

## **Environmental Action – How do we Make It Happen**

– Leigh Hobson

For the first time in my life, I marched in protest. The Provincial cutbacks to Education awoke in me a desire to stand up and make a difference, to be an activist. In reflecting on the momentum of that day in Hamilton, I found myself wondering why I put so much more energy into that issue, when I feel much stronger about environmental issues. A similar question has been with me since I finished a thesis exploring the impacts of an integrated outdoor education programme. How do we foster environmental action in students?

I was fortunate enough to be part of Mayfield's first integrated outdoor education programme, ROC (Roots of Courage, Routes Of Change). During the five months this programme was in action, I got to see first hand the powerful impacts of experiential education. For my final year thesis, I decided to explore what the students got out of this programme eight months after it was over. Many gems were revealed, too numerous to mention in one article; however, the question of empowering environmental action came out loud and clear.

The driving force behind ROC was to 'increase environmental awareness, knowledge, and commitment to action through outdoor adventure activities, field work, in-class studies, community involvement, and cultural journalism' (Barrett, 1994). One outcome I wanted to discover was the degree to which students became environmentally active community members. Did they continue to 'do' once the programme was over? From the individual interviews, I quickly encountered a mix of enthusiasm and guilt. All of the students I talked to remained very dedicated to the environment on a personal level, even encouraging their friends and family to follow their example.

'I talk to my friends and I'm trying to lead by example...I've started bringing a cloth napkin to school instead of paper towels. Some of my friends have seen that and they think, 'Gee, that's kind of stupid' to begin with, but later on they're kind of getting the hint...they don't have the nice matching Tupperware that I have, but they bring margarine tubs and stuff! (C)'

'I don't throw out pop cans anymore. I haven't joined a club or anything, but I still make sure all the recycling gets out on Thursday nights...I make sure the rest of my family does it too. (K)'

In the relatively short period of between the completion of ROC and my interviews, I can report little dedication to environmental action on a larger scale. Think globally, act locally sums up the outcome of their action. It has been argued that environmental education has done little to change the way our culture treats the earth (The Conservation Council of Ontario, 1986; Horwood, 1989). Thirty-five years of thinking globally acting locally have failed to elicit the courage to make significant changes on a large scale. Why is this so?

I ask this question to the students themselves during our focus group discussions. It is evident that they care about the earth and are concerned about human impact. So

what is stopping them from pursuing greater environmental action? The students responded as follows:

‘Time is a major factor! We were given time last year, but now we have to use our time to do other things like homework during our lunch or spares. (K)’

‘In a small group where you know everyone. You feel more comfortable reaching out, but in a big group of strangers you don’t want to make a bad impression so you just kind of go with the flow and don’t swim backwards (C).’

‘It’s hard to make people change!...It’s not that I don’t want to, it just doesn’t seem like it’s worth it when you don’t see the results. It’s frustrating! (G)’

These concerns are completely valid; however, in accepting them, we leave ourselves with the same dilemma – the failure of environmental education to promote action. Horwood (1989) and Robottom (1987) have advocated the need to focus on the spiritual elements of environmental relationships. Students need to go further than intellectualizing about environmental issues. They need to ‘feel’ them deep inside. They have to connect with the environment, so that when the earth is ill, they feel ill. To do so, Horwood (1989) suggests introducing them to special places where they simply feel the atmosphere surrounding them. Educators need to emphasize relationships with our fellow beings and encourage learners to appreciate the gifts of the earth.

Looking back at the activities of ROC, it is evident that M.J. Barrett (their teacher) was well aware of the importance of these connections. She dedicated a great deal of energy to foster these spiritual ties to the earth. Why then do we not see a greater dedication to environmental action among ROC alumni? I believe that the answer lies in the form of ROC and all other integrated outdoor education programmes are forced to take. As it stands today, these programmes make up an extremely small proportion of a student’s academic career (typically one semester in length). As put by one student: ‘ROC was like a vacation that you can come back from and say ‘I went to this Island and this is what I learned’.’ Experiential learning on the whole was very new to the students of ROC. It opened their eyes to a whole new way of thinking about their education; however, it should not be expected to completely transform their paradigm. It simply did not have enough time! So what do we do about this dilemma? How do we ensure our efforts are not suffocated by the pressures faced once students leave the womb? How do we encourage students to continue fostering their own connections to the earth? How do we feed the flames of environmental action?

Perhaps we can start by extending their experience. Not so much in the programme, but through a support network created once the programme is over. M.J. made significant efforts to keep her alumni in touch with ROC through alumni letters, invitations to speak to future classes, and suggestions of learning opportunities to explore. This approach worked extremely well for one student:

‘I helped M.J. with a journaling workshop (at a C.O.E.O. conference)...I was there with all these teachers who were exactly like they were in ROC...Being there that whole day, I realized I guess I had missed ROC more than I thought, ‘cause suddenly I was back

among friends. So I started journaling again and I've been journaling ever since that weekend...it's coming back to me finally! (H)'

From my brief experience as a protestor, I realized that being an activist isn't easy. It takes more than dedication to a cause. It takes time, energy, and most of all, support. Only then can these new connections to the earth transform into environmental action on a large scale. This challenge is the responsibility of both the teachers, to help students along the fragile bridge between the island and the mainland, and of the learners, to take a chance and go against the flow.

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