

Evaluation of a Curriculum-based Training Program for Novice Drivers from the Perspective of Teachers, Students and Parents

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ABSTRACT

Obtaining a Learner's Permit in Australia has traditionally involved undertaking a standardised written test. The Australian Capital Territory began to move away from this approach in 2000 with the introduction of *Road Ready*, a curriculum-based training program.

Road Ready, developed by the Department of Urban Services, is a comprehensive, well resourced unit included within the Year 10 curriculum of most ACT schools. Although its placement within the educational program varies, the unit itself covers a clearly defined set of topics divided into a number of lessons. Extensive training is provided to teachers delivering the program to ensure their familiarity with the course philosophy, content and resources.

Road Ready offers the first major shift in driver education in Australia and, as such, has been the focus of extensive evaluation. Key questions, for researchers, funding agencies and government departments alike, have focused on the appropriateness of the methodology and the impact of curriculum-based driver education on student awareness of road safety.

This paper describes *Road Ready* and the responses of teachers, parents and students involved in the ACT's driver education initiative. In addition, it summarises the key factors to be addressed in the implementation of similar curriculum-based programs and draws upon the findings outlined in *Evaluation of the ACT Novice Driver Safety Program*¹ to highlight potential areas of concern.

The Learner's Permit

Many young people regard the possession of a Driver's Licence as a rite of passage – an important and essential step to becoming independent. For most adolescents that passage begins with acquiring a Learner's Permit ... a functional task that generally involves rote learning road rules contained in a small booklet and undertaking a written test.

The 'real' learning, in so far as the young person is concerned, begins once the L plate is positioned in the window and he or she turns the key in the ignition, puts the car in gear and places a foot on the accelerator. The passage from dependant to adult is thus perceived to have begun.

¹ National Curriculum Services and Steer Davies Gleave, *Evaluation of the ACT Novice Driver Safety Program*, June 2001, December 2001, January 2002.

Road Ready ... The Program

Road Ready, a curriculum-based training program, approaches the education and support of novice drivers very differently. Rather than having young people *memorising* road rules – generally in isolation – it provides a framework and structure for students to learn about driving within a broad social context. The complexity of driving, risk and hazard identification and choices relating to road use are issues explored with Year 10 learners long before they position themselves behind the wheel of a car.

The program itself consists of six topics:

1. Getting Ready for the Road
2. Crash Types and Contributing Factors
3. The Complexity of the Driving Task
4. Risk and Hazard Identification
5. Making Rules About Safer Road Use
6. Road Rules.

These topics are divided into 23 separate lessons – lessons that focus on developing the knowledge and skills required for safe, defensive driving.

In terms of delivery, the course has a mandatory 15 hours teaching time with a suggested 22-hour limit. Teachers scheduled to conduct the program attend a two day staff development session organised by the Department of Urban Services. During this time they are familiarised with the underpinning philosophy, course content and the comprehensive array of resources.

An extensive Resource Book containing lesson plans, suggested activities, overheads, CD-ROM and accompanying notes, video, board games and cue cards is supplied to all teachers implementing the program. Their role – as facilitators, coordinators and assessors – is crucial to its delivery and success. But they are not the only ones to receive resources. Students and parents are also given materials – a Student Resource Workbook in the case of learners and a ‘Preparing your Pre-Learner for Driving’ booklet for parents.

Although the program is fixed in terms of design, content and resourcing, its placement within the curriculum varies across the ACT. Most schools base the Year 10 course within Studies of Society and Environment. Occasionally, however, it is offered as an elective and located within the enrichment, citizenship or health streams. Learners from Year 9 and 11 are likely to attend the program when it is presented outside the set Year 10 curriculum.

To successfully complete *Road Ready*, irrespective of its position or status within the school environment, learners are required to attend 80% of classes, meet peer/self assessed and teacher assessed criteria and pass the multiple choice road rules test provided by the Department of Urban Services.

Program Evaluation: The Sample

The *Road Ready* course has been in operation throughout the ACT for over two years and subjected to intense evaluation. In a joint study conducted by National Curriculum Services in Melbourne, and Steer Davies Gleave in Adelaide, 18 schools throughout the ACT were targeted to assess the program’s impact, success and appropriateness. The selected schools encompassed public, private and Catholic providers and represented a cross-section of Canberra’s geographic, socio-demographic and cultural diversity. In each instance the school had completed the program – some more than once – and was willing to assist in the extensive assessment process. Student numbers involved in *Road Ready* within the various schools ranged from a minimum of 20 to 200.

The data gathered by the researchers, combined with results obtained from an extensive independent review undertaken on behalf of the ACT Department of Education and Community Services, provides a comprehensive overview of teacher, learner and parent reaction to the course.

Survey Instruments

1. Teachers

Designing and developing the curriculum based approach to novice driver instruction involved a significant investment both in terms of teacher time/training and resources. The survey materials thus focused on evaluating the staff development program and reviewing the *Road Ready* curriculum and resources in terms of: individual lesson outcomes, time allocation, background notes, resource suggestions, key questions and homework tasks.

Three distinct instruments were used to acquire the desired information:

- an individual lesson questionnaire focusing on the topics outlined above
- a general questionnaire examining broader organisational/administrative issues
- face to face interviews.

Twenty six teachers completed the evaluation – eight of whom were also interviewed by staff from National Curriculum Services. The eight teachers interviewed were selected to represent a cross section of schools, program size and teaching experience.

2. Students and Parents

In order to ensure all students and parents were provided with the opportunity to critique the program, the reviewers obtained class lists from each of the eighteen schools.

Questionnaires focusing on the learner's attitude towards driving and their existing level of knowledge and awareness of road safety were distributed during the first week of the course. Two separate survey instruments, one for parents and one for students, were issued to participants. Similarly, each learner received another two forms at the end of the program. On this occasion students were asked to evaluate all aspects of the *Road Ready* course including resources, content, appropriateness, relevance and its impact on their outlook. Parents, on the other hand, were asked to comment on their child's level of interest, the degree to which they discussed the program at home and the perceived impact on the learner's approach to road safety and driving. This paper concentrates on the findings of the second 'after course' survey.

Completion of the questionnaires was voluntary and non-respondents were not pursued.

Teacher Feedback

Twenty six teachers completed the evaluation and all found the course useful, straight forward and easy to teach. Seventy seven per cent also found it enjoyable. The two day training program was generally regarded as a good induction into the *Road Ready* methodology with the majority of staff observing that the activities provided a sound base upon which they could build in the classroom.

Of the 133 elements assessed – elements covering 23 lessons – 117 (88%) had a 100% approval rating. Only two elements, both relating to Topic 3, *The Complexity of Driving*, rated lower than 50% (resources and an extension activity).

Teachers were unanimous in their belief that lesson outcomes could be achieved. Similarly, they were positive in their assessment of the Teacher Resource Package. The professionally produced material, with its range of strategies and activities, was regarded as one of the program's major strengths. This is not to imply that the resources were used without modification or accepted without criticism. On the contrary, the majority of teachers made minor adjustments to the material to suit their learners' needs. There was also concern that the Teacher Resource Package was not adequately cross referenced with the Student Resource Workbook. Essentially, however, feedback relating to the resource was favourable with a number of staff suggesting guest speakers, additional posters and multi-media could be used to supplement the supplied material.

Yet it was in the area of multi-media and modern technology that some schools encountered difficulties. Delays and obstacles in accessing the *Road Ready* website caused frustration at a few delivery sites. In addition, a small percentage of schools had problems booting from the CD-ROM and/or using the technology to download the road quiz from the Department of Urban Services website. The age of the schools' computers, the number of machines available and the schools' networking arrangements had a significant impact on the ability of teachers/learners to effectively use the multi-media and IT options. For the majority, however, the website and CD-ROM when used, were well regarded.

In terms of the range, coverage and appropriateness of the program, teachers regarded Topic 4, *Risk and Hazard Identification* and Topic 5, *Making Choices about Safer Road Use*, as particularly good. A few thought some of the material a little too detailed – or not detailed enough – but essentially reactions were favourable.

Teachers were also positive in their assessment of the Student Resource Workbook, observing that it added ‘substance’ to the program and provided learners with something of ‘significance and value’. Furthermore, staff believed it created a good impression, aroused interest, reinforced classroom teaching and was an effective tool for measuring understanding and assessing learner progress. But it was felt that it too could do with improvement. Although 69% of teachers liked the range of activities, 31% felt they were repetitive, narrow and below Year 10 standard. Suggestions for refining the Student Resource included:

- inserting additional graphics, pictures, diagrams
- eliminating duplication
- replacing lower order questions with more challenging and engaging tasks
- reducing the number of written exercises.

Asked to rank student interest in the program, teachers noted that 25% appeared very interested, 50% moderately interested and 25% disinterested. All believed that students were particularly keen to take the test at the conclusion of the course.

In summary, teachers regarded the program as a well resourced, well structured initiative. They appreciated the range of options and tailored course delivery and assessment to suit their particular learners. In all six lesson specific categories the response was favourable:

1. Outcomes were achievable.
2. Background notes were useful.
3. ‘What to do’ materials were realistic.
4. Recommended time periods were appropriate.
5. Resources were adequate.
6. Key questions and debrief points were useful.

In some cases teachers decided to extend the length of the course to 30 hours and/or to deliver the program across a full term. This was not as successful as the more concise program and resulted in student complaints about repetition.

The major problem confronting schools in delivering *Road Ready* relates not to the material, staff training or learner interest, but in placing the program within an already full educational curriculum. Although most schools endeavoured to embed the course within Studies of Society and Environment, few found it an easy task. At Canberra Grammar, for instance, the difficulty of placing *Road Ready* within the normal school day proved too great, the coordinator eventually offering the program at 5 pm on consecutive Fridays. Despite the ‘out of hours commitment’ the course still attracted 50 participants. Lanyon High School eschewed this approach, attempting instead to integrate the program across a number of subject areas. At Calwell High the solution was to deliver the program in the Work Wise Health course. This administrative aspect of *Road Ready* was the principal area of concern. Some teachers suggested that reducing the length of the course could be a solution, making it easier to place within the educational program. Yet whilst most respondents commented that it was a long course, they were almost unanimous in finding the recommended time scales ‘realistic’. The dilemma thus remains – how and where can the 15 – 22 hour program be placed within an already over-crowded curriculum? It is an issue schools have yet to resolve.

Student Responses

Although *Road Ready* is teacher driven and directed, the program was conceived and developed with the needs and interests of learners at its base. With 96% of all students indicating that they will eventually apply for a Driver’s Licence, it is extremely important that they be provided with instruction, guidance and information that will enable them to drive safely, defensibly and sensibly. Their reactions to the course are therefore of significance in determining the value and effectiveness of the *Road Ready* program.

The student questionnaire, focusing on course relevance, appropriateness, length, resources, learner interest and areas in need of improvement, was similar in design to that distributed to teachers. Students were presented with a number of statements and asked to either tick the appropriate box or rate their responses on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 is extremely negative and 5 is extremely positive.

In relation to their interest in the program, students virtually duplicated their instructors' responses with a median reply of 3 and an average of 2.6. Course length was perceived as too short by 7% of respondents, too long by 28% and 'about right' by 62%. Similarly, 77% of students were happy with the lesson order and 73% felt that the content was relevant and concentrated on the set objectives.

Yet there were criticisms. Twenty one percent of the student group ($\Sigma = 355$) believed that parts of the course were irrelevant. Areas identified by this group are indicated in Table 1, below.

Table 1: Perceived Areas of Irrelevancy

Repetition	24%
Drugs and alcohol	5%
Crashes	5%
Statistics	8%
Most of it	24% (many said it was 'common sense')
<i>Something else</i>	35%
Participating Students (Σ)	76

Asked if there were areas of the course that needed expansion, 78% of learners responded that they were happy with the existing program. The remaining 22% wanted more attention devoted to driving practicalities. Items specifically highlighted by these students are identified in the table below:

Table 2: Student Perceptions of Areas for Expansion in the Course

Road rules	36%
Vehicle operation	20%
Drugs and alcohol	15%
Road rules and vehicle operation	13%
Crashes and crises	10%
Other	7%
Participating Students (Σ)	78

Two areas, 'drugs and alcohol' and 'crashes', feature in both lists, a result that can be credited to individual interests/disinterest on the part of participants and the teachers conducting the program.

In terms of course 'enjoyment' most aspects of the program appealed to significant numbers of learners. Passing the test at the conclusion of the course was very important, a fact noted by teachers in their program evaluations. The videos were also well regarded, the local images and content engaging student interest.

Yet, while learners may have had difficulty concurring vis a vis the program's strengths, there was clear agreement on the least enjoyable aspects of the course: filling out the Student Resource Workbook and content repetition. Writing activities were not popular.

Despite the emphasis on classroom instruction, not all the program was delivered within the school environment. Commentary Driving – a facet of the course involving students and parents discussing road rules, behaviours and strategies when in the car together – was a learning activity designed to involve parents in their child's *Road Ready* education. For this to occur, parents needed to receive the 'Preparing your Pre-Learner for Driving' booklet and to understand the nature of the program. According to the students, however, only 51% gave the reading material to their parents, with only 39% engaging in commentary driving. Of those who did so, more than 90% found it helpful.

In summary, most students liked the program and believed they had increased their knowledge of road safety. At the same time, however, many were frustrated by the repetition and the emphasis on writing tasks.

In terms of learner achievement, the pass rate was high. The few students who did not receive a favourable assessment either failed to meet the 80% attendance requirement and/or did not complete the set assessment tasks.

Parent Observations

Parents play a critical, yet often unacknowledged, role in creating and shaping their children's attitude to learning. And this doesn't change simply because the child has reached secondary school or because the skill relates to behaviour outside the classroom. Involving parents in the learning process is one of the more interesting and innovative features of the *Road Ready* program. But it is an involvement that requires learner initiation. The responsibility for giving the 'Preparing your Pre-Learner for Driving' booklet to parents lies with the student. If they choose not to give the material to their parents, parental participation in commentary driving is unlikely to occur.

As mentioned earlier, parents were surveyed twice during the course of the program.

Asked to identify the degree to which their sons/daughters had discussed *Road Ready*, 43% said 'a little', 12% 'a lot' and 46% stated that their children had not mentioned the course. Of those who had engaged in conversation with their offspring, most thought that their son/daughter had found the course interesting (3.6 out of 5 was the average response, with 5 being 'most interesting'; as mentioned earlier, learners averaged 2.6 in their feedback).

A similar discrepancy between parental perceptions and learner feedback exists in relation to commentary driving. Sixty three percent of respondents noted receiving the 'Preparing your Pre-Learner for Driving', yet only 51% of learners admitting giving the book to their parents. And the inconsistencies continue with 58.6% of parents observing they had engaged in Commentary Driving whilst only 39% of learners acknowledged that this had taken place. This disparity between adult and learner responses can be explained, in part, by the fact that a slightly lower proportion of parents responded to the questionnaire. Those who did were more likely to be interested and involved in their son/daughter's schooling and could, perhaps, have been proud of exhibiting the 'correct' (i.e. involved) behaviour.

Parents who had engaged in commentary driving were almost unanimous in thinking the experience useful (97% believed it was helpful to their daughter/son, with only 3% expressing reservations about its value). Benefits cited by parents included:

- making their children more aware of driving skills and processes
- assisting young drivers in learning road rules
- identifying and analysing different traffic situations
- increasing learner understanding and confidence in relation to road rules and appropriate behaviours.

A number of parents added that their involvement in commentary driving had the unexpected effect of prompting consideration of their own reactions and habits behind the wheel. *'It (commentary driving) helped her (and me) be aware of the implicit thought processes involved in safe driving.'* But not all parents found the task an easy one, at least initially. Some found describing their well-entrenched and automatic behaviours distracting.

Those parents who did not engage in commentary driving refrained for the reasons outlined in the table below:

Table 3: Reasons for Parents not Engaging in Commentary Driving

Too busy, no time	14%
Haven't received/didn't read booklet	27%
Son/daughter hasn't got Ls	25%
Don't want to do it	9%
Son/daughter already learning to drive	5%
No car or don't drive	5%
Other	16%
Parents not engaged in Commentary Driving (Σ)	58

Although parents and students all responded to questions relating to commentary driving (even if it was to state that it did not occur), there was some confusion between this practice and learning to drive. While the differentiation is clear in the curriculum, it was less obvious to the people directly involved in the process. A review of the written information has been recommended to address this issue.

In summary, parents expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the course and believed it fulfilled its aim of assisting young people in becoming *Road Ready*.

Conclusion

The *Road Ready* program has, to date, been well regarded. Teachers, learners and parents have expressed overall satisfaction with the content, resources, activities and objectives. Given the results of the surveys and evaluations it would appear that the Department of Urban Services has designed a course that offers a viable and appropriate alternative to the traditional self directed learning undertaken by novice drivers, an alternative that improves students' knowledge and understanding of road safety.

Nonetheless, there are areas that require improvement.

1. The program includes a CD ROM and encourages staff and students to use the *Road Ready* website. Unfortunately not all schools have the technology or the infrastructure to utilise these resources. Students undertaking the program within these environments are thus denied the full benefits of the multi-media resources.
2. At an administrative level the course is difficult to place within the already over-crowded curriculum. This, in turn, results in lesson discontinuity, staff frustration and concerns relating to time-tabling and delivery.
3. In terms of support materials the Student Resource Workbook is occasionally repetitious and relies too heavily upon written activities, whilst commentary driving requires further explanation to parents and learners.

But, taken in context, these criticisms are relatively minor and can be addressed.

For organisations seeking to implement *Road Ready* or a similar curriculum-based training program the lessons are threefold:

1. Teacher commitment is paramount. It is essential that staff delivering the program not only meet the stated course objectives but that they tailor the length and focus of sessions to meet learners' needs. A staff induction program can help develop skills in this regard.
2. The program should be concise and interactive. A reliance on written exercises and activities reduces student enthusiasm and creates the impression that this is just 'another school subject' rather than a stepping stone towards getting a Drivers' Licence.
3. The school or department needs to address issues pertaining to technology, timetabling and organisation well in advance of delivery.

Road Ready offers a useful model and resource: a resource that ensures teachers, learners and parents are active partners in the creation of safe, defensive and aware novice drivers.

References

National Curriculum Services & Steer Davies Gleave, 2001/2 *Evaluation of the ACT Novice Driver Safety Program*, Report for the Department of Urban Services, Canberra.