

Mary Jones

It pays to use peer leaders!

At a recent presentation to teachers I discovered that the majority of the people in the room were interested in Peer Education, even though very few were involved in it.

I asked the participants on the course to get into small groups and have a quick think about the reasons why they thought it was a good thing, and the reasons that they gave were all the honourable, above-the-board things that you would expect. Key elements were that it is more relevant, that young people would speak the same language as their peers, that it is around the whole business of empowerment, that the grapevine exists anyway so why not make actual positive use of it... and so on and so forth. I agreed with them that all these motives were plausible even if not always sound, but had to admit that my own motives were not entirely as honourable — a main reason which spurred me to this way of acting was the financial one.

Limited impact

Kent Education Authority has one Advisory Teacher for Health Education, who works for the Professional Development Unit. This Unit has little actual budget and has to finance itself by INSET time from schools. Therefore, in order to run a training event one has to be very, very careful. I have 26 secondary schools and 6 independent schools in my district, and if you are

talking about £100 a day to release a member of staff you can start to add up just how much it would cost to run a two-day meaningful training course. So basically it comes down to the Health Authority being required to fund virtually all activities in this area.

In my first year in the post I did run such a training event for teachers — with a written guarantee that within a year I could see what they were doing, if it had had any value, and so on. I tried very hard to make sure that the teachers I got were the ones worth working with, and by and large a lot of progress was made — but it really was determined by the structure within the school. If that person had a co-ordinating role the impact could be greater, and often led to development days on sex education (and specifically HIV), or on what one might call 'controversial issues', so there was a little bit of mileage in that. If they were Deputy Heads or had an equivalent role, it really depended on how many other things were being heaped upon them. There were some good examples of what could be done, but again impact was limited. Then of course there were the teachers who were promoted internally or moved away out of the area, as well as those who felt that really the impact was restricted to their own classroom.

So having done that once, using nearly half of my entire budget for HIV prevention, it was

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not something I could repeat immediately. While I continue to give support to those teachers who were engaged in the training, the whole idea of Peer Education — which sounded more cost-effective and a better investment of my time — was an appealing one.

In January 1990 my colleague Lyn Bamford and I started to research what had been done in schools by writing to the HEA, by putting articles in *Liaison News*, and just following up leads. We found examples from the USA and very good examples from what had been going on in youth clubs, but very little evaluated work of Peer Education around HIV in schools. What we read, however, prompted us to think "Yes, we have a fair idea about how to go about this".

Recruiting the peer leaders

The first thing we did was to let schools know in June 1990 through my quarterly newsletter *AIDSLINK* that something would be happening in December. The reason for this was that December 1 was World AIDS Day, and the theme was 'Women', and so using the £500 grant which had been given by the Regional Health Authority we decided to invest it in a weekend Peer Education programme, something whose benefits should be felt afterwards.

That autumn I gave presentations to eight schools which had female pupils. This usually took the form of an assembly or talking to individual PSE classes. Since most of the schools concerned were co-educational I did it by way of a presentation around HIV in general and World AIDS Day, and then talked about the weekend.

I think for me the important bit was recruitment. I spoke at length to various people who had fallen down here — they had a lot of enthusiasm at first, and then it fizzled out. So I made it clear that the weekend was going to be fun, but it was also going to be hard work, that they would have to have a commitment to do something afterwards, and obviously a whole weekend might mean loss of income. They would have to have parental permission and a sponsor within the school. The sponsor could be any adult within the school to whom the peer educators could turn to by way of being a safety net, not necessarily a classroom teacher but someone with whom they felt they had a rapport.

From the very beginning I made it clear that there would be a variety of art and drama media available. One might argue that I was being very

selective to which pupils would actually come forward, but the other side of the coin was that at that particular time I had no idea what the outcome was going to be. I just felt that there might be something to interest the young women if we offered a variety of different media.

If somebody was interested they had to contact my named person within the school to pick up an application form. In other words I did not ask people to show interest there and then — when you sell an idea there is always a lot of immediate interest, so I wanted them to think about it properly. As a result, of the 21 applications that were returned 20 of the young women actually saw the weekend through.

The other important point about recruitment was the fact that from then on I dealt with them as individuals, and the commitment to the weekend was their own.

The weekend ran from Friday evening to Sunday morning. The Friday evening was very much about making groups and group work skills, and then we went into basic HIV information workshops. These involved the usual sort of materials, including the AVERT 'Working with Young People' pack, Riverside 'Situations', and 'Learning about AIDS' from AVERT. One of the things we had agreed in our scene-setting session was that people could work into the evening if they wanted to, and breaks could be flexible; but that when there was a specific workshop, timekeeping would be very important.

Basically on that first evening we worked until 1.30 am. People did not want to go to bed.

Looking at their own attitudes

We spent the first part of the following morning looking at our own attitudes and some of the exercises, the idea being that if they were going back to face a variety of attitudes themselves, they should have a chance to examine what they personally felt, in order to form their own counter-opinions and really develop coping strategies for dealing with people who might be antagonistic to what they wanted to do.

The main part of Saturday, however, was spent on two sites (9 girls at one, 11 at the other). I made myself scarce, and on one of the sites the day was mainly taken up with drama, video workshops, art workshops, the girls selecting what they had a specific interest in. We were extremely lucky in this regard because in Kent

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there is an Artwise Drama Studio, which is part of the Youth Service and has some excellent staff. The group that I worked with looked at the whole issue of media — particularly the portrayal of women in the media, how sex is used to sell products — and they re-wrote storyboards and were given the skills to crew and script the adverts themselves. The adverts looked at promoting condom use with young women.

In the evening they had a presentation of what they had produced during the day, with all the out-takes as well which were very funny. The group was now working incredibly well together, and we started looking at negotiating safer sex, and what *is* safer sex — all kinds of personal things started to come out in the session. We ended up the evening designing 'safer sex' underpants, underpants for the man of the nineties. The other site, working with my colleague Trish Tougher, similarly had started designing 'safer sex' tee-shirts, and apparently they also again worked through to the small hours.

We chose to evaluate the first weekend simply by a diary that plotted the ups and downs of the weekend.

At the final Sunday morning session people said what they intended to do back in school and what they might need. I said that if they required anything from me they should get in touch, but if I did not hear from them then they should expect to be contacted in three months' time.

Trish likewise had agreed a similar strategy with her group: say what you need now, but if we do not hear from you we will assume everything is working and you will hear from us in three months' time.

Three months later . . .

Three months elapsed. We had had some contact from individuals, but at the end of that time we wrote a letter and agreed to meet or to talk on the telephone with everyone to find out how things had gone.

From that we learned that the most important factor in achieving something meaningful was the sponsor. The balance between being there as a safety net but standing back was really important. Where people reneged on the responsibility and did not back them up, the peer educators felt very isolated and angry. Where they became too directive the leaders got quite shirty. Where the balance was right, however, it was most successful.

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What they had done over the three months varied enormously. Small groups tended to have had a greater impact in terms of longevity, and some were still working up to five months after their initial training. One group had prepared six one-hour sessions with their Lower Sixth PSE group: they found that people were skiving other lessons to come along, even though the PSE course (which was supposed to be compulsory) had been poorly attended before. They chose to lift a lot of the ideas from the weekend, in particular the media items and the advertising ideas, and used them around their own work.

Another group had decided to use the ideas in deriving a 'game show'. This involved their Media Studies group (and this is one secondary school in Faversham where they have a very good Video Department), so that they became involved in a much larger group of people, scripting, crewing, editing, doing voice-overs and all the things that went to make a professional product. It was then shown to the whole year group within PSE time, and discussion took place afterwards.

Impressive

Other people wore the tee-shirts they had made around the school and invited people just to comment on them, and chatted about them. One girl's artwork was so impressive that her Art teacher decided that she should explain to the others how she had produced it, and the other group decided to take up the theme as part of GCSE Art.

Another girl who had come on her own produced 'safer sex' Christmas cards for her friends, and also gave a talk to each of the four year 9 groups in her school.

Another girl, who had also come on her own from a Sixth Form Grammar School, did a graffiti board where people had to put their comments up, and she also had done creative writing to support that. Three other girls did a dance drama for assembly aided by my colleague Trish.

Such was the enthusiasm that we decided to have a reunion for the two groups, and 15 of the original 20 came. We figured this was really very good 8 months after the event.

After the reports, some said things like "Well, we could not do what that group did because we did not feel confident enough with public speaking," or "We would have liked to have held group sessions in schools but we did

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not feel confident enough to". Some others said "We had to go back and work with a group of boys in our class, and it would have been really good to have had a boy in the group". Some said that although they were leaving school they might go on to college — could they continue it there?

A number of things came from this. We decided we had to run another weekend involving young men, and we would start a sessional workers group for the ones who were now leaving school but could be drawn upon for events at college and for other groupings such as within Youth Clubs. We decided also that there was a need for further training, and after some negotiation we set up two further training days — one for group-work skills and the other for theatre and education techniques. Those who wanted to become sessional workers completed a form, which is an idea I lifted from my good friends in Lothian, although they used adults as sessional workers.

The second training weekend was run very similarly to the first, although we did not have to go back and recruit because when the word got around all I needed to do was send in application forms which were duly returned. The problem was that we had 36 applications, and I had set a ceiling at 16 because they were to be based at just the one site. Selecting people was very difficult, but we had to go on those who had applied in a group because of the success rate that the small groups had managed to achieve. We also looked for musical talent because one of the things we had decided to add was a musical dimension. So with those being the criteria we had the 16 — five female, the rest male.

The other difference was that this time most of the training around HIV and attitudes was not done by myself — it was done by two of the young women who had been trained the first time around. I became the continuity person, making sure people had enough biscuits, hot chocolate and so on.

Resource

What they produced on the second weekend was amazing. One group decided that condom use was a big problem for them, particularly young men. They decided that people were still embarrassed about the use of condoms, and they telephoned various pharmacies until they got one to agree to allow them to film in the pharmacy. They also telephoned Margate police to

notify them that they would be setting up a small display.

So having set all this up, they filmed a 'Candid Condom' where they hung condoms from a tree, filmed passers-by in the Jeremy Beadle style, and then interviewed various people, and although you could criticise their leading-question style it has been a very valuable resource. I have used it a lot myself since it really does generate a lot of discussion because the scenes are local.

The last bit of 'Candid Condom' was the art of condom buying. They had two scenarios in the pharmacy: how to go in, being assertive and assured, and how not to do it. A bit of a cliché but again a good discussion trigger.

Another part of the group spent their day looking at the role of cabaret in getting across health messages, and they took some scripts and they changed them. I have to admit that the idea was the drama tutor's, but the change of the script was entirely their own work. They did a safer-sex Newsround with a Selina Scott character, and they did an 'Anneka Rice' out in the street, asking people about condoms. They also did a sketch which was based on Marjorie and Joan, the Victoria Wood/Julie Walters characters, which showed the characters' narrow, prejudiced attitudes — and the wild assumptions that can be made. All this again was also performed in the evening of the Saturday.

Outrageous adverbs

The Saturday evening this time was rather different because the group had really began just wanting to socialise, so running competitions and so on seemed a little bit stale. Instead we played a lot of games like charades, as well as the adverb game — which was new to many of them — and this was not wasted time because it was all around group-work skills and gaining confidence, and people who initially did not even know what an adverb was were getting into outrageous adverbs by the end of the evening.

The next morning, as on the previous weekend, we discussed what they were going to do by when, what they were going to need, and so on.

A number of them were so keen on the cabaret idea that they wanted to pursue that fairly soon, and this was quite fortuitous because we had already started to develop a play called *Ring of Roses*. A 20-minute one-act play, this had been written as an original piece of drama by an

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A-Level Drama student at a local school two years previously, and the director had approached me to see if it was worth expanding into a 45-minute self-standing play. I felt that it was, and two of the cast of five had actually been at my first training weekend, so that was the HIV link into the cast. I happened to know all the other cast members as well, because I hate to admit it but they were all ex-pupils!

Although the play was developing well, we felt that the cabaret could support it as an evening's entertainment for school audiences. So six of the group started meeting and put together the safer-sex cabaret show, using a lot of the ideas they had gained in the weekend but with some original materials.

Back at school some of them were holding workshops within their PSE groups, and *The Times Educational Supplement* used this as an example in their article (1). However, this led to a lot of people writing to ask "Can I have the lesson plans that these sixth-formers used?" or "Can you send me your itinerary for the training weekend?" I had to write a very polite letter back saying the sixth-form lesson plans were not my property — they had based them on ideas that they had gained. Likewise I was reluctant to send them the training weekend details because the philosophy was that peer education really was what they made of it, and the plan was organic with the group.

We invited schools to attend our show and they usually brought 9th or 10th year groups. We also took it to special-needs schools — the Royal School for the Deaf, where we did a signed version, and Herne Bay Stoad Park Institute for disabled young adults, where the cast spent a lot of time chatting with the residents afterwards. We also took it to King's School and played to the lower sixth there. In total 605 people saw the play over seven performances in November.

Confident

Kent Radio were put in touch by Jo Burn of Artwize and we had a half-hour drama/art show on World AIDS Day, the group feeling confident enough to host the magazine programme themselves. In an evening they scripted it, interviewed one another, interviewed me, and chose what sequences they felt would actually work best, and the producer had just the right approach, not dictating what should be done and what shouldn't be done.

I became very aware that there was a lot of

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interest in what we had been doing, and our other workloads meant that we needed someone to take over and expand it. The only person we could think of who would take this on and who knew enough about this was Lisa, one of the young women who became involved herself in December 1990 and who had also been one of the cast members of *Ring of Roses*. She was currently doing her A Levels, so we asked her if she would consider taking a year out before going on to do her H.E. studies, and she agreed. The main part of her job will be supporting the sessional workers.

The idea of the sessional workers project is to encourage and support people who have been trained up in school to carry on with the good work afterwards. Those who have gone on to college have become quite instrumental in setting up open days or safer-sex focus days and getting involved in the health side of things through the students' union. They have also worked for us on World AIDS Day, approaching their contemporaries in the streets. They have also been involved in a couple of professional seminars, enabling them to become the trainers at other events run in schools where there is an interest in peer education. Lisa will become their first point of contact, assessing what further training needs they will require and so on.

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To sum up . . .

The philosophy that we have used from the beginning is that the outcome of a peer education programme cannot be determined in advance.

Formal education is one part of the process but there may be all sorts of other alternative media that need to be explored.

With respect to recruitment, don't allow schools to decide who is going to go on the weekend. Don't allow them to use the weekend as some sort of carrot or stick — get a contract with the young people themselves, so that they are the ones who feel committed.

Alternative messages can easily be overlooked by the tutor. Therefore we tried to provide a large number of varieties of ways of working in order to find something that would spark off the imagination of the participants.

In terms of the peer-leaders' own measure of success or failure, the most important factor was their sponsor in the school. From my own point of view, the weekend would have had some value even if all they did was speak to ten other

people about it. But clearly, from their viewpoint, if they went back with ideas and all sorts of schemes and they fell at the first hurdle because the sponsor was not supporting them, it was very demoralising.

Lisa is now in post. She is recruiting for three further training weekends — for deaf pupils, years 10/11 and year 12 + F.E. She will be using the peer sessional workers, and also organising all those direct-contact events with young adults.

My own involvement this year will have to take a back seat, although I have one more session with the HEA project to train HIV/AIDS trainers, run by Stephen Clift and David Steers at Canterbury, and I shall be assisting the Ibis Trust in promoting peer-led methods in HIV education.

Reference

1. Susannah Kirkman, 'Friendly Advice'. *The Times Educational Supplement*, 31 January 1992, p 23.