

***Innovative Approaches towards Peer
Education***

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Centre for the Study of AIDS

The Centre for the Study of AIDS was established in 1999, in the first instance in response to the call by then Deputy President, Mbeki for a Partnership Against AIDS as well as, secondly, with the aim of mainstreaming HIV/AIDS through all the activities of the University of Pretoria.

The Centre was developed to ensure that the University as a whole was able to plan for, and cope with, the impact that HIV/AIDS is likely to have on the institution and the tertiary sector as a whole.

There are currently no reliable statistics available for the rate of infection in students in tertiary institutions.¹ There is no reason to believe that students would be significantly different from the national and antenatal survey projections. This means that the tertiary sector has a current infection rate in excess of 10% - the crucial cut off point for containing an epidemic. All of the Centre's programmes are based on this assumption.

What is Peer Education?

Peer education is a popular concept that implies an approach, a communication channel, a methodology, a philosophy, and a strategy. The English term 'peer' refers to "one that is of equal standing with another; one belonging to the same societal group especially based on age, grade or status". The term 'education' (v. educate) refers to the "development", "training", or "persuasion" of a given person or thing, or the "knowledge" resulting from the educational process (Merriam Webster's Dictionary, 1985). In practice, peer education has taken on a range of definitions and interpretations concerning who is a peer and what is education (e.g. advocacy, counselling, facilitating discussions, drama, lecturing, distributing materials, making referrals to services, providing support, etc.)

¹ Abt and Associates have recently completed a report of the impact of HIV/AIDS on the education system (currently not released) in which they suggest infection rates as high as 25% -this is based on projections rather on surveillance and testing on the campuses.

(Shoemaker et al., 1998; Flanagan et al., 1996). A Peer educator is therefore a person who has been specially trained to conduct an education programme for his/her peers.

Why Peer Education?

Approximately half of all people, who get infected with HIV, become infected before they turn 25². Thus it is crucial that programmes be undertaken within institutions to help young people to protect their sexual health. There has been a lot of uncertainty in how to address HIV/AIDS prevention in young people. Within a South African society there is still the concern that 'too much' sex education will lead to widespread promiscuity and cause young people to become sexually active prematurely. Other programmes have ABSTINENCE as their primary focus, without really giving insight on issues such as sexuality, safer sex and gender equality. Several studies have shown however, that well designed and accessible programmes that combine messages about safer sex as well as abstinence, may delay sexual debut, as well as increase preventative behaviours among young people who are already sexually active. Where youth have been able to access appropriate knowledge, skills and means, they have shown willingness to adopt safer behaviour.

Peer education is widely implemented because it implements the following:

- **Communication:** Peer educators are effective and credible communicators who have inside knowledge of the intended target audience.
- **Behavioural theory:** Peer education is based on behavioural theory which asserts that people do not make changes of scientific evidence or statistics but because of the subjective judgement of close, trusted peers who have adopted changes and who act as persuasive role models for change.
- **Access:** Peer educators have physical and socio-cultural access to target audiences in their natural environments.
- **Cost-effective:** Peer education is a cost-effective intervention because it makes use of student volunteers
- **Accepted and valued:** Peer education is a widely used and implemented strategy that is accepted by the target audience (students) and educators.

² Innovative Approaches to HIV Prevention – Selected Case Studies. 2000. UNAIDS Geneva Switzerland.

- **Participatory nature:** Peer education facilitates the involvement of the target audience.

Designing a Peer Education Programme

When designing a peer education programme, we are not in search of the Holy Grail and one does not need to re-invent the wheel. There are numbers of models and programmes available, one must only select and combine some of them. When designing a programme the keyword is networking, i.e. making contact with people who have done it before. Partnerships will, in the long run, increase the sustainability of a programme.

The experiences of young people vary according to gender, socio-economic status and cultural context. For a peer education programme to be successful, it needs to abandon stereotyped images of young people and take full account of their diversity, while recognising that all young people need accurate information.

Models should also include complementary programme components like: condom distribution/social marketing; psychological counselling; information, education and communication campaigns and materials.

The CSA Programme

The Centre's programme consists of one basic programme and some more advanced programmes.

Basic HIV/AIDS awareness: *this* training is provided for all students who have registered to be part of the UP AIDS Programme. This training covers all the basic facts as well as training in attitudinal work, cultural, racism and gender issues and in AIDS as a development issue. After this basic training students opt for further training in different specialised areas as follows:

- Befriending (peer counselling for students who wish to have an HIV test, students who are HIV positive or students who are affected by HIV/AIDS)
- Community outreach (these students are trained to do community outreach work and are placed with organisations in the community)

- Education and awareness (this training covers more advanced training in education and awareness raising for HIV prevention)
- Research (this equips students to understand and be involved in research around HIV/AIDS, primarily as research assistants)
- Media and resources (these students are trained in the development of HIV/AIDS media and they also ensure that they help to keep the Centre's Resource Library up and running)
- Workplace (this equips students with a basic understanding of HIV in the workplace, policy development and programme development)

The Centre also places students from the above specialisations in areas of focus in the campus such as hostels, the library and in faculties.

In addition there is specialised training as follows:

AIDS in the workplace: this is specialised training to give graduates highly developed skills in AIDS in the workplace management. They will be trained in impact assessment, programme evaluation and design, peer counselling and support, legal and ethical issues and in the labour legislation. They will be trained in presentation skills and in the ways to maintain and sustain a programme.

Advanced facilitation skills: this involves taking students through a five-day train the trainer programme so that they can plan, implement and evaluate HIV training programmes. These students are also used to run the Centre's basic HIV education course.

Mentoring skills: these students are trained to monitor and mentor the students who work in the specialist groups listed above.

At present the Centre is working with close on 500 student volunteers in this programme.

Selecting Peer Educators

Peer educators must be acceptable to the target group and their personality must be conducive to the training and suited to the work they will be doing. The selection of peer educators is the most critical element to programme success. The selection must not be a top-down approach, but it should be a collaborative effort between the trainers (institution) and the target audience. Selection criteria are largely formed by what parties involved would perceive as 'good' peer educator qualities and what the responsibilities will be. This facilitates the transparency of and support for the peer education programme.

The Centre relies on existing structures on campus for the recruitment and selection of peer educators. Resources such as campus newspapers and radio stations can be well utilised in reaching the intended target audience. There are no selection criteria for the Centre's basic awareness training, a lot of students are reached in this manner. 148 Students were trained in the first semester of 2001, since 1999 more than 500 students have received the basic awareness training. Entrance into the other specialist groups is not always automatic, for the Centre's Befriender programme for instance, face to face interviews are conducted.

Training and Supervision

Comprehensive training should include both HIV/AIDS facts and information on behaviour change, participatory techniques (interpersonal and group communication skills) that peer educators can use to engage their peers in problem-solving dialogue about behaviour and underlying sexuality, gender and socio-economic barriers.

The Centre's training is done in workshop format. Experience has proven that students dislike the 'lecture' format. Participation is vital, and the success of any peer-based workshop relies on group dynamics. A training climate should be fostered where students will look forward to training. A good way to judge this climate is to monitor attendance and talk to them to assess their feelings towards the training programme.

The basic awareness training will last five weeks, where-after students fill in a volunteer placement form to identify their area of interest. Advanced training and mentoring are not options on this form since students in these groups are selected on

the basis of interest and commitment. Training in any of the other groups varies in length depending on a variety of issues.

Supervision builds the strength of any peer education programme. There are various ways to supervise peer education programmes:

- On-on-one meetings with the educators; or
- Group meetings to discuss and resolve common problems
- Observation of educators during their activities
- Evaluation of a peer educator's performance and feedback about the evaluation
- Evaluation of peer educator's performance by supervisory staff

Good supervision will identify the need for refresher sessions when needed. Regular refresher sessions or workshops will keep educators at the forefront of new developments in the field.

Evaluation

Sessions facilitated by peer educators should always be evaluated by the participants at the end of the workshop. This will help educators to see whether the aims and objectives have been met and to improve the session in the future. Evaluation will help programme managers to develop effective programmes.

Specific areas to address when evaluating a session:

- Were the overall aims met?
- Were the expectations of the trainer/educator and participants met?
- Was the programme design suitable for the target group and was the skills and knowledge acquired?
- Was the information accurate, relevant, clear and easy to understand?
- Were the methods and techniques appropriate and useful?
- Were the audio-visual aids appropriate and useful?
- Was the time allocated for each module sufficient?

Sustainability

Despite the fact that HIV/AIDS peer education rely heavily on unpaid or low-paid volunteers, it may prove beneficial to generate funds for peer educator incentives, professional and supervisory salaries, materials, training costs, and office space and equipment.

Despite the financial strain on peer education strategies, strategies within tertiary institutions also rely on a short to medium term volunteer corp. Students do not stay at institutions forever, thus the training of new peer educators will form a continuing cycle. The Centre trains new volunteers on a yearly basis and depending on the need, sometimes twice a year, as is the case this year.

New Approaches

Since its establishment in 1999, the centre has been seeking new ways to address an epidemic in a high risk and at times lethargic and conservative university or tertiary environment. Students are tired of conventional approaches towards HIV/AIDS education and awareness. The Centre implements a semi-mass media approach towards awareness and education. Anything from TV commercials on the university's DSTV channel, to provocative poster campaigns and an interactive web site. Finding the right approach will make stepping stones out of most challenges facing peer education.

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