Road safety – Education or engagement?

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# Abstract

Recent increases in the road toll, particularly in first world countries, have produced a renewed concern and desire to tackle this social issue. More education is usually called for and politicians are often keen to run publicity campaigns. Community road safety campaigns are genuine in their intent but in terms of maximising success, quite a number are questionable.

In the past the method of changing behaviour could best be described as being in the style of “parent-to-child” communication. The stern lecture about how you must “change your ways”.

This paper reviews the authoritarian approach of early road safety campaigns and outlines an alternative approach which is not just about making better one-off messages. It embaces an active listening, on-going approach that accepts that people must discover and own their solutions.

# Introduction - Threats, Urgings and behaviour change

If you are caught drink-driving with a blood alcohol concentration over 0.15, you are likely to have a drinking problem rather than this being just a one-off aberration. Hingson, R and Winter, M (2003) said “..fatally injured drivers with BACs of 0.15 percent and higher were twice as likely to drive after drinking at least weekly (40 percent vs. 20 percent), and three times more likely to be rated as a problem drinker (31 percent vs. 10 percent)”. If this is the case, then a series of threats and pleas to “do the right thing” are unlikely to bring about change. You will need to understand and address the underlying problems.

While other driving offences may not have the stigma of drink-driving, the issue remains that the behaviours are often a result of imbedded attitudes and behavioural patterns. A person whose phone rings while they are driving, for example, is unlikely to think about a generalised warning on road safety and is more likely to be motivated by FOMO - the fear of missing out. Furthermore, the person on the other end of the line is indifferent to the situation of the driver. This is true of all drivers, not just the young.

There is an ever-evolving acceptance among health professionals that problems such as addiction, obesity and depression are not resolved with a “sit down, shut up and listen” approach to the sufferer. Reporting on the opioid crisis in America, CBSN had an article titled “Health experts to Trump administration: treat addiction like a disease” (CBSN 2018). There is still some debate about calling it a ‘disease’ (Centre on Addiction - undated) and we should not ignore short term fact-based warnings, but a successful, holistic approach must have an understanding of the factors that lead to the problem and the recipient must ‘own’ the solutions.

In 2016 the International Congress of Behavioural Medicine was held in Australia under the auspices of the International Society of Behavioural Medicine (ISBM undated) and I spoke to some of the participants. The papers and discussions resonated with some of the more recent developments in road safety. These recent developments need to be embraced by the public, parents and politicians because we will not reduce the road toll by an old-style approach of one-off threats and urgings to do the right thing.

This paper addresses the need for a major shift, across all stakeholders, in accepting and applying the science of behavioural change rather than the all too frequent righteous indignation.

# Extreme example of the old approach to road safety

In 1947 The NSW government released a [short film on a road safety](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Enxook7yZg) (Road Safety Council of NSW (1947). It was called Alice in Blunderland and was a classic example of communication in the “adult to the child” style even though the characters were of driving age. The film can be seen on YouTube and can be found by entering “1947 NSW sexist road safety ad” in any search engine.

The premise of the film is that Alice is a scatty blonde who goes to the city to buy a new hat and is much more concerned about the hat than she is about driving safely. At one stage Alice pulls out from the kerb without looking and another driver blows their horn. The voice over says that Alice would “give that driver a piece of her mind... if she had any!”

While the sexism of the film now gets most attention, it is the style of communication that that needs closer consideration because, to some degree, we are persisting in this approach.

In the film, Alice then goes and meets her boyfriend who also suffers from inattention when driving. They have a crash and are taken away in an ambulance. Subsequently they are given a lecture by a policeman in academic gown and hat, writing on a blackboard. The young adults sit in a classroom, at times wearing a dunce's hat. This is a classic example of a patronising, moralising approach where the authority figure has all the wisdom which they have to instil in young people even if that means belittling them.

# Other flaws in the approach

The problem of the old-style approach is more than just sexism and a patronising approach.

We have made important improvements to our approach but the typical media reports of bad crashes or the road toll trend are the usual hand-wringing which make the following mistakes:

## Fixing the action rather than the root cause

Road safety community promotions are usually based on what researchers have found to be the specific factors at the time of the crash. One of the consequences of this approach has been to try to teach people how to control the vehicle once they find themselves in a dangerous situation. ‘Advanced driver training’ has proved, on average, to have negative consequences because it gives people more confidence to travel at higher speeds (Beanland et al 2011)

Research from MIT suggests that a crash is rarely just one sudden mistake (AITPM 2017b). By filming many drivers over a long period of time they could recognise tell-tale signs before the final mistake. Fatigue, for example, is not just the final act of falling asleep, it is the lifestyle and recent decisions you have made that put you in that situation.

## ‘Shock and Horror’ images

There has been a strong push to show the consequences of dangerous driving – so called “shock and horror” ads. There have been wide spread reports that this type of advertising, while memorable, does not work (The Times 2003). Sadly, while people remember the ads they don’t think it applies to them and there has been little changing of behaviour (Parry, S. et al 2013).

## Point-the-finger lectures

How often do we start a road safety talk by blaming people for their behaviour? In their video titled ‘The difference between life and death’ (Safe Journeys 2015), the NZ Government’s Safer Journeys strategy refers to this as the ‘point-the-finger’ approach. I have done a considerable number of interviews on radio where the interviewer starts out by pointing out all the wrongs young people are doing when driving, but often ends up admitting they have done similar things.

## Vague Messages

When advertising campaigns have focused on issues such as speeding and drink-driving, quite often they are surrounded by vague advice such as “drive safely” which along with messages such as “don’t speed”, can mean different things to different people.

## The approach assumes we have malicious intent

While we have to accept that our driving behaviour can be wrong, it is often assumed in the public mind, especially toward young people, that ‘they’ are wilfully, even malevolently, breaking the law.

Driving on the road is a derived task arising from the culmination of many factors. Consequently, we have many things on our mind, not just steering a vehicle. They can all affect our judgement on what we do and why we do it.

The Safe System approach, which is the cornerstone of the NZ Government’s Safer Journeys strategy, recognises the interaction of many factors and professions that need to be incorporated in reducing the road toll. This is not just a matter of physical infrastructure. It is the social context in which we live. We all make wrong decisions on the road, but not all are malicious. The problem is clouded, however, when we judge actions that are high risk or involve some anti-social behaviour such as road rage, as being justified because of our driving skill or the actions of other people.

## One-off messages

This approach is based on the old-fashioned concept of a classroom where pupils are told something (with the occasional revision) in the belief that they will remember the information and apply the message in all future situations.

# If we listen, youth culture has something to say

In 1970, the artist then known as Cat Stevens released a seminal album titled “Tea for the Tillerman” (Stevens 1970). One of the most successful songs from that album was titled “Father and Son”.

In the song the father offers generalised advice to his son. He tells him to settle down and take it easy, his fault is that he is still young and he still has a lot to go through and things to find out. The father does try to be “modern”, telling the son that he should settle down with a girl but he doesn't necessarily have to get married.

The son’s reply is one of frustration that he has received a lecture which does not address his particular situation. In part he says “From the moment I could talk, I was ordered to listen”. He then goes on to say “If they were right I'd agree but it's them they know not me”. Clearly the story is of a son who has received a continual stream of information that he does not relate to. Ultimately, he has to go away to develop his own solutions to his own problems.

# A more complete approach

There have been some significant steps in road safety communication but we need to make a more dramatic advance, a quantum leap.

Liz Ampt is an international expert on transport survey methods and practices. She was the project manager on the first Sydney Household Survey in the early 1980s and has developed techniques in this area for many years. These surveys identify the trips people are making and most importantly, the reasons why they are making them.

This deep understanding of the motives behind travel has led Liz to establish a second string to her professional activities. She has founded a company called [Concepts of Change](http://conceptsofchange.com.au/) which has an approach of focusing on the person, not the problem. Liz is an innovator in using voluntary behaviour change thinking and practices to change individuals, organisations and communities. She is sought after to teach and enthuse others on how to run their own programs.

Her community projects have resulted in reduced water use by 19-21% compared to the control group and reduced car use by 18% when the control group increased by 6%.

The very core of this approach is not just to occasionally ask people “do you have any comments” or “how do you think my approach will apply to you”. Specifically, interviewers do not offer solutions.

In an [interview for radio](http://drivenmedia.com.au/wp/transport-planning-what-transport-needs-do-we-have-and-are-experts-the-only-ones-with-solutions/), (Ampt 2016), Liz described her approach in a project to encourage less car travel. In part she said:

*- - - but if you really want to change behaviour and achieve those results that you mentioned earlier, the best way to do it is to ask them if they want to change and that way you'll get a completely different solution. So the method that we use, for example, is to say “When was the last time you were in a car and wished that you weren't”. Everyone has an answer for that and our next step is usually to say “and have you thought of a way of solving that” and doing it that way, people come up with their own solutions and as you probably realise, in life it's much better when you come up with your own solution and often those solutions are not something we would have recommended at all, it wouldn't have been in our palette of tools.*

By asking open ended questions that are not designed to lead to a preconceived solution, you are getting to the motivations and personalised solutions that can bring about change.

The approach does not negate the need for measures such as better infrastructure and policing. The Australian and NZ Random Breath Testing campaigns have significantly reduced the amount of drink driving, but there are many issues that cannot readily be addressed by a police enforcement function and there will always be people making mistakes without breaking any laws. Equally, being aware of the consequences is also still part of the equation. NZ Safe Systems believes that too many people are not considering the potential consequences of what they are about to do when they get into a car.

# Can you learn without being told the answer?

If you don’t tell people what the solution is, then how can they learn?

In the annals of philosophy there is a classical reference to an experiment where a person developed an elegant solution without prior knowledge of the subject. It is the story of Meno’s slave.

To convince his student, Meno, that learning is not just being told the solution, Socrates picked one of Meno’s slaves who had little or no knowledge of mathematics. He asked the slave to develop a proof of Pythagoras’ theorem (in a right triangle the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares on the other two sides). By letting him draw squares with diagonals, and by only giving him feedback on his own thoughts, the slave was able to work out an understanding and a solution. At no stage did Socrates give any mathematical insights.

Plato, who wrote up the story, concluded (as noted in (Crease 2009)):

*Enforced learning will not stay in the mind. So avoid compulsion, and let your children's lessons take the form of play.*

Commenting on this story Robert P Crease (Crease 2009) in his book “The Great Equations – The hunt for cosmic beauty in numbers” makes the following comment:

*Acquiring knowledge is not like putting things someone else gives us in a mental warehouse, but a back-and-forth process….*

# A specific example of a new approach

In her interview Liz Ampt (Ampt 2016) provided the following example:

*There was a lady, who when I asked her “When was the last time she was in a car and wished that she wasn't?” She said “Oh I shouldn't really say but I don't want to drive my child to school. You know I never get to read the paper I always seem to be spending the morning taking my child to school”.*

*So I said to her “Well have you thought of a way of solving that?”.*

*She said well “Yeah it would be great if somebody else could take them every second week but I don't even know anyone - we've only just moved here”.*

*Liz asked “Well can you think of something. How could you find out who you could share rides with?”*

*She thought for a minute and said “I know I could ask my son in school who of his friends’ parents lived near us” which is what she did and that's the way she found a way to alternate weeks driving to school.*

As a transport planner, I might have jumped in and told her about the benefits of using public transport or how walking or cycling can make you fit because I like those ideas even if I have no idea how applicable they are to the other person. Liz and I are now looking at how this approach can be applied in road safety.

# How would you respond in these situations?

Here are a few situations where I have had to make comments about road safety. I have listed the circumstances and what I was tempted to say. I have left the comments I made, which I hope are helpful, to the next section of the report as I do not want my answer to indicate that it is the only approach. It would be helpful if you firstly think of your own ideas and then compare them to what I did.

## Driving too fast

It was raining and I was driving at the speed limit a good distance from the car in front with my 16-year-old boy. He is keen to get his learner’s permit and licence. He said “You are driving too fast”.

What I could have said: “I am travelling at the speed limit, I have been driving for many years and have a lot of experience so I judge what I am doing to be safe”.

## In a car with a dangerous driver

My son’s mates are starting to get their driving licence. There will come a time when they will offer to give him a lift and I am concerned that they will show-off by driving dangerously.

What I could say: "Research shows that you are in much more danger if there are a number of your peers in the car. Be very careful about being in a car with other young people”.

## Peer pressure

I recently had a conversation with a young lady who had just finished school. She said that her immediate goals were to go to parties and then go to Schoolies Week (in Australia there is a trend for young people to holiday with their friends after they finished all their schooling. This is the biggest focus in the Gold Coast in Queensland at that time. Alcohol consumption is a major part of “having a good time” at Schoolies).

What I could have said: “I am concerned about your safety particularly if you are in a car with others. Research clearly shows that the more of your peer group in a car the more likely they are to encourage the driver to take dangerous risks”.

# Possible conversation starters

I am sure there are many ways to continue the above conversations. Any suggestions would be gratefully received and possibly used in further papers and media activities. For the record this is what I said:

## Driving too fast

What I did say: “What speed do you think I should be driving at?” The next question would be “What factors do you think are important in setting the speed?” Subsequent discussions: “What are the conditions like and what speed do you think I should be driving at?”

## In a car with a dangerous driver

What I did say: “Which of your mates is likely to drive like an idiot when you are in the car with them?” My son immediately named a particular friend. It was the person I would have said but it was much more important for him to be the one who identified the problem. I should have then asked him “How will you cope with that situation?” and/or “How are you going to tell him you are not happy” or “What alternative transport might you look for?”

## Peer pressure

I asked the young lady what she would do if she found herself in a car that was being driven dangerously. She said she would fake an epileptic fit. I tried to take this further and say she could pretend to be carsick but she did not want to discuss my comment. She continued to talk about her solution. I think this is quite understandable. Because she had thought about the problem and devised a solution, if it didn’t work I am sure she would try other things. I could have gone on further and asked her about what her girlfriends thought about such a situation and if they might have a united front in telling male (and female) drivers that they all do not want to be associated with dangerous situations.

# It is not just a short, intense process

Dr Laura Berman, (Berman 2009), a New York Times’ bestselling author, wrote a book titled “Talking to your kids about sex”. The sub title of the book “Turning ‘the talk’ into a lifetime conversation”. This is the definitive description of how we should look to road safety ‘education’. We need to have conversations with people rather than just a one-off talk and it needs to be a two-way conversation with an emphasis of where they are coming from. We cannot rely on governments, schools or other authorities to conduct all the conversations. We need to empower parents, friends and mentors to take up the type of conversations that allow people to identify and implement their own solutions.

# How do we measure success?

Obviously, a reduction in road deaths and serious injuries is the key measure.

Evolving technologies in motor cars could also provide much more behavioural feedback. Scientists are developing sensors which can understand feelings, in a bid to make driving safer. By integrating biometric sensors into cars this will allow, for example, the vehicle to detect when a driver is tired or stressed. The information could be used by the car to issue warnings or take corrective action but it could also be collated to get an assessment of the driver’s performance for their own feedback.

The principles of this approach have a foundation in enhancing relationships. By working with health professionals and those involved in the social sciences, on-going measures in areas such as family interaction could be explored. Road safety could well be considered as one subject for programs to enhance family and community interactions rather than just an isolated project. In this way the program may be more effective and its impact more measurable.

Like the solutions, the outcomes can be unexpected. In the example Liz Ampt talked about in section 8 above, they conducted a further interview after the person had applied her own solution which reduced her car driving and gave her more time to read the newspaper. Liz mentions one aspect of the outcome:

*She said “You know what happened? I was at a dinner with my husband for work and I was chatting to his friends and when we came home my husband said to me ‘Darling, I didn't realise you could talk about politics the way you did. I was really proud of you’” and so she said “using my car less made my husband love me more”.*

# What next Do we need to do?

We have a list of people who are interested in being kept informed and possibly participating in the development of this approach. They attended a round table discussion at the 2017 ARRB conference where the subject was initially raised. Anyone who is interested on being on that list should contact me.

Liz Ampt and I would like to do a trial project along the lines of the successful behavioural change programs she has conducted in other areas. To achieve this, we need to find relevant stakeholders who are prepared to champion this approach. This would include transport, health and education experts and community leaders.

Once we have solid support, we can seek funding for the project.

# Conclusion and recommendation

Road Safety is a health issue. Changing behaviour is more than just telling people what we think is important to them.

We need solutions that people know are relevant to them and they know when and where they should be applied. The way to this is for people to be facilitated through a process where they will identify their own situations and find the solutions that will become their own.

To progress this project as effectively as possible would require the working together of transport, health and education experts and community leaders.

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