COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS TO PROVIDE EXPERIENCE TO LEARNERS: LESSONS LEARNT FROM ROTARY’S DRIVE 120

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ABSTRACT
The Rotary Club of Sunbury developed and implemented a community-based program to provide learner drivers with additional driving experience, with funding assistance from a number of agencies. The focus of the program was primarily on helping learner drivers who have limited opportunities for accruing experience to attain the recommended 120-hours of experience prior to applying for a probationary licence. As the importance of driving experience for learner drivers has been demonstrated in other research and is widely accepted, the Transport Accident Commission asked the author to develop guidelines for similar programs that might be developed in the future, based on the experiences of Rotary Club members involved in the Drive 120 program and on the broad scientific literature relevant to novice-driver safety. This paper presents some of the results of this project, with a focus on its practical recommendations for future community-based programs for learner drivers.

INTRODUCTION
The relatively high crash rate of novice drivers continues to present a difficult challenge for road safety practice and policy. This challenge is further complicated by the need to ensure that novice driver programs are evidence based. Research evidence can be summarised as follows:

- There is consistent evidence that safety-related measures that might be politically difficult to implement are likely to be effective – such as a requirement for accruing a high minimum level of experience as a learner driver, or curfews and passenger restrictions for newly-licensed drivers (see Harrison, 2003).

- There is consistent evidence that traditional driver education and training programs are at best ineffective and at worst likely to increase the risk of crashing. This contradicts popular opinion – most likely a consequence of the apparent face validity of education and training in other areas – but is well-supported in the scientific literature (see Christie, 2001).

- There is increasing evidence that the so-called insight-training approach to novice-driver education and training may be a dead end. Under this approach, experiences are used as the basis for helping novice drivers become more self-aware of the limits of their own driving skill. Research in Sweden, Finland, and Australia has failed to demonstrate the substantial road safety benefits that were expected (see Christie and Harrison, 2003, 2004).

In this context, policy and programs in Victoria have focused on encouraging learner drivers to accrue substantial pre-licence experience, setting a recommended target of 120 hours behind the wheel in a range of driving conditions. This approach avoids the political difficulties that might occur if a mandatory minimum was set, and avoids recommending the potentially-unsafe education and training programs. One of the problems with this approach, however, is that some learner drivers are less likely than others to have ready access to opportunities to accrue driving experience. Learners from poorer families, from families with less access to a car, or from families where relationship or practical issues restrict opportunities to practice are less likely to accrue the recommended 120 hours of learner experience (see Harrison, 2003b).
Given the evidence concerning the benefits of additional driving experience on safety-related outcomes, any program that succeeds in helping learner drivers gain driving experience would be expected to have a positive effect on their safety as novice drivers. The Drive 120 program developed and implemented by the Rotary Club of Sunbury is an example of this type of program. Its aim is to provide opportunities for learner drivers to achieve 120 hours of driving experience before they obtain a probationary licence, with a particular focus on those learners who would otherwise find it difficult to achieve this goal.

The program uses volunteer supervising drivers and a car provided by local government. Key features of the program include the following:

- The car and its operating expenses are provided by the Hume City Council. This arrangement includes comprehensive insurance, and the car is leased by Council.
- Supervising drivers include Rotary members and members of the general community. They undergo a Police check and take part in a short training program.
- The car is garaged at a local Police station.
- Learner drivers join the program and are then assessed by a local professional instructor to ensure that they are ready for on-road experience. Learners keep a log book, and decisions about ongoing driving experience are made based on their log-book record.
- The role of the volunteer supervising driver is not educational. Their role is to provide the opportunity for the learner to practice.

The purpose of this paper is to summarise some results from a project commissioned by the Transport Accident Commission (TAC) to develop guidelines for organisations that might want to implement a similar learner-driver experience program. The project aimed, in part, to use the lessons learned during the development and implementation of Drive 120 to help other organisations avoid some of the difficulties encountered by the Rotary Club of Sunbury. Information about the program was obtained from documentation provided by the Rotary Club, and through discussions with two Rotary Club members involved in the program. It should be emphasised, however, that interpretation of this information and the recommendations or suggestions included here are the current author’s responsibility. This conference paper summarises material that will be considered for inclusion in a guide book for organisations interested in developing this type of program. The paper is necessarily concise, and organisations that have an interest in this area are advised to obtain a copy of the guide book when it is published.

**ISSUES AND SUGGESTIONS**

**Program Focus**

Evidence in the novice-driver area and in the broader area of skill acquisition suggests that a successful experience-based learner driver program would need (at least) to have the following characteristics.

- **An early start**: Assuming they make use of the available time, learners will be able to accrue more experience, and to space it out over a longer time period, if they obtain their learner permit as soon as possible in the learner period.

- **A gradual increase in complexity**: The learning process should commence with the development of basic vehicle control skills in a non-threatening environment, and from there should incorporate increasingly-complex driving contexts.

- **Regular, spaced practice throughout the learner period**: Once over the initial enthusiasm, it is easy for learners and their supervising drivers to reduce the regularity of driving practice
until the looming licence test encourages them back onto the road. Regular practice provides opportunities for better learning and for contact with a broader range of driving conditions than would be possible if the learner’s experience was restricted to early and late in the learner period.

- **A positive experience**: The potential for relationship factors and other negative aspects of the learner period to interfere with access to practice is high. Learning occurs better when practice occurs in a low-stress environment, and the learner is likely to be more motivated about taking up opportunities for practice if their experiences of practice sessions are routinely positive.

- **Variety and breadth**: Experience in a broad range of conditions ensures that the novice is better-prepared to cope with many driving environments, and it also helps to keep the learner motivated to continue to practice.

- **120 hours or more**: The ideal learner period would ensure that learners have an opportunity to accrue 120 hours of experience as a minimum.

**Expectations and Commitment**

The development and implementation of a learner driver experience program involves a substantial, long-term commitment on the part of an organisation, and a substantial time commitment on the part of those involved in the program. Discussions with Drive 120 people stressed the importance of a realistic understanding of this level of commitment at the start of the program. Failing to take the required time commitment into account at the beginning of a program will almost certainly limit its effectiveness, and may result in the program’s failure or significant stress problems amongst those involved.

**Administration and Management**

*Drive 120’s* experience suggests that the administration and management of the program is too large a task for one person. A management committee would help ensure that the load is distributed amongst a number of people, but having only one person involved specifically in administration of the program would help ensure that the program runs smoothly once underway.

Management of this type of program relies strongly on continuity on the part of the management and administrative team. The common service-club practice of turning-over positions of responsibility each year is a potential problem for a learner-driver program. It is recommended that turnover be limited as much as possible, and where this is necessary that only a minority of the project management team be replaced each year.

**Community and Funder Links**

The learner driver program relies on developing and maintaining relationships with the broader community and specifically with current and potential sources of financial and practical support. Effective development and use of these linkages has been an important part of the success of *Drive 120*.

Potential sources of financial and practical assistance for a learner experience program could include the following:

- **Government bodies with a specific interest in road safety** – such as the TAC, VicRoads, and the Victoria Police. Whether these organisations are able to provide financial assistance will depend on policy-related factors that are variable, but they are certainly in a position to provide practical assistance. The *Drive 120* program, for example, has an arrangement...
whereby Police checks of potential supervising drivers are provided at no cost, and the interest of local Police was tapped by arranging for the car to be garaged at the local Police station. Whether similar arrangements are possible for new programs is uncertain.

- **Community-based road safety advocacy groups.** These groups bring together local people and local representatives of organisations such as the Police and VicRoads with an interest in road safety. They can be a valuable source of practical help, and in some cases can act as an additional conduit into organisations that might be able to provide financial assistance.

- **Local Government.** The *Drive 120* program made use of links with local Government to obtain a motor vehicle. It is also able to provide practical assistance. It is recommended that existing links with people involved in local government should be used where necessary.

- **Local media.** Local media (newspapers and, in some cases, radio) are generally open to approaches to provide small amounts of publicity for community programs. They also have a strong news interest in local stories, and generally have a strong interest in stories relating to youth and to road safety.

- **Businesses:** The potential involvement of business in providing support for a learner-experience program almost certainly depends on the size and local focus of the business. The *Drive 120* team, for example, developed a strong relationship with their local office of Telstra Country Wide that may become useful as a source of additional financial support in future. Large organisations may be prepared to assist learner experience programs, but it is important to note that willingness to provide this assistance is likely to decline as the number of programs increases. Smaller, local businesses may be willing to support the program in many ways, including marketing the program, providing equipment or materials, etc.

  A specific local business that should be approached for support is a local driving school or professional instructor. The involvement of professional instructors should be limited to ensuring that potential learner participants have sufficient skill to drive with a supervising driver. This approach has been taken by the *Drive 120* program – where one local driving school is involved in assessing the readiness of learners for the program.

- **Schools, youth workers and youth groups/centres.** Marketing the program to young people with restricted or limited access to opportunities to practice driving with a licensed driver will be difficult. It will ultimately rely on the ability of program teams to develop positive relationships with schools and youth workers.

**The Car**

It would be very difficult to implement a learner experience program without flexible, full-time access to a motor vehicle. The alternatives – using the learner’s car or their family’s car, or using the supervising driver’s car – are unsatisfactory. The *Drive 120* program ultimately received full-time access to a leased car from the Hume City Council for the full lease period. This lessens the administrative load for the program, and included insurance, fuel, and maintenance. This is almost certainly the ideal solution – but it requires access to an organisation that is able (and willing) to provide a leased vehicle in this way.

It would be preferable for a learner experience program to have some input into the choice of motor vehicle, although this may be difficult if a supporting organisation has a particular vehicle that it is prepared to provide. Selection of a motor vehicle needs to take safety and the target group into account. Ideally the car would be mid-sized rather than small, and would have appropriate active and passive safety features such as dual front-impact airbags, side airbags, an active restraint system, and ABS technology.
The vehicle should not have dual controls. Although it may make the supervising driver feel more comfortable to have the ability to intervene and stop the car if necessary, the presence of a dual control capability changes the relationship between the licensed and learner driver and places an increased level of responsibility (and possibly liability) on the supervising driver.

**Insurance**

Two insurance issues need to be addressed in planning and implementing a program.

- Vehicle insurance may be a potential problem. Insurance companies sometimes ignore the relative safety of learner drivers compared to most other groups of drivers and impose additional premium costs or a high excess. It may be necessary to negotiate specific arrangements with insurers. The Drive 120 program had comprehensive vehicle insurance included in the lease arrangement donated by the Hume City Council, but then had to negotiate to have the excess waived should a collision occur.

- The more-difficult insurance problem is public risk or public liability insurance. This has proven to be a significant problem for the Drive 120 program, and at the time of writing this paper it had only recently been resolved. A program of this type must have public liability insurance to protect the service club, the supervising driver, and the learner drive if something happens that results in some liability for injury or damage. In addition to holding public liability insurance, it is essential that this cover be appropriate for the activity being undertaken. It may not be reasonable, for example, for a service club to assume that its public risk insurance cover will automatically cover this type of program, because the insurer may perceive a different level and type of risk compared to normal service-club programs. Where an existing policy is relied upon, it is strongly recommended that the situation be assessed by the insurance company before the program commences.

The Drive 120 program was able to make use of the general public risk insurance provided for Rotary activities under Rotary’s international insurance arrangements, and has now managed to obtain a written indication that the participants in the program are covered.

**Supervising Drivers**

The selection, training, and support of supervising drivers need to be considered. The longer-term success of the program most likely depends on word-of-mouth referrals and how the program is perceived by learner drivers. If their perception is that the supervising drivers are positive, affirming mentors who enjoy spending their time in this way, the program will continue to attract learners. If learners come to perceive the supervising drivers as less positive, or if a small number of learners have strongly-negative experiences relating to the supervising drivers, the program will become ineffective. Learners who have had negative experiences with the program will almost certainly share these experiences with their peers.

Selection of supervising drivers is compounded by the voluntary nature of the task and the need for potential supervising drivers to have some flexibility in their availability to meet the need for driving experience under different driving conditions. Never-the-less, it is essential that the selection of appropriate volunteers be based on the match between their characteristics and those required by the task, rather than on the need to fulfil a quota.

It is recommended that supervising drivers see their role as a mentoring role rather than a training role. The specific characteristics required for success in this role with teenage drivers include:

- Familiarity and comfort with teenagers
- Ethical behaviour
- Patience
• Mentoring skills

It needs to be stressed that the selection of supervising drivers who lack some of these characteristics will result in negative perceptions and comments by learners who take part in the program, with a resulting decline in new participants as the negative perceptions spread through networks of young people. It would be impossible for program organisers to repair a bad reputation, so it is important to try and prevent this by selecting and training appropriate people as supervising drivers.

It is recommended that the following process be used for new volunteers:

• New volunteers should have an initial discussion with one member of the learner-experience program team. This would serve to provide information about the program to new volunteers, and might also contribute to the team’s assessment as to the volunteer’s suitability.

• There should be an information form for supervising drivers to complete. The Drive 120 form requests name, date of birth, address, and contact information as well as preferred times of the week, licence information, and an indemnity agreement. The paperwork necessary for the Police check should also be completed at this stage and the check instigated.

• When the Police check is satisfactory, the volunteer could meet with the program team to further assess their suitability for the program and to provide them with any additional information about the program and information about the induction/training program.

• The final stage of this process would be the induction/training program in which a small group (no less than three) new volunteers would undertake a driving assessment and then take part in a discussion/activity program similar to that outlined very briefly below.

The strengths of this approach relate to assessing the match between the program’s requirements and the volunteer. It provides ample time for the volunteer to assess their own willingness to commit themselves to the program as they obtain more information about how it works. It also provides a number of opportunities for the program team to discover more about the volunteer’s motivation and match with the program.

This process does require, however, that the program team be prepared to reject anyone who they believe may not be well-suited to the program. This is likely to be a difficult task, but it is essential that learner drivers in the program are supervised by people who are well-suited to the mentor role.

The supervising drivers will need an induction/training mechanism that focuses on their role in the vehicle, and developing an effective working relationship with the learner. The Drive 120 program has had assistance from the Victoria University of Technology in the development and provision of training for supervising drivers. Similar resources are unlikely to be available for other groups intending to start this type of program. The purpose of this induction/training is not to create driving instructors – it is to help the supervising drivers become more confident in their role, and to help them develop skills that will encourage the learner to continue their involvement in the program. An induction/training program might include the following topics:

• The importance of experience in preventing crashes
• The problems some young people have accessing experience
• The learner-experience (Drive 120) program
• The supervising driver’s role and making decisions about the type of experience needed
• How to encourage the learner driver to remain in the program – mentoring skills
• Ethical, insurance, and legal issues.
In addition to this, it would be useful to provide new supervising drivers with an opportunity to role-play with someone taking the role of a learner driver. This could be conducted in small groups and the outcomes used as the basis for some additional discussion.

A small induction/training program of this type would take less than a day and would ensure that the supervising drivers are more prepared for their role than would be the case otherwise.

**Learners**

Although the focus of the learner-experience program should be those learners who find it difficult to access driving experience, it will be difficult for the program to target these learners and to exclude others. This is particularly so at the beginning of the program. It is recommended that invitations to participate in the program be delivered to as many learner drivers as possible and that it be marketed broadly through schools and TAFE Colleges, perhaps with a central message that the program is especially for those learners who are less able to practice. This will require the development of a relationship with school management and school welfare staff.

There may be mixed reactions to the programs from schools. Some schools run driver education programs as part of their road safety program, and may do so through external driver education and training providers. Some schools respond negatively to requests from outside organisations or programs because of concerns about potential workload increases for teachers, or because of concerns that assisting the program may result in a reduction of available teaching time for core subjects. While these problems are not likely to result from a learner-driver experience program, teachers’ anxiety about these issues is substantial.

It will still be necessary to market the program directly to some groups of learners who may not be aware of it through school or TAFE. This will almost certainly involve making contact with youth workers at the local council and in other organisations, and will almost certainly involve speaking directly with potential program participants. Although the Drive 120 program team had positive contact with youth workers, it has proven difficult to encourage participation from young people contacted in this way. This is not surprising as the Drive 120 program requires completion of an enrolment form as a first step; the original enrolment form required a passport-size photograph; participation in the program requires parental consent if under 18 years of age; the program is conducted primarily by people who are considerably older than participants and who may be perceived negatively as a result; and the general behaviour pattern of young people in this target group may be oriented towards higher levels of risk taking, making them less open to road safety programs.

An incentive program could be pursued with local businesses as most learner drivers would be expected to lose interest in the program after they have become more confident. By introducing incentives that are awarded based on achieving some predetermined milestones (such as when achieving 40, 80, and then 120 hours), learner drivers who might drop out of the program may be encouraged to remain.

Learners should be given opportunities to comment on the program and their supervising driver(s). This is important for three reasons. It provides the learner with a stronger sense that the program is focused on them and meeting their needs. It provides an opportunity for the program and the supervising drivers to improve as the program develops. Finally, it provides the opportunity to collect information that might help avoid any developing problems.

**Planning and Timing**

It should be assumed that development and planning will take at least six months, and a full twelve months may be more reasonable. The Drive 120 program took about seven months from the first meeting with the Hume City Council until the car was available, and an additional twelve months after
then was required before the first group of learner drivers were assessed and ready to start their on-road experience.

**In Operation**

Once launched, the keys to ongoing success include the following:

- **Persevering despite the problems and setbacks.** It is important for the program team to expect that things will go wrong. The delay experienced by Drive 120 in obtaining public liability insurance, and the consequential four-month halt to the program, is an example of this.

- **Maintaining networks and providing feedback to supporters.** The program’s longer-term success will rely on attracting new supervising drivers to the program, attracting learner drivers, and on maintaining positive relationships with organisations that have provided financial and practical assistance. Feedback about the program and ongoing relationship building is particularly important in relation to those organisations that have provided assistance to the program as the program will rely on their ongoing support.

- **Maintaining an effective administration system.** This is important for two reasons. The main task of linking learner drivers, supervising drivers, and the program’s car relies on an effective system for registering the supervising drivers, enrolling learners, keeping track of the appointment preferences of supervising drivers, keeping track of appointments, and providing reminders to learners about upcoming appointments. The other reason for maintaining an effective administration system – and this also applies to record keeping during program development and implementation – is that it will be necessary at some stage to hand tasks over to new team members.

**Closed Doors**

The program relies strongly on the provision of financial and practical assistance by organisations other than the service club or other community organisation developing the program, and it is generally the case that service clubs in particular have considerable expertise in encouraging this type of assistance. It is likely, however, that some organisations will be reluctant to provide assistance. This is especially so in relation to the need for a motor vehicle, and in relation to insurance.

The strongest argument that can be mounted for supporting the program would combine an appeal to emotion concerning the relatively high rate of crash involvement amongst novice drivers, and an emphasis on the need for an evidence-based approach to reducing their risk of crashing – which leads to focusing on learner experience rather than driver education or training.

Some negative reactions might be a consequence of uncertainty about the longevity of the program or its potential profile in the community. Organisations that respond negatively could be approach at a later date when the program has been operating for some time and is therefore perceived to be successful. Providing organisations with information about the program’s success and plans for the future may encourage a more-positive response to requests for assistance.

**Difficult Customers**

There will be problems from time to time relating to program participants.

- Potential participants may sound interested and take an enrolment form away but then fail to return it. This has been a problem for the Drive 120 program in Sunbury, especially in relation to learner drivers who might have less access to opportunities for experience than most learners.
• Learner drivers involved in the program may make an appointment for a practice session and then not attend for it. The problem may be prevented in part by contacting the learner drivers the day before their appointment as a reminder. A follow-up call in cases where the learner did not show for an appointment, to re-schedule, could also be useful and might provide an opportunity to ask if the program is meeting their needs.

• Despite passing the initial assessment, some learner drivers may drive unsafely during the practice sessions. The safety of the learner and supervising driver is the central concern, and learners who are perceived to be unsafe by a supervising driver should be withdrawn from the program. Learners in this situation could be referred back to a professional driving instructor for some lessons and re-assessment before returning to the program.

• Some young people may act aggressively or defensively towards the supervising driver. When this occurs, it most likely reflects the personality or coping style of the learner driver. Prevention of this type of problem may require setting some ground rules for the program that are provided to participants at the first practice session.

Supervising Drivers

Some specific problems can arise in relation to the program’s supervising drivers.

• Some potential supervising drivers may not show sufficient safe-driving skills or people-skills in the initial induction/training program. Drive 120 has had experience with this, and it is important to ensure that drivers for whom there are any doubts are excluded from the program.

• Some supervising drivers may attract criticism or complaints from learner drivers. The problem here will be determining whether the complaint relates to a personality conflict between the learner and the supervising driver, or to something more substantial. If the supervising driver has attracted negative comments from other learners, it may be necessary to discuss the apparent pattern with him or her. If the complaints relate to inappropriate behaviour towards the learner, the supervising driver may need to be withdrawn from the program regardless of the truth of the complaint. If a complaint is made about an inappropriate behaviour that may be illegal, the program team will need to refer this to the Police and to ensure that the supervising driver concerned is withdrawn from the program.

• Some supervising drivers will extend their role beyond mentoring into the teaching or training domain. This is not acceptable. Most of the supervising drivers in the program will not be qualified to teach learners how to drive, and doing so creates a liability for the outcome that could have negative consequences for the supervising driver and the program.

Dealing With the Media

Successful interaction with the media is an important focus for the program team. The media will be useful to help recruit new supervising drivers, to recruit learners, and to encourage interest in the program from potential supporters. It will also provide an opportunity to reward ongoing supporters with some publicity of their relationship with the program.

• Making use of free community-based advertising in local newspapers and on local radio in rural/regional areas is essential. Most smaller media outlets provide service groups and similar organisations with an opportunity to place small amounts of marketing content at no cost.

• Local news media (local newspapers, radio, and (to a lesser degree) television) have a strong interest in locally-relevant news stories and should be used as a form of free publicity. A
media release can be prepared at important program milestones and sent to local media outlets, ideally with a contact for more information and a suggested photograph opportunity. The program team should plan a media strategy that makes use of these opportunities.

CONCLUSIONS

The Drive 120 program developed and implemented by the Rotary Club of Sunbury is a potential model for similar programs elsewhere in Victoria. Its aim of increasing the amount of experience accrued by learner drivers who might find it difficult to access opportunities to practice driving is consistent with research evidence that indicates that driving experience is an important predictor of safety for novice drivers. The Drive 120 program also provides some important information that can be used to help other organisations planning the same type of program to avoid potential problems. Consideration of the program and the skill-development literature suggests that key factors include obtaining substantial ongoing financial and practical support from other organisations; a very high level of commitment to the program by members of the program team; effective administration; the selection, preparation, and supervision of supervising drivers suited to the task; and effective marketing of the program to attract learner drivers.

REFERENCES


