“IF YOU BUILD IT, WILL THEY REALLY COME?” WASTE EDUCATION AND ITS PLACE IN EFFECTIVE RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Introduction

Waste education has been on the agenda in NSW for many years. Local Councils and waste collection companies have been aware of the need for effective promotion and education to encourage the correct usage of whatever system is being implemented. Despite this, education from an Industry perspective has historically been recognised as peripheral, rather than central to mobilising communities towards waste avoidance and resource recovery.

The situation in NSW is not too different from that all around New Zealand. New systems are being implemented, new services offered, more people are moving into metropolitan and regional areas and waste generation rates are climbing. In Australia, more and more Councils and companies are employing marketing or education focussed team members. The trend is heartening, but also brings its own sets of problems, such as a disjointed approach to education, non-regional based campaigns and duplication of large amounts of work, since there are so many educators working locally and in isolation.

In NSW and across Australia working groups of Educators and other waste professionals have been formed and are working on raising the profile of waste education and enabling resource sharing throughout the industry to combat the feelings of isolation of educators and the duplication of work. This paper will explore the process undertaken by the NSW Waste Education Working Group to address these and other issues and to integrate waste education into the ethos of the Australian Waste Industry. It is hoped that this process will be of value to educators in New Zealand and that similar groups could be created to link with groups in Australia for further resource sharing and networking.

Are there waste education synergies between Australia and New Zealand?

Both NSW and New Zealand have a governmental framework, which provide core messages of waste avoidance, waste reduction and recycling, and these messages are subtly changed and adapted for local delivery. The Waste Education Working Group (WEWG) members have recognised the need to share their local experiences and successes, but also the need for a common message or baseline on which to build a local program.

New Zealand is Australia’s number one inbound tourist arrival source and Australia is New Zealand’s. We all have a vested interest in ensuring we deliver a common message on waste avoidance and resource recovery – one that is no different in Australia or New Zealand, but focuses on waste avoidance, rethinking behaviour and resource recovery. Behaviour change
does not occur over night, but through consistent messages throughout all aspects of peoples lives.

The NWS WEGW did some research to uncover similarities between the challenges we face in our State (and country) and those for New Zealand. The New Zealand ‘Life After Waste’ document highlights some similarities.

‘Life After Waste’ clearly stipulates that education has been ad hoc and poorly focussed. Further, it states that there is no integrated comprehensive, consistent approach to education. Finally, “that education will not work in isolation, but must be supported by “how to tools” (infrastructure), monitoring and feedback.”

In NSW, we have found the absence of coordinated support infrastructure a major challenge in achieving consistency in waste education across local Government boundaries. It is not enough to have a “motherhood” top down, Central Government driven policy approach if it is not supported by a detailed action plan, budget and participation mechanisms for all education stakeholders. We have learned that to achieve a consistent approach to education, even with central government support, educators themselves must be consistently communicating and provided with opportunities to build from the grassroots upwards.

Consider these statements from ‘Life After Waste’. Education is certainly recognised as fundamental in achieving waste and environmental outcomes, but is the detail missing??

- Page 8 – “Personal Responsibility”
  - “People have become disconnected from their environment…they have lost sight of their personal responsibility and ownership of their actions…we need to empower them to develop their own environmental stewardship ethics and inspire them…”
- Page 10 – “Education and know how”
  - The key to overcoming the lack of understanding about waste and its interaction with the environment is education. However, education will only succeed if it is integrated, all encompassing and relates to the individual. Education must be from the ‘top down’ as well as the ‘bottom up’…Education cannot simply be about raising awareness it must provide people, businesses and organisations with the desire, commitment and tools to change their behaviour”

In NSW, we suffer a similar problem. Education is verbally heralded as vital to achieving participation within the community, but there remains an absence of a detailed action plan to fully integrate it to the broader waste system. The NSW WEGW mobilised in response to a need for best practice education to improve community engagement and mitigate the absence of a holistic approach to waste education throughout the state. At the same time, we recognised pockets of excellence and attempted to draw those together and capitalise on the best the State educators had to offer.
**What is the Waste Education Working Group?**

The WEWG is a working party of the Waste Management Association of Australia (WMAA). For many years the WMAA has attempted to form an educators branch but has been unsuccessful due to other groups that have been operating and the lack of a co-ordinated and structured system for educators to operate in. Other States, such as Victoria and Queensland have been operating formal groups for many years, but NSW has only recently been formed.

Our educators began connecting through an informal web forum, where they shared information on resources, suppliers, education and experiences. From this, a face-to-face meeting was held. These took place quarterly until a meeting was called in Canberra to mobilise all interested parties. Representatives from NSW, the ACT, State Governments and other interested parties were invited to participate and listen to the experiences of Victoria, the southern State that had good waste education momentum compared with NSW. Meetings continued to take place quarterly, and for a long time, it was difficult to isolate the real strategic intent of the group.

In February 2004 a committee was elected from the regular meeting attendees, including a chair, vice chair, secretary and two communications officers. The committee of dedicated professionals drove the group to achieve specific outcomes, including the development of a draft strategic plan and a website which acts as a communication space for the group. Stronger numbers at meetings aided the sharing of experiences and has created strong momentum. For participants, it was not the fact that the ideal vehicle needed to be in place immediately, but more so that new objectives needed to be met each meeting to ensure maintained interest and momentum.

The group currently consists of over 90 members from all sections of the waste industry including Local Authorities, State Government, waste contractors and waste processors, environmental consultants, non-government organisations and other businesses affiliated with the industry. Meetings act as a forum where all these different ideologies are able to interact and find a common way forward.

The formation of the group all those months ago was not an easy task. There are numerous regional groups operating across the State as well as an active informal email network of educators historically confined to Local Government.

Although we are delighted at the working group progress to date, there remains a great deal of work to truly shift waste education to the mainstream agenda of waste industry professionals and gain the status that education deserves. It is education that changes behaviours. It is education that will help achieve NSW Government waste minimisation and diversion targets.

What we are lacking in NSW is a coordinating authority to identify education best practice and draw all local government educators together to impart skills and experiences. Instead
State Government support is project-based rather than holistic. There is a distinct lack of understanding of the challenges local government educators face and few educational tools available to assist with local government behaviour change processes.

These sorts of frustrations led to a grassroots mobilisation by educators to fill in the education ‘gap’. Although this might not be the ideal long-term solution, we know that to achieve financial and political support from government we must first mobilise and show them what we need and how our efforts can support their objectives.

**Finding a ‘place’ for the WEWG?**

Although groups of educators were already working together in NSW, no group had the right kind of ‘across the board’ membership to achieve education outcomes and influence industry towards an acknowledgement of the role of education. Involvement with the WMAA has allowed educators to become a member of the State Committee and the formation of a National Division of the WMAA, which means that education now has a place on the Association’s National Executive. This strategic involvement in the peak industry association has already seen membership numbers increase from the low 20’s earlier in 2004 to over 90 now.

The WEWG also encouraged members of the regional groups to work with educators from many different areas to eliminate the feeling of isolation that most educators felt, and has provided a vehicle for effective resource and experience sharing. The bi-monthly meetings held by the group are becoming more focussed on professional development and it is expected to attract larger and larger number of members as the group progresses its State Action Plan. The members hope that as the group increases in size and reportable outcomes, there will be greater appreciation from management of their role and an associated increase in support for programs.

**What tasks does the group hope to achieve?**

Initial meetings of the WEWG provided excellent information on what the members felt was important, and these are now the cornerstones of the Strategic Plan. The main objectives identified were:

1. To unite waste educators in NSW and provide opportunities for networking and communication between waste educators, other industry sectors and the National Waste Educators division;
2. To share knowledge and information between educators and encourage the continuity and consistency in messages;
3. To build partnerships and raise the role and profile of waste education within different sectors (education stakeholders, industry and the broader community);
4. To identify preferred practice and foster excellence in waste education.
The NSW WEG Action Plan will continue to be a living document, responsive to changes within the waste industry. Recently the NSW Government released the new Waste Strategy developed under the *Waste Avoidance and Resource Recovery Act (2001)*. The strategy has identified targets for waste diversion, minimisation and avoidance with diversion from landfill expected to increase from 26% in 2000 through to 66% in 2014. For any Council or company in NSW to achieve these targets it is acknowledged that neither legislation nor inspiration alone will make it happen. Only through development of systems, infrastructure and effective and sustainable behaviour change will we succeed in reaching these targets.

In developing the objectives and Actions of the WEG an understanding of the resources of the groups membership was needed. It was widely recognised that the members had almost untapped experience and there was an excess of resources already produced which were being used on a daily basis. As such, the first formal task of the group was to survey all members of the WMAA in NSW to identify what experience was in the industry, what the different focuses of programs were, what background members had and what resources they used in program development and delivery. The survey results were compiled and are now available on the WEG website ([www.wmaa.asn.au/nsw/edu.html](http://www.wmaa.asn.au/nsw/edu.html)).

The group has since moved on to develop a list of common industry jargon, acronyms and definitions to ensure that everyone in the industry understands what everyone else is talking about. It is no use attempting to educate someone when they have a different meaning for a term used than the educator does! Members are also outreaching to other environmental education groups and linking waste education into these associations. The website has been a major development for the group and is still only in its infancy. The WMAA has provided web-space for all resources developed and the WEG has sourced a web host company to provide an on-line chat forum where educators and other waste professionals alike can discuss major changes in the industry and work together to develop cohesive programs and responses to questions.

**Key success factors**

We can identify several factors that were critical to the successful development of the group so far. These include:

- Developing outcomes from each meeting and delivering results to the group at the subsequent meeting.
- Identifying a core committee that were willing to sacrifice time to achieve outcomes. Committee members also demonstrated managerial capability, were task driven and possessed good interpersonal skills.
- Linking with other groups such as the Victorian AWARE group and the National Waste Educators Division of the WMAA to give NSW’s activity context. This was particularly significant for those NSW stakeholders who held National roles.
- Developing an online ‘space’ for WEG members to post the work achieved through the group. This was achieved through the Waste Management Association of Australia agreeing to host the site and the skill of one employee in manipulating the
information supplied for online posting. The development of the website made the group feel ‘official’ and real. Updates to the site are regular and content is extremely relevant, as it is the output from our meetings and current projects.

- Links with the WMAA led to a number of calls from comparable groups across Australia and gave the group a sense of importance and leadership in what they had achieved.
- Working party membership was and remains diverse. The level of knowledge within the room facilitated informed debate on many occasions. Several issues raised at the WEWG were solved or advanced through discussions at meetings or afterwards, and the networks are effective in helping address the education-related challenges faced by attendees.
- Finding extra time to communicate achievements at conferences to the broader waste management community assisted in raising the profile of education through WEWG.
- Guest speakers began to approach WEWG for speaking opportunities, building awareness of the WEWG initiatives through other networks.

A group such as the WEWG does not emerge in isolation of the waste industry. Once the fundamental information sharing priorities for the NSW WEWG were determined and the strategic priorities set, it was obvious that to have an effect on community behaviours in the absence of real governmental support, we required a strategy to impact leading industry stakeholders and political influencers. Part of this was an exercise in profiling, but more significantly, the WEWG recognised industry leaders would need proof of the effectiveness of education. That is, programs we regarded as successful would need to be objectively assessable, replicable and measurable in terms of return on investment.

**Conclusion**

The outcomes achieved in the first formal 12 months of the WEWG have been substantial and will continue to grow as time goes on. The work that has been accomplished by NSW is being shared with the other States of Australia, and a National Waste Education Division of the WMAA has been formed. There is now a concerted effort across Australia to provide consistent messages, to ensure there is adequate professional training available for waste educators, and most importantly that waste education is recognised as one of the most important factors of waste management and is included as a Stage 1 foundation-stone in any waste management system or program.

The coming ten years will be critical in gaining the commitment of local communities towards waste minimisation and resource recovery. More so, as educators and an industry, we need to train our communities to become responsive to new ways of resource management as our technologies and waste processes change. It is truly a time for partnership across all sectors of the waste management industry and recognition of the vital role education plays in improving our environment.