

The Role of Research in Cool Communities

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Cool Communities is an Australian Government project between the environment organizations and Australian Greenhouse Office. The aim is the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions from households, thus it is an action based education project.

From the outset, Cool Communities has had a strong focus on measurement, distinguishing itself from awareness raising projects. We were always clear the project would be evaluated in the strict measurement sense. However, towards this measurement outcome, we were also interested in what were effective ways to facilitate householder change.

Cool Communities operates on a number of levels, we are concerned with our target audience; householder change within our selected communities, but also the general public's comprehension of greenhouse issues, global warming and electricity. These latter concerns are particularly important for the environment organizations.

This paper will consider what assumptions and research initially guided the project, and analyse what new findings have impacted, why and how. Most of this research has been conducted specifically by Cool Communities, to better focus our efforts.

Research to be considered in this paper includes a mix of formal and informal findings: focus groups in the 22 Cool Communities, surveys with the general public in Leichhardt, evaluation of Leichhardt workshops, a national phone poll survey, evaluation report of Cool Communities, the final measurement report, and finally feedback and design change from a Cool Community, the Ecoliving Centre.

To be useful for other educators this research will be analysed in terms of *why* it is informative, or its function rather than *what* were the findings. This paper will explore the links between research and practice in the context of Cool Communities, it relates to a number of the conference themes in particular: integrating education with other tools, research and evaluation as a strategy for change and proving its working: what works and how do we know?

The Role of Research in Cool Communities, why was it useful, linking research and practice

This paper is designed to share with other environmental educators how we have linked research and practice in the Cool Communities project. I would like to devote attention towards explaining *how* research has guided and informed the project. I think it is safe to say most environmental education projects do not spend enough time documenting and sharing experiences, as environmental educators are too busy delivering their projects. This conference presents an excellent opportunity for us to document and share our findings with each other as environmental educators.

Before I go any further I think it is necessary to define what I mean by the term 'research'. This paper perhaps takes an expanded view of 'research' compared to a more formal interpretation, such as the Oxford dictionary definition for research: "*Careful search or inquiry, endeavour to discover facts by scientific study of a subject, course of critical investigation*".

To me, as the NSW Cool Communities facilitator I have interpreted research for the purposes of this paper to include anything that "informs" our work and the way in which we conduct the project; from reports and surveys to anecdotal participant feedback and conversations with other educators. This paper considers a range of research that relates to the motivation of individual change.

In my discussion I will follow the flow of research that has informed the design of Cool Communities, from the beginning to the present, I will discuss various forms of research eg (surveys, evaluation questions, anecdotal evidence); where it comes from; how it has been incorporated and how it now fits in with the overall project.

The research input has been an iterative process. Like most projects Cool Communities is in constant evolution and development, this is the result of new information, and a "learning as we go" approach. Today I will consider the role of research from the national to the local community level, from the perspective of the NSW Cool Communities facilitator.

Background

It is necessary to provide a concise explanation of the structure of Cool Communities as background context before discussing how research has influenced the project. Our immediate goal is the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions with Cool Community households, but our broader, longer term goal is to create a culture of greenhouse understanding and action in Australia. Cool Communities basically works with community groups to reduce their household greenhouse gas emissions. The project provides these groups with funding, advice, assistance and a framework for working towards this goal. Cool Communities commenced in 2001, with a project team consisting of: a facilitator in each state; staff at the Australian Greenhouse Office; 8 Executive Officers of the state based Australian environment organizations (AEOs); and central management staff to represent the environment groups. It is an important and unique partnership between the Australian Greenhouse Office and the environment groups.

The project team represented a variety of backgrounds, most staff came from a campaigning background, while others from community development, health and environmental education. This was significant because they acted as *filters* or *lenses* for development of the project. The different viewpoints brought different kinds of knowledge, assumptions and focus to Cool Communities. I would like to highlight the extreme importance of diversity and flexibility in a project such as this. From the outset, Cool Communities had a management that was not only supportive of, but celebrated the diversity of the project. Such an approach was fundamental in generating a variety of approaches and learnings. The environment groups' management lobbied and recognized that there is not one approach for 22 communities with 8 facilitators and decisions need to be tailored and owned at a local level. Such flexibility is a significant success factor for a national, community based project. Without flexibility and local ownership, the community aspect is compromised, and you end up with nothing more than a generic, top down, uninspiring project.

Some of the early assumptions of the project included: 1) community focused change 2) NGOs are better placed (than government) to facilitate and administer a climate change project 3) evidence from similar initiatives overseas supports the project concept 4) social marketing ideas about energy efficiency and what motivates people to change.

Some things we were less clear about were: 1) whether Australians would make changes in the home 2) what defined community capacity and made a strong community 3) what are successful change techniques.

Early Research: Social Marketing/ Research

Social research, such as studies on household energy efficiency formed the background to some of our decisions about project design and especially communication. The actions promoted by Cool Communities related to household energy efficiency, transport and waste. We mostly encouraged the reduction of household greenhouse gas through energy efficiency measures. Formal studies and research on how people respond to energy efficiency was considered. At this stage we incorporated some marketing notions, such as different messages and values will resonate with different people, or the importance of tapping into peoples' values to facilitate effective change.

However, such research also needed to be understood within our individual paradigms and understandings of how change happens. The combination of research that informed the early model of Cool Communities included a lot of social marketing ideas mixed with "community development" or what we might call 'Education for Sustainability' (EfS) concepts. This mixture proved an interesting one, there was sometimes friction between competing approaches and principles, but at other times it was smooth and complimentary. To expand, broad and general social marketing messages about human behaviour, such as "people are motivated by the hip pocket" presume that values necessarily lead to action. While EfS concepts such as values clarification and critical thinking suggest there are gaps between peoples'

values and their actions with no necessary connection between the two. This latter approach suggests the process of change is much more complex than simply developing the right campaign message to an audience. We found that this latter approach to change was more suitable for a community based project.

Broader social marketing research was useful and true to a degree, but it was not the most applicable information for a project that is primarily concerned with change at a local level. The immediate audience of Cool Communities is not the entire Australian public, but the specific communities we are working with. In most states we are only talking about a few hundred people. As a basic rule, it is useful to target the level of inquiry to the level of change you are aiming to achieve. What is the relevance of broad conclusions about Australians when you are actually working to deliver change with a small section of the community? However broader social marketing research is useful for a general awareness raising campaign, which is a secondary goal of Cool Communities

I suggest that the different approaches were at times complimentary because social marketing deals with broader understanding and awareness-raising. The issue of climate change remains confusing for most people, and as environment organizations one of our aims through Cool Communities is to also increase the public's understanding of this issue. Most Australians do not know where their electricity comes from and developing simple messages that communicate this issue has also been a significant goal for us.

Focus groups

The project commissioned a lot of Cool Communities specific social research this involved focus groups in 16 of the 22 communities. The focus groups involved 8 people from the respective communities discussing climate change and energy efficiency issues. The focus groups were done for the benefit of both the community organizations and the facilitators to get a better sense of who their audiences were in terms of general profile. The weight of these findings varied among the project team. The significance of the focus groups was dependent on the confidence from the facilitator and how representative the focus group was. In some cases the community might have been a local government area so you might be talking about a diverse population of 64,000 people, thus it is difficult to draw broad conclusions from 8 people. As an example the conclusions from the Leichhardt focus groups were very different to the attitudes of the Leichhardt Cool Community households we subsequently worked with.

This research was useful not so much for the individual projects, which was their initial intention, but for the broader aims of Cool Communities. Through this research we have come to recognize that Cool Communities has a greater capacity to address the particular circumstances that contribute or facilitate individual change. What perhaps was most useful from the focus groups, was that it demonstrated that Australians in general, have very little understanding of climate change, energy efficiency and environmental issues. I think the greatest value of this type of research is that it is a reminder to project managers and coordinators of the level of understanding in the audience they are targeting. A lot of us working in the

environment sector become so familiar with environmental issues that we need to be reminded that there too many assumptions in our messages.

What do people know, general perceptions and understanding?

My personal learnings from the social research process would be that it is always important to first gauge what the general perceptions of an issue are. Do people understand the greenhouse effect? No. Do they understand the connection between electricity and the greenhouse effect? Definite No. Without this basic information it is difficult to know how to pitch the project to your audience. If this type of background information is not affordable or possible start at a minimal level of understanding, presume nothing. A conclusion from the preliminary social research that still holds true is the notion that most people do not know where their electricity comes from. Many of the audiences I work with are what I call the “non-converted”, your average householder who might not be concerned with the environment or has limited environmental connection. They are not likely to understand the electricity greenhouse connection. This early finding has been confirmed again and again by practice.

DIY

I would recommend to all educators to ask the questions you want to know the answers for. The next research I would like to discuss are the surveys we conducted on World Environment Day 2001. We were not totally convinced by the findings from the Leichhardt focus groups, so we decided a larger survey of the community was necessary. This might seem onerous, but I think we all need to be very careful about the assumptions we make and that we are often not aware of. For me, the results from our DIY surveys reiterated just how little people knew about climate change. Yes people were concerned, but there is very little understanding of the connection with their lives, what this meant, what they could do etc. people are disempowered, as with most issues. The findings from these surveys contradicted those of the focus group, but we felt the latter were more useful.

Internal project team influence

As indicated earlier Cool Communities is the construct of a team of people from various backgrounds. Thus we need to recognize the different viewpoints and paradigms on offer. The paradigm that I try and communicate, that I also recognize as a form of research influencing the project is what is commonly referred to as ‘Education for Sustainability’. Fundamental aspects of this approach are capacity building, partnerships, ownership, critical thinking, futures thinking and values clarification. ‘Education for Sustainability’ is sometimes at odds with a project such as Cool Communities; in its first year, because Cool Communities was a project funded by the Australian Greenhouse Office, there was strong pressure to deliver a project that could achieve high greenhouse gas reductions and quickly. Such expectations necessarily compromise other objectives, such as participation and capacity building. As those of us who work on such projects know, it is very challenging to try and achieve high measurable change in environmental impact and

high levels of participation and capacity building within a short time period. The latter two aspects are intensive and require longer time commitments.

However, 'Education for Sustainability' has influenced the NSW Cool Communities wherever possible. In the design of the Leichhardt workshops we tried to use methods of engagement that were active and participatory, and as a national project Cool Communities supports locally owned and designed solutions to reducing household emissions. I recognize that Cool Communities falls short of 'Education for Sustainability' in particular there is less evidence of futures and critical thinking.

Evaluation

Perhaps the most valuable information or research for me was the evaluations conducted for the Leichhardt workshops. This research related specifically to both the particular education style and the audience. This research consisted of questions I was interested in asking and directed at the householders we had engaged during the workshops. The responses were useful because it was done during the lifespan of the project and it was possible to respond to the feedback. Types of questions asked related to the educational material used, displays, quizzes activities etc. Often projects are evaluated from a distance or after they have been completed, this is useful for the funders perhaps, but it is not timely for those of us who are involved in the delivery. The project was also evaluated independently at a national level, this is covered in the next section.

Project evaluation

The project was evaluated by an independent consultant last year. The focus of the evaluation was the entire project, each community was also evaluated independently by the consultant but most of the useful findings related to the overall delivery of the entire project. Some of the identified strengths were:

- The project structure was successful in engaging community support, responsive and flexible to deal with problems.
- The project provided for the development of effective partnerships, engagement of new community organisations, community outreach for the state based environment groups.

As to be expected, there has been an effort to maintain the identified success factors of the project.

Some of the weaknesses include:

- Tendency to become over bureaucratized
- The pressure that measurement places on community ownership, there is a need to be realistic about the parameters, otherwise there is the risk of raising expectations.
- Working with community volunteers takes a long time, this is their volunteer, unpaid time.
- Constraints on facilitator and community capacity.

Some of the above aspects we were able to be improve upon more than others. The facilitators have become much more discerning about community capacity, primarily

as a result of the national evaluation. We reduced the planning process, so that community groups are ready to go by the time the agreements have been signed and it is not necessary to do more planning after this. We tried to make the planning process more explicit so that the parameters were clear. In addition, the facilitators are much more discerning about their own workloads.

While the evaluation was useful in addressing the weaknesses, due to political realities and other constraints, it has not been possible to address all of the lessons. Ironically, some of the weaknesses have become even more apparent in round 2. In particular, although it was identified that the time frame was too short in round 1, it was reduced even further in round 2. Like any government funded project we are operating in a political construct; the Federal government has not yet made their announcement on Greenhouse and this has an obvious bearing on the future of the project. Our funding body, the Australian Greenhouse Office are similarly working under the same uncertainty. Thus the project has not been able to accommodate for the issue of increased time frames when working with volunteer groups.

Measurement (Abatement)

From the outset, Cool Communities has had a strong focus on quantitative measurement. It has been clear to distinguish itself from an awareness- raising project. This strong ethos of measurement was initially inherited from the funders, the Australian Greenhouse Office (AGO). As Australia's lead organization for the reduction of greenhouse gases, all AGO programs relate to this aim and thus measure the reduction of greenhouse gases they have achieved or what is called the 'abatement'. The measurement for the project consisted of a pre and post questionnaire. Participants were asked to complete the pre questionnaires as soon as they signed up to Cool Communities and the post questionnaire after they had undertaken some actions in the home, usually at least 5/6 months after they had joined.

While the pressure to produce measurement results has had a bearing on the delivery and process of the project as noted above, there are a lot of benefits to the measurement approach. The focus on measurement provides a framework as well as positive feedback to the participants. There were certain dates by which the measurement surveys were due and collected. We recognize the importance of a flexible program due to different community realities, but it was beneficial to have a definite timeframe to work within. It is my view projects can be assisted by a guided framework, otherwise responsibilities can blow out. Initially we were a bit reluctant about the measurement surveys, primarily because of their length. When it came to collection of the post questionnaires, we received more than we expected in NSW. I think this demonstrates that people are interested to measure and learn the difference they are making. Through the measurement a sense of achievement an impact was created for all participants; householders, funders, partners and project staff.

Conclusion

The process of writing this paper forced me to tease out some of the research that has informed Cool Communities. While there was an obvious distinction between

research and practice in some areas, for other areas it was less apparent. A seamless interaction between research and practice might seem harmonious, but this runs the risk of not being aware ourselves of the assumptions in our framework, as well as not being explicit to others external to the project. The research is somehow incorporated into our overall approach, but the rationale is not clear to other professionals.

Another point I would like to make is the validity of a variety of forms of research, from surveys, reports and evaluation but also the role of informal research. Useful research may come in a variety of forms but I recommend that this always be interpreted at a suitable level of inquiry. The project evaluation was beneficial for the overall findings about the project, but not necessarily for the individual projects and vice versa. Always question the research itself, for who is it being conducted? who is paying for it? what is their agenda? and what are the assumptions in the process? Finally do your own research and document it for others. If there are questions, things you are interested in uncovering and what to investigate, ask those questions, consider what questions you want to ask and how could it be done? The Cool Community participants were interested in knowing the difference they were making with the measurement surveys, similarly as education professionals we are interested in whether our processes are suitable, what are effective processes for change and what has worked for others in the profession.