

Stop the Madness!

Developing Effective Education Programs To Keep Your Sanity

By Angela Manuszak, Education Coordinator

Do your environmental education programs make a difference? Sure, your students smile at you and you get to experience their “ah ha” moments with some regularity, but what about take-it-to-the-bank proof? You’re really busy, but does that mean you’re really successful? What if you’re really busy doing the wrong things?

After completing several courses and conferences, I have experienced a series of epiphanies about my work as an environmental educator. I am no longer satisfied with running around madly, not knowing if my programs have a positive impact on environmental literacy, behavior change, or environmental improvement. Over my 11-year career, the satisfaction of making learners smile has faded. I now want all of my programs to be better focused, more aligned to our organizational mission, and more valuable.

As a result, I have been developing and implementing a two-year strategic education plan that prioritizes the education programming presented by The Miami Conservancy District (MCD). By sharing the process for creating this plan and some of the results, I hope to inspire you to move with me toward a more fulfilling day in this profession.

Define large goal categories.

These should be over-arching, long-term, visionary concepts. Defining the overall direction of our program is a policy decision, so I assembled MCD’s nine-member management team to brainstorm and prioritize efforts. While involving so many people in the process may sound like over-kill to come up with a simple goal like “protect water resources,” I was able to proceed with assurance that my leadership team supported what I’m doing. They trusted me to work out the details of who, when, where, and how this goal is addressed.

Research target audience.

Following the thread of protecting water resources, I had to ask myself what the greatest threats to those resources are, who has the power to decrease the threat and what are the actions my audience is most likely to do. This process helps to focus in on the set of individuals and behaviors where my time is best spent.

Focusing in on a specific target audience is also related to the organization’s niche. MCD might want to address agricultural runoff, but realizes that local soil & water conservation districts are trusted and effective at empowering agricultural producers to reduce pollution from their farms. On the other hand, MCD has a 90-year history of protecting urban areas from stormwater quantity problems.

It was logical to conclude that urban stormwater runoff should be our No. 1 issue. And folks with the most authority to change urban stormwater management --city engineers,

stormwater managers, and decision-makers in urban and suburban areas of the watershed – should be our No. 1 audience. These are the folks who are not only influential, but also required by the Clean Water Act to develop a program to reduce urban runoff pollution. Making this audience a priority meant I needed to accept fewer invitations to speak to school groups. Fortunately, again county soil and water conservation districts, park districts, and nature center staff people are meeting this need in my area.

Assessing the target audience is probably the most difficult, but also the most essential element of the program. You'll need to do some research. We do focus groups, online surveys, and personal interviews to find out what our audiences' needs are and also to gather some baseline data before the start of a program. This information, along with involving members of the target audience in the program design, helps us develop an approach that meets audience needs. (If you want to hold some focus groups to learn about your target audiences, The Ohio State University Extension has staff trained to moderate these groups and will often assist you at no charge.)

Create a key message.

What is the take-away? For the stormwater issue described above, our key message to our target audience is: "Stormwater can be managed efficiently and economically." Notice that we don't necessarily use water resource protection as our top message. That's because we recognize that our learners will be motivated to change toward more sustainable behaviors if those behaviors meet their own existing needs. So, instead of overloading them with sad stories about decreasing aquatic diversity and increasing toxic sediments, we talk about how these innovative stormwater practices can save them time and money in the long run.

Define measurable objectives.

One of my previous employers used to encourage setting measurable objectives by saying, "If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time." This important step lays the foundation for the program evaluation. Let's be realistic; not everyone will make it where you want them to go. Measurable objectives set a specific mark to let you know what you have to do to be successful and when you've hit the mark.

Measurable objectives define four elements – the audience, what you want them to do, by how much and by when. Here's one of our objectives:

By Dec. 31, 2007, increase by 25 percent the number of watershed communities that allow the use of low impact development principles in new development.

Use strategies and tactics that work.

To get to our 25-percent increase related to new development, we involved members of the target audience in the program design. We created a series of conferences and seminars that started with basic low impact development concepts and are now progressing toward more technical aspects.

Based on participant feedback, we also are providing online resources to help them share low impact design concepts with others, access to research about the effectiveness of the

practices, and an online chat group where those we've trained can continue to interact with each other.

In addition, I always try to apply adult learning theory principles when planning a program, knowing that adults have special needs. Each of them arrives at a learning event with a valuable set of experiences and ways in which they can contribute. Put members of your target audience on the stage and encourage them to share their expertise with the group.

Amplify impact with partnerships.

Sometimes it's not the program content that matters the most, it's who's involved in sharing the message. Through our research, we learned that our audience trusted us but that they were more likely to get information about some of these technical site-design issues from their professional associations: the American Society of Civil Engineers and the American Society of Landscape Architects. So, we contacted the local chapters and have established a successful ongoing collaboration with them. These partnerships can help spread out the cost and responsibility of planning an event. For one workshop – targeting building contractors about construction site erosion and sediment control – we partnered with the Home Builders Association and ended up having triple the attendance we expected!

Measure, evaluate, adjust, smile, and report!

This is where you look back at your measurable objectives and find out if you're there yet. Measuring success can be challenging and rewarding. Bad results are better than no results. Good evaluation techniques, even if you don't get the results you had hoped for, will tell you how to improve your program. I'm getting comfortable with making mid-course corrections, based on assessment and evaluation data, because that will get me to my goal.

Good educators and scientists know it's important to measure several parameters to better understand a program's results. Feedback about the lunch and speakers is valuable, but what you really want to know is how your learners have changed because of your efforts. Use quantitative tools like surveys, and qualitative tools like interviews and focus groups to get a complete picture of your results.

For our stormwater managers, we are doing all of that, and asking for access to actual city ordinance documents to see when we reach our objective. We will keep checking and adjusting our program until we do.

Measurement is one thing, but using the results is another. Take the time to sit down and really look at your results and figure out which parameters show the program was successful and which ones point the way to better methods or previously undiscovered target-audience needs that you can meet. Submit your results to the leadership team who helped develop the program so they can share in your success.

Find and fit in adjoining pieces of the puzzle.

At MCD, our educational programs are also integrating appropriate elements that target other audiences into our overall approach. For example, we are taking decision-makers on river kayak trips to help them connect to the beautiful quality-of-life amenity all these stormwater programs are protecting. We train citizen volunteers to connect with their local streams by monitoring water quality and sharing the data with local decision-makers. We are also enabling planning and zoning officials to include water resource planning in their comprehensive land use plans.

So now, after all these years, I'm enjoying my own "ah ha" moment as I figure out how to really become an effective educator. I'm still really, really busy, but I set aside regular time for program planning and feel that I can justify how I spend my resources. Knowing that I will have documented proof of program effectiveness at the end is my new motivation for excellence.

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