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Moving Beyond Apathy to Environmental Action

by John Fallis

It's so nice here compared to Toronto. The air is fresh and the water is so clear. You people don't have any problems.

The city is such a polluted mess. I'd like to help out but I don't know where to start, plus, it seems hopeless!

These are comments of frustrated, environmentally aware high school students who have participated in residential school programs at the Boyne River outdoor and environmental education centre. During their stay of up to a week, their lives have been enriched through a range of outdoor, hands-on, learning experiences. They may have gained a new perspective of the land through cross-country skiing. They may have learned something of the diversity of life through a stream study. Students may

have challenged themselves through ropes-course activities and gained self-confidence. Through regular informal evaluations with students and teachers, we felt we were achieving many of our goals. The students reported more knowledge and awareness of their environment. They often developed a greater feeling of self-worth and a greater understanding of each other. Despite this positive feedback, this new understanding about themselves and the environment was not leading to responsible environmental behavior, but instead to frustration and apathy. Our students are aware of current environmental problems, but they don't know what to do or how to do it. Our objective was to develop a program which culminated in positive environmental action.

The purpose of this article is two-fold: (1) to provide an example of work in progress which suggests that

residential school experiences can be a valuable springboard to help students take environmental action in their schools or communities, and not simply a place to promote environmental appreciation and understanding; and (2) that programs have much to gain from staff members taking the perspective of reflective practitioners (Schon, 1982)—critically evaluating their practice and developing theories, concepts and strategies for change based on their own educational context, rather than simply relying on theoretical knowledge handed down from academia.

The 5R approach (Recognition - Research - Resolution - Responsibility - Revision) to environmental action planning proposed by Glew (1988) provided both an organizational framework through which we designed the pro-

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gram and also an educational process for the students to move through in order to achieve practical environmental action goals. Our work to develop this program originated in our reflections on students' perspectives of what we were and were not achieving. This reflection brought a clear *recognition* of the environmental action problem. We then *researched* the problem, came to a *resolution* through an initial program design, took *responsibility* for implementing it, and then evaluated it and moved on to *revision*.

Research

Our research involved lengthy outside discussions with students, visiting teachers and other educators in the province who were involved in action strategies, not simply academic research and consultation with experts. The need for an action component, which we had recognized based on our experiences and discussions, is not included in Ministry of Education curriculum guidelines for Ontario Courses. For example, the Intermediate and

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Senior Environmental Studies Guidelines state the course should provide students with opportunities to:

- analyse, explain and evaluate the nature of, and the reasons for, human modifications of natural and built environments;
- investigate local environmental issues and suggest solutions to them;
- evaluate their attitudes, values and responsibilities with respect to the use of the environment. (Ontario Ministry of Education 1988)

However, there were outside models which supported our research. The objectives of the Skills Mentorship Action Research Model (Hammond, 1985) were similar to ours. It proposes that "participants must develop political efficacy, group dynamic and communication skills through practice; determine and implement the action research focus; and implement their initial action project. Once they have completed a successful action project they will be empowered to succeed without the mentor support system" (Hammond, 1985). This model had been successfully used in a high school environmental education seminar designed "to help students acquire and refine skills through practical experience in addressing significant community problems" (Hammond, 1985).

Based on the discussions and research, we decided the program had to include the following three components:

- 1) *Factual content:* The students needed more facts. They felt unsure of themselves and ineffective being "emotional biologists."
- 2) *Interpersonal skills training:* The students needed to develop effective group problem-solving and decision-making skills.
- 3) *Development of a support mechanism:* Student contact with a teacher was felt to be important if students were to be effective in implementing change within a school. This person should understand the bureaucracy within the school and provide advice, criticism, and encouragement.

Program Design—Resolution

One planning approach to a residential week at Boyne River involves working with a group of teachers from several schools to develop a multi-school approach to a specific goal. This method allows a group of teachers the freedom to design a program to meet their own objectives. The objective of our multi-school program was to move students from awareness, through knowledge, to action on an environmental issue.

One teacher with approximately twelve interested students was invited from each of six different high

schools to participate in a five-day fall residential experience in 1989 at Boyne River, followed by a one day evaluation conference the subsequent May in Toronto.

The 5Rs approach now also provided the framework for structuring the students' experiences. It had been successfully used with grade seven and eight students in the City of Waterloo, Ontario (population 80,000), to deal with the issue of water use. Because of this effort, and the efforts of other agencies, water shortages have been minimized in the city through a significant reduction in demand by students, families, and other members of the community. The 5Rs were defined in relation to the environmental action goals as:

Recognition is awareness. In our case most of the students come to us with some recognition of environmental problems.

Research is the cognitive input that enables the students to become informed citizens. The students collect information on an environmental problem.

Resolution is when the students make decisions in light of the consequences. This is the normal end of a school project. The students have collected information and then make a value-based decision.

Responsibility is crossing the apathy line and applying their values and knowledge.

Revision is when the students respond to new data and assess their progress.

This progression was articulated to students to help them understand how the program was to be organized so that they would realize that the May conference would evaluate their commitment to responsibility. The true measure of program success would be whether students had taken significant environmental action in their school community come May 1990 when they would report to us and to each other.

Implementation—Responsibility

In October of 1989, the pilot five-day residential program was run at Boyne River for the teachers and students from each of the high schools. During the first three days they spent all of their time in an interest group gaining more knowledge on a selected environmental issue. This was the recognition and research phase of the plan for them. The students selected the issue of their choice.

The topics, as determined by the Centre staff, were waste management, water quality, wetland conservation, forest practice, and land use. Topics were selected that had global implications, could be studied at our centre, and had applications to the students' lives in Toronto. For example, the waste management group did a waste assessment of the Boyne River school and then devised

a waste reduction plan. The water quality group learned how to do various water quality tests on the Boyne River, assuming that they would use these same tests in their local watershed in Toronto. The land use group went through the process of designing a master plan for a proposed provincial park nearby. From these experiences, the students learned about the different agencies involved in land use planning and how to become involved.

2. *Needs assessment:* What does their school need to be environmentally friendly? Brainstorming was used to design an environmentally friendly school. This design was then compared to their school community.

3. *Decision-making analysis:* This was a workshop on how decisions are made with reference to leadership and power.

4. *Defining the action plan:* The students were asked to democratically design a reasonable action plan for their school using the previous three stages.



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Dave Secunda

The action plans were presented to each other on the last morning. One school was going to raise money so the students could go to the Temagami wilderness area to protest against logging practices. Another was going to approach the student council with a plan to implement a litter-less lunch program for all students. A third was going to plant trees in part of their school yard. By presenting these plans, the students realized that they were making a commitment to take action.

The students departed environmental zealots armed with information

and skills to make a positive change. When asked to name two things that they learned during the week, the top two responses were: factual information and the importance of organization.

For all of these topics, outside experts were integrated into the program to deliver current information. The high level of expertise to which the students were exposed proved to be a significant motivating factor. They realized that they were receiving relevant information from people with significant environmental credentials. During the last two days of the week, the more demanding resolution phase occurred for them. The students were put back in their own school groups with their teacher and asked to come up with an action plan for their school. The visiting teachers served as group facilitators. The stages of this process were:

1. *Community self portrait:* This was an activity designed to have the students realize who they were and how they fit into their immediate community. A role playing activity known as sculpturing was used. Each student takes the role of one part of the community and the sculpture is formed by joining these parts together.

Evaluation and Revision

May finally arrived. The participants reported on their actions and a new group of interested students was invited to observe. Hopefully, the observers would form the nucleus for the next program. Four of the six participating schools had done something. Their accomplishments included: paper recycling in the school; formation of an environmental awareness club which acted as an environmental watchdog within the school and community; local water testing combined with a month long clean-up of a local creek; and participation in Earth Day activities which included tree planting in the school yard.

It is interesting to note that several schools completed alternative action plans to those they designed during the residential experience. Their original plans proved to be unrealistic but they felt a responsibility to carry on with

their commitment to action.

During the second section of the May conference, the students evaluated the program and made recommendations for the future. They examined such questions as why some groups were successful and others were not, did they have adequate knowledge to attempt a project, did they have the necessary skills, did their teachers help, and what should be changed in the following year's program.

In the fall of 1990 we ran another five day residential experience. The program was changed to accommodate both our own recommendations and those of the initial group of students. Wetlands and forest practice were deleted as topic areas while energy and food production were added because the students expressed particular interest in them. More emphasis was placed on developing students' decision-making skills and less on collecting factual information because the students realized that their ineffectiveness, and their difficulty generating support within their schools, was due to their weak group problem-solving and decision-making skills. This change in emphasis was implemented by introducing problem-solving work on the first day of the program and focusing the entire five days on the design of a realistic action plan with all students sharing in the ownership of it. Also, the role of the visiting teacher diminished, not by choice, but because of practical problems in keeping them involved in the entire program. One positive result of this diminished teacher role was the development of student action groups which were self-directed and self-governing. The role of the visiting teacher will probably change again once we design a practical method to include them in the planning of another program.

These changes are significant and the initial response has been favourable, but the ultimate success of this second week will be determined by students' reports on their actions at the end of the year. Will they have built a solar heater for their pool at school? Will they have removed all disposable serving materials from the school cafeteria? Will they have staged a piper style march through the streets of Toronto to raise awareness on environmental issues? Will a school greenhouse be built?

The clearly defined action plans provide a powerful set of criteria for the evaluation of the success of the students and the program. This evaluation provides new input for reflection and revisions in the future.

This is an exciting project for the staff at Boyne River School which we hope can become a viable model to develop environmental activism at the high school level, but more trials will be necessary to gain hard data and any degree of certainty. Over the next few cycles we hope to gain more insight into fundamental questions which remain unanswered. Can environmental activism be taught? If so, is formal school the appropriate venue? What effect does a staff mentor have? If one allows students to design their own project and proceed without teacher support, what effect does this have on the success rate?

The project is but a start in developing the kind of empowered environmental activists that our planet needs.

Notes

1. Boyne River Natural Science School is an outdoor and environmental education centre 90 km northwest of Toronto which is owned and operated by the Toronto Board of Education. There are twelve teachers and a complete support staff employed full time at the school. When the school opened in 1973, the name of the school was appropriate, but now it tends to be misleading. The focus is not natural science but changes from week to week depending on the needs and objectives of the teachers and students who are involved.

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