

MindShift

The potential of peer leadership to engage teens in sustainability issues.



Photographs: MindShift

By Alan Warner

A SOLITARY SENIOR STUDENT stands at the front of a high school class in a darkened room with a large screen behind her. She states firmly and quietly, “This is *MindShift*. Please stay calm and in your seats. What you are about to see is real... or is it?”... She departs as the room goes black. Galaxies in space flash on-screen accompanied by eerie, synthetic music. Seven students burst into the classroom as astronauts in full space suits and use metallic foil to set up their consoles over empty chairs or desks. From the front, the captain asks for reports on the ship’s energy, water, terrain, atmosphere and health systems. “All clear” comes back the report from each Lieutenant assigned to a particular system. They are dispersed throughout the class. The Captain orders Lieutenant Decade, who is at the helm computer, to “engage,” and the ship begins to travel through time with images on-screen, starting in the year 1890 with the destination of 2030. The class counts off the decades as they progress, with stops every 20 years for detailed live reports on the status of the ship’s systems from the Lieutenants, followed by responding comments and orders from the Captain.”...

This is the opening to the initial performance phase of *MindShift*, a sustainability peer education program written by and for high school youth, which is currently operating in both high school and community contexts across Canada from

Nova Scotia to Alberta. In schools, teams perform for classes in their school. The team’s hour-long, dramatic, multimedia performance and interactive discussion leads into a second phase in which the team becomes a nucleus of an extra-curricular club (or is part of a current enviro club). This group organizes and facilitates school and/or community sustainability education events through the rest of the year. Typically, two afternoons and a number of afterschool rehearsals prepare the team to perform. This process provides the team bonding that enables the group to work together through the year on sustainability projects of their choosing. In the community context, a youth action team from the Halifax Regional Adventure Earth Centre (a municipal recreation centre), which originally developed the program, provides presentations to youth and adult groups, be they community youth events or adult gatherings and conferences. This team’s action projects are ongoing and interspersed with the performances.

The first of four aims of this article is to describe the why, what and how of *MindShift*, and its underlying peer education approach. All of the program resource materials are freely available on line for use and adaptation by any school or community youth group.¹ Second, it briefly summarizes in-depth research on the learning and growth of youth who have lead the program. Third, it addresses the challenges of implementing a peer education program of this nature and the lessons learned. Finally, it considers the untapped potential of peer education as a tool in working



with youth in education for sustainability.

Peer education has been a very valuable, frequently utilized tool in health and substance abuse education. Despite a range of individual initiatives with respect to environmental and sustainability topics, there has been limited systematic work in this area. Its potential has been largely untapped by students, teachers and community youth groups. Whether MindShift is a program one actually considers implementing, its process and style may be an inspiration and resource for creating any number of other programs in sustainability education.

The Journey Continues...

The performance continues in the classroom. Of course the “ship” is the earth, which the grade 10 students rapidly surmise. The journey does not go well, as reports on the ship’s systems use accurate scientific data to describe the voyage from 1890 through to the present. The status reports for the year 2030 are of course speculative, and result in the ship “crashing” due to the continued actions and inaction of its human passengers. At the climax of this scenario there is pandemonium in the classroom with panicking Lieutenants, rapid fire images of despair, followed by a “Red Alert” and then a powerful crash-bang through the speakers... The scene instantly changes as the lights come on, and a musical interlude enables the astronauts to return to their everyday garb... “Alex”, an average sort of high school student,

wakes up from his or her dream. What follows is a series of dramatic, positive and fun-filled skits portraying how a typical young person can shift their lifestyle and live more sustainably.² The skits start in the morning in the bathroom and proceed through chemistry class to lunch, and then after school to shopping, leisure time, a computer hang out and watching TV ads. Creative human props, be it a garbage can, computer or shower add amusement and spice to the performance. Each skit begins with typical behaviour and following a “shift it,” morphs into positive action taking with the “Shifter” providing background on how and why specific actions make a difference.

The final skit is followed by the youth leaders breaking the audience into small groups in which each performer facilitates a discussion using focused questions to help students reflect on the performance and the issues it raises. The final question is... “What are you going to do to “Shift it”?” In Nova Scotia, the MindShift performance content fits best into the grade 10 science or the grade 12 global geography curriculums. Other areas may slot it into other courses, while community youth teams perform in a range of settings. Some schools reduce the number of repetitions by performing for school-wide or grade-level assemblies. Following the performance, the young people are then invited to join the school’s MindShift Club (or the youth team in a community context) and make a contribution to its broader education efforts around topics such as rejecting bottled water, promoting sustainable food, saving energy or challenging consumer

purchasing. In some cases MindShift is a project of an existing enviro club or green team. Whereas the initial performance is tightly scripted, the ideas and plans for the educational activities are generated by team members in their school based on their interests, opportunities and skills. The team manual is a resource for ideas and processes for action planning.

A range of significant events have emerged from the work of teams in their schools. Two teams have convinced their high schools to operate without power for a day, and there have been clothing swaps, sustainable food events, educational videos and participation in climate change demonstrations. Each high school leadership team has a captain or co-captains as well as a teacher/coach. The coach's role includes: facilitating logistics and permissions with school administrators and other teachers, providing positive feedback and support, problem-solving team conflicts and group dynamics issues and providing continuity and support for recruitment over the years as team members graduate.

Why Peer Education for Sustainability?

Despite the enormous potential and skills of youth to promote change, high schools are a challenging nut to crack with respect to sustainability education. Curriculum crowding, discipline silos, narrowly defined outcomes, youth behaviour issues, and teacher overload all provide challenges to new initiatives. Moreover, there is a broader perception endemic to many high school youth across North America that environment and sustainability is not "cool," something reserved for a few "greenies." Saving energy or eating sustainable food does not rank up there with Lady Gaga, Lebron James or Snoop Dogg.

The initial impetus for MindShift, and the potential of peer education, is to begin to shift these perceptions and the culture of a school.³ Peer influence is extremely powerful among young people. They may rebel against authority figures in their midst while they less consciously absorb the ever broadening marketing and consumerist messaging of mainstream culture, be it through social media, web content, entertainment or professional sports. Athletes are often at the top of the high school pecking order, but the stars of the high school musical are not far behind, hence drama is a valuable and engaging entry point for peer education initiatives.

MindShift was written by a team of seven critical-thinking youth leaders with strong sustainability values who were associated with the Halifax Regional Adventure Earth Centre. They shared a strong commitment to make a difference for a better world, an intimate understanding of their everyday school culture and the support of adults keen to facilitate and promote their efforts. There are others like them in schools across around the world—they need to be engaged. Though they came from different schools and parts of the city, they quickly bonded and found fun and fulfillment in their time together. From the beginning of a year-long writing and piloting process, they were clear that a successful program needed to be interactive, edgy and dramatic if it was to catch the attention and respect of their peers. It had to be written in their language for their context with their words and humour. Peer education through drama works because the development and rehearsal process requires extensive interaction, team building, challenge,

risk and peer support. Ultimately, when drama is performed well, the actors receive the respect and admiration of the peer audience who recognize their commitment, skills and excellence. The peer education process in turn translates into learning and growth for its leaders.

Learning and Benefits for Peer Education Leaders

In 2009-2010, Cate deVreede as part of her graduate research at Acadia University, completed in-depth interviews, surveys, participant observation and focus groups with 23 of 26 youth leaders across three high school MindShift teams.⁴ Students began their work with their teams in September and worked as a part of MindShift through the year. She interviewed these leaders half way through the year and again at the end.

In brief, she documented important learning and growth for youth leaders in areas such as positive environmental habits, skills for action, sense of empowerment, positive environmental attitudes, knowledge of sustainability, interpersonal relationships, and taking action for sustainability. *Every high school leader reported multiple lifestyle changes, with an average of five different behaviour changes per leader. One student explained:*

The little things, the habits, like turning off the lights, and ... unplugging things, ... I feel like those started when I first joined *MindShift*. Ah, I need to be as *MindShift* as possible! But then stuff like, my cutting back on eating meat and like biking to places, and... taking the bus ... all the, kind of, like, bigger things have kind of developed in the past couple months... the more involved I got with *MindShift* the more I transferred it over to a more permanent habit.

An increased sense of both individual and collective empowerment was also evident in the words of many. Here are a couple of examples from team members:

I learned that I could put myself in a situation that I never thought I would do and I can actually succeed in it. And, I learned that I can be more out there ... I can be louder and get my opinions expressed and I can make a difference, which is really cool. ...I never really took part in something before that really made me ... go out there and do something.

It's the fact that [*MindShift*] involves ... youth showing confidence and youth showing how they actually know what's going on in the world and they actually have an opinion and that they want to do something about it. ... [A]dults... just kind of say "oh... they're just taking up space", but we have an opinion, we know what's going on and we want something done about it.

The research went on to identify the elements that youth attributed to the changes that they had reported. There were four key factors identified as bringing change: the support of peers, making a meaningful contribution, being in a teaching/

leadership role, and having a sense of youth ownership. These seem to be valuable characteristics for peer education initiatives related to sustainability. They are touchstones for anyone designing a peer education program.

Implementing MindShift: Processes, Challenges and Lessons

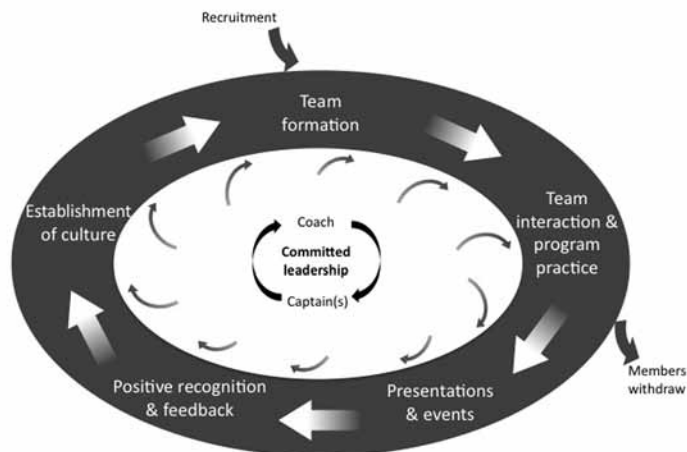
MindShift has brought many benefits to the youth and schools implementing the program but it, and peer education in general, is not a magic bullet. There are challenges that need to be acknowledged and addressed in implementing this approach. Initially it was hoped that *MindShift* would have a team in all Halifax high schools within five years, but in fact there is a strong presence in approximately a third of the schools, some presence in others depending on the year, and no uptake by others. Here are four key challenges that have been grappled with over five years. Further detail on strategies to overcome the challenges are provided on-line in the *MindShift* team manual¹:

- Youth and Coach Recruitment*: The initial youth developers came from four high schools and three of those schools launched successful teams the first year, largely inspired and facilitated by the youth. They were able to recruit peers and identify a supportive teacher to serve as a team coach. Recruiting other students was less of a challenge than finding a coach who was up for taking on a year-long extracurricular commitment, had the required respect of youth, and the ability to work with them in a youth-adult partnership. The youth from one school attracted a coach who has provided continuous support across years, and a strong and vibrant *MindShift* culture has developed there. In another school the youth struggled to find the right coach and the team has been intermittent over years. In a third instance, a teacher initiated and built a strong and dynamic team. Particular teams have had very successful years almost wholly as the result of effective student leadership. But without a supportive coach, teams have fallen apart in subsequent years when the leaders have graduated. A favourite *MindShift* saying is that the “youth make it happen but the coach ensures it continues.”
- Youth Team Training*: Beyond providing the program resource materials that are available on-line, the Halifax Adventure Earth Centre has facilitated a yearly training session for youth from high school teams on a teacher inservice or weekend day in the Fall. This has evolved into a five hour session in which the new youth see an actual performance and then talk about their team roles, before immediately jumping into presenting the skits to each other in a spontaneous, improvisational format. They then return to their schools and do an intensive session as a team, plus a few weekly rehearsals, before presenting to classes. Seeing a performance is key to building a commitment among volunteer youth. Performing spontaneously for peers on the first day breaks down the anxiety of being “on stage” before peers. Youth also greatly value meeting other youth interested in similar issues from other schools and seem to draw significant support from recognizing that they are not alone. Though there are back stage roles organizing performances or subsequent educational events, the drama performance is the initial focus for teams.
- Supportive Coach and Captain Roles*: The peer education teams follow a common life cycle over the year as portrayed in the figure. Success appears to be fueled by supportive leadership from both the coach and the captains. Recruitment is an initial challenge, but once achieved, the second key is establishing a positive team culture through the rehearsal process. If teams bond, they can move to perform within a few weeks. This brings positive feedback and recognition, and the subsequent education events and actions tend to proceed smoothly. On the other hand, if there is conflict and/or a lack of attendance and commitment in the early sessions, then teams may stumble and members withdraw, potentially threatening the ability to continue as every role must be filled. Captains facilitate this process but coach support is important both to provide affirmation and positive feedback, and to problem solve conflicts when the captains are unable to resolve issues. Effective coaches have had very different styles, from being on top of everything that happens to rarely being present. They seem to share an ability to step back and support and

Accessing MindShift

The *MindShift* website at www.earthed.ns.ca/mindshift, provides the detailed seventy page team manual including the performance script, strategies for training, team-building, logistics issues and event planning. The website also includes a brief two page overview, a manual for coaches, and a manual for participating grade 10 science teachers on ways to incorporate the performance into their curriculum. All of these materials are free downloads but credit is to be given to the *MindShift* Development Team and the HRM Adventure Earth Centre. They would like to know if and how youth and teachers are using the materials, and what they have learned and adapted as the result. The website provides details on arranging community presentations in Nova Scotia. Based in Dunnville, Ontario. DREAM (www.dreamfwb.com), a community-based and school affiliated youth organization provides both high school and community performances.

MindShift is in its fifth year of implementation in Halifax, five to seven urban high schools participating per year. The *MindShift* youth development team won the Nova Scotia Youth Eco-Heroes Award for their work. The performance piece has been presented many times as a keynote, receiving standing ovations at a wide range of national, regional and local conferences for both youth and adults. The second generation performance team traveled to central Canada in 2011 to present the performance and workshop youth on implementing it in schools there.



The Life Cycle of MindShift peer education teams (deVreede, Warner & Pitter, in press)

empower the captains and youth to lead. Strong captain-coach communication is key. Ultimately the coach must be willing and able to step in and be respected when needed. Having clear role expectations from the outset facilitates success.

4. *Time Commitment and Logistics.* MindShift, or any other engaging peer education program takes time, both from youth members and the coach. This needs to be recognized at the outset so that those volunteering appreciate the commitment they are making. Youth, particularly those interested in leadership opportunities, tend to be busy. There is time competition from academic, work, social and other extra-curricular commitments. Inevitably, youth prioritize what they value and when a team provides a strong, positive atmosphere early on, they then commit and the program spins into a positive self-fulfilling cycle (see figure). Captains and coaches play key roles in facilitating logistics such as finding suitable meeting times and then working to ensure everyone turns up. Food and fun are huge assets when it comes to getting everyone there.

From High School to Community

At the outset, MindShift was designed by students for high school students. The initial design team practiced and performed together as a means to spread the program. First parents and friends, and then professional colleagues heard about and wanted to see the performance. They came and were impressed enough to then spread the word through their adult networks. Soon organizers of adult and youth conferences and community events began calling to request community performances. Many tears have been shed by adult audiences as the performance hits home on current global trends and the power of youth as role models and leaders of change. Adults have left performances and taken significant steps to change their own behaviour in concrete ways. After a large portion of the staff of the Halifax Regional Municipality had seen MindShift, they upped the design plan for a new public library from silver to gold LEED designation.

The original design and performance team has passed

to a second and then a third generation team as older youth graduate and move to other locales. In this case, the youth culture of the Adventure Earth Centre maintains a strong performance team. The main challenges with the community performance team are in facilitating drives for youth to arrive from disparate homes, and in freeing them of school commitments when requested to perform during school hours. The evolution of this community performance team has been as powerful as it has been unexpected. Youth, when performing with sophistication and passion, have an ability to help adults “shift it” in ways that adult speakers do not. The call for the need to preserve and protect the planet for future generations is particularly powerful when it is dramatically portrayed by youth who are making a difference. This community-based MindShift process indicates that the program, or others like it, need not be school-oriented. Community youth groups can shift their communities by performing and working outside of school contexts.

When the initial MindShift design team first sat down together, the goal was clear: to have a significant impact on helping a broad range of youth to shift toward a more sustainable lifestyle through high school presentations in the curriculum. They wanted to make sustainability “cool”. This and other remarkable accomplishments have occurred on the five year journey. The potential of peer education and leadership experiences for sustainability education is immense. Yet the accomplishments have been tempered by reality. It can be a difficult process to identify coaches and bring high schools on board. Effective coaching and leadership is key and yet not always readily available. No program or approach works without passion, commitment and skills from those involved. Finding them in every school has been challenging. The evolution of MindShift is ongoing, but it has already changed lives and the wider community for the better.

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Notes

1. See the “Accessing MindShift” sidebar for details.
2. The skit portion of the MindShift performance was inspired and in parts adapted from the work of the Otesha Project (www.otesha.ca), with their support and permission. We are forever grateful to them and encourage the support of their programs.
3. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZueBsdKdFU for a video example of an initiative to shift a school culture and a school board with respect to bottled water that came about as a result of MindShift student leaders. This was spearheaded by Grace Hamilton-Burge (performing the rap) and her teammates at Citadel High School in Halifax.
4. The full copy of the thesis including a program evaluation is available from Cate deVreede at catetrueman@gmail.com.

References

deVreede, C., Warner, A., & Pitter, R. (in press). Facilitating Youth to take Sustainability Actions: The Potential of Peer Education. *Journal of Environmental Education*.