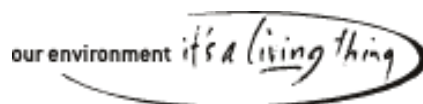


Write it up!

Sustainability education case study

**Youth LEAD:
from little things, big things grow**



Youth LEAD: from little things, big things grow

Snapshot

Youth LEAD is a leadership and entrepreneurship program, which enables young people, aged 15–25 to design sustainability projects—and put them into action. Youth LEAD helps engage, equip and enable young people to improve their environment, lives and the world.

Prior to joining the program, participants felt that practical, positive ways to help solve their environmental and social concerns were hard to find. They didn't know where to start, and many of their friends were more excited about buying new things than improving issues such as environmental degradation, consumerism or youth health.

Location

Youth LEAD has been developed and implemented by the Global Rivers Environmental Education Network Australia (Oz GREEN). Oz GREEN is based in Sydney and has led Youth LEAD programs around Australia, in Pakistan, India, the United States and East Timor.

Who is involved?

Oz GREEN is the umbrella organisation for Youth LEAD and many other eco-social programs.

Good practice principles

- Strategies to build life sustaining communities
- Strengthened emotional intelligence and critical thinking skills
- Creation of national and global networks
- Enabling reduction of personal household ecological footprints
- Passion, focus, drive and vision to be active citizens in local communities and beyond

Funding

Youth LEAD is funded by a wide variety of sources from corporate sponsors to local community groups, including Vodafone Australia Foundation, Social Ventures Australia, Price Waterhouse Coopers Foundation, Myer Foundation, and the Australian Government Department of Education, Science and Training.

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Acknowledgements

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Col Lennox	Co-Founder / Executive Director Oz GREEN and Lead Facilitator of Youth LEAD
Wendy Hopkins	Education Officer Oz GREEN, Youth LEAD Trainee Facilitator /mentor
Jodi Lennox	Events Manager Oz GREEN, Youth LEAD Trainee Facilitator/mentor
Six Youth LEAD participants	Shared their thoughts, memories, and insight
The Sydney Northern Beaches Youth LEAD crew	Contributed to a memorable weekend

A Youth LEAD participant story

Over four years from 2002, more than 300 young people from 20 urban and regional communities and six countries had participated in the Youth LEAD program. I'd wondered how this program helped young people make inspiring headlines in their communities and beyond, and was keen to join.

I was able to attend my first Youth LEAD program early in March 2006. The two Youth LEAD facilitators brought the entire group together in fantastically fun, yet focused sessions. Overall the program helped us learn how to create the changes we wanted to see, in a comfortable and trusting environment.

Four weeks later I attended the MYRiveR Murray-Darling Muster (MMM) at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. (MY RiveR and MMM are initiatives of Oz GREEN, the same independent non-profit organisation that runs Youth LEAD.) At the MMM, school students from across the Murray-Darling Basin gathered for a week to discuss their investigations into the well-being of local waterways and share ideas on how to restore river health. Lawyers helped participants logically think through, structure, and present their arguments. The week culminated in a presentation to federal Parliament on the students' vision for the future.

In follow-up meetings we shared inspiring stories of our progress, challenges and actions. One of the participants wanted to improve environmental and social conditions for her relatives in Fiji. Oz GREEN inspires participants to act: she helped Oz GREEN with her web-based marketing skills, and Oz GREEN helped her fly to Fiji through their village program (formerly in New Guinea and East Timor). She was then able to talk to her uncle, the chief.

The true power of Youth LEAD—the long-term support and network building—allows young people to work as leaders and active citizens in their communities.

Background

Educators Sue and Col Lennox, the founders of OzGREEN, felt students were becoming overwhelmed by the negative information on environmental and social issues. 'I was seeing them shut down, rather than engage with it,' says Sue. Sue and Col wanted to help students get beyond the standard situation of seeing issues in black or white, and to help them work through complex issues themselves, together.

Experiential education and strategic questioning

'We were fortunate to do our teacher training at a time when experiential education was a really important tool, said Sue. 'Our whole way of operating is based on the principles of participation and learning from our own experience.'

Sue discovered Fran Peavey's work on strategic questioning, and knew this was the tool to help people move from the space of not knowing what to do, to knowing what to do.

Curl Curl Lagoon

'When I came back to the school on Monday after the strategic questioning workshop, there was an incredible coincidence. That day there was a massive fish kill in Curl Curl Lagoon, and the kids were really angry and upset. So we dropped all the other stuff we were doing in class and went into strategic questioning. And the kids were so enthused—they came up with 100 different ideas of things they could do, they were really switched on to it. And out of that whole process they developed an action plan of conducting interviews with businesses around the school, making a video, and creating a water monitoring program at school.

'We didn't initially have the skills to do any of those things, but that was part of the learning— to get those skills. The surprise was that the consequence of doing each of those actions was beyond anything that we would have anticipated. The kids went out and interviewed the businesses and they realized what powerful educators and motivators of adults they could be. The water-monitoring program worked with Streamwatch; the video ended up winning a UN Media Peace Prize.'

India

Fran Peavey invited Sue and Col to India. 'We weren't able to breathe the air without feeling sick, and we, for the first time, actually measured the water pollution in the Ganges River. It just absolutely broke our hearts, and we wondered how we could live with ourselves, if we did nothing. We knew what skills worked and that we could do something that could make a difference'.

Sue and Col knew they had to be prepared to put their own resources into making this happen. 'When we started OzGREEN, we left our jobs, careers, we sold our house, and we moved into a very insecure situation, with three young kids,' said Col. 'Even though we didn't have a clear pathway, we started taking steps. And then it was just a matter of taking advantage of opportunities as they arose...'

Youth LEAD workshops

Each Youth LEAD workshop involves engaging young people (aged 15-25) and local mentors in a three-day residential workshop. The workshops provide skills training in envisioning, strategic questioning, and action-planning. (This is preceded by a 1-day mentor training program involving up to 6 mentors.)

Follow-up support meetings are held 1 month, 3 months, 6 months and 1 year after the workshops. These meetings, along with regular phone and email contact with all participants, play an important role in mentoring and support.

Good practice in sustainability education

Youth Lead includes a range of good practice strategies in sustainability education.

Making the information and situation real

Youth LEAD presents information about environmental degradation in tangible and meaningful ways—not as dry facts and figures:

Sharing personal stories

Sue and Col have travelled up and down the Murray and Darling rivers to conduct environmental testing and they have seen environmental degradation in many international locations: India, Pakistan and East Timor. They provide first hand experiences, stories and photos.

Being honest while being positive

While they acknowledge the truth of the situation, the facilitators also believe that each participant has the ability and power to create positive change.

Analytical tools

Youth LEAD facilitators incorporate tools to help make the environmental situation real. Conducting an ecological footprint test and lifestyle analysis allow participants to see how their actions (and actions of others) contribute to the situations in the world today.

Developing action plans

'Young people learn about being a leader by undertaking projects that they have designed and then drive themselves,' says Col. Action plans are a crucial part of Youth LEAD workshops. These plans allow participants to translate the momentum of the workshop and their new skills and enthusiasm into achievable steps.

Throughout the three-day workshop, the participants have time to brainstorm and refine three action plans which:

- enhance their leadership skills
- decrease their ecological footprint
- plan a personal or eco-entrepreneurial project

Participants list specific strategies and actions that need to happen for them to reach their goal, including who will carry out the actions and when.

Believing in oneself

It is hard for participants to become leaders if they don't believe in their own answers. Youth LEAD helps youth understand that they can move past the self-doubt and use their inner wisdom to make decisions.

In Youth LEAD Pakistan, said Col, 'A young person came to me and said 'I come from a village on the end of town and there is an industrial drain that ends past the end of town and our farmers are using that water for irrigation, and I am really concerned about what that is doing to the food and what happens when we eat that

food'. He asked me twice if it was okay if he worked on that problem. Now he has been able convince 3 companies to stop dumping their waste into the water.'

The Youth LEAD facilitation philosophy fosters confidence. Facilitators are always asking questions, not giving answers. 'When mentoring, I don't actually know what is right for them, but they do. Youth LEAD explores what is right for them and their heart,' said Col.

Providing a supportive environment

Workshops, networks, advice, other action opportunities, water testing gear, mentors, or a cup of tea: support in Youth LEAD is one of the defining aspects of this program. As Col noted, 'One of the differences about what we do, is that when youth do this workshop they are not just launched out into the world—'you are a leader, now go and lead'—there is ongoing connection, support, and other opportunities provided to help them become leaders.'

Youth LEAD facilitators discuss course preparation needs and clarify expectations prior to the workshop. During the workshops there is a supportive environment: energised and reflective, fun, serious and safe. Participants feel comfortable about sharing their opinions. They build skills through strategic questioning, critical thinking, creative thinking, reflection and visioning. After the workshops facilitators assist participants deal with the initial barriers they may experience. Friends, families, or teachers may tell participants that their action plans are not possible. This can reduce their confidence, but support from Youth LEAD often brings a sense of resilience, and they can bounce back despite setbacks.

Youth LEAD also builds connections between participants. Those interested in the same issues can work on them together, for example:

- most participants in each workshop are from the same area. This close proximity helps young people stay in touch and achieve their action plans.
- The entire Youth LEAD network stays in touch by email and sends updates or invitations to events
- follow-up meetings allow everyone to gather again, share their stories and discuss progress on their action plan
- the 'National Gathering' is an opportunity for the broader network to get together and build on each other's positive energy and experiences. Oz GREEN strives for a feeling of connectedness among Australian and international Youth LEAD workshops, and in their workshops for adults. This connection will help build much needed understanding and peace in our global community.

Maintaining a positive vision

Maintaining a positive vision of the future is also a solid foundation for support. As Sue explained, 'Something we do the whole time is building the sense of possibility, opening to the sense of possibility of us bringing about change.

'Cootamundra participants wanted to rehabilitate wetlands in their community, but were knocked back when they first approached their local council. Youth LEAD facilitators helped them keep their eye on their goal and encouraged them to work out what they were going to do next. The Cootamundra girls eventually garnered the support of their community and have since helped reclaim the original wetlands for their community.'

Providing opportunities for continuing involvement

On finishing the program, Youth LEADers can train as mentors, facilitators, or work as volunteers with various Oz GREEN programs in Australia or overseas.

Students can help bring MYRiveR (a program involving water-testing, reporting and action-planning) to their school. They can also use their Youth LEAD experience as part of the service component of the Duke of Edinburgh Award program.

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.

Lessons

Youth LEAD provides leadership training and mentoring for youth led eco-social projects, as well as creating a broader network for support. The program continues to build a national network of young leaders who are working in their local community and beyond to create a life-sustaining society.

Some key lessons from the experiences of Youth Lead are:

- Be clear about your aims and design the program around them.
- Use critical reflection to identify lessons or options that will help you maintain a state of readiness for what is next.
- Help participants learn from the answers within, and focus on more than just one way of knowing (feeling, not just thinking).
- Ensure you respect your learners, their dreams - and take their intentions seriously.
- Build on skills and resilience to take on today's challenges.
- Encourage young people to seek and develop their own pathways (without being prescriptive).
- Provide support and opportunities for long-term engagement.
- Form partnerships to help strengthen your program and as well as others.

Reference

Oz GREEN (2005). *'Youth LEAD Global Rivers Environmental Education Network.'* Pamphlet, Australia Inc.