans (1997), architect of action learning, believed that it is difficult to describe because it is so simple. McGill and Beaty (1995) defined it as "a continuous process of learning and reflection, supported by colleagues, with the intention of getting things done" (p. 21). Similarly, Inglis (1994) defined AL as "a process which brings people together to find solutions to problems and, in doing so, develops both the individuals and the organization" (p. 3).

In order to understand what AL is, it is necessary to know what it is not. Perhaps in part because of the similarity of the names, action learning is often confused with "learning by doing" (Wallace 1990). Revans himself contributed to this confusion by loosely defining AL's essence as learning from and with peers while tackling real problems (O'Neil and Marsick 1994). However, Revans (1980) also indicated that action learning was not synonymous with project work, job rotation, or any form of a simulation such as case studies or business games. In what ways does AL differ from these other methodologies (Inglis 1994)?

- Learning is centered around the need to find a solution to a real problem.
- Learning is voluntary and learner driven.
- Individual development is as important as finding the solution to the problem.
- Action learning is a highly visible, social process, which may lead to organizational change.
- Action learning takes time. As originally envisioned, an action learning program would take 4-9 months, excluding implementation.

Five basic elements of action learning are the problem, set, client, set advisor, and process.

The Problem(s) must be salient to the AL participants. In other words, the outcome of the problem solutions must matter to them (Dixon 1998). Participants within the small group (set) may all work on the same problem or different problems (Froiland 1994). In addition, the problem(s) may either deal with strategic issues (what to do), or tactical issues (how to do it) (Dilworth 1998a). However, the problems should be nontechnical in nature and sanctioned by a "coalition of power" within the sponsoring organization(s) (Dixon 1998).

The Set refers to the four to six action learners who work together to solve the problem(s) ("What Is Action Learning?" 1996). Each set member acts as a consultant, advisor, and devil's advocate for every other set member (Inglis 1994). The set members need not be specialists, but they must be competent and committed to the process. In order to see the problem with "fresh eyes," the sets should be composed of people from diverse disciplines and/or present problems with which they are unfamiliar (Dixon 1998).

The Client is the person who owns the problem. The client may be synonymous with the set member or may be the sponsoring organization(s) (Inglis 1994).

The Set Advisor acts as the group facilitator. The role of the set advisor is most important at the beginning of the process. Later, the set participants may assume the responsibilities of this role. (Dilworth 1998a). The set advisor increases group cohesiveness by explaining the action learning process to the group and, when necessary, building appropriate interpersonal skills. In addition, the set advisor may increase the confidence and commitment of the client through open communication with the client. Once the group has started, the set advisor may assist individuals in gaining a better self-perception and may act as a resource by asking appropriate questions or suggesting appropriate references ("What Is Action Learning?" 1996).

The Process involves observation of the problem, reflection and hypothesis forming, and action. Factual information about the problem is gathered on an ongoing basis. Reflection and hypothesis forming take place before, after, and during set meetings. Action may be immediate or at the completion of all set activities (Mumford 1997).

Typically, set meetings are made up of a collection of individual time slots of approximately 30 minutes apiece. Each individual discusses the progress they have made on their own project since the last set meeting. Then, fellow set participants ask open-ended questions. This questioning leads to new insights about the nature of the problem. Each participant ends the discussion of their individual problem with an oral (and written) action plan to be accomplished by the next set meeting. The meeting ends with a brief reflection on set accomplishments and recommendations for process improvement. Usually, set rules include speaking one at a time and maintaining absolute confidentiality. Periodically, it may be necessary to schedule a presentation to the set members by a technical expert on some matter of mutual interest during a scheduled set meeting. Ideally, all meetings should take place in private, quiet, and relatively comfortable surroundings (McGill and Beaty 1995).

There may or may not be a facilitator for the learning groups which are formed. Revans mostly avoided them. Current practice, I think, is mostly to use them.

Action research

Action research is a process by which change and understanding can be pursued at the one time. It is usually described as cyclic, with action and critical reflection taking place in turn. The reflection is used to review the previous action and plan the next one.

It is commonly done by a group of people, though sometimes individuals use it to improve their practice. It has been used often in the field of education for this purpose. It is not unusual for there to be someone from outside the team who acts as a facilitator.

Experiential learning

Both action research and action learning may be compared to experiential learning.

As usually described, it is a process for drawing learning from experience. The experience can be something that is taking place, or more often is set up for the occasion by a trainer or facilitator. Clearly, both action research and action learning are about learning from experience. The experience is usually drawn from some task assumed by a person or team.

All are cyclic. All involve action and reflection on that action. All have learning as one of their goals. You might say that experiential learning is the basis for the learning component of both action learning and action research.

You could also say that both action learning and action research are intended to improve practice. Action research intends to introduce some change; action learning uses some intended change as a vehicle for learning through reflection.

In action research, the learners draw their learning from the same change activity. All are stakeholders in this activity. In action learning, as I said earlier, the learning and the activity used to be unique to each learner. With the increasing use of project teams in action learning programs, this is no longer true.

The experiential learning cycle

Consider the following simple learning cycle. It appears to capture the main features of experiential learning, action research, and action learning.

At its simplest, it consists of two stages: action and reflection:

action --> reflection

in an ongoing series of cycles.

However, the reflection gains its point by leading to learning, which in turn leads to changed behaviour in the future:

action --> reflection --> action

We can therefore expand the reflection component. We want to take into account that it is partly a critical review of the last action. It is also, partly, planning for what will happen next.

action --> review --> planning --> action

We can now add "theory" or principles to this. In our review, we can only make sense of the world in ways which build on our prior understanding. In enhancing that understanding, we become better able to act on the world.

When we are acting, we often don't have the time to be deliberate about what we are doing. The "theories" we draw on are intuitive theories. In review and planning our theories can be made explicit. In other words, action is informed by intuitive theories. Critical review and planning are informed by conscious theories and assumptions. These theories are derived deliberately from recent experience, and used to plan the next experience. You could say, then, that experiential learning functions by a dual alternation: between action and

reflection; between unconscious and conscious theories. By engaging with both of these in a cyclic procedure, we integrate them.

To return to action research and action learning...

In each, action informs reflection and is informed by it. The reflection produces the learning (in action learning) or research (in action research). Think of both learning and research as understanding. In both, the action is changed as a result of the learning/research, and leads to more learning/research.

What Are the Advantages of Action Learning?

Through AL, set participants are able to solve long-standing problems that could not be solved by simple training, while developing their leadership abilities (Lanahan and Maldonado 1998). The process empowers participants by encouraging them to take charge of their own problems (Mumford 1991). Action learning also accommodates a wealth of objectives and flexibility of design ("What Is Action Learning?" 1996). In addition, transfer of learning may be increased with AL since participants are able to take immediate action (Yorks et al. 1998).

Recommendations for Implementation

Prepare set participants for the action learning process with a start-up workshop to increase their understanding of the nature and purpose of AL and clarify the problem (Inglis 1994).

Have set participants complete a learning style questionnaire prior to the start-up workshop. Evaluate these questionnaires and discuss the impact of learning styles at the start-up workshop. If possible, diversify the learning styles within each set (Wallace 1990).

Discuss and reflect on the impact of set politics on the process at the first meeting (Vince and Martin 1993).

Be sure set advisors have appropriate preparatory training (Wallace 1990).

Document personal development and encourage reflection by asking participants to record any new thoughts concerning their problem or the AL process in a learning log between set meetings (Inglis 1994):

1. learning for managers should mean learning to take effective action. Acquiring information and becoming more capable in diagnosis or analysis has been overvalued in management learning.
2. learning to take effective action necessarily involves actually taking action, not recommending action or undertaking analysis of someone else's problem.
3. the best form of action for learning is work on a defined project which is significant to the managers themselves. The project should involve implementation as well as analysis and recommendation.
4. while the managers should have responsibility for their own achievements on their own project, the learning process is social; managers learn best with and from one another.

5. the social process is achieved and managed through regular meetings of managers to discuss their individual projects; the group is usually called a “Set”. The managers are “comrades in adversity” (Revans).
6. the role of people providing help for members of the Set is essentially and crucially different from that of the normal management teacher. Their role is not to teach (whether through lecture, case or simulation), but to help managers learn from exposure to problems and to one another. As Revans says, action learning attacks “the inveterate hankering of the teacher to be the centre of attention”.

This process is more than a rephrasing of learning from experience. Crucially, the idea of people working together in a Set to discuss a defined project differs from two other, apparently similar types of learning from experience. It differs in structure and intention – and certainly in results – from the informal though natural exchange of ideas and wisdom that occurs in any management team discussing any management problem.

It also differs from the kind of group discussions that occur on management training courses where, even if real problems are discussed, they are discussed only because the program exists, not because the problems have brought about the program. It is also different from experiential processes like business games, outdoor training and Lego bridge-building, which focus on process through simulation, not task and process through reality.

Action learning asks managers to focus primarily on their own live experiences, rather than on dissecting dead bodies, such as case studies of how other managers have behaved in other situations. Carrying out that tenet for this article means concentrating on experiences I have been directly involved in. I have used the experience of others to clarify, challenge and improve my own understanding.

The most effective forms of action learning in the 1990s will follow the four I's:

- **Interaction.** Already a major feature in the original philosophy, the ideas of “fellows in adversity” – managers discussing problems together in the Set – must be converted into “fellows in opportunity”. Moreover, interaction must be extended outside the Set to include the major organizational players – the manager’s manager, clients for projects, mentors – all those who will influence task performance and achieved learning.
- **Integration.** Action learning must be sensibly combined with appropriate inputs of knowledge and skills. The kind of intellectual segregation which has been seen in the past needs to be torn down. Of course, we must be clear about what each of the learning processes is intended to achieve, but together they will achieve more than any could separately.

The original Revans equation needs to be adapted, as shown below. The most effective learning is driven by the need to resolve a managerial problem Q1 . This leads to the acquisition of relevant knowledge (P) – which then stimulates the identification of further management opportunities Q2 . The revised equation is:

$$Q1 + P + Q2 = L.$$

- **Implementation.** Real work has always been at the heart of this process. We need to set more stretching targets for what form it should take. In the main, managers get paid, not for analysing problems but for solving them. Action learning should focus primarily on tasks for which the manager is personally accountable.

- **Interaction.** Action learning programs can be marvelously productive in terms of achieved results, through the enthusiasm and commitment generated by attention to real tasks. But, as with any other management development program, unless they are linked into real management processes on a longer-term basis, we will have missed some of the more productive potential.

Within any program there should be a variety of opportunities for integrating learning achieved through structured problems and projects with those unstructured and informal processes which arise during the program and which will emerge after it.

Dick, B. (1997) Action learning and action research [On line]. Available at <http://www.scu.edu.au/schools/gcm/ar/arp/actlearn.html>

See also:

- <http://www.free-press.com/journals/gabal/>