

Youth For Youth: Piecing Together the Peer Education Jigsaw

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There are three major questions about peer education: what is it? how do you do it? and does it work? Surprisingly, there is little consensus in the literature in relation to these three questions. The reason being that different studies use different definitions, go about peer education in different ways and so end up with different results. Because of this, the focus of this paper will not be a step by step approach of “how to do peer education”, but a discussion of the ways peer education can vary and the importance of tailoring it to fit particular circumstances. There are numerous issues to consider in peer education and it can be difficult to work out which to consider first. This paper is about piecing together the jigsaw that is peer education.

Important considerations for design of peer education programs include definition of peer educators and peer education, aims, the setting, characteristics of the target group and evaluation. Each of these considerations will be outlined, followed by some issues for reflection in relation to each consideration

SETTING THE SCENE

The impetus for this paper came out of the Youth for Youth Project which ran from February 1998 to October 2000. The project was funded by the Department of Health and Aged Care under the National Illicit Drug Strategy Community Partnerships Initiative. The purpose was to develop skills and resources within the Youth Advisory Forum to conduct peer education activities. The Youth Advisory Forum is a group of volunteer young people aged up to 25. Their purpose is to increase the availability of accurate information, with a harm minimisation focus, about alcohol and other drugs to young people using methods such as peer education

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and consultation with community organisations. The Forum is supported by the Drug and Alcohol Services Council of South Australia. This paper is based on the lessons learned from both the literature and experience in the Youth for Youth Project.

DEFINITION

The first issue in designing a peer education program is to decide what is meant by the term. While studies do differ in their exact definitions, they do share a commonality. Most peer education programs can be described as:

Providing information about alcohol and other drugs to young people, usually in a group situation that discourages drug use, and encouraging them to pass it on to others in their social network.

(compiled from definitions used in Hall, 1995; Tobler, 1992; Ward, Hunter, & Power, 1997)

Another broad definition was given recently by the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention:

The use of same age or same background educators to convey educational messages to a target group. Peer educators work by endorsing “healthy” norms, beliefs and behaviours within their own peer group or “community”, and challenging those which are “unhealthy”.

(United Nations Office For Drug Control And Crime Prevention, 2000)

The above definitions indicate that there is some consensus regarding what peer education is, however, the definitions used to guide development of programs vary considerably (Miller, 1996). Programs differ widely in terms of who the young people are, how the information is provided to them and how they pass it on.

Who are the peer educators?

The term “peer educator” may refer to true peers or near peers. A true peer is a person who is considered a member of a particular group, both by themselves and by other group members (Gore, 1999). A near peer is similar but differs in some small way, for example they may be a few years older (Cripps, 1997; Harrison, 1996; Wiist, 1991). The peer group can also be defined in different ways (Hall, 1995). The meaning of “peer group” may be as narrow as a group of friends or as broad as the more generic group regarded as “youth”. Finally, a person who is a leader or respected within the peer group is more likely to be influential (Gray, 1996; Prendergast & Miller, 1996).

The process by which a young person becomes a peer educator may affect whether they are perceived as a true or near peer and whether or not they are influential in the group. Peer educators may volunteer, they may be selected by teachers or community leaders, or they may be voted for by their peers. For example, a peer educator who has been selected by a teacher on the basis of good behaviour and academic achievement may not be seen as a peer by the kids who sit at the back of the room and misbehave. Similarly, peer educators may act in different roles, such as facilitators, counsellors, sources of information, support workers or tutors (Coggans, 1997:

Gonzalez, 1990; Prendergast & Miller, 1996), either alone or with a teacher or other adult present (Klepp, Halper, & Perry, 1986). Alternatively, they may simply act to pass on information in informal, everyday situations (Gore, 1999).

Issues for Reflection

- **Who is the target group and what are their characteristics?**
- **Who is likely to be influential within this peer group?**
- **If the program begins with the peer educators instead of the target group, how**

(Ryan, 1999). Informal methods require both support from the trainer and an understanding of how social learning occurs (Gore, 1999; Prendergast & Miller, 1996).

Another informal model is the Peer Participation model, where the target group is involved in the decision making process. This model recognises the knowledge and expertise that already exist in the target group and uses existing networks to circulate information and skills (Gore, 1999).

Issues for Reflection

- **Which model is most suitable for the particular peer education program?**

AIM

Before designing a program it is also important to think about the desired outcomes. Peer education programs may have an aim as simple as increasing knowledge about drug related issues (Gooding, 1996; Hunter, Ward, & Power, 1997; Ming, 1995), or it may be as complex as attempting to change attitudes and behaviour (Coggans, 1997; Ming, 1995; Perry & Grant, 1988; Weiss & Nicholson, 1998). The aim may be increased knowledge so young people are empowered to make informed decisions (Coggans, 1997; Gray, 1996; Hunter et al., 1997), or so that they will change their behaviour to decrease risks. The desired outcome may be to prevent participants from ever using drugs, to delay onset of use, or to change the behaviour of those already using - for example, to stop use, reduce use or prevent further development of their drug repertoire. Perhaps the most complex aim is cultural change (Bloor et al., 1999; Brew, 1996; Klepp et al., 1986; Miller, 1996) – providing information so that it is passed on to others, who in turn pass it on to others, until there is a change in attitude to drug related issues throughout the social network. Cultural change is usually the aim of programs which use informal methods.

It is important that the design of the program is in line with the stated aims. There is little use in designing a program that consists entirely of factual information if the intention is to change behaviour. Similarly, it is little use training peer educators to conduct formal education sessions if cultural change is the desired outcome.

In addition, the aim of the program will be a determining factor in choosing a peer education model. For example, if the intention is to change knowledge, it is probably more appropriate to use the Peer Teaching Model. If it is to reduce harm, the Peer Participation model will be useful. Alternatively, the Peer Influence Model may be chosen if the aim is cultural change.

Issues for Reflection

- **What is the aim?**
- **Is it achievable?**
- **Which model will be most appropriate?**

SETTING

The setting in which peer education is to be conducted has an impact on the peer education strategy. In a school setting, the Peer Teaching model is more common than informal approaches. Often in school settings the peer educators tend to be from privileged sections of the school (Shiner, 2000).

In a community setting, however, informal, interactive, collaborative approaches, such as the Peer Participation and Peer Influence models, are more common. The peer educators in community based programs tend to be from socially excluded and vulnerable groups (Shiner, 2000).

Issues for Reflection

- **What are the characteristics of the target group?**
- **Is a school or community approach more suitable?**
- **What model is most appropriate for both the target group and the setting?**

CHARACTERISTICS OF TARGET GROUP

The recipients of peer education may differ in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, lifestyle, experience of drug use or education level. As such, it is logical to tailor the approach to peer education to the characteristics of the target group so that they find it credible. There are two aspects of credibility in peer education – message-based and messenger-based credibility.

Message-Based Credibility

The credibility of the message will be increased if it is culturally relevant, targeted and non-judgemental. Information is more likely to be seen as credible if it is consistent with and relevant to the culture of the target group in relation to the meaning of drug use (Coggans & Watson, 1995; Gonzalez, 1990; Mundy, 1997). Drug use is increasingly seen as normal behaviour, both by users and non-users (Coggans & Watson, 1995) and many young people see drug use as fun, social (Broadbent, 1994) and functional (Perry et al., 1989).

It is important to target education to the particular group in terms of drug type (“licit” or “illicit”), type of user (experimental, recreational, regular or problem users) and readiness of users to change their behaviour (Coggans & Watson, 1995; Mundy, 1997; Tobler, 1992). Those with some experience of drugs are unlikely to respond to scare tactics, eg “all those who experiment with drugs will become addicted” or “use of softer drugs will lead to addiction to harder drugs”. Younger people with little or no experience of drugs are much more likely to listen to information about the negative consequences of drugs (Baklien, 1993; Bloor et al., 1999). Those who currently use drugs are more likely to respond to information about how to minimise risks associated with drug use.

Messages that are non-judgemental and based on accurate facts are generally credible (Miller, 1995; Parkin & Haynes, 1998; Tobler, 1992). Messages based on fear-arousal

contradict young people's experience and knowledge of drug use (Broadbent, 1994; Coggans, 1997; Coggans & Watson, 1995; Cripps, 1997; Mundy, 1997; Shiner & Newburn, 1996).

Issues for Reflection

- **What is the range of experience with alcohol and other drugs in the target group?**
- **Do some of them use drugs recreationally, experimentally or do they abuse drugs?**
- **What is their average age?**
- **What is the mix of male and female?**

Messenger-Based Credibility

Similarly, recipients must believe that the person providing information knows what they are talking about. Messenger-based credibility refers to how credible the peer educator seems – which can be influenced by their personal characteristics, role, experience, knowledge (Shiner, 2000). For example, someone who has been through a drug education program is seen as more credible than one who has not. Someone who has had contact with drug users may seem more credible. Someone who has good communication and presentation skills may seem more credible than one who does not.

Issues for Reflection

- **What level of training or experience will the target group expect in a peer educator?**
- **Do the peer educators have the personal characteristics required, such as communication and presentation skills?**
- **Does the training program cover these skills?**
- **Which skills and knowledge are most relevant for the peer education model that has been chosen?**

EVALUATION

Finally, to determine whether the peer education program has been successful, it is necessary to tailor evaluation appropriately. A key reason why the literature is equivocal regarding the utility of peer education is that different evaluation methods are used, which may or may not be appropriate for the specific program. It is important that the aim of the program forms the basis for evaluation. For example, assessment of whether participants have increased their knowledge at the end of the program is inappropriate if the aim is behaviour change (Coggans, 1997).

Sometimes, however, it is not possible to accurately assess whether the aim has been achieved – perhaps there is no opportunity to follow-up the target group, or perhaps it is only possible to assess short-term effects instead of long-term. For example, if the aim is cultural change it is unlikely that the full effects can be assessed. While there may be some change in the social network in the short term, cultural effects would be expected to increase over time as word gets around (Bloor et al., 1999; Rollin et al., 1994). Similarly, while there may be a dramatic change in knowledge immediately following peer education, this may decrease over time as people forget things. If the peer education is informal, such as handing out leaflets to the general

public, it will not be possible to access the target group for evaluation. In such cases it may be more appropriate to use process evaluation, rather than outcome evaluation.

The purpose of evaluation will influence the type of evaluation. Evaluation may be aimed at assessing the impact on the target group or, alternatively, the skills of the peer educators.

Issues for Reflection

- **How can you design evaluation to best assess your aim?**
- **What are the limitations on evaluation in terms of time, follow-up and other resources?**
- **What conclusions can you confidently draw from your evaluation?**

SUMMARY

Peer education programs do share some commonalities, such as the broad definition of peer education and the content of peer educator training programs. Generally, however, peer education programs differ widely in relation to a number of factors. A well-designed program is based on a thorough analysis of the circumstances surrounding the program. Issues for consideration include definitions to be used (who? and how?), the aim, setting, characteristics of the target group and evaluation. Consideration of these and related issues will significantly increase the likelihood that the outcomes of the peer education program will be satisfactory.

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