

Case I: Hands on Learning

(Foundation grant to a not-for-profit for a program with schools)



Priority areas: student engagement, transitions within school, post-school transitions, student retention

About: Hands on Learning

A government school teacher saw an unmet need and a way to address it. Russell Kerr was that teacher from Frankston High School in Victoria. Russell developed an in-school program, Hands on Learning, for secondary school students most at risk of leaving school early. Russell went on to become the CEO of Hands on Learning Australia, a not-for-profit charity.

Today, 13 years on, the Hands on Learning methodology runs in 17 schools across Victoria and Queensland. Two specialist staff work with 10 students from Years 7 to 10 for a full day each week. The students come out of the classroom to work on real world projects of genuine value to their school and community (e.g. building an outdoor pizza oven).

The program acts to change the experience of learning at school for students. By doing so, the program is boosting a student's confidence, school attendance and retention.

To learn more, visit: <http://handsonlearning.org.au/>

About Newsboys Foundation

Newsboys Foundation began in 1973, but has its roots in the Victorian gold rush days of the 1880s. William Forster, a wealthy merchant and saddler, led the formation of the Melbourne Newsboy Club in 1893. The club filled a gap for boys who sold newspapers on the streets. It provided them with a social, education, health and sport network.

In the present day, the legacy of William Forster lives on but with renewed focus. The Foundation supports projects in Victoria from community organisations that assist the diverse education needs of young people (11-18 years) so they may re-engage with education.

To learn more, visit: <http://newsboysfoundation.org.au/>

What we discovered

Build capacity and commit appropriate resources –

- ▶ put money into staff to build capacity within an organization.
- ▶ talk together about an idea: so don't be too fixed on what you want to do or what you will fund.
- ▶ keep supporters in the loop: developing capacity is a two-way dialogue.

Impact –

- ▶ gather data on the key things you are setting out to change so you can continuously refine what you are doing.
- ▶ find someone who is doing research in an area that is the focus of your project.

Build capacity and commit appropriate resources

The Hands on Learning story reflects different forms of capacity building - from the knowledge and skill

Getting an idea 'off the ground' = a local issue + principal support + a little bit of money from school budget + the skills and drive of teachers.

development of Russell Kerr, the CEO of the not-for-profit, to improving a school's capacity to engage with the program, to changing the life and learning trajectories for students.

The evolution of Hands on Learning is itself an example of how the capacity of the program and those leading it has built over time. As a teacher at Frankston High School, Russell had been thinking about how to address the issue of students disengaging from school and learning. With the backing of the principal, a little bit of money from the school's budget and his own entrepreneurial skills and drive, Russell got going on an 'in-house' solution for Frankston. "But then you need to get a bit more support", recalls Russell.

Russell approached the CEO, Ellen Koshland, of the then Education Foundation in Victoria. He spoke at length with Ellen about the need and his vision for addressing the need. The Foundation provided Russell with some funds to develop a program at Frankston. Supportive of the vision, but reluctant to keep funding one school, Russell

Talk with others about your project and vision for it.

remembers Ellen telling him that the program had to expand. Enter, The Myer Foundation and Sidney Myer Fund. Again, through

a process of meeting with the CEO to ensure there was a 'good fit' and putting in an application, Myer made a grant of \$60K to help get things going. Later, Ellen from the Education Foundation would continue to mentor Russell in the expansion of what would become known as Hands on Learning.

Moving from an 'in-house' program to a program for many was a challenge. The support from the Education Foundation and The Myer Foundation helped Russell develop and refine the thinking and practice of the Frankston program. But "how do you expand something when you're busy doing it?" says Russell. "I was highly motivated but I simply didn't have the energy to go further afield".

To address the capacity gap, Social Ventures Australia (SVA) became involved

Find a mentor or mentors.

when Hands on Learning was a successful applicant of the AMP Youth Boost Fund. Through SVA, Russell was given access to a mentor, who told him, "Everything is in your head". The mentor provided advice on how to prepare a strategic plan and introduced Russell to other people who could advise him on financial and legal matters. A number of these people have since joined the Board of Hands on Learning. At this stage, central to building Russell's capacity and that of the program was the critical task of crystalising the Hands on Learning model and its potential to be replicated. "That's the key to it", explains Russell, "I needed to really understand the model and how to scale it up".

In 2005, SVA invested \$40,000. They saw that the program was a way to deal with the huge issue of student disengagement. But they did not provide the funds. That's not their remit. Instead, SVA removed the burden from Russell alone to seek supporters. SVA sought support on the school's behalf. That was a critical value-add in terms of time, knowledge and networks.

Russell remembers that to move the program from 'in-house' to other schools required evidence that the program could work in other settings. Working with SVA, the Frankston High School principal and other principals from the local area devised a way to run Hands on Learning in four other schools. "That's the power", Russell explains, "of principals working together from the ground up around a shared issue."

Enlist the support of others who share a common need and passion to address it.

In order to free up some time and staff, they agreed to scale down the Frankston High School program to two days

Think creatively about how to free up time to expand your program.

per week: a temporary inconvenience for what they proposed would be a long-term gain for the program, schools and students. This increased Russell's capacity to lead a demonstration of the program in the other local secondary schools. This provided cases of the program's success in other contexts, which was important to generating wider interest and refining the model further.

Between 2005 and 2008, SVA incrementally built their support of Hands on Learning from \$40,000 to \$300,000. Over the life of SVA's involvement with

Others can assist in filling the gaps in your knowledge.

Hands on Learning to the present day, through their philanthropic and business networks, they have been able to source \$1 million for the program. They have assisted Russell, as CEO, to navigate the complex legal and tax issues of setting up Hands on Learning as a not-for-profit organisation with Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) charitable status.

In 2010 Newsboys Foundation also took an active interest in Hands on Learning. Sandy Shaw, CEO of Newsboys, recalls meeting with Russell and others from SVA. At this stage, Hands on Learning had branched into other schools. Sandy became aware that the Hands on Learning program at Mornington Secondary College

Others can assist in brokering new relationships.

had stopped operating due to lack of funding. As Sandy describes, "There was a frame for a hut that students had built on the school site. But the building stopped when the money dried up. We thought that it was important for the students to be able to finish the building that they had begun. We funded Hands on Learning so the school could embrace the program fully. Now the program at that school is consolidated with other funders and is running extremely well."

Sandy was very impressed with the robust model that Hands on Learning had created and the effective outcomes for young people. She paved the way for Russell to present to a peer group of foundations and trusts: The Jack Brockhoff Foundation, The Ian Potter Foundation, the R E Ross Trust and Helen MacPherson Smith Trust. Staff from these foundations and trusts were invited to see the program in action onsite. Cameron Wiseman, Funding Manager, Hands on Learning, says this thinking and practice shows, "an enlightened giving and real leverage approach to giving".

Young people are the ultimate beneficiaries. But for young people to benefit fully, those leading and running the program need support too.

the capacity of an organisation. They want to see the grant go directly to the young person, which is fine,

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Later in 2011, through Newsboys, Hands on Learning was provided with some capacity building funding. But as Sandy explains, "So often, foundations won't offer grants to build

the ultimate beneficiaries should be young people. But the young person won't get the benefits of the program if those leading and running the program aren't supported too."

In addition, Sandy introduced the team from Hands on Learning to the Newsboys Chairman and gave them the opportunity to present to the Newsboys Board. "It's important", stated Sandy, "for the Board to also 'get a feel' for the programs we are supporting". More recently, Sandy has introduced Hands on Learning to another philanthropic peer group. "It's not just the 'connecting' that's important" explains Russell, "it's the fact that in doing so, the foundation is saying to their peers that they endorse our organisation and that we have been put through their due diligence – they have taken the time to get to know us."

"At the school level, Hands on Learning provides a solution to a problem that principals do not know how to solve on their own," says Russell "School leaders love that we assist them to identify specialist staff to be employed in their school and training of their teachers and specialists. Both become very well equipped to run the program". Bridging this inside-outside relationship between school and community, adds Russell, "is what teachers and school leaders do not necessarily know how to do."

Members of the small team – a deliberate strategy to keep the operational overhead costs down – train teachers and specialist staff, share their knowledge in project management and offer ongoing support. For example, they work closely with the school and its networks to identify appropriate specialist staff (e.g. a builder) and assist the schools in seeking funding to run the program. "Meeting the staff and students on site is very powerful. You can only convey so much on a website or in a pamphlet", says Cameron.

To date philanthropic supporters have helped build the capacity, and refined and tested the program in action to ensure it is ready to be delivered in secondary schools across Australia.

Take the time to learn about those you are supporting or being supported by.

Find a way to bridge school-community relationships. This assists in building the capacity of teachers and school leaders.

Unexpected events can test your capacity. Innovating can be a roller coaster experience at times.

Hands on Learning has had its ups and downs. When the global financial crisis hit, “we went ‘through the windscreen’ or we would have, had it not been for the generosity of two private funders”, recalls Russell. “They said to me, ‘Russell, we’re not going to let you go to the wall’ and they gave us large donations to get us through the tough times.”

Impact

Stay focused on who you are supporting and what you are trying to change.

With clear capacity building strategies in place and a bit of ‘being in the right place at the right time’, Hands on Learning has gone from a one-teacher initiated in-house program to a fully functioning not-for-profit program in 18 schools across Victoria and Queensland.

Apart from clear organisational and governance structures and processes, key to the success to date is remaining focused on changing the experience of learning for secondary students.

‘Roll your sleeves up’ – learn about the schools you are seeking to support.

Data gathered from participating schools on the impact of the program shows that Hands on Learning increases attendance of students at school (54% reduction in the number of absences). It reduces behaviour problems (83% drop in detentions). 92% of students have moved into apprenticeships or further study. The program, says Russell, “provides an incentive for young people to learn”.

A range of student and parent outcomes and various ways to gather information is evident.

Principals are also finding that parents, who would otherwise struggle to engage with the school, are coming along willingly and enjoying doing so. As Cameron notes, “the young people are proud of their achievements and say to their parents, ‘come and have a look at the pizza oven we have made’.” As Kim Day, the parent of Michael, a Hands on Learning participant at Mornington Secondary College, states, “Without Hands on Learning, Michael could so much have gone the other way. Every kid should have the chance to find something that they enjoy so they can grow and realise that they are capable of achieving and start to look at what is possible in life”.

These positive encounters, says Sandy, are, “basically redefining education for these parents and their children. Students who were otherwise lost are now listened to and their thoughts are taken into account in the development of the program. It’s not just about the ‘building’ or ‘doing’ of ‘X’. It’s about the young people also developing skills around menu planning, cooking and budgeting”.

Really listen to those you are seeking to support.

Students work on creative building projects that benefit the school and local community. In the process they develop confidence, new social networks of support and a sense of personal achievement. “Hands on Learning was the reason I came to school ... everyone treated each other with respect. It gave me confidence, brought me out of my shell and helped me make friends,” says Sarah, former program participant from McClelland Secondary College.

Benefits to the student, school, local community are evident.

In addition to the data the Hands on Learning team gathers, the program is part of a larger study being conducted by The University of Melbourne on early school leaving.



Postscript

Recently, Russell and Cameron caught up with people from the former funder of the Education Foundation. This philanthropist who had supported the Education Foundation was interested to know how Hands on Learning was travelling these days. Ten years on this same philanthropist was thrilled to see that Hands on Learning is now operating in 18 schools. The philanthropist could see the growth of the program and its journey. Through this reconnection, the philanthropist is now going to support the program again.