



Governance International Case Study

Close To — Peer Training of Learner Drivers by Offenders in Austria



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Introduction

Young drivers tend to engage in risky behaviour and don't fully understand the risks of driving, which often leads to serious accidents. In every European country, this group is particularly vulnerable to accidents.

“Yes, accidents happen – but not to me” is a widespread belief among young learner drivers. Even when they have had sound training in their driving schools and been subjected to major publicity campaigns aimed at preventing accidents, many young people remain insufficiently aware of the risks they run as car drivers – and particularly as learner drivers.



Close To is an ambitious national project in Austria, with the objective of reducing the high number of accidents among young drivers. It follows up the EU project *Module Close To* and is now being rolled out in Austria by the Mobility Research Agency (*Forschungsgesellschaft Mobilität*).

1. Objectives

The project has the objective of significantly reducing the number of accidents within the target risk group of young people.



2. Change Management

The co-production approach of the project is very simple and effective: Young offenders between 17–28 years old add to the theoretical training given in driving schools by telling their peers in a very direct and authentic way how they caused an accident (in most cases under the influence of alcohol) and by using their own cases to point out the implications of risky driving. The fact that the offenders are of the same age and meet with their peers face-to-face during the driving tuition creates an emotional closeness between the offender and the driving school pupils. The principle of peer education means that young learners are directly confronted with the experiences of young offenders. This approach breaks down the normal distance between trainer and trainee – it holds up a mirror to the young drivers, in which they can see reflected their own behaviour, and its likely consequences.

The peer trainers tell about their experiences within a training unit provided by the driving schools: What happens to a young person who has caused serious injuries or even the death of a person? Why did he/she drive under the influence of alcohol? What kind of judicial, economic and social consequences does he/she have to suffer? The peer trainer raises all of these issues by sharing his personal experiences with the learner drivers.

The recruitment of peer trainers, who are often still serving their prison sentence, is often done through the courts. In other cases, offenders volunteer when they learn about the project in the media. Typically, the offenders have

to attend a preparatory training programme, where they themselves learn how to deal with their accidents and its consequences. Afterwards, the offenders are helped to prepare their presentation, working together with a peer coach, before actually delivering the training to learner drivers.

In the meantime, peer trainers are now also being recruited to work in vocational schools, training centres and companies. Since 2010 even the Austrian army has integrated peer trainers in its driving lessons for young recruits.

3. Outcomes

Some statements from the learner drivers demonstrate how much they were affected by the contributions from the peer educators and their discussions together:

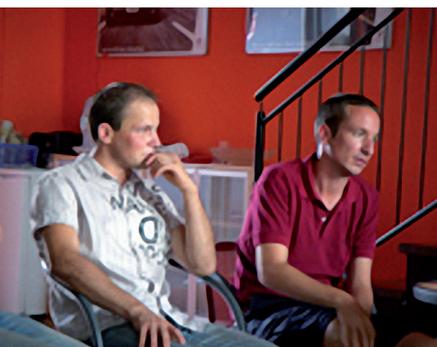
“I have sometimes been driving home slightly drunk but luckily nothing happened. However, since talking with the peer educators, I will never do that again.”

“Before I got my driving license, I thought ‘Why not drive after drinking?’ Since I talked to the peer educators, I now think about this differently. Since I passed my driving test, I have never driven after I have been drinking.”

In particular, being able to get close to the peer educators, who are after all just young people of the same age, has made a deep impact on the learner drivers and has influenced the level of risks they take:

“This story has opened my eyes. Most of the time, you think that this can never happen to you or to somebody close to you. But when somebody tells you about an accident, right in your presence, you understand that this can happen to everybody.”

“It is easy to read about accidents in books and magazines but to meet somebody who has gone through an accident makes everything more real”.



“You can easily forget that accidents happen every day. So it is better to hear about the reality from somebody who has actually been through such an experience, than reading anonymous statistics.”

Furthermore, peer education and emotionally-charged learning have a sustainable impact on the views of learner drivers. Many participants were able to remember the stories of the offenders months after the presentations:

“I remember their stories. It is useful having somebody explain to you what can happen because reality can be terrible.”

“From time to time, I think back to the discussion.”

As well as changing the behaviour of the young learner drivers, the project also aims at behaviour change on the part of the peer trainer. The repeated confrontation in public with his/her own behaviour, which brought about the accident, and their reflection on their behaviours during the preparatory training, done with mentors, support the re-socialisation of these offenders and help to change their behaviour. Offenders often say that they are happy about being able to prevent others from making the same mistake that they did:

“The project *Close To* gave me the chance to deal with the consequences of the terrible accident I had. When I tell learner drivers about it, I believe I can change something in their heads. What happens when you are drunk and still drive is so evident to them through my personal fate.”

In the meantime, Austrian courts have recognised the positive impact of the peer training on young offenders. Many judges increasingly recognise participation in *Close To* as an alternative or complementary punishment or use it instead of a fine or prison. Furthermore, participation in the project is recognised as one reason for reducing the punishment, e.g. by granting early parole.



4. Performance indicators

In Austria more than 10,000 learner drivers have already participated in *Close To* in the period from May 2008 to March 2011. More than 370 training sessions have been delivered by peer trainers in driving schools, military facilities, companies, training centres and schools. It is intended that the number of training sessions will increase to 570 in 2011.

An evaluation of the project by the organisation Mobility Research Society (*Forschungsgesellschaft Mobilität*) shows that the project has a significant impact on the behaviour of learner drivers. It interviewed 1448 learner drivers from 40 driving schools in Austria, just after they left the driving schools and then interviewed 330 of them again by phone 3–12 months after the training. The control group included 663 learners driver, of which 262 were interviewed twice. More than 93% of interviewed learner drivers said that the peer trainers had won their attention. More than 86% thought that the peer training had made them aware of the risks of road traffic. 89% suggested that they will drive more carefully in the future as a result of *Close To*. On the other hand, learner drivers in the control group, who had not participated in *Close To*, tended to exhibit much more risky behaviours.

The responses of the interviewed learner drivers also provide evidence on the sustainability of the co-production approach. 80% of the learner drivers could remember details of the story they had heard from their peer trainer – including even details of the fines paid by and prison sentences served by the offender, and the number of people who were injured. 72% of learner drivers indicated 3–12 months after their participation in the *Close To* project that their driving behaviour had been influenced by the presentation of the peer trainer.



Costs and Savings

The overhead costs of the project have been financed by the Austrian Department for Traffic, Innovation and Technology. These costs included public relations and the recruitment and training of offenders. The costs of the training sessions are covered by the agencies commissioning the peer trainers. Typically, the costs for one session by a peer trainer, including the tailoring of the presentation to the target group concerned, are €250–300. So far commissioners have included the state government of the Steiermark, the Federal Defence Department, Austrian Railways and many driving schools.

There has been no economic analysis as yet of the savings resulting from *Close To*. However, apart from the human suffering as a result of road accidents, economic analysis suggests that there are significant economic costs amounting to over €1.76m from the loss of performance due to the death of even one person between 15–19 years old in a road accident.¹ This shows the value for money of prevention of road accidents.

5. Lessons learnt

The project *Close To* is an effective co-production approach which influences young drivers to reduce the riskiness of their driving behaviour in a sustainable way. The involvement of peers who can provide authentic experience to other young people helps to promote responsible behaviour in future car drivers. In particular, this approach has proven to be very sustainable as it has a strong emotional impact on the young learner drivers.

¹ BMVIT (2007): Forschungsarbeiten aus dem Verkehrswesen. Unfallkostenrechnung Straße 2007 unter Berücksichtigung des menschlichen Leids, Band 177.

6. Further information

Website of the EU Project Module *Close To*: <http://www.close-to.net/>

Website *Close To* in Austria: <http://www.close-to.at/>

Projekt *Close To* – Prevention work by offenders as a chance for reduced punishment (in German): http://www.close-to.at/docs/file/close_to_in_richterzeitung_juni_2010.pdf

Video: *Close To* in the Austrian Army: http://www.bmlv.gv.at/download_archiv/videos/videogalerie.php?videogalerie=berichte&id=36

Video: Feature programme on “Juvenile criminal justice” for the TV programme *Oberösterreich heute*:
<http://www.close-to.at/index.php?ID1=10&id=10>

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