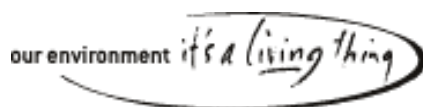


Write it up!

Sustainability education case study

The Watershed: an Urban Sustainability Resource Centre



The Watershed

an Urban Sustainability Resource Centre

Snapshot

Aims

The Watershed Sustainability Resource Centre offers community access to a wide range of sustainability education projects and activities in inner-city Newtown. It aims to improve the ecological footprint of local residents and businesses.

Location

The centre operates from a shop front on King Street in Newtown, Sydney, NSW. King Street is busy and vibrant, with around 670 businesses in retail, dining and entertainment.

Who's involved?

The Watershed is a Sustainability Resource Centre located at 218 King Street in the heart of Newtown. It is a joint initiative of City of Sydney and Marrickville Councils, part of an ongoing commitment to supporting sustainable environments. The Watershed activities involve local businesses (including cafes, laundromats and retailers), workers, residents and volunteers. Both Marrickville and City of Sydney local councils work together as provider organisations through a Steering Committee and Working Group.

Good Practice Principles

The Watershed:

- provides transformative adult environmental education
- provides motivation, skills and support for individuals to take positive action
- fosters an understanding of the interconnectedness of ecology, society, and the economy
- facilitates partnerships
- celebrates local achievements and actions

Funding

The Watershed receives funding from Marrickville and City of Sydney local councils. It was initially established with a NSW Stormwater Trust grant in 2002.

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Acknowledgements

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Michael Neville	Sydney of City Council, Watershed Working Group
Nell Graham	Marrickville Council, Watershed Working Group
Celine Steinfeld	Watershed Project Officer (former volunteer)
Tracy Graham	Watershed Facilitator (former volunteer)
Vanessa John	Former Watershed Coordinator
Therese Hor	Former facilitator at the Watershed
Katie Ross	NSW AAEE Case Study Facilitator
Phil Smith	NSW AAEE Case Study Facilitator

Watershed programs

The Watershed more than lives up to its name: literally, symbolically and strategically. Literally, the Watershed sits on the ridgeline between Sydney Harbour and Botany Bay, two iconic historical catchments in Sydney. Symbolically, the shop front is a highly visible meeting place for the Newtown community. Strategically, the Watershed represents two local councils, Marrickville and the City of Sydney, because their boundaries meet along King Street.

Initially set up to tackle storm water and illegal dumping issues, the Watershed's scope has now broadened to address sustainability as a whole. It does this through face-to-face engagement, workshops on a range of topics, research and advice, business liaison, and project planning and coordination.

The Watershed runs an Urban Sustainability Workshop Series for the community. Workshop topics include waste, water, energy, natural cleaning, no-dig gardening, composting and worm farming and eco choices for sustainable living. Workshops are constantly evolving to meet changing expectations and needs and include:

- The Business Initiative – which helps people learn about the economics of sustainability and about their own practices.
- No Butts in Newtown – practical demonstration of the relationship between stormwater and the ocean.
- Cork recycling - a partnership project between the Watershed and NSW Girl Guides. The Watershed collects tens of thousands of corks from local restaurants, hotels and residents. These corks are sold and reprocessed into boat decking and floor tiling.
- A volunteer program - volunteers are integral to the Watershed programs and work in a range of roles- as project leaders, workshops facilitators and business educators.

The Watershed aims to improve the community's collective ability to build a sustainable society from the ground up. Michael, a waste education officer from the City of Sydney, said: 'Not a lot of people are in the position to make global changes; they don't have the power or the money or the education. Everyone working together has quite a cumulative impact'.

Good practice in sustainability education

The Watershed promotes good sustainability education practice through community interaction facilitated by a central location, integration of volunteers, responsiveness to change and educational approaches that include systemic thinking, values clarification, support for long-term learning and development of partnerships.

Community interaction

Watershed staff don't just 'give away pamphlets' - they try to engage people, help them think critically about their questions, and find their own answers.

As the manager, Kalina, explains: 'We had some grey water [information] kits stacked up out front, and I found that people were coming in, grabbing their kit and walking away—but that is not really the point. The Watershed is not here to provide paper. We've moved all of the printed kits in the back now, with a permanent kit at the front of the shop, so when people come in and say they were thinking about getting a rainwater tank, we say "great, come in and sit down to talk for five minutes. Why were you thinking about getting a rainwater tank? How much money have you got to spend? Have you ever had one before? Do you know the difference between grey water and rainwater? Where would you feel comfortable using the water in your house? Would you be interested in coming to a workshop?" '

When forming the questions and sharing the experienced of finding the answer, people leave feeling empowered. People are also encouraged to come back, chat with staff and use the reference library at any time.

A wide range of resources and books in the research centre at the front of the shop allows the Watershed to accommodate most questions and requests for research. 'The topics covered span water-wise gardening, local flora and fauna, environmental friendly pet-care, rainwater tanks, composting, sustainable urban design, natural cleaning and environmental theory' (Watershed 2005).

Volunteers

Volunteers play an important role in the environmental education activities and some eventually become accredited workshop facilitators.

'Bagbusters', for example, is project created by a Watershed volunteer, Celine Steinfeld, who was supported by staff to put her ideas into action. After conducting research to identify environmental projects and models for plastic bag reduction (Australia dumps 7 billion plastic bags in landfills a year!), Celine created Bagbusters. This project works with local businesses and the community to raise awareness about the environmental cost of plastics bags and create positive action to reduce the number of bags used. The 'street level' approach builds strong relationships and healthy collaborations with local businesses, the Councils and the wider community which helps people become more comfortable and open to new ideas (Steinfeld 2005).

Sustainability education builds a 'learning society' through critical and reflective engagement; it seeks to enable the development of new understandings of the environment and of our place within it.

Location

A continued, high-profile existence in King St Newtown has increased community access and participation in Watershed programs. People from businesses, local residents, visitors—all sectors of society—just walk in off the street. Interesting window displays or signs offering free low energy light bulbs, for example, help attract foot traffic.

'Many environmental educators discuss the need to make a real connection to 'place' in order to bring about the necessary transformative experience in order to make a commitment to positive action. This is commonly thought of in the context of wilderness, or our childhood experiences with nature, or in the natural world which is some place else – somewhere over there. The Watershed is very much an example of exploring a connection to an urban place as the site for such transformative learning and shared experience' (John 2005).

As a local government partnership, the Watershed promotes local councils' sustainability initiatives and forms a link between councils, local businesses and the community. However as a shop front in a busy urban retail strip, the Watershed is a long way from large administrative council buildings and therefore not immediately prone to common negative perceptions of councils. The 'Shed has its own identity and enjoys a special autonomy. In this way, relationships are built, valuable information is collected (e.g. illegal dumping) and sustainability outcomes are achieved' (John 2004).

The development and delivery of sustainability education aims to assist the community move towards sustainability.

Responsiveness to change

The Watershed has adapted to the changing suburb, and focuses on what is relevant to their community. Staff remain outward looking, find out what interests people and respond to these issues.

'Right now, there are just so many people coming in and asking questions about water, so we are getting on board and developing water workshops and resources to meet the needs of people who are asking the questions,' said Kalina. The Watershed also responds to volunteer's concerns and interests—some want to learn new skills, others are new graduates or undergraduates focused on a career in the environment, and some are simply responding to a local issue.

Sustainability education promotes social change through the initiatives of individuals and organisations.

Evaluation

The Watershed evaluates at many levels: at workshop, program, and Steering Committee levels.

For example, in 2007 an Environmental Trust funded evaluation of the Watershed's sustainability workshop series from its inception in 2003 was undertaken to assess

the success of these workshops in achieving longer term behaviour changes amongst workshop participants (Booth and Roche 2008). While workshops are very well supported and attended, this evaluation, using a range of methods, was able to establish that they generally met participants expectations and that participants had subsequently made a range of changes in their homes, workplaces, marketplace and neighbourhood.

The evaluation also found the volunteer program had become a highly effective way to influence others and foster behaviour change. However, the evaluation focused on areas for improvement. It found, for example, that participation in workshops was from fairly narrow demographic groups and that steps should be taken to widen participation to broader segments of the community.

Continual improvement underpins all planning, delivery and evaluation of sustainability education initiatives.

Systemic thinking and values clarification

In each workshop, the facilitators encourage systemic thinking about how the issues in their community are related and affect each other—and to see the connections between local and global systems.

‘When we do our workshop on energy, you have to talk about greenhouse gases, you have to talk beyond your domestic environment to global warming, to really get a sense of the issue. This perspective helps people find the motivation to make changes,’ said Kalina.

The facilitators also help people become conscious of what they do, why they do it (values clarification) and how this impacts on sustainability. Tracy described it as: ‘bringing people’s attention to their own habits.’

Sustainability education acknowledges the complex connections between diverse aspects of environmental problems.

Support for long-term learning and action

The Watershed provides support for people to continue making long-term changes in their lives, work and play that will help their community become sustainable. ‘My role is to make each individual understand that their actions can make a difference,’ said Tracy

Sustainability education is relevant to all aspects of our lives and is regarded as a life-long learning process.

Partnerships

King Street sits on the border between Marrickville and the City of Sydney Councils. These two local government areas have capitalised on an opportunity to build upon

regional partnerships for sustainability and created the Watershed as a joint initiative.

Effective collaboration and communication have helped build an effective partnership between the Watershed and the two councils

Lessons

As a successful joint initiative between two committed local councils, the Watershed provides relevant, manageable sustainability solutions for people wanting to make a positive difference to their environment. The Watershed experience has produced the following questions which may help others plan their own programs:

- What types of data do you gather when preparing a program to achieve sustainability outcomes?
- What resources could potentially be available to you in your community?
- How does your location provide unique opportunities for you to build upon larger partnerships for sustainability?
- How can you make the learning experience not only fun but engage learners in such a way that it becomes a part of 'cool' pop culture?
- How can you locate the topic in a national and international context?
- How can you engage with community members that have not already been converted?
- What skills could you develop in your learners, to enable them to make change for sustainability within the larger system societal systems: education, policy, culture, etc?
- What are the issues in your area that really motivate and engage the locals to commit their time and energy? How can you help direct that energy? What do people in your area want? What are they converting to?
- Do you know if your project is working? How do you know and how can you monitor the flow on effects? What data do you need to gather before hand to compare the results of your program to? How does your project meet the real needs of the audience, as opposed to the perceived needs before you start?
- What is the sustainability of your program? Are processes and systems in place to allow your program to continue after you leave?
- How do you personally keep motivated when things are difficult ie in the face of changing imperatives, staff, funding priorities?

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