Road Ready Plus: The ACT program for Provisional drivers

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ABSTRACT

During 2000, the Australian Capital Territory developed the fourth of its consecutive initiatives to promote safer driving. Known as *Road Ready Plus*, the program features facilitated group activities, following completion of a range of individual activities, which then attract an award in terms of return of demerit points and the capacity to drive without displaying a Probationary plate. The program is targetted to young, novice drivers under 27 years, who have had their license for a minimum of six months. The paper outlines the program as developed by a team at the University of Canberra, and explores its educational features as translated into the design for reducing risk behaviours among the target groups.

Keywords: risk, driver education, young drivers

The ACT Road Ready Program background

In common with many other Australian states and international concerns about improving driver safety records, the government of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) has had a strong record in developing programs and altering requirements for drivers and their license arrangements. Prior to the development of the Road Ready Plus program, the ACT Government through the Department of Urban Services had already instituted three stages of their Road Ready program, including research and development and the introduction of a learner driver program, largely based on year 10 in schools. The aim for the fourth stage was "to provide support for provisional licensees during their period of highest risk as new solo drivers by enabling them to identify, relate to and thereby avoid, high risk behaviours and potentially high risk situations" (DUS Tender Specification, March 2000).

It had been determined prior to the letting of the tender for development of the fourth stage of Road Ready that Provisional drivers (P Plate) would be given a reduced number of demerit points than previously, some of which could be 'won back' as a reward for successful participation in the educational program developed. The opportunities and constraints offered by the tender specifications and prior activity in the ACT gave the University of Canberra team an excellent framework for developing a risk-sensitive educational program that focussed on developing a peer culture. Given the cost constraints arising from the desire to offer a universal program in a small population, a number of more expensive options were ruled out of contention – use of expensive equipment or facilities, activities that needed qualified supervision, or options that might pose risk to participants.

The range of strategies developed for the program took into account research in Australia and elsewhere, particularly those dealing with young, inexperienced drivers (Drummond Research 1999, Gregersen 1995, Shanahan et al. 2000, Triggs et al 1996) as well as research into risk (Lupton 2000) and adult education principles (Knowles 1990) in order to distinguish it from school-based programs or having the 'feel' of schooling. In taking up an educational intervention with novice solo drivers, the ACT has taken a particular stance relating to how young people deal with issues of risk in relation to driving behaviours. The underpinning aims of the program to reduce risk, while not promoting a risk or fear orientation, posed an educational challenge to the developers and remain an ongoing challenge to the Facilitators of the course. As with successful programs in other arenas of social activity concerned with risk-taking behaviours, the educational focus of this program has to be directed towards developing informed awareness, building a culture of discussion and information sharing, and a peer culture that allows for differences to be expressed in a safe manner. This requires developing a peer culture among young novice drivers in which it is possible to hold discussions related to driving skill, perception, self-analysis, analysis of conditions, issues of driver perception, and vehicle analysis. The strategy depends strongly on building an expectation of individual contribution, participation in group activities designed to elicit discussion without strong intervention by the Facilitator. The program was developed during mid 2000, with a trial involving four groups in the target age group occurring in July-August 2000.

This paper focusses in particular on the educational issues at stake when designing and producing a program that involves small group facilitated discussion with insight activities. It is largely descriptive since this is the first paper about the ACT program available to outside groups. The first section of the paper outlines the program, the second, main section explores educational design principles, and the final section notes some issues to monitor for future evaluation and development in novice driver education.

Road Ready Plus: The program outlined

The Department of Urban Services in the ACT specified group facilitated discussion nd related activities at a cost of no more than $50 per participant. Within these constraints, the University of Canberra team developed a range of activities, which could be tailored by facilitators for use with small groups of novice drivers under 27 years old who

had their license for more than six months. Demerit points had been reduced for this group and if the program is completed successfully, they will be allowed a further four demerit points and will not have to display their Probationary Plate.

The materials for the Road Ready Plus program include:

?? a facilitator training package, including materials to be used in the driver group sessions, overheads, and suggested reading.

?? a Driver Resource Booklet for use in facilitated discussion groups with young people.

?? a number of activities for use in the groups with novice drivers, for both pre-course and program settings, including discussion, video, card-based and visual activities.

The activities developed for young, novice drivers include a selection to be completed prior to undertaking the group session and a range of activities to be completed in a three hour group session. The activities developed are summarised below.

PART ONE: LESSONS FROM THE ROAD (PRIOR TO DISCUSSION SESSION)

Participants are asked to choose two activities, from different sections, anticipated to take about one hour each. These activities are designed to be attractive to a variety of novice drivers in the target group of young people. The presentation of the activities by participants at the commencement of the group session has the advantage of breaking the ice among group members, giving young people themselves the 'driving seat' of the group discussion and eliciting more insight than could be accomplished in single session of discussion. The completion of pre-course activities has the advantage of ensuring that 'completion' does not merely indicate passive attendance.

GROUP ONE: RESEARCH

Activity A: Interview 3 drivers
Activity B: Search web sites on youth accidents
Activity C: Investigate motor vehicle insurance for young people
Activity D: Conduct two vehicle inspections

GROUP TWO: ACTION-ORIENTED

Activity E: Keep a log of driving behaviours of other vehicles
Activity F: Visit a wrecker and examine three vehicles damaged in accidents
Activity G: Design a poster (graphic and creative exercise)
Activity H: Create a 30 second TV advertisement
Activity I: Design a Web page

PART TWO: LEARNING TO ANTICIPATE

A number of activities were designed, with more examples than would be used in any one session, thus allowing the facilitator the option to select and tailor activities to particular group demographies and experiences. The theme "Learning to anticipate" emphasises the positive spin given by the activities, the non-fear orientation, and the emphasis on ongoing learning so important to inexperienced drivers. The participants each receive a workbook.

Activity J: *What IF?* exercise. Includes video clips taken from car and motor cycle vantage points of local settings in the ACT and immediate country surrounds. The format is a board game in which one participant plays 'driver' and others play passengers or conditions, using three sets of cards which pose additional contexts on the situation: internal constraints (usually emotional), external factors (such as passengers or weather) and additional 'wild cards' that add in an unexpected occurrence.

Activity K: *Who, what, when how* – another card-based game. It asks participants to estimate accidents rates, gender age, speed, crash types and patterns of risk, before being presented with statistics for discussion. This activity aims to build skills in understanding environmental factors putting new drivers at risk and provide some factual bases for discussions.

Activity L: *ACT Road Maze* – aims to relate skills of eye-hand coordination to the skills of driving by reflecting on difficulties of handling multiple distractions in an unfamiliar task.

Activity M: *Interview with Young Drivers* Video and questions for discussion re 'good/bad' driving

Activity N: *So what's the Risk?* Risk Questionnaire and self analysis with de-briefing

The session finishes with each participant filling in an Action Plan to identify some immediate learning outcomes from the session and plans for themselves.

FACILITATOR TRAINING

The Facilitator Handbook as prepared and used in the program has a number of different parts, in addition to the Driver Resource Book. It includes an overview and rationale for the Road Ready Plus program, placing it in context of research on young drivers in general and on the ACT approach in particular. It provides suggested reading and web sites as resources, and includes copies of all print and overhead materials required to run the program. A detailed rationale for the program's approach is included, as are suggestions for how to deal with distress among participants. In the trial training, the facilitators found a run-through of all activities helpful but were grateful for the level of detail provided in the Handbook which they could study at their leisure. Facilitators were also provided with the UC Tender submission, summaries of research and a selection of research papers seen as relevant. We looked for facilitators who would be skilled, knowledgeable and acceptable to the target group and thus identified the following criteria: facilitators should be aged 22-35 years old, both male and female, with good communication skills in dealing with young people and others, group facilitation skills and familiar with issues facing young people and their work. This again would support adult learning principles, remove any feel of 'school' or authoritarian approaches, and encourage a supportive but focussed peer culture to develop in the groups that were to form the basis of the learning activities and their transfer to driving and other situations. Small groups with an upper limit of 10-12 were suggested to maximise the capacity to learn with and from one another and create a different peer culture.

Educational design features: building towards a less risky peer culture

A number of criteria for the educational design of the activities emerged from the DUS briefing specifications, from relevant research on young people's responses to risk education and by examining principles of good adult learning. These can be summarised as criteria that require activities to:

- work from principles of adult learning, emphasising independence and inter-dependence - the social dimensions of learning – and building on the existing knowledge of the participants (Knowles, 1984).
- build on findings in the literature on accident and injury types among young drivers in Australia, and specifically those related to age and levels of experience (Catchpole et al, 1994)
- carefully balance information, analysis, reflection on experience, and contribution of peer culture
- offer a range of learning experiences, with a particular focus on peer discussion, activity, visual, and life-experience analysis.
- be likely to build group rapport and the capacity to share experiences and strategies to maximise the longer term effect of the session
- contribute to capacities for lifelong learning from experience
- be enjoyable and of interest to a range of young people in the target group, including male and female, different social class and locations, with differential access to cars/bikes and driving experiences.
- help participants explore their different reasons for pleasure in driving and access to vehicles rather than emphasise a message of fear, danger and risk.

The key educational design issues which needed to be addressed if the activities were to meet the objectives of the course as a whole will be discussed as: 1) issues in facilitated group discussion, 2) how to deal with the tendency for group settings to valorise risky behaviour among especially young males, 3) how to deal with risk-related issues in ways that do not breed a fear-reaction while still covering relevant topic materials, and 4) how to deal with sensitive emotional issues in the group, especially for those who have lost friends or families in road accidents.

The facilitated group activities were designed to promote as much interaction and reflective discussion as possible among participants. Target group participants are young people, often just recognised as adults (in voting, for example) – for whom a license is an important symbol of entry into the adult and social world. It is thus important to capitalise on the adult nature of the license and to use adult learning principles in the design and conduct of the activities. The single, most common response to the evaluation question, "What do you enjoy most about driving?", was 'freedom' (19 out of 32), with 'independence' (10) and 'control' (7) closely following. Seven participants referred to 'time saved' and five to 'convenience'. It is thus important to bolster the adult nature of the task of driving, rather than using a 'problem' or negative risk orientation. The latter would tend to underscore the program as didactic, placing the participants in a less powerful position and creating resistance to the messages of the course.

We have established 10 people as the optimal group size, based on literature on group discussion and the relation of outcomes to direct participation. Groups where all members participate are likely to be more effective in terms of outcomes – in facilitated group discussions, participants learn from both talking and listening to one another. This is unlikely unless the group develops rapport, difficult in larger settings, and in a climate where all feel encouraged and able to speak. The size of the group directly correlates with the amount of time available for

members to engage in discussion directly. The group size is crucial to the design and success of the intervention using facilitated group discussion and practical insight exercises.

It is important to ensure that a one-off group such as this has the best capacity to influence its members. To do so, it is important that all members are able to participate in a range of roles. The pre-course activities were designed so all participants arrive at the session having completed two activities. The group, after introductions and a brief overview of the session, can then move straight into discussion of what participants found in their pre-course activities. Discussion of individual findings, and any patterns or differences across findings, can then be used to raise questions, identify or explore issues and share strategies. People who bring activities to the group are less likely to be shy about joining discussion and the range of activities and people, with a good facilitator, meaning that no single participant is in a position to dominate the group. Group gender mix was an important aspect of the trial, given the different findings on accidents and risk behaviours and outcomes among young men and women drivers. When asked whether they would prefer single sex or mixed group sessions, those participating in the different groups gave differing responses. That most of the young women in the trial expressed a preference for single sex and two out of five men wanted the option of single sex groups tends to be in keeping with the research on performance by girls and boys in single sex classrooms. It is likely that if the session was enjoyable and was perceived by participants to cover important issues, then the gender mix might have been perceived to have been part of the reason. On the whole, girls tend to perform better in single sex classrooms, while boys do better in mixed sex rooms. Research does also support the comments that levels of openness, honesty, competition and performance may be in effect in mixed classes. However, it is also clear than many young women also enjoy the opportunity to learn together with men, as well as vice versa. On these grounds we recommended the option of some same-sex groups be available as well as mixed sex groupings.

The role of facilitator is crucial to the program, in putting the educational design principles into practice and in offering suggestions for regenerating the program over time. These criteria are confirmed from the trial as crucial. A number of participants directly commented on this aspect in their feedback. A number of the young women participants commented on the need for 'someone we could relate to', and a woman facilitator was seen as an important bonus. The young males also demonstrated an appreciation of the opportunity to interact with someone knowledgeable, skilled and male. The mixed groups also wanted someone 'we can relate to'. When one facilitator revealed she had a baby, this was seen to distance her from the group, making the group dynamic less effective.

It was important to the design and conduct of the activities that the facilitator role be one of questioning, providing information in answer to questions, rather than that of expert 'handing down' information for the 'good' of the young person. The facilitator training thus has to emphasise the necessity of an adult-participant-orientation, building on what young people bring to the session, and encouraging sharing of information, opinions and strategies. In relation to the 'distraction' maze activity (L), for example, most reported issues with passengers as a key distractor, with another distractor being prior internal emotional state lessening concentration and exercise of skill. Strategies to deal with passengers and internal emotional states can thus be shared, even by those who had not brought up the topic. This requires levels of experience and sensitivity among facilitators that cannot come only from the task-specific training offered as part of the program. However, the content and the way it is covered needs to recognise and build on existing expertise and add in dimensions that challenge stereotypes of young people in the target group.

The second educational design issue is the well reported tendency of certain groups of young men to gain glory by dwelling on gruesome, risky or scary stories, often in a competitive mode, and/or bringing out sometimes apocryphal tales. (The 'my crash was worse than your crash' mentality.) This tendency is exacerbated by both resistance to adult moralising about 'bad boys' and the lack of a range of appropriate ways for people to enjoy speed, control of vehicles, risk-taking and skill development in our society. The danger in the initiative is that this behaviour could be 'licensed', given free rein, and take over the whole of the group's time, further adding to its acceptability and self-identification with risk as a particular form of the masculine. This habitual competitive 'macho' behaviour was certainly exhibited during the all-male group. Driving at night with lights off, tailgating, speed, changing gears fast, competing with others on the road, and active responses to other driver misbehaviour were all reported as routine excitement among this group. It was hard for the facilitator to steer the discussion into less competitive and more reflective, skill-related discussions. However, this was achieved through the pacing of the activities which they found challenging and interesting. Ways to work appropriately with this tendency needs attention in the facilitator training sessions. Activities J (Video clips, and cards with different situations)and K (estimating different statistics related to accident speed, time of day, age of drivers etc) were designed to be fast-moving to minimise the tendency to dwell too long on any particular story or experience. The framing as a 'game' of Activity J also provides its own discipline, as participants want to go on to the next part. The young men were

able to participate in the range of discussions and their self-identified learning showed evidence of rethinking some aspects of their risk-taking behaviour. They also seemed to appreciate that there were other aspects of their interest in skill development and their relations with friends that were open to questioning and exploration when the overt performance of masculinity as risk-taking was less to the fore. The discussions were able to take off in other directions. And while some of the responses to the question about enjoyment of driving included 'speed', 'adrenaline', and 'music', there was also an enjoyment of relaxation, of independence, and demonstration of skill.

The third problem area which could be anticipated is related to the previous one: the issue of how to deal with risk-related issues, in ways that do not build into fear tactics or didactic messages. Similar issues are dealt with in drug education or sex education and have been extensively explored in those areas as with driver education and behavioural change. The literature on education in relation to risk and behaviour is extensive and largely confirms the importance of avoiding a heavy risk emphasis in any educational intervention, whether media-based or short course (Triggs & Smith, 1994; ARRB Transport Research, 1998; Drummond Research 1999; Shanahan, Elliott & Dahlgren, 2000; Lupton, 2000). Carter argues in relation to health education issues:

> *Those groups facing danger which can be defined as 'other' often face controls which work in the interests of the powerful 'same'. Thus a range of social practices exist, connected with risk assessment, which historically have often targetted specific groups … the effect is to push the group into a space of danger – the place of the 'other'. Here they become a useful repository for our cultural ideas of danger. As long as we are 'good'…then danger is elsewhere.*
>
> Carter, 19995: 142-3

This is particularly relevant to considerations of educational initiatives promoted for young people who are posed as 'other' to the adult world of 'those who know better' and also have to carry the burden of embodying our fears. Too much educational intervention has been premised on the notion of creating fear among young people, with counter productive outcomes, as work on drug education, sex education and driver education campaigns has demonstrated. The strategies designed for this intervention were not to create a gap of expertise between experienced drivers and novice drivers, but to start from assuming that all make mistakes, that all risk is not a private matter, and that we all have the possibility to learn more through sharing with one another. Rather than 'blaming' young people and individualising the risk behaviours, we wanted also to help construct a way of analysing the shared situation of drivers in a particular context.

That this was appreciated by the participants emerged particularly in points raised in discussion about how to deal with P Plate stereotyping in our society. Participants were clearly aware and frustrated by their negative positioning as young people and as P Plate drivers by the 'adult' society which by definition did not include them. Beck's (1992) discussion of a risk mentality in the late modern world is worth exploration as to the extent to which it permeates the Road ready Initiative as a whole. In this sub-program of the overall initiative, we have attempted to avoid stereotyping young people and to allow them a space to contest their dominant framing as 'risk' bearers, while not ignoring the trends about prevalence of accidents and injuries among the group. This careful balance in the group discussions as they develop needs sophisticated treatment by the facilitators. It is easy to take the opposite tack and 'blame the oldies' rather than removing the binary as far as possible. Thus, while we took the point from the Dutch study (Wittink & Twisk) that young people can share shortcomings in the context of a facilitated group discussion, our emphasis has been on expanding definitions of skilled and poor driving rather than a focus only on deficit.

A fourth important issue for the educational conduct of the group sessions continues to be how to deal with participants who have experienced an accident or lost a friend or relative in an accident. This had occurred in several of the groups. The emotional issues and perhaps unresolved tensions around risk, accidents and driving may either be ignored by a poor facilitator or become too strongly the focus of the groups' discussion. Neither are helpful learning situations for the group as a whole. Facilitators need to be alerted to this possibility and to develop strategies to address emotional investment in personal experiences related to the topics under discussion. It is likely that use of the video-clip and accompanying situation cards gives a way to address but also provide a framework for discussions that are both personal and shared in the hands of a skilled facilitator.

Another of the issues facing the program's educational design was how to certify successful completion of the program, other than by merely turning up to a three hour session, for which participation would attract an additional four demerit points and the right to remove the display of P plate. Participants in the trials were not eligible to receive these rewards, hence the payment for their attendance. The program resolves the certification problem by introducing the two activities which need to be completed before the facilitated group activities, by the introduction of an action plan for participants, and by making it possible for the facilitator not to certify mere attendance as active participation. The certification is thus criterion-based performance.

The underpinning aims of the program to reduce risk, while not promoting a risk or fear orientation, pose an educational challenge to the developers and an ongoing challenge to the Facilitators of the course. In this, Road Safety education shares a number of concerns and strategies with programs with similar concern to reduce risk-taking behaviour, such as Drug Education or Safe Sex education. As with successful programs in these arenas of social activity, the educational focus has to be on building awareness, building a culture of discussion and information sharing, and a peer culture that allows for differences to be expressed in a safe manner.

Issues for future development and monitoring

How well the program as designed meets the goals of developing a less risky peer culture for novice, young drivers needs ongoing monitoring and evaluation. This is likely to be a difficult task, since it will be impossible to treat Road Ready Plus as an totally independent variable, linked as it is to a whole array of driver education strategies within the ACT and nationally, and related also to the positioning of young people in our society around issues of risk especially in health. Further understanding of young people and risk-related activities is required: perhaps some cross-field evaluation work around issues of risk might well be undertaken, of use to health, driver and education sectors more generally.

The cost constraint of offering a program that costs $50-60 per person is considerable, in educational as well as societal terms. Access to additional, more practical tasks such as those outlined by Gregerson (1995) may well be worth consideration (for example as prizes for attendees, or developing a culture of 'presents' or for fees) in linking this program to a pathway of options for continuing driver education. It will be important to monitor target groups of young women drivers – a larger group in the ACT given its layout and demography – and blue collar males – to ensure that a full range of young novice drivers actually participate, for example through comparisons with population statistics for the ACT. Perhaps some groups need different advertising targetting, cost subsidy or other means of access than would be provided by this course, even in the small population of the ACT.

Comparisons of this strategy with other strategies in use in other states and territories is an important national focus for evaluation, given the range of approaches taken. We need to understand more about take-up, peer culture, the balance of enjoyment and its relation to issues of risk, information and understanding, and understanding and practice in lived situations. For those of us at the University of Canberra, the development of the program, its trial and evaluation was a worthwhile experience and we look forward to others' reported experience and analysis of its implementation.

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