

Issue:

Youth are searching for a passage from childhood and school.

This begs the question:

What is a comprehensive model for rites of passage?

Answer:

Combine Walkabout (challenge areas) and accelerated model (powerful learning experiences)

Youth are searching for a passage from childhood and school to adulthood. In the process, they seek **challenges**. They know from experience dealing with challenges leads to self-discovery. Puberty puts youth on the path of self-realizations. Because puberty is a purely physical event and something they have no control over, it may be one of the few things youth truly regard.

Compared to so-called primitive societies, post-modern America offers neither official or pro-social rites of passage, nor the challenges that provide youth the format and specific rites that lead to adulthood. Official rites, no; but youth, due to the ontological nature of psychological development, put into motion by puberty--simply put--must show others they are no longer children and so act-out, through their own peer culture conceived rites and challenges, this universal event.

Consequently and unfortunately, most of these peer-conceived challenges and rites are anti-social activities. Smoking cigarettes, consuming alcohol and/or drugs, having sex, joining a gang, being a mother or father, going to prison, and other **risk-taking** behaviors are what the youth subculture has created as ways youth can prove they are no longer children.

To get a better view of what happens to youth after puberty in different societies, let compare America with the Australian aborigines. The aboriginal rite of passage, the **walkabout**, is a 6-month long test during which youth must survive alone in the wilderness and return to the tribe as an adult or dies in the attempt.

In contrast, we prepare and test our youth's readiness--their demonstration of the knowledge and skills necessary for them to be a contributor to society--with written exams. These exams test skills very removed from actual experience they will have in real life. Our high school students write; they do not act. They solve familiar theoretical problems; they do not apply what they know in strange, but real situations. Our youth are under direction and in a protected environment to the end. They do not go out into the world to demonstrate that they are prepared to survive in, and contribute to, our society. Their preparation is primarily for the mastery of content and skills in the "disciplines" and has little to do with reaching maturity, achieving adulthood, or developing fully as a person.

The isolation the walkabout involves is in sharp contrast to the high schools. In an extended period of solitude at a crucial stage of development, tribal youth are confronted with challenges to their competence as well as their inner and spiritual resources. In our large schools, students are seldom formally separated from others. There is little formal opportunity to confront their anxieties, explore inner resources, and come to terms with the world and their future. Finally, unlike the predominately left-brain orientation of our schools, the outback experiences accentuate the **right-brain** development due to challenges that require heightened sensory

perception, instinct, and intuition. Just read Marlo Morgan's *Mutant Message Down Under*. As well, check out Patrice Somé's, *Of Water and Spirit*.

Our Western view of schooling makes abstractions out of such events. It creates exams that are sucked dry of the richness of experience, in the end having little to do with anything directly critical or even significant that students can anticipate being involved in as an adult—except the pursuit of more formal education and more written exams. And yet, it is clear that what will matter to students and to Indiana is **not their test writing ability or even what they know about, but what they feel, what they stand for, what they can do, and what they are becoming as a person!**

However, schools are there to educate; schools are not in the rites of passage business...or are they?

Surprisingly, what has just been discussed sounds like the **powerful learning experiences** of Hank Levin's Accelerated Model (Levin, 1989). This experiential approach is similar to the traditional outcomes of the walkabout concept. Students get academically, emotionally, and experientially involved in solving a real-world issue or problem. Through research, assessment, and proposals students produce and carry out solutions. What if Marion County schools were able to educate students while at the same time providing rites of passage—where graduating would also be graduating from youth to adulthood?

Fortunately this is exactly what nationally acclaimed educator and youth advocate Maurice Gibbons asked over 30 years ago in the May, 1974 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, "Walkabout: Searching for the Right Passage From Child to Adulthood."

<http://youngspirit.org/docs/SelfDirectedLearning.pdf>

- *What would an appropriate and challenging walkabout for high school students in America be like?*
- *What sensibilities, knowledge, attitudes, and competencies are necessary for a full and productive adult life?*
- *What kinds of experiences will have the power to focus student's energy on achieving these goals?*
- *What kind of performance will demonstrate to the student, the school, and the community that the goals have been achieved?*

To answer these questions, Gibbons suggested these guidelines for making a model that would work for students in a high school in his *PDK* essay:

"First it would be experiential, not virtual; not knowledge about aerodynamics and planes; not flying a simulator, but the experience of solo flight in which the mastery of relevant abstract knowledge and skills is manifest in the performance.

"Second, it should be a challenge which extends the capacities of the student as fully as possible, urging him to consider every limitation they perceive in himself as a barrier to be broken through; not a goal which is easily accessible, such as playing an instrument they

already play competently, but a risky goal that calls for a major extension of their talent, such as earning a chair in a junior symphony or a gig at a reputable under-21 club.

“Third, it should be a challenge the student choose for himself. The major challenge for youth in our society is making decisions. In some societies there are few choices; in technological societies like ours there is a bewildering array of alternatives in life-style, work, politics, products, possessions, recreation, dress, relationships, environments, etc. Success in our lives depends on the ability to make appropriate choices. Yet, in most schools students make few decisions of any importance and receive no training in decision-making or in the implementation or reassessment cycle, which constitutes the basic growth patterns. Too often graduation cuts students loose to muddle through for themselves. In this walkabout model, teachers and parents may help, but in a Carl Rogers style—by facilitating the student’s decision making, not by making the decisions for him. The test of the walkabout, and of life, is not what he can do under a teacher’s direction, but what the teachers has empowered him to decide and to do on his own.

“In addition, the trial should be an important learning experience in itself. It should involve not only the demonstration of the student’s knowledge, skill, and achievement, but also a significant confrontation with himself: his awareness, his adaptability to situations, his competence, his nature as a person.

“Finally, the trial and ceremony should be appropriate, appropriate not as a test of schooling which has gone before, but as a transition from school learning to the life which will follow afterwards. And the completion of the walkabout should bring parents, teachers, friends, and others to share the moment with him, to confirm his achievement, and to consolidate the spirit of community in which he is a member” (p. 598).

Using the above criteria as a basis, small schools have the opportunity to use the following challenge area in combination with course outcomes, state graduation requirements, and students’ needs, interests, and career goals to create a situation were students not only fulfill the requirements for passing particular high school courses and general state graduation requirements, but also have experiences and the various rites of passage that signify a break from childhood and the entrance into adulthood.

CHALLENGES AREAS

Adventure and Field Experience: a challenge to the student’s daring, endurance, and skill in an unfamiliar environment. Adapting, changing and observing new places with a sense of excitement and curiosity, students grow and widen their perspective on life. Particularly related to science and social studies, the challenge involves activities outside school. Movement combined with new ideas is bound to constitute an adventure.

Creativity and Enrichment: a challenge to explore, cultivate, and express one’s own imagination. The challenge culminates in an esthetically pleasing form. Students are encouraged to venture outside the classroom to meet this challenge, which includes both content (experiencing) and process (doing).

Service: a challenge to identify a human need for assistance and provide it; to express caring without expectation of reward.

Practical Skills: a challenge to explore a utilitarian activity, to learn knowledge and skills necessary to work in that field, and to produce something useful. Practical skills are not usually taught in high school, but are important for functioning in society. Students will challenge themselves to master skills they feel will help them function as an adult.

Logical inquiry and research: a challenge to explore one's curiosity, to formulate a question or problem of personal or academic importance, and to pursue an answer or solution systematically and wherever appropriate, by investigation. This challenges students to satisfy their curiosity by research, scientific experiments, surveys, interviews, and other types of investigations. Finding will be presented in a comprehensive and organized manner.

Cognitive Skills: a challenge to take on the responsibility to develop basic academic competencies necessary to survive intellectually and to provide leadership in most communities. Although course competencies are already defined for students, the challenge lies in how much they extend themselves in fulfilling them.

Futurism and decision-making: a challenge to pick a situation and create possible outcomes based on various scenarios. This is a challenge to identify alternatives in the decision making process, evaluating how each one might affect their lives and the lives of others. We make a number of decisions every day, and as an adult, students will have to make even more.

This is the framework not only for a successful simultaneous passage through high school and adolescence, but a test of passage for the staff and the school itself. We, as adults and school staff, cannot deny students what we ourselves seek by creating small schools: the opportunity to test our limitations, imagination, curiosity, confidence, hopes, and endurance—simply put, the process of individuation. The school is a metaphor for what is required of the students--recapitulating the very acts and challenges the students will tackle in order to graduate and become adults. Every one in the school will be doing what the walkabout concept is. It is no coincident that both the aboriginal elders' goals for its youth and the goals of our school, for both staff and students, are the same:

- gain knowledge
- use all our skills and abilities
- apply knowledge to real problems
- see tangible results and act accordingly
- have time for introspection and to assimilate what we have learned, and...
 - all through the trial of "school" itself.

If we deny students the opportunity to be channeled through various rites we will deny ourselves the opportunity to learn from them these very important lessons. Researchers Herbert & Otto's article gives these insights:

- **Adolescents are fully engaged in the process of clarifying and developing their identity—they issue the challenge, a reminder to adults that identity formation is a life-long process.**
- **Adolescents are at a point of major impetus in self-actualization and enfoldment—they symbolize the human potential actively committed to self-realization.**
- **The adolescent is a growth catalyst, offering adults a challenge and opportunity to grow with and through them.**
- **The adolescent represent a force for social and institutional regeneration—a challenge to our school to be an example of what a restructured high school will look like.**
- **The adolescent represents the wave of the future—the nature of their being and the quality of their developing self foreshadows the man or woman of tomorrow—this is a challenge to adults that their time is soon to pass and it is nearer the time to pass on the key to the next generation.**

The educators must realize that youth seek the right passage from childhood to adulthood. In many institutions in America the rites passage are not offered and the youth innately create their own. The public schools have an opportunity to facilitate this very impotent transition. The school and the staff will be in the process of self-actualization. We cannot deny this same need and opportunity to our students.

References

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- Somé, P. (1994). *Of water and the spirit: Ritual, magic, and initiation in the life of an African shaman*. New York, NY: Putnam.

Resources

- Nancy Lesko. Reading Reflection #1: "De-naturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations."
<http://alannaevolves.blogspot.com/2012/09/reading-reflection-denaturalizing.html>

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