



What's best?

A decision tool for choosing appropriate community education methods

Educators and managers often ask questions like:

"What works best, a brochure, an advertisement or a seminar?"

I used to reply (hedging my bets) that "the message is more important than the medium".

However I've since learnt that there are vital differences between different educational approaches. This paper sets out a decision tool to help educators make and justify decisions between broad categories of educational tools.

First a note of definition. 'Education' is used here to refer to programs with behavioural outcomes, as opposed to simple awareness-building. That is, we are talking about 'behaviour change' programs, whose success is measured by the adoption of new behaviours by the chosen audience.

Four categories of educational strategy

All types of community education methods are not equal.

While it is true that the message is usually more important than the tool, it's also true that education tools can be divided into at least four general categories, those that suit the needs of innovators, of early adopters, of mainstream audiences and of laggards.

The choice between individual tools, for instance, between television advertising vs mail, probably does not make much difference to the success of a program.

Our view, however, is that the choice between the four strategic approaches is a critical success factor.

EE Decision Tool

The following "wily worm of public involvement" illustrates the way the four different approaches meet four quite different 'involvement levels' of different audiences.

The four strategic approaches are:

- 1) **Participative**, high involvement programs where members of the public are collaboratively involved in defining the problem and devising and testing solutions.
- 2) **Two-way education**, medium involvement programs where members of the public have the opportunity to converse with experts and negotiate the process of adopting an innovation, perhaps customising the innovation as they go.
- 3) **One-way education**, low involvement programs, where the design of the innovation is non-negotiable and hence either accepted or rejected by members of the public.
- 4) **Legislative**, where a regulatory 'stick' is required to motivate adoption by resistant audiences. (For practical purposes, regulatory communications take the form of warnings, and use the same methods as 'one-way education' techniques.)

A decision tool

To simplify the choice between one-way, two-way and participative methods in environmental education, I devised the following tool.

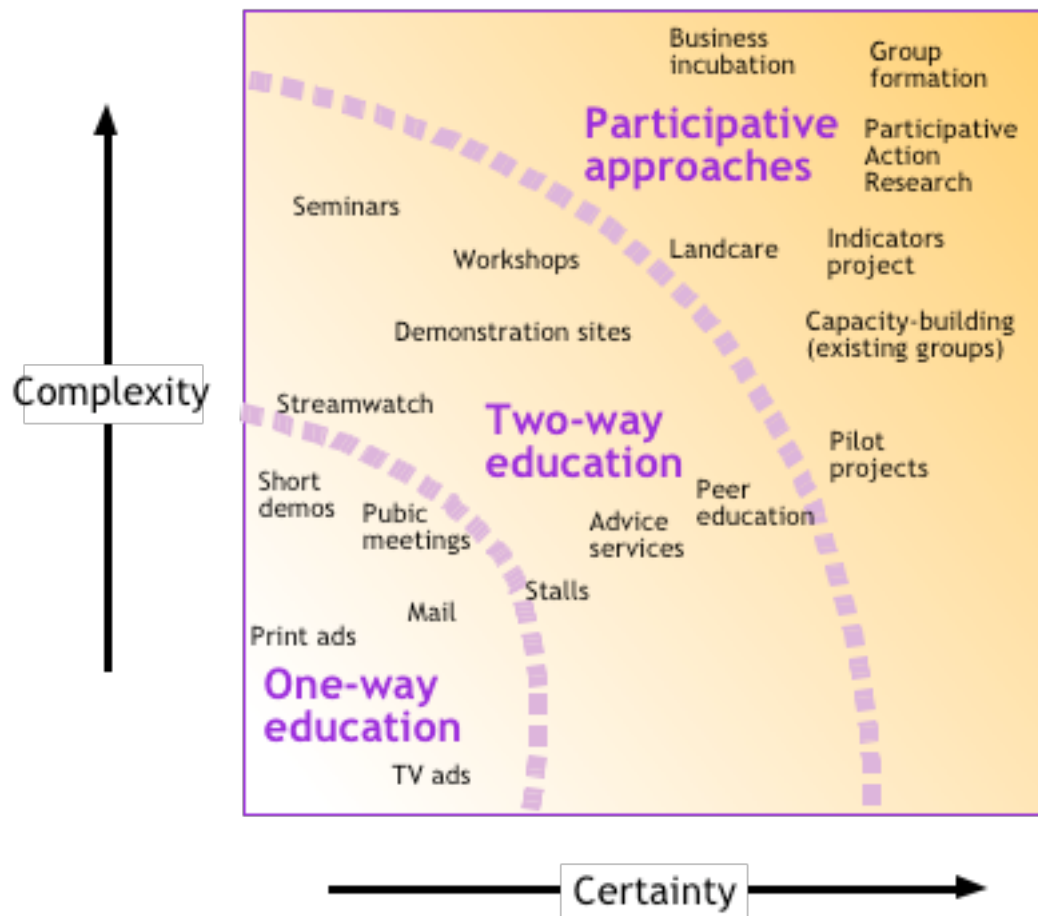
This is a simple matrix based on your assessment of two factors:

- 1) the *complexity* of information which needs to be digested by members of the public before the desired behaviour(s) can be understood and implemented;
- 2) the *certainty* of the behavioural directions which are being communicated. That is, specific instructions which can be immediately implemented versus fuzzy, abstract prescriptions which need to be interpreted by the public.

(See next page)

EE Decision Tool

The decision tool



Note: the typology of educational methods in this matrix is only indicative: the character of a particular method in practice depends on many factors.

See following pages for the decision questions.

1) Assessing the complexity of the information being communicated

SIMPLE:

Can the behaviour be communicated as a short simple statement?

Examples:

"Remove caps on bottles before recycling", "Install a low-flow shower-head", "Return unused medicines to any chemist", "Don't be a tosser"

YES NO

INTERMEDIATE:

Does the behaviour require a multi-step process?

Examples:

Installing a compost bin in your backyard, using simple Natural Cleaning techniques, applying simple forms of Integrated Pest Management, starting an organic garden, managing a worm farm, carrying out a waste audit.

YES NO

COMPLEX:

Does the behaviour depend on a acquiring a significant body of knowledge?

Examples:

Devising a household or neighbourhood environment plan, developing or advising on a local environmental strategy (e.g. litter reduction), 'greening' a business, forming a local action group (e.g. Sustainable Streets concept).

YES NO

2) Assessing the certainty of the information being communicated

CERTAIN:

Can the behaviour be communicated with 100% certainty?

Examples:

"Place glass bottles in the recycling container"

YES NO

INTERMEDIATE:

Does the desired behaviour depend on customisation to local conditions?

Examples:

Installing a compost bin, becoming a Green Office

YES NO

UNCERTAIN:

Are the specific behaviours or outcomes not knowable in advance?

Examples:

Becoming a sustainable or low-waste neighbourhood, developing a local sustainability strategy, greening a commercial business strip

YES NO

This tool was developed in a consultancy carried out for Resource NSW in 2002, in collaboration with Jenny Kent and Jenny White.