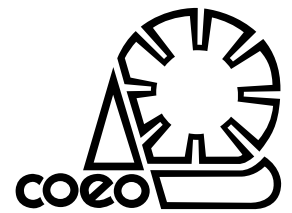


Pathways

THE ONTARIO JOURNAL OF
Spring 2022, 34(3)

OUTDOOR EDUCATION



Pathways

COEO

Formed in 1972, the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) is a non-profit, volunteer-based organization that promotes safe, quality outdoor education experiences for people of all ages. We achieve this by publishing the *Pathways* journal, running an annual conference and regional workshops, maintaining a website, and working with kindred organizations as well as government agencies. Members of COEO receive a subscription to *Pathways*, as well as admittance to workshops, courses and conferences. A membership application form is included on the inside back cover of this issue of *Pathways*.

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Pathways

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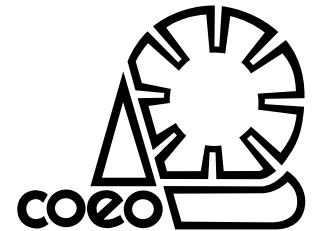
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I am thrilled to be the guest editor of this theme issue of *Pathways* examining the great and unique values of school-sponsored canoe trips. I am also honoured to have such varied and passionate voices from experienced kindred spirits across the country. Some are veteran authors for *Pathways*. For others, this is first-time contribution. For all contributors, this is about connection.

We start with an earlier unpublished version of the Op Ed that COEO President Karen O’Krafka and I wrote for the *Hamilton Spectator* last fall. This one includes memorable quotes from both teacher and student participants.

Next and from B.C., Sonya McRae evocatively refers to the Indigenous roots of this very Canadian pastime. Middle school students enthusiastically paddle ocean coastlines in 26 and 35-foot canoes. Settler ways of being yield to much older and deeply respectful ways of being. Interconnection is square one.

Jason Blair, Katie Gad and Paul Gifford are all veterans of four-credit high school integrated programs that have positioned back country canoe tripping as a touchstone experience. Jason speaks of the “inherent ability” of the canoe to foster connection and community. Katie describes how such trips enable connections to nature and to each other that in turn inform and empower young people to address global issues such as climate change. Paul explores how geography and history combine to make natural Canadian landscapes become alive

and relevant. Once again, connection is implicit throughout these pieces.

Tim O’Connell from Brock University takes us beyond anecdotal evidence. He shares current research on how adolescent canoe trips foster both personal and social development that continue long after the experience. The development of “place attachment” (another word for connection?) is also noted.

Michelle Brown readily correlates her desires to make a real difference as a teacher with taking students on canoe trips. Experiential trial and error combine with moments of stillness and reflection to create lasting foundational memories. Accomplishment, Community, Serenity — all can be achieved through school-based canoe trips.

James Raffan powerfully recalls the 1978 Temiskaming canoeing tragedy that led to the drowning deaths of 12 teenaged boys and a university student leader. And, yet, the resulting “vilification of canoes and canoe tripping” is totally unjustified. Risk is a part of being alive. We must make every effort to be safe. We must continue to offer such formative experiences.

And, finally, Bob Henderson adds his playful and whimsical perspective on this uniquely Canadian pursuit. It is, in so many ways, our rite of passage.

Grant Linney
Editor



Sketch Pad – Katie Sweet is a secondary school digital arts teacher from Barrie, Ontario. As an illustrator and writer, she loves making comics and teaching kids how to meme. She’s created all of COEO’s conference posters since 2011. @hexacosm hexacosm.com

The chorus of frogs is welcoming spring. The tender emergence of spring ephemerals are whispering through last year's leaf litter. I've seen bloodroot and round lobed hepatica, two that spark hope for the greening to come. The season of carefully harvesting ramps for pesto is almost upon us, and as migratory and winter weatherers mingle, the birds are singing their hearts out. I hope you are out embracing the spirit of spring renewal.

In this spirit of renewal, the COEO board have begun the triennial process to review and revise the council's constitution. This vital document articulates our membership organizations' values, vision and goals and Watch for an updated version of the COEO constitution that will be released for your input in advance of the 2022 annual meeting at our fall conference.

We've been celebrating spring with lessons learned in the garden. Thanks to M Nowick who celebrated the Joy of Garden Based Learning in our April Wednesday webinar. They shared the power of GBL to support connection to food and farming, and encourage food literacy in youth. They also demonstrated the power of GBL to promote diversity, inclusion, and mental health and wellbeing, as well as building muscle with "farm gym". They sewed so many seeds of inspiration.

We are also sewing seeds amongst our membership. We are excited for awards nominations this spring, hoping to celebrate with bountiful outdoor educator awards to present at our 50th anniversary conference. Nominations are open for our 5 annual awards. These awards provide an important opportunity to recognize individual and group efforts, as well as to celebrate the many and varied expressions of outdoor education within COEO and the province of Ontario. We have a few years worth of awards we might present. Each award holds particular significance - celebrating

everything from emerging professionals new to the field of outdoor education with the Amethyst Award to the Honorary Life Membership which recognizes the substantial and lasting contributions of long-time and esteemed members of COEO who are a vital part of its traditions and successes.

This year is especially significant as COEO turns 50. The long lists of award winners stretch far back to our earliest founders - firefighters and tenders through so many seasons of outdoor education. I recently stumbled upon a beautiful tribute to our 1984 Robin Dennis Award winner, Jean Wansborough (1927 - 2022) who passed away this Spring. Jean was a founding member and conference presenter at our first conference. As the tribute noted, she received the award for outstanding contribution to outdoor education in Ontario, for her inspiring, pioneering accomplishments and influence and notably her "train the trainers" role in spreading outdoor education and outdoor leadership competencies". In a post celebrating her contribution to OE on our facebook page, Charles Hopkins shared "Jean was a wonderful spark plug in the 50s and 60s, building bridges between conservation ed and outdoor ed. Always a cheerful person with her sleeves rolled up to get things done - A true OE pioneer."

This fall we will celebrate members who have spent decades rolling up their sleeves, and pioneers kindling new fires of outdoor education. Who would you like to celebrate?

Wishing you a wonderful spring season.

Karen O'Krafka
President

Ensuring Safety While Celebrating School-Sponsored Canoe Trips

By Grant Linney and Karen O’Krafka

The following is a different version of an Op Ed that was published in the Hamilton Spectator on November 19, 2021. It includes direct quotes from both student and staff participants.

The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) mourns the tragic and avoidable death of 15-year-old Jeremiah Perry during a 2017 school-organized canoe trip in Algonquin Park. Last fall’s “not guilty” verdict in the criminal case of the lead teacher is not the end of this matter. Lessons must still be learned, responsibilities assumed, policies updated, and compliance assured. This devastating incident cannot happen again.

We know that Ontario students do not all have the same opportunities for outdoor education. As we address this inequity, we must also carefully follow safety procedures to maximize the benefits of these transformative experiences and to keep students safe.

We make a distinction between spending much-needed time in nature—in “what made you”---and our all-too-common absorption with the artificial constructs of “what you made.” The former can create awe and humility; the latter false arrogance and destructive superiority.

When students go on a multi-day canoe trip, they commit to “what made you” while leaving screens and routines behind. Direct and memorable encounters with the natural world and with each other are now possible, as evidenced by student observations:

- “I learned that I am more capable than I thought.”
- “I never knew what I was missing by hiding indoors.”

- “Even though we had it easy compared to the ways people camped a long time ago, I still think of this trip as roughing it. Up till now, ‘roughing it’ to me meant having only two outlets.”
- “It felt like I could just be myself, in the moment, completely focused and involved in whatever task I was doing.”
- “It is so peaceful out here, so vast and yet so magnificent. Each tilt of the head gives you a totally different aspect. This lake and its wonders are my picture gallery, where my mind can run free.”
- “I loved the experience of making my own paddle and using it on the trip. I can look at it and say, ‘I made that’ and it will always be a reminder of the hard work I put in and how much fun I had.”
- “I wanted to keep going with this group of people because they helped me and I helped them. I would like to do this again ... I will never forget all this.”
- “Now we are like family. We have been through many adventures learning to work together and to help each other out.”

Teachers leading canoe trips share these observations:

- “Canoe trips are about connection: connection to land, connection to a group, connection to one’s own abilities and purpose. Connection is what brings meaning to education. Without it, students are alone.” (Katie Gad, Upper Grand District School Board)

- “The character and resilience gained on a canoe trip carry directly into the classroom and forward into life. Kids learn that they are stronger, both mentally and physically, than they think. Canoe trips break down socio-economic barriers between kids; students learn to appreciate and value those who are ‘different’ from their peer group. There are very few learning opportunities within a high school that have as long-lasting learning as a canoe trip.” (Bill Schoenhardt, York Region District School Board)
- “So many firsts: sleeping in a tent; cooking a meal; the satisfaction felt at the end of a long portage; relying on someone other than your parents; seeing wildlife; a front row seat to the Milky Way; connecting with peers and teachers around a campfire.” (Deborah Diebel, Blue Water District School Board)
- “School-based canoe trips are often the first and possibly only experience students from non-privileged families will get.” (Kyle Clarke, Lakehead University)
- “On a backcountry canoe trip, students connect with nature, each other and ultimately themselves in ways simply not possible in the confines of a traditional classroom. It is this type of profound connectedness to self, community and nature that will spark the next generation of environmental leaders to action.” (Jason Blair, Halton District School Board)

COEO believes that the outstanding benefits of school-sponsored canoe trips, together with all the necessary preparations, procedures and follow-up present a convincing case for the continued offering of such experiences. To ensure both safety and success, these trips demand commitment to established provincial standards by all involved. It is everyone’s responsibility to ensure this happens.

Karen O’Krafka is the current COEO President. She has been an outdoor educator for two decades. Grant Linney is a retired career outdoor educator whose exuberant forays into OEE started as a counsellor at Camp Kandalore in 1971. (Yikes!)



Canoe as Teacher

By Sonya McRae

Həyšx'qə. I give thanks to the Lək'wəŋən Peoples, the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations, on whose unsundered lands and waters I do my work and my learning and whose ongoing relationships with the land, ways of being and traditional technologies make my work possible. As the Big Canoe Program Leader at a middle school, I am honored to share experiences and receive knowledge from working with educators (Brenda Pohl, Pam Russ, Sarah Rhude, Gerri Sam, Dr Butch Dick, Dr Elmer George), skippers, and pullers from First Nations communities. Thank you.



PART ONE: The Questions

I want to write this article. Working toward validating and honoring the canoe as teacher may be my life's work. And yet here I am in front of my computer for the umpteenth time banging my head on the table in frustration. This is familiar. It is like I am a student again with a task that requires a set of skills that I am not good at, my ideas dissipating and my belief in my abilities disappearing the longer I try. Does this sound familiar to you? Do you see these students in your classrooms? Have you ever sat back and seen—really seen—those students that are struggling to succeed in school?

I see students walk into the classroom with confidence: they are where they belong; they will know the answer today and they will share their knowledge; they are learning. And I see students hesitate at the door of the classroom: they are unsure; today they will be confused and frustrated; they don't know if they are where they should be. In our school, the students denied educational assurance are predominately Indigenous living on reserve and/or from working class families—students whose families walk in a

settler colonial¹ capitalistic world imposed on their homeland and ways of being².

If only I could take you all out with me in the canoes, tell you stories and explain my understanding of the value of this work. I could show you the ways that the daytrips we take every Wednesday and Friday with a class of students into the local area are vital for the opportunity they give students to experience how all things are interconnected. Instead, all I have are these tools that I use in a clumsy unpracticed way.

My weekly schedule is dictated by the tides and the wind. This is a gift, experienced by the lək'wəŋən Peoples³ on these waters since time immemorial. Our school was constructed on the shores of an inlet at the end of a waterway where the ocean floods in and ebbs out daily. For generations this waterway carried snóx'wəł, canoe, pulled by the ancestors of the Esquimalt and Songhees Nations into their villages—out to their fishing grounds. This waterway carries the descendants of the same families today and will continue to do so tomorrow. Within this expansive timeline and these deep relationships between the people and these lands and waters, I am but a newly arrived and briefly introduced visitor.

Each canoe journey may only be a day in experience but it was tens of thousands of years in the making⁴. It is my understanding that the lək'wəŋən Peoples became who they are because of how the lands and waters evolved and the land and waters evolved in the way that they did because of the relationship between them and the people. For example, the lək'wəŋən Peoples were here before Western Red Cedar—I should say, x'péy'—became common in the area. The pollen record shows x'péy' showed up in this ecosystem 6000 years ago and only became common between 5000 and 2000 years ago (Hebda 1984). One Sxwsepsum Sqw'unukwul (Kosapsom Village site) has artifacts dated from 5000 years ago (Beckwith 2004). X'péy' grew tall as lək'wəŋən woodworking skills

developed and changed until $\chi p\acute{e}y'$ were large enough to become the $sn\acute{x}w\acute{a}l$, canoe, that we know today (Hebda 1984).



With this knowledge we must understand that the canoe is so much more than a vessel of transportation or sport. It is $sn\acute{x}w\acute{a}l$ (“canoe”—never a boat). My possession of and skill with a canoe cannot ‘indigenize’ my ways of being nor allow me any claim to these unsundered lands and waters (Dean 2013). Let us not use the canoe; rather let us create a space for the canoe to be our teacher. A canoe day will start amongst the fog or the cold or the rain or the just warming light of the early morning. The students are instructed to move the canoes to the boat launch. There is a cacophony of students laughing and yelling instructions or being pushed into bushes by the turning canoe. It usually takes the whole class as the students are on the small side, 4’ – 6’ from grade 6 to 8, and our three canoes are on the big and



bigger side; ces (sea lion) and $t\acute{c}et\acute{c}eak'un$ (mink) are 26’ ten-person voyageur style canoes and $Sta'qeya$ (wolf) is a 35’ eighteen-person Salish style canoe.

Once on the water the students are confronted with a technology that many have never experienced before. From the stern of the canoe, I watch quietly as they work to use deceptively simple equipment developed and honed to perfection by the $l\acute{a}k'w\acute{a}n\acute{c}h$ Peoples. Not only do they have to figure out how to balance in a canoe on water, to sit in this canoe and hold a paddle and to somehow use this paddle but also how to do this while the person in front, beside and behind them is trying to figure out the exact same thing while at the same time being distracted by the amazing way the water ripples and

eddies around the paddle blade. Only after they have all had a chance to work it out themselves (or play) do I choose a student who has either been in a canoe before and knows what they are doing or is one of those rare youth who really knows how to control their limbs and what objects can do in space to demonstrate while I point out the ways they are succeeding. I will explain: “You are reaching your paddle out in front of you and pulling the land towards you.”

And then the canoes will inevitably start to race. There’s yelling and splashing and clashing of paddle blades as chaos ensues. That’s when one of the harder lessons is learnt. It’s not how fast you pull (or paddle); it’s pulling in time with each other that will make the canoe go fast. Now all 10-18 students in the canoe must figure out how to put their paddles into the water and pull all at the same time, every time. I will chant for them if I have any voice left (“pull ... pull ... pull”) or they chant for themselves (“chicken ... nugget ... chicken ... nugget”).

What is it that the canoe can teach us? School is a “settler way of being”; the $sn\acute{x}w\acute{a}l$, canoe, is Indigenous technology. Being in the canoe is a “space where Indigenous knowledge meets settler ways of being” (Morin 2016 p. 71). The canoe can be a transformational space. A place where settler ways of being are demoted, pushed to the side and a space is opened for honoring and exploring Indigenous knowledge and ways of being⁵.



PART TWO: The Answers? No...A Pandemic

Yesterday, January 28, 2022, British Columbian news sources reflected on the two years that have passed since the first case of COVID-19 was detected in the province. Our school’s COVID anniversary would be March 17th. It was on that day, when the majority of our students and staff

were packed into buses coming back from Mt Washington, that the Provincial Health Officer declared a public health emergency. That was the day we realized that this was not something we would be watching from the sidelines as it ran its course elsewhere in the world. That was the day before our two-week spring break—the second last day of ‘normal’ school. We have been trying to come to terms with a ‘new normal’ ever since.

Now students must sit at individual desks in rows all facing the front of the classroom. They are expected to line up single file to be escorted through the hallways. These are the ways we will protect ourselves and each other in this world of indoor spaces, of right-angled rooms and straight narrow hallways. Inside has become dangerous. Inside school is a place that has been dangerous for many Indigenous students for generations.

How did we get here? Scientists are pointing to human damage to ecosystems and incursion into wild spaces as the leading cause of these deadly outbreaks (Carrington 2020). Indigenous activists and scholars are calling out settler colonial exploitation upheld by capitalistic values of individualism, ownership, and racial superiority⁶ for treating the environment and Indigenous Peoples as disposable (Jacob et al., 2021). Indigenous families who have carried the responsibility for places since time immemorial have addressed governments about issues of land use since colonization began (Turner 2008). The conversation needs to go beyond a ‘new normal’ and be about the transformation of our values as a society. “We must turn to Indigenous values and cultural teachings for meaningful solutions.” (Jacob et al., 2021 p 135)

Since the beginning of the pandemic, there was one message that made sense to me “Please, go outside” (CBC 2020). Pre-pandemic, we would schedule as many classes in the canoes as we could often taking two classes out a day. Now we take a full day with one class stopping at a park and having a picnic. Pre-pandemic, I focused on integrating curriculum into the program with lessons about mapping, the Ice Age and Newton’s

laws. Now, I let the students be. I may (with permission) tell the story of Camossung when we canoe down to see the reversible falls or I will stop in front of a beach that was an Esquimalt village site and we will talk about woolly dogs or hunting ducks. I will ask them to imagine a different time. Because, in these times, the experience is more important than the lesson, our imaginations are more important than curriculum, and a little joy and freedom is necessary for our mental and emotional health.

Now imagine⁷ if the education system was based on the ‘Principles of Learning, First Peoples.’⁸ Learning would then support “well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors” and be “holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).” Slowing down has created the space for emotional experiences along with the physical experience of canoeing allowing for a connection to place that has meaning for students (Little Bear, 2009). You can be told that a waterway contains schools of herring, but it is when you see a quick flash of silver leaving a momentary mark on the water’s surface that you know. As all eyes in the canoe become open to the sight of jumping fish, the anticipation and excitement create a connection between you and the little fishes. Then, when you are told that *lək^wəŋən* means ‘place to smoke herring’ (Hirtle, 2018), your knowledge and connection deepens. Knowledge requires experience; experience creates relationships. Little Bear (2009) explains that “[k]nowledge ... is the relationships one has to “all my relations⁹” (p. 7).

We may, by exposing settler values and assumptions that undergird western systems, and emphasizing Indigenous values that restore relatedness and balance, be able to find new directions to address our most pressing social and environmental problems and create spaces and opportunities for healing the damage of white settler colonialism. (Jacob, etc. 2021 p 137)

The canoe is a space not completely colonized where engaging Indigenous values will “allow for healing humans’ relationships with the environment, our more than human relations, and with each other” (Jacob et al, 2021 p. 143). It is vitally important that we teach our children that all things are interconnected, that we exist in a web of relations: “We are, therefore I am” (Brayboy, 2005 p. 439). Being a part of community, makes one who they are. In the big canoes you gain the skills to pull the canoe to benefit everyone in the canoe. You must find ways to work with the whomever is in the canoe, even those you may not always get along with, because it is only by pulling together that the canoe will move forward (or sideways or backwards depending on where we need to go).

Endnotes

¹ According to Tuck & Yang (2012) “Settler colonialism is a structure not an event ... In the process of settler colonialism, land is remade into property and human relationships to land are restricted to the relationship of owner to his property.” (p. 5)

² “... [F]or most Euro-Canadians, colonization and racism are things of the past. “When racism is not acknowledged as contributing to low self-esteem, the effect is to assume a failure on the part of Aboriginal students to develop a healthy sense of self.” (Little Bear, 2009 p. 15)

³ For more information please explore: <https://www.songheesnation.ca>

⁴ “Indigenous archaeologist argues humans may have arrived here 130,000 years ago.” (Ayad, 2022)

⁵ Indigenous are many Peoples and people, cultures, languages and places and in no way am I saying there is one way of being or knowledge that is Indigenous. From my understanding there are shared values and ways of being that can be talked about in contrast to colonial values and ways of being.

⁶ Racial superiority as white supremacy—as Brayboy (2005) explains—being the “idea that the established, European or western way of doing things has both moral and intellectual superiority over those things non-western.” (p. 432) And whiteness, an unmarked unnamed category that is normalized as center to which all else is othered. (Rose & Paisley, 2012 p. 141)

⁷ “... [T]he inability of white Americans to *imagine* a world without grades, is one result of *cultural imperialism*. Young (1990, 58), following Lugones and Spelman (1983), defines cultural imperialism as the ways ‘dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of [one group] invisible at the same time stereotyping [that] group and marking it out as the “Other”’ (italics added)” (Jacob etc. 2021 p 135)

⁸ The First Peoples Principles of Learning can be found on the First Nations Education Steering Committee website see references.

⁹ “The constant transformation, deformation, and restoration results in a ‘spider web’ network of relations out of which arises the concepts of interrelationship which are summed up in the saying “all my relations.” In other words, if all are energy and spirit then one can relate to them, be they humans, animals, plants, rocks, the earth, the sun, the moon, the stars, and so forth.” (Little Bear, 2009 p. 9)

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Journeying to a Better World — It's All About Connection

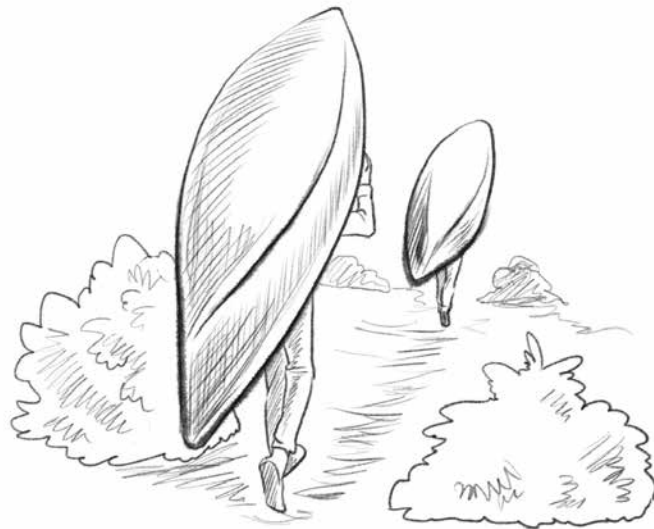
By Jason Blair

There is quite possibly no more quintessentially Canadian experience than undertaking a backcountry canoe trip. From its origins among the First People of this continent, to its use among the Voyageurs and prominent artists like the Group of Seven, the canoe connects us across time and throughout the vastness of the great Canadian wilderness. It is much more than a transportation device. It is a true icon of Canadian culture; one that links the past with the future because of its unique ability to provide connection. I would argue that the canoe has shaped Canadian identity as a whole and grounded a sense of place for anyone who has ventured into the backcountry.

When asked to provide a sense of the value of school-based canoe trips, this is the benchmark from which the conversation needs to always begin. As soon as a student sits or kneels in a canoe for the first time, they become intimately linked with the vessel, its history, and are completely connected to the natural world through which they travel. Unfortunately, for many youth, especially those who grow up in urban settings, exposure to the richness of experience that canoe tripping can provide is difficult if not impossible to access. The role that public school-based canoe trips can play in providing equitable access to this activity cannot be understated. For many racialized communities, and certainly new Canadians, public schools act as a conduit through which these experiences can be realized. Without school-based programs, most students would not have the means or access to the expertise required to safely participate in back country canoe trips. The benefits of a backcountry canoeing experience in a modern outdoor experiential education context extends far beyond the merely esoteric. As valuable as many of the skills learned through outdoor education are (e.g., canoeing, navigation, outdoor cooking,

species identification, survival strategies), it is the power of connection to the natural world, realized leadership capacity, and the community built through those experiences that have lasting impacts for students.

Part of the power of participation in backcountry canoeing comes from safely guiding students to push outside of their comfort zone and embrace the independence and at the same time, interdependence, that comes with pursuing outdoor adventure. In all parts of life, we cannot grow and evolve as individuals without the kinds of experiences that force us to expand our worldview and most importantly take new stock of our potential to meet, overcome and ultimately learn to embrace adversity. Canoe tripping is simply a vehicle to foster this progression.



As mentioned above, the canoe has an inherent ability to foster connection. With teens, the necessity of connection is perhaps more important than at any other age. Adolescents crave to belong. Unfortunately, in a world where traditional and social media permeate their lives with all too often toxic consequences,

teens can feel isolated and insignificant. Creating a positive community structure is critical for a group to build trust and work towards common goals. This community connection is exactly what happens on a canoe trip. Positive and supportive peer relationships are challenging for many teens to find but can be transformational, especially for those who have been ostracized or isolated for various reasons (gender identity, socio-economics, learning disability, “uncool”) or who see little support from home.

On a canoe trip, deep meaningful friendships that can last a lifetime are only the beginning. There are many different connections, each important in their own way.

- Connection to self: Understanding of who they are and what matters to them.
- Connection to others: Realizing a healthy and interdependent human community
- Connection to nature: We tend to protect what we value.
- Connection to what you are learning: Through interaction comes understanding and appreciation.

Richness of connection breeds empathy and it is through empathy that we give and gain acceptance. Students who participate in outdoor programs gain the skills and experience needed to navigate into adulthood as critical thinkers who understand how to work with others to create positive change and build resiliency to navigate all life’s challenges.

Through community and connection, a new confidence emerges. Not arrogance though. In the presence of the vastness of wilderness, confidence comes from the realization that one is not apart from nature but truly a part of nature. It comes from small successes that the group celebrates together. It comes from knowing that you have value and that you can meet challenges. This confidence

leads to empowerment. Students learn that their actions have impact and that, by collectively working with others, one can achieve so much more than on their own. Being immersed in the natural world fosters an ethic of responsibility. Students who participate in outdoor programs become committed to protect the things which they have come to value. They also show a desire to commit to their classmates' success as well as their own. There is a noticeable migration from focusing on personal success to embracing the richness of experience that comes from collective success.

More than ever, our world needs youth to value the natural world, find their voice and be the positive agents of change needed to combat a growing polarization in our society. Passionate young people armed with empathy, critical thinking, an ability to work collaboratively and an insatiable love for all the natural wonders of our planet are surely the leaders we need to ensure issues like our climate emergency receive the attention and action required to secure a sustainable future for us all.

The start of that journey begins around a campfire, next to a lake, listening to the distant call of a loon, staring up at the Milky Way, feeling simultaneously insignificant and empowered, awestruck and inspired. So, what is the true value of backcountry canoe tripping? I am not sure it is possible to quantify it in terms of any one metric. However, I am confident in saying that the more students who have the opportunity to build their own connections in a canoe, the better off our world will ultimately be.

Jason Blair is the lead teacher for the RBG ECO Studies Program in Burlington, Ontario. Started in 2007, this is an applied science-based, integrated (4 credits, one semester) environmental leadership program. The program motto is, “Don’t Just Learn it, LIVE IT!”

Connections from Canoe Trips: A Teacher's Perspective

By Katie Gad

"No one will protect what they don't care about, and no one will care about what they have never experienced."

—David Attenborough

In my 15 years of facilitating canoeing and traditional winter camping trips, I have come to deeply appreciate the importance of the connections that these trips build.

In a time of climate emergency, I hear all too often from students that our method of teaching about environmental issues from textbooks and websites has missed the critical step of connecting them with the place their generation will have to work to save.

Watching the mist swirl on a lake at sunrise, howling for wolves, feeling the warmth of the Canadian Shield on your back as you lie on a rock—any one of these experiences students have on canoe trips could be the spark that kindles caring. In years when we have been able to do the three km (there and back!) portage into a postage stamp of old-growth forest in the south-west corner of Algonquin, we didn't need to do the quadrat study I'd prepared, or pull out the ID guides for students to appreciate the differences in biodiversity. Touching the moss-draped logs, seeing the nurse logs bearing fully-grown trees, trying to get through growth at all levels throughout the understory and witnessing the occasional ancient pine towering above all others are an instant lesson in the impacts of past logging on the rest of the park. Student journals frequently cite this as a key part of the entire semester and the richest lesson they could get about forestry techniques in the Environment and Resource Management Geography Course. The time and space a canoe trip gives to actually appreciate nature is like no other experience we can give students. More recently, I have been wondering whether

fostering this connection and deeper appreciation for land in youth has a part to play in Reconciliation with Indigenous communities in Canada.

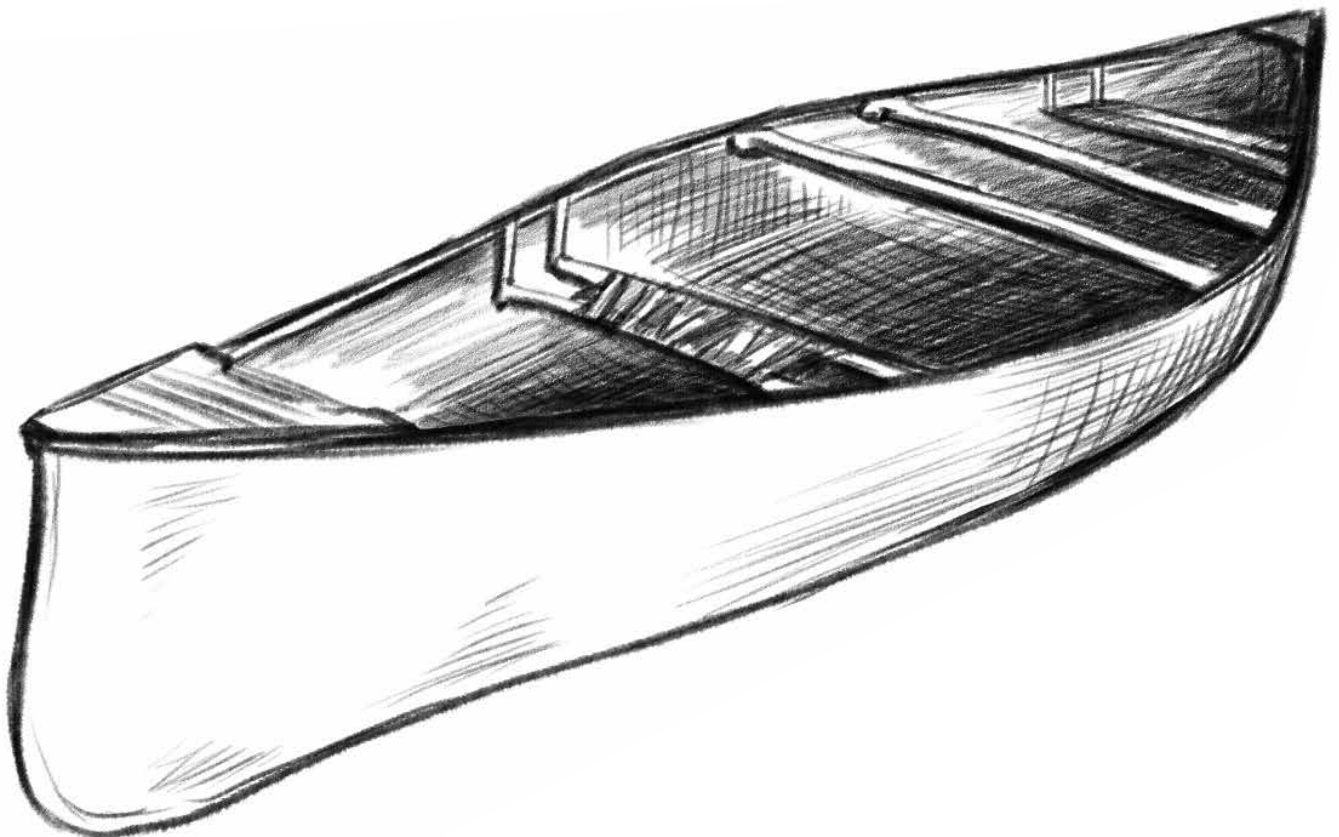
One often thinks that to canoe one must go north to remote wilderness. However, one of my favorite trips is to take students down the Eramosa River right here in Guelph. There are moments on the river where you feel like you are in the middle of the wilderness while paddling through one of the most densely populated parts of Canada. The water in June is warm, slow moving with the occasional swift and often so shallow we are wading and dragging boats. I love watching students' faces light up seeing a great blue heron or 15 turtles sunbathing. Seeing their faces drop as we paddle under the bridge on the outskirts of the city and the water turns from clear to goopy brown is worth a thousand online water quality data studies.

In a culture where students (along with most of us) are profoundly distanced from producing their food, building their shelter and hauling their water, the simplicity of a canoe trip returns us to providing for our means of survival. When students prove to themselves that they can indeed paddle and portage a canoe, cook a meal, make a fire, and build a shelter (albeit a nylon one with poles!), there is a sense of confidence, of self-reliance and satisfaction that is not achieved when they get 90% on a test. Often it is the students who don't get 90s who are the leaders when it comes to getting the fire started, leaving their academically-inclined peers baffled at the lack of step-by-step instructions to be memorized. In completing tasks together, and in singing around a glowing campfire, youth revel in a shared experience in real-time instead of the alienation of watched experiences

on social media. With phones left at home, the canoe trip becomes one of the last refuges where the only option for connection is to self, others, and our natural surroundings. As in any community, interactions are overwhelmingly positive with occasional scrapes over who didn't do the dishes or portage their share of the packs. I often marvel that after a canoe trip, so many students journal "this class has become my family!" I remind myself often that it doesn't matter what wonders we present to them; they are developmentally wired to value connection with others their age above all else. Such trips form bonds that last a lifetime. When I hear people dismiss this element as "just fun", I get frustrated: show me something we would want more for our students from their education than to be contributing members of a working community where they find connection and a positive sense

of self! It is the parents in the program who appreciate this the most as they see a more confident, self-reliant version of their young person emerge with skills for their future. Parent Raymond Soucy notes that, *"They have to figure out how to work together for a semester—very similar to a work environment."*

Long before concepts of Nature Deficit Disorder or forest bathing emerged, outdoor education practitioners have known the mental health benefits of time in nature. As youth face uncertainty both in the short and long-term, it will be more important than ever for them to connect to nature, themselves and others. Systems that deal with youth are realizing that there will be a pandemic of addictions, mental health disorders, eco-anxiety, and physical health decline in this population following COVID.



So why not send every high school student on a canoe trip when we can do so again? It is, of course, costly to take students on trips. Most programs and outdoor education courses, like ours, have fees to cover transportation, gear, park entrance, and food. Critics say that it is only well-to-do students who can participate in these experiences. It is true that our programs have primarily attracted those who have grown up in a “camping culture,” who have cottages and who attend summer camp: it’s how they “got the bug.” However, it is also true that I have had numerous students on trips for whom it was their first time going. Were it not for structured canoeing programs and school outdoor education experiences, I myself would never have learned to paddle or go on canoe trips. My parents were European immigrants and, although affordability wasn’t an issue, it was not in their culture to camp or canoe and we didn’t have a cottage or go to overnight camp. Fortunately for me, they valued learning this aspect of Canadian culture. A number of my students who are the children of immigrants are in the same boat, so to speak—they may not come from backgrounds with the experience, gear or “culture” of the outdoors. There are also students whose parents would not be able to afford trips. In our program, bursaries and support with gear go a long way to making sure all can attend.

Another barrier for school-based canoe trips is the amount of preparation it takes. Even for our yearly three-hour paddle down a local river, I fill out aquatic and field trip forms two months in advance, arrange for and pay for a swim test at a city pool supervised by a lifeguard and record results, renew my NLS every two years, make sure I have enough ORCKA qualified leaders, arrange canoe drop and pick up, and do a canoe practice including canoe over canoe rescue.

To go on a wilderness trip, I add the following tasks. I hold a parent meeting and present the possible risks of a canoe

trip and what we do to mitigate them. I review and refresh my risk assessment and mitigation form each year. I pour over the student bios making sure I have enough epipens to buy the two hours EMS might take to reach us and figure out how to keep insulin at the right temperature and eat at regular intervals and arrange for an extra volunteer to make sure the diabetic student can come. I eliminate allergens from the menu, make sure that gluten and dairy-free diets are accommodated, and that there will be foods to appeal to different tastes. I order bulk food in advance from a local store and do the fresh groceries to introduce students to affordable, made from scratch trail food in place of the Kraft Dinner students might have chosen. I play Tetris with paddle partners, cooking groups and tent lists so as to enable smooth group dynamics. I assess mental-health conditions and arrange to check-in with students who might be out of their comfort zones. I recruit and brief the rare volunteers who are willing, unpaid, to spend five days on a canoe trip with a bunch of teenagers and somehow also have canoe and first aid qualifications as well as have a vulnerable sector police check in hand. These people are the unsung heroes of the school canoe trip and often the people who bring the best stories, and who students learn most from. The first few weeks of the semester are a whirlwind of preparations: people, gear, food. Lessons on gear, trip safety, paddling and portage skills must be taught. Each student brings in their gear and if they are missing a warm sleeping bag or wool sweater we make sure they can borrow it or lend it to them.

On the first night of the trip, I feel that all the preparation is worth it as I watch the students participate in a tea ceremony where we pause in silence and in gratitude. Lying huddled in my tent, sometimes soaked after a last-minute check on the waterproofness of the tent set-ups and herding the stragglers into their tents, it often hits me in a wave of anxiety: the buck stops here. If there is an

emergency—a lost student, a mental health crisis, a storm—I have to be on. I have to solve it. I am lucky to have had incredible teams of volunteers and other staff but, as the lead teacher, these incredible young people are ultimately my responsibility to keep safe. As someone who struggles with Generalized Anxiety Disorder, it can be overwhelming. Hearing about a tragedy like the Jeremiah Perry drowning stops me in my tracks. Am I doing enough to keep students safe on these trips? Is it worth the risk and the toll on my mental health?



On a personal level I know that I have worried to the point of irritating people about mitigating every risk one could encounter on trip. Statistically speaking I know that my students have a much higher chance of being in a car accident when they are driven to school, or being killed when they run across the road to join their friends at lunch hour. Their risk of heart disease, obesity and depression from sitting in a classroom all day on their Chromebooks and phones far outweighs their risk of injury on trip. Yet, the perceived risk and the very rare accidents on wilderness trips are what we focus on, and what boards set out to eliminate. In doing so, I fear that the already high safety requirements may become unwieldy and teachers may give up. There is a thin line between a healthy culture of risk management and an unhealthy culture of fear of liability.

It is getting more and more difficult for students to sign up for outdoor ed classes

and programs in an educational culture that focuses on grades, prerequisites to post-secondary, resume building and STEM courses. I find this frustrating: despite the incredible amount of work that goes into such programs and the rich learning that emerges, there is a sense that what we do is not important in the education system; that we are “getting away” with taking students out of real learning to “have fun”; that somehow, despite the extraordinary experiential learning opportunities this kind of real-life learning with authentic tasks and consequences offers, this way of teaching and learning is an expendable luxury. It doesn’t have to be a canoe trip for every student, but the education system needs to do a better job of providing and valuing real learning experiences that foster mental health, community-building and connection to nature for youth. Our youth and our planet will make sure we feel the consequences if we don’t.

What every student gets out of a canoe trip and out of our program is unique to them. For some, it is the physical empowerment of completing a difficult portage. For others, it is the connection with different people or connection to the land. Ultimately, that is why we have to preserve the canoe trip in public education. The meaning and connections formed from shared authentic experiences with real life consequences are learnings that endure and become part of people’s stories about who they are and how they are connected to themselves, each other and the planet. This is education in its most rich and transformative state. It has been a profound privilege and joy to paddle with so many incredible students and to witness connections form.

Since 2006, Katie Gad has led canoe trips as a teacher with the Guelph-based Grade 10 CELP and Grade 12 Headwaters integrated programs on the Magnetawan River and in Algonquin Park. She remains indebted to the legendary Michael Elrick who founded these wonderful and life-changing programs.

The Geography of Somewhere — Finding the Sense of Self in a Sense of Place

By Paul Gifford

Recent research in neuroscience has revealed that we remember things in the form of a map. The same parts of the human brain that work together to help us find our way through a landscape, also allow us to learn new skills and consolidate memories.

Navigation is older than language, and language is full of wayfinding metaphors, including the very idea of “finding our way.” Learning is “an adventure” and “a journey.” New experiences “push our boundaries” and “expand our horizons.” When we take risks, we’re “on the edge” of our “comfort zones.” Hard decisions are made “at a crossroads.” Confusion is analogous to being lost. And we seek “common ground” even as we ask for “personal space.”

We continually invoke *conduits* and *portals* and *boundaries* and *frontiers*, as if we can’t think about doing anything without also thinking about going somewhere, as if we have to be somewhere in order to orient what we know. Well, as it turns out, that’s how the brain works. It’s very recent research, but it speaks to a very ancient understanding.

Think of a natural place, a landscape, where you spent countless hours when you were between the age of 6 and 12—which is when we form a deep and abiding relationship with nature, and with ourselves *in* nature. You knew this landscape “like the back of your hand,” and you could draw a map of it even now, however many years later. You have a map in your head. You have *landmarks*—your forts, your hiding places, your treasure troves. You probably had a lookout—for spying into enemy territory. You probably had a home base—a big, old, gnarly-barked tree. If there was water anywhere in your landscape, you would have found it and spent countless hours playing in it or along

it—where you got soakers, where you found the clay, where you built the bridge. Those are landmarks.

And if you go back to that childhood place as an adult, you might find that it has shrunk, or that you grew so much in relation that it seems tiny compared to how you remember it. Maybe it shrunk, but you didn’t grow that much. The seeming-smallness of the place probably isn’t a function of physical scale. It’s more likely a function of *emotional* scale — the place looms so large in your memory and imagination because of how important it was to you, because of how important you felt there. It was a big deal when you were small. It still is. You may never know a place so well, and you may never know yourself so well in one place.

This is “The Geography of Somewhere,” which is an inversion of the title of a book (*The Geography of Nowhere*, by James Howard Kunstler), about the social impact of urban existence. The Geography of Somewhere is also the antithesis of where we ask most children to play. If the icon of urban sprawl is The Smart Centre, its educational equivalent might be the prefab play structure in the elementary schoolground.

The play structure is set between the asphalt courtyard and the turf-grass playing field. There is next to no topography anywhere, although there is often a scattering of peripheral trees, their branches lopped off below 8 feet. As one grade 4 student said to me when she was told she had to stay on the school ground for recess after we’d been playing in a much better landscape near the school for an hour and a half, “There’s nothing to do out here but get into trouble.”

What children need are places to hide, treasures to seek and loose parts to build

things with—like forts. Children thrive in landscapes with topography and biodiversity, and where there is water. Children are like the young of any other animal in this respect, and they prefer being in the company of other creatures. They like habitat. In your childhood landscape, you would have known and allied yourself with the other animals—the rabbits, the chickadees, maybe the fox.

But how does all this apply for teenagers? What's a good landscape for a high-school student? Well, again, it's not the ones around most of their schools, which are even worse than elementary schools. It looks like the architects either ran out of funding, or just gave up on the idea of *place*.

A teenager needs everything in the childhood landscapes, but a lot more of it. So much more, you could never build one around high school, no matter how much space there was. What characterizes adolescent outdoor play is the need for a journey—to go somewhere else, to go anywhere but where they are. That motive may have been inspired by enduring 10 years of recesses on an elementary school ground, but it's got more to do with the intense transition adolescents are navigating.

Teenagers have to go on an *actual* journey through a *physical* place. The place—if it's a good one—will inspire the adventure the students need to have in order to remember whatever it is they have learned—in any subject. You can literally weave the curriculum through the landscape, tying learning to landmarks where it will stick.

I've been working at this for 25 years and I have yet to find a better landscape for teenagers than the one where only a canoe trip can take you. Of all the vehicles and vessels for travelling through compelling places, for journeys and adventures, for discovery and self-discovery, I think the canoe is ideal—at least for age 15 and 16, which is the age group I have worked with

most of my career. By 15, students are big enough to handle the physical rigors and master the technical aspects of a canoe trip. And they are personally and socially ready for what they can learn from each other on a canoe trip. If you took a 15-year-old human being and hired the best engineers to come up with the perfect vehicle for them to get them through adolescence, the engineers would re-invent the canoe. At least in this country.

Canoes are vehicles of the shoreline. They can move across shallow waters just as well as deep waters. They can travel upstream or downstream on creeks and rivers, by using either a pole or a paddle. They can get into and out of small places no other boat can navigate. In canoes, we travel on the water and camp on the land. We portage between lakes and scout rapids from the shoreline. We are constantly getting in and out of the boat, which this keeps our feet on the ground where we can make landmarks. And the places canoes can take us lend themselves to making maps in our heads upon which we can pin our landmarks.

In ecological terms, when two biomes come together and briefly overlap, it's called an ecotone. In an ecotone, species from both biomes thrive in the interface between them. The possibilities for life surge.

Adolescence is like an ecotone. It is the brief and bustling interface between childhood and adulthood, where a person lives on the edge not just between what they know and what they don't (which is the territory of outdoor-experiential educators), but also between who they were and who they will become. And so, what better place than an actual ecotone to take them to help them navigate this transition? And what better craft than a canoe to take them there?

One trick to debriefing on a canoe trip is to use a map. I didn't use the actual topographical map, as the scale was too small, and it omitted the personal nuance in how the students remembered where

they had been. I would either have them use paper and pencil, or draw the map in the dirt with a stick and use stones and sticks for landmarks (literal landmarks). That said, all the students drew a river and its lakes. And so, the shape of their memory was the shape of the water moving through the land.

Beyond that, the maps were quite different. Even if students shared the same landmarks—like a waterfall—they saw them differently, magnifying different aspects of them to draw attention to what they did and how they felt there, as if the landmarks were symbols in a story as pins in a map. What I didn't see on any map was *apathy*—the absence of emotion.

Among other things, I was a Canadian history and a Canadian geography teacher. I pulled the Grade 9 and 10 courses together because I think the geography makes the history more memorable, especially if you take the students out into the geography, where it becomes not only the setting for history, but also for the stories of the student. Where things happen—“real and dramatic experiences.” In this context, the canoe becomes a kind-of time machine, that allowed students to imagine the past while living intensely in the present. Real and dramatic experiences that were also historical re-enactments, as the setting of both stories was very similar. The geography of somewhere is also about inspiring a sense of who was there before you were, and what went on. When we acknowledge land, we also acknowledge other people who knew it.

And so, the canoe trip wasn't just a canoe trip. It was a deliberate orchestration of memorable experiences through which I could weave all the facts and dates and events and characters of the story of Canada. I was also the English teacher, so stories mattered all the more.

Canoe trips in high school are only rarely more than four days, and that's a lot of work for not a lot of time. I extended the canoe trip's curricular reach by having

students make paddles in the month leading up to it. It was not completely “full-process,” in that we didn't cut the trees down and then mill the planks and then dry them, but each student chose the wood they wanted to use—maple, ash, cherry, walnut, beach, birch, cedar, pine and various laminated combinations of all of the above—and they began with a big fat plank that would take about 20 hours to turn into a paddle that would be functional but also historical and personal.



I opened the wood shop for an hour every day during school and an hour every day after school. Increasingly, as the students got into their paddles, as the wood began to take shape, the students showed up. Like they'd never shown up for anything. They would have worked in the shop all day if I'd let them. I thought some of them might even quit school to become woodworkers.

One remarkable thing that happened in the shop was that some of the quieter students and the students who struggle to share their emotions and speak from the heart, began to talk. I noticed in in both the boys and the girls, but more so in the boys. They were 15-16. And they liked to work with their hands. They had already built a log cabin, and furniture for the cabin, winter sleds for a snowshoes trip, so I knew they

would love making paddles. Even more so because they were personal.

And so, three or four boys would go down to the shop and set up beside each other on the work benches and begin to carve the wood. And they'd start talking. I'm not even sure they were aware I was listening. They never looked each other in the eye because they had to keep their eyes on their work, and somehow that disarmed them and they began to open up. They began to talk to one another in ways I had not heard them before. And they shared their feelings almost effortlessly.

There was something in the repetitive movement of their hands on the block planes and spoke shavers and rasps on the wood. I read in a book about woodcarving that the block plane, which was the students' favorite tool, is held in the hand so that it crosses the meridians of the *head* and the *heart*. I also read that woodcarvers often think of their work as not just creating something new, but also releasing something old—as if it was waiting inside the wood, if it was inscribed in the memory of the tree, in its growth wrings, in what would become the grains of the wood. Well, that's kind-of what happened with these 15-year-old boys. I knew how they felt, from umpteen one-on-one talks and from reading their journals. But I could never get them to share it with each other.

The paddle-making was a pedagogical miracle, integrating perfectly the Manual and Technical Education curriculum with the Personal and Social Education curriculum. I started calling what happened, "The Grains of Truth." And because of that, I added an extra piece to the paddle-making project. Before the students finished their paddles, before they sealed the grains of truth, I asked them to create a personal symbol that captured their sense of self in the context of the class and over the course of the program. And I asked them to share the stories behind their symbols at a meeting around the campfire on the first night of the canoe trip.

One week later, we are on the water. The students got to use their paddles for the first time, dipping them into the lake as if they were sacred objects, or as if they weren't sure they would work. They did. Moreover, the paddles were made from wood that grew in the forests around the lake we were on. They could paddle along the shoreline and look up to see those very trees.

Because it was this class's third wilderness trip, and because they were so invested in the trip before it began, the teachers were able to sit back and let the students run it. And while they encountered no adversity, as the weather was fair and the route was clear, this group had been through its fair share of storms—literal and metaphorical.

At the show-and-tell campfire, the students held their paddles as they told the stories behind their symbols. I recall there being a lot of birds, which symbolized various ideas including *perspective, freedom, transition* and *courage*. And there were several trees, which represented *opening up, branching out, and having roots*.

The symbol sharing was similar to debriefing with a map, except this was a map of the entire school year. A whole host of stories came out, including the storms—the wind squall on the overnight sail on tall ship, the rainstorm on the winter camping trip. And so, the canoe trip, while a journey of its own, was also a synthesis of the larger journey. They had landmarks for all their stories, and we might have made a made a master map on a massive paddle, but didn't need to at that point. I knew they would remember all this.

Paul Gifford taught Grade 9 and 10 integrated curriculum programs for 13 years in Quebec and Ontario. Before that, he was an Outward Bound instructor, guiding canoe trips for 15-16 year-olds in northern Ontario. He now lives in Guelph with his two children and, yes, he canoes with them every summer.

Benefits of School-Based Canoe Trips: What the Research Says

By Tim O'Connell

Students invariably come home from a school-based canoe trip with memories of a good time. They recount the fun they had, tell about the things they saw and did, and may mention in passing some of what they learned or how they were impacted by the trip. While there is plenty of anecdotal evidence surrounding the positive outcomes of school-based canoe trips and school-based outdoor education experiences, there is also a substantial body of research that illuminates these effects. The purpose of this article is to briefly highlight some of the research literature on the myriad benefits of school-based canoe trips, outdoor adventure activities, and outdoor education experiences evident for secondary-school aged participants.

While there are many ways to classify the outcomes associated with outdoor experiences, they generally fall into one of four categories of benefits: personal development, pro-social behaviours, mental health, and environmental stewardship (Holland, Powell, Thomsen & Monz, 2018). Not surprisingly, most of these relate to the overarching goals and objectives for many school-based outdoor programs and are the primary reasons that these experiences were started in the first place. Additionally, these outcomes are usually linked to various provincial and local curriculum documents.

Personal development, sometimes referred to as character development or positive youth development, is often in the spotlight in terms of benefits for students. It includes such things as improved awareness of an individual's strengths and challenges, the enhancement of the "selves" (i.e., self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy), fostering of leadership skills, increased physical fitness, development of technical skills, and increased resilience (Holland et al., 2018; Scarf et al., 2017). Many of these benefits relate to noncognitive skills that cannot be assessed by conventional

academic assessments (Richmond, Sibthorp, Gookin, Annarella, & Ferri, 2018). Research has consistently found that students who participate in school-based outdoor experiences such as canoe trips have improvements in these areas (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Sibthorp, Furman, Paisley, & Gookin, 2008). McKenzie (2003) and Humphreys (2018) note positive impacts on leadership skills and overall positive health effects due to increased physical activity and time away from screens. Enhanced interest in academics and better academic performance has also been found to be an outcome of participating in outdoor experiences (Widmer, Duerden & Taniguchi, 2014).

Pro-social behaviours or outcomes such as improved social skills and social intelligence, enhanced intrapersonal relationships and group dynamics, sense of community and expedition behaviour are another category of benefits resulting from participation in school-based outdoor programs such as canoe trips (Breunig, O'Connell, Todd, Anderson, & Young, 2010; Holland et al., 2018). For example, Richmond et al. (2018) found that the key outcomes from participating in outdoor adventure education experiences included social connectedness, improved self-efficacy in leadership and a recalibrated sense of self (i.e., more positive beliefs about personal values, competence, potential and empowerment). They noted that social connectedness was a prevailing theme across all grade levels and that there was no difference in reported levels of rapport and social bonding between students who looked forward to the trip and those who were less excited about it. In other words, students were equally as impacted in a positive way by the outdoor adventure program regardless of their pre-trip level of apprehension about the experience.

Importantly, researchers have found that peer support during outdoor adventure programs helped motivate students and assisted them to be successful in confronting the challenges they faced during their trip. This was fostered by creating a positive group culture of compassion and commitment which was promoted by both instructors and students (Orson, McGovern, & Larson, 2020). However, this culture must be “fed and cared for” by teachers in order to crystalize and to be maintained, both during a trip and upon return to school. For example, curriculum designed for the outdoor education experience must have clear learning objectives focused on developing positive group culture and interpersonal relationships. Following the trip, teachers should continue to nurture and reinforce these gains through a growth-oriented atmosphere that integrates “aha moments” and concepts from the outdoor experience into classes (Richmond, et al., 2018). Establishing and maintaining a sense of connections and community as a result of participating in school-based canoe trips has been shown to positively impact students’ commitment to school as well as assist in transitioning into school (Howard, O’Connell, & Lathrop, 2016). Intentional conversations using canoe trips as a metaphor have been found to be particularly powerful in this regard (Hannah, 2018).

It is no surprise that there are an array of mental health benefits from engaging in school-based canoe trips. It is especially important as 10-20% of children and adolescents around the world are affected by some type of mental disorder (Scarf et al., 2017). Further, decreased participation in outdoor activities by youth as a result of the COVID pandemic has been linked to self-reported decreases in subjective well-being and overall mental health in adolescents (Jackson, Stevenson, Larson, Peterson, & Seekamp, 2021). However, researchers have also found that when youth and adolescents do participate in outdoor activities such as school-based canoe trips, they experience increases in resilience and perseverance, develop a positive mindset, have increased life satisfaction and enhanced mindfulness,

among other positive effects (Cohen, Stollefson, & Bopp, 2022; Mutz & Müller, 2016; Richmond, et al., 2018; Scarf et al., 2017).

One of the biggest positive impacts of participating in school-based outdoor experiences such as canoe trips is stress reduction (Lackey, Tysor, McNay, Joyner, Baker, & Hodge, 2021; Mutz & Müller, 2016). This usually happens due to being in nature and away from the “goings-on” of everyday life, including technology. Reduced levels of stress may be maintained in school settings after outdoor education experiences in much the same way as a positive group culture may be fostered post-trip. For example, teachers and peers provide instrumental support by helping a student solve problems on the trip (e.g., properly fitting the straps on a heavy pack to reduce discomfort). This instrumental support can be transferred back to the school setting and help reduce stress through collaborative problem-solving (Orson, McGovern & Larson, 2020). Similarly, emotional support from peers and teachers in the school setting can help reduce anxiety, distress and anger and assist in redirecting or deescalating stressful situations (Orson, McGovern & Larson, 2020). This hinges on the purposeful development of positive group culture during the outdoor education experience as the act of creating bonds and having shared goals creates feelings of mutual responsibility that can be brought back to the school setting (Johnson & Johnson, 2009)

There is a long history of demonstrated positive impacts of participation in school-based outdoor education and outdoor adventure activities on environmental perspectives and behaviours (Humphreys, 2018). Students have been found to develop a sense of place and place attachment, enhanced knowledge of the ecosystem and its processes, and increased pro-environmental attitudes (Holland et al., 2018; Marchand, 2014). Importantly, school-based canoe trips (and other outdoor adventure experiences) can provide students with immersive experiences in the nature world (Mullins, 2009). This can combat feelings

of hopelessness as well as the lack of pro-environmental behaviours that may arise due to lack of a real connection to outdoor places and spaces; this lack arises when students have only book knowledge about the environment (McKinley, 2008; Nagel, 2005; Prabawa-Sear & Baudains, 2011). Mullins (2009, p. 242) eloquently notes that, “canoeing, then, is understood not only as a mode of transport, but also a way of attending to the world...” Mikael and Asfeldt (2016) support this notion and suggest that the canoe helps people better understand the human-environment relationship by meshing nature and culture together.

While many people might not consider the time getting to and from school-based outdoor activities such as canoe trips a meaningful time for students, a recent study found this an important period during which impacts and benefits could emerge. North and his colleagues (2021) note that this “unstructured time” encouraged conversation between and among students and was characterized as playful and fun. It was also perceived as neutral ground outside of the school and “normal” settings in which student/teacher roles are more dichotomous in nature. They found this contributed to “status leveling” among students and teachers which gave participants confidence to talk with others with whom they might not normally converse. This “leveling of the playing field” outside of ordinary circumstances can contribute to the other positive outcomes already mentioned.

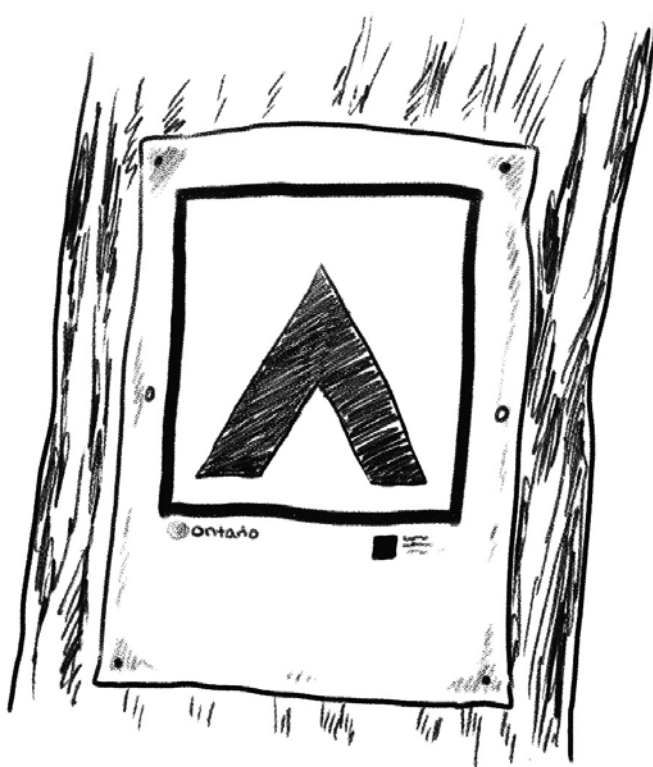
There is a good deal of research supporting the efficacy and benefits of school-based canoe trips and other types of outdoor education and adventure education experiences for students. This article barely scratches the surface of what research is available examining various aspects of school-based outdoor education and outdoor adventure programs. When combined with smiling faces and positive stories, there is ample evidence to support continuing to offer, starting to offer, or to resume offering school-based outdoor experiences, including canoe trips.



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The Path of the Paddle

By Michelle Browne

"The path of the paddle can be a means of getting things back to their original perspective."

-Bill Mason

I think it is a human instinct to want to leave some kind of legacy; to know we have left the world a better place. Parent or educator, I think we struggle with the question of: *How do we give our youth meaningful experiences that help them reflect and grow into responsible and caring adults?* There are many ways to do this, but I think one of the most impactful is a canoe trip. In this era of social media, living for likes, virtual everything, nothing is a more real and grounding experience than a canoe trip. Now, more than ever, I think the youth NEED canoe trips.

I was lucky enough to be a volunteer canoe trip leader for an inner-city youth group for five years. The kids were from 12 to 16 years-old and mostly working-class background. They were teens who had rarely seen more than five trees together at a time: so, we were starting at ground zero with almost all of them. We did an info-night and a how-to-pack night and then booked the sites and ordered the bus.

It is quite a transition to go from an urban environment, with instant access to social media, video games and one's own bedroom to the rustic, communal, hard work of a canoe trip. Though we were thorough in our descriptions, these kids had no real idea of what they signed up for.

Early on leaving day, the kids started to drift in. I had extra garbage bags for ones who had forgotten to waterproof their clothes and sleeping bags. At 9 a.m., the bus was packed, our checklists checked, and we set off to Algonquin Park: ten teens and four leaders.

The looks and sounds of horror and disbelief came not at the portage, but when

we announced that all cell phones were to be left securely on the bus. "But, but, but... what will we do??!!" "If I knew that this trip was going to be run by fascists...!" "This is going to be so lame!"

We managed to get them off the bus and all packed into boats despite this grave injustice. The sun was glorious. The wind was a mild breeze as we began to teach them the infamous song, "There Was a Bear".

The first portage went well; the second had some grumbling—"Boats are for paddling NOT carrying!"---but they were spurred on by promises of S'mores. Campsites were found, tents set up. There were a few hiccups about the latrine ("We have to go where??!!!"), but the logic and the science about esthetics and disease transmission were absorbed. Tasks were allocated and dinner started. Many had never cooked or washed dishes. Some were curious, some indignant, but dinner was a big hit and the S'mores even more so.

Slowly we evolved from a group of friends and acquaintances into a team. The stronger carried more canoes, the less fit pumped more water. New skills acquired and small victories celebrated. It is my opinion that we infantilize our teens. We give them lots of knowledge about the world, but no real responsibility or accountability. We live in an era of awards for everything, but rarely teach the value of failure or recognize the resilience that trying again will build. The beauty of a well-run canoe trip is that you can meet everybody where they are at and celebrate very tangible and immediate accomplishments: the best kind for teens. They can gain a sense of independence; exactly what teens are searching for as they grow towards adulthood.

Never cooked before? Try a turn at the grill.

Never lit a match? Learn the basics of fire building and responsible management.

New to canoes? Learn to stern and control the boat.

Never had siblings? Learn how to manage conflict and create compromise with your group members.

None of these tasks can be learned on the first try. They require trial and error, then practice, like so many other things in life. This is one of the two most valuable life lessons that can be gained on a canoe trip. This lesson of trying again is appropriate in any era; past or modern. The second lesson of stillness and reflection is desperately needed in this time of constant digital connectivity and over-stimulation.

I would like to demonstrate the magic of canoe tripping through the experiences of two kids from these trips: Shane and Laura.

On the second day of the canoe trip, during some down time, Laura was moping around. She was “soooo bored!” I said, “Okay, I am going to give you a task and you might think it is dumb, but you have to do it for 10 min. If you are still bored, come see me.”

There was a small stream running along the campsite into the lake. I challenged her to make three diversions or build three dams. I demonstrated a bit and then left her to it. She was still at it an hour later and had to be pulled away to eat dinner. In this simple activity she learned: a way to entertain herself without a device, working toward a goal, basic problem solving and a number of physics lessons. Along with these lessons she learned how to just “be”.

This is a lesson much needed in today’s times: engaging in a quiet, perhaps meditative task, without likes or selfies or hopes of outside approval. While this generation will be better at many things than my own, I worry about this: how they will find their own authentic path as they

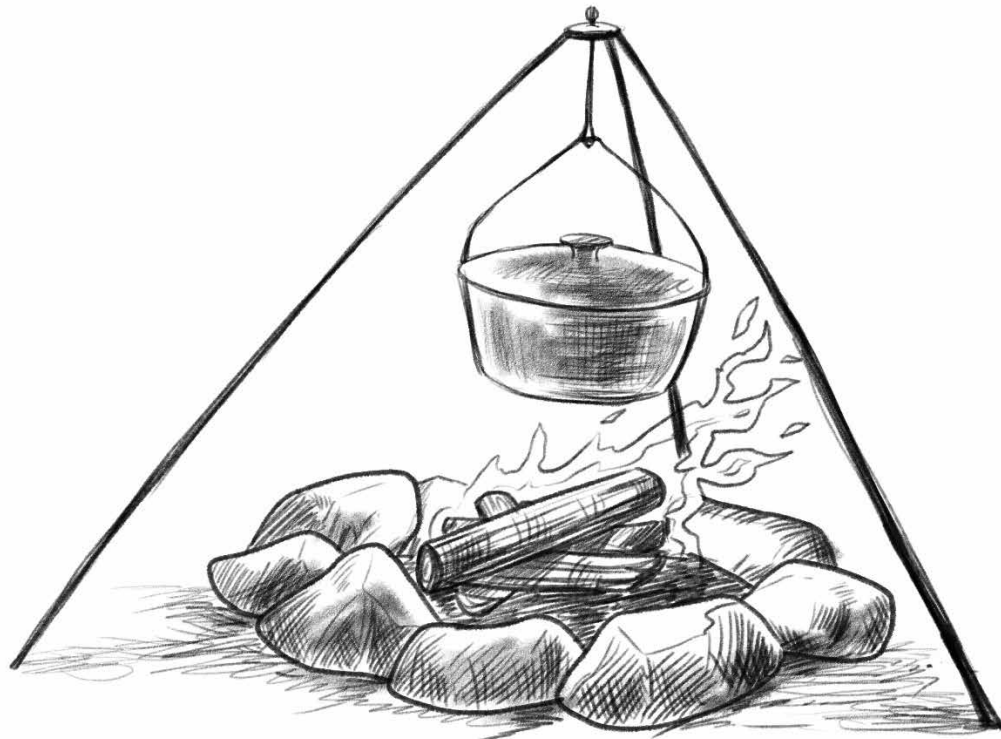
constantly live a life driven more by their audience and outside approval, than by their own desires and motivations?

Laura came on a trip in year three and four. Shane was on all five trips we did. On our inaugural trip, Shane was a long and lanky 15-year-old who appeared to be all arms, legs and feet. He was shy and prickly with insecurity and this new, foreign environment was not making him more gregarious. He was lukewarm about the trip to begin with and grew more so with each portage. Carrying something over land that was made for water made “no sense” to him and the thunder box/outhouse was a concept akin to knitting with human hair: something only weird people do. He complained about the thunder box, the bugs, wearing sunscreen, the portages and washing dishes. I was sure this was his first and last trip. To my surprise he showed up the next year and volunteered to portage the canoe. The next year he helped with planning, counselled the newbies and sterned a canoe. For the last two years, he functioned as a junior counselor; shouldered extra packs, helped with meals and encouraged the flagging younger kids in just the right way.

We have stayed in touch, and if I do nothing else with my life, I know I got this one thing right. We started with a gangly, unsure 15-year-old, and through a perfect combination of challenge and encouragement we helped form this bright, caring, passionate outdoor enthusiast.

He has credited the trips with “changing his life”. He has worked in outdoor stores “helping people buy the right stuff for their trips.” He has shared his experience and passion for the outdoors at Camp Cadicasu in Alberta and is currently teaching at the Seneca Outdoor Education Program.

If this insecure, slightly sullen 15-year-old had not had this opportunity to canoe trip, where would he be? Even under that teenage angst, there was a good heart and I am sure he would have eventually found his stride. However, I know that



canoe tripping allowed him to begin to build confidence, instead of increasing insecurity; gave him a supportive community to celebrate his successes (still celebrating...yah, Shane!) in lieu of a gang; a productive place to focus his teenage energy and need for independence in lieu of many of the negative choices left to inner city teens, like drugs and crime.

What value do canoe trips have for youth? They teach a sense of accomplishment and a sense of community. Most importantly, they teach a sense of serenity at a time when youth are in the highest level of mental-health crisis we have yet seen.

If we want our youth to grow into confident, resilient, responsible, community minded, mentally healthy adults, then we need to allow them the opportunity to have experiences outside of their comfort zone. Experiences where they can try and fail and try again, where their actions impact not only themselves,

but also members of a community, where they learn to offer and receive help. You cannot understand success if you have not experienced failure. You do not understand community if you have not participated and been held accountable in one. Canoe trips teach youth to be strong and resilient and to value others. What will they learn if we leave them to Instagram?

I am not Bill Gates. I do not have access to millions of dollars to change the world. My legacy will not be recorded in history. My legacy will be smaller and unwritten, but no less important. I have changed the world one heart and one canoe trip at a time.

After over 10 years teaching science and outdoor education overseas, Michelle Browne has returned home to Guelph put some roots down. She is currently enjoying the Canadian outdoors in all its seasons, and doing contract and consulting work.

Père Lallemand Speaks

By James Raffan

Inshallah¹, on June 26th, 2023—National Canoe Day—two weeks and a day after the 45th anniversary of the St. John’s School tragedy on Lake Temiskaming, a brand-new Canadian Canoe Museum will be opening on Little Lake in Peterborough. And, inside that long-awaited seven-generation home-on-the-water for the world largest collection of silent craft, in an exhibit zone called “Pushing the Limits,” will be perhaps the most infamous craft in the collection, a 22’ Chestnut “Selkirk” canoe, navy blue in colour, called Père Lallemand, named after Charles Lallemand: a Jesuit priest who was the first Superior of the Mission among the Hurons at St. Marie, and whose 1626 letter to his brother began the important historical series *Relations des Jésuites de la Nouvelle-France* that documented the beginning of colonization for North American Indigenous peoples including the Huron, Innu, Mi’kmaq, Haudenosaunee, and Anishinaabe.

As a member of the exhibit design team for the new museum and author of *Deep Waters: Courage, Character and the Lake Temiskaming Canoeing Tragedy*, I have pondered the key messages that will contextualize the experience of beholding this big blue canoe. It marks the worst outcome—ever—for a school-based canoe trip. Of twenty-seven teenage boys and four masters who set out that sunny day in June 1978, twelve boys and one young volunteer master perished in the cold water of Lake Temiskaming. We can’t talk about school canoe trips without mentioning Temiskaming, lest we forget. On the occasion of this theme issue of *Pathways*, I wonder if this canoe could talk, what would it have to say?

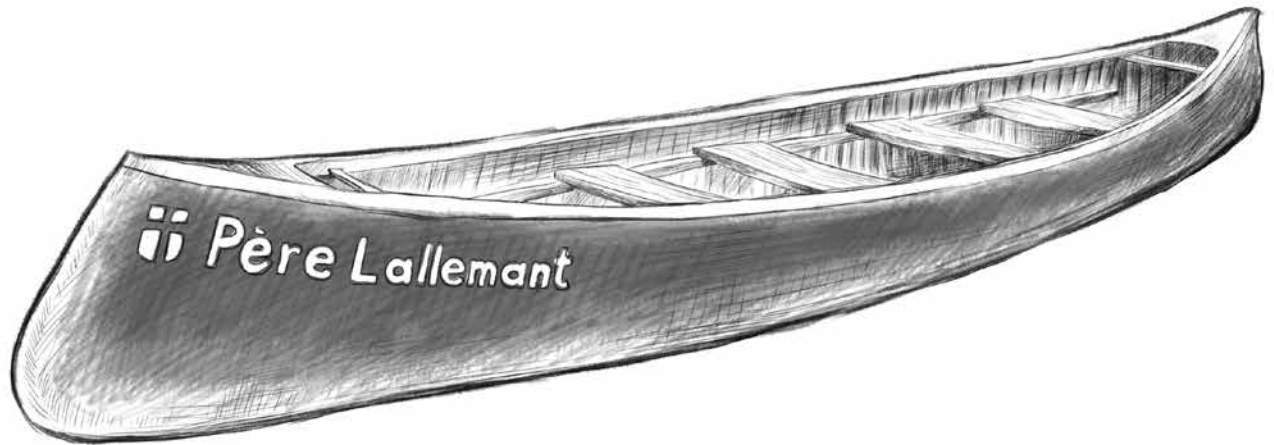
At the very top of the list would be the categorical statement that it is never okay for a human being—least of all a child—to perish at the hand or through the desires, however twisted or well intentioned, of another human being. Whatever else Père

Lallemand might have to say, this storied vessel asks us to mourn the passing of twelve teenage boys—Dean Bindon, Owen Black, Chris Bouchier, David Greaney, Jody O’Gorman, Andy Hermann, Tim Hopkins, Tom Kenny, Simon Croft, Barry Nelson Tim Pryce, and Todd Michell—and their heroic Queen’s university student leader, Mark Denny. Their lives ended so tragically, so unnecessarily, in the cold waters of Lake Temiskaming on June 11th, 1978.

But Lallemand might also add that it was not the canoe nor the activity of school-based canoe tripping that caused this catastrophic loss of life. These deaths were caused by arrogance, ignorance and total failure of leadership on the part of the staff and administration of the Toronto-based St. John’s School. Inside a completely wrong-headed school philosophy that set out to create challenges that students, by design, would never surmount, were inexperienced leaders and a critical lack of sound decision-making practises. Quebec Coroner Stanislas Dery concludes:

We feel that for boys from 12 to 14 years of age, this entire expedition constituted an exaggerated and pointless challenge.²

Happily, history has shown that echoes of the failures/lessons of Temiskaming have created within the international outdoor and experiential education community a sea-change in thinking about school-based canoe tripping, particularly about the need for proper training and preparation, about the dangers of cold water, and about the centrality and importance of sound philosophical and ethical underpinnings for this type of activity. The Temiskaming case study is now woven into adventure curricula world-wide. In our own jurisdiction, the Ontario Physical Activity Safety Standards in Education (OPASSE) for canoe tripping are rife with rules that can be tracked back to Temiskaming.



The question of whether OPASSE has gone far enough or perhaps even too far, in some instances, in setting the risk response algorithm needs to be a topic of discussion within the educational community but there can be no doubt about the generative learnings that have been wrought from the profound losses on Lake Temiskaming that day in June 44 years ago.

If members of the outdoor and experiential community have failed in our response to Temiskaming, and perhaps the Big Blue Canoe would agree, it is that we always seem to assume a responsive, even defensive, posture in answering questions about the risks of school-based canoe tripping. Seldom have we pointed out that, by any metric of analysis one might choose, the risks of conventional school contexts—particularly the gymnasium and the school yard—as expressed in student injuries and deaths on a per capita basis, far exceed those of school-based canoe tripping. We have never really tackled head-on the broad public perception that “indoor” education is safe and “outdoor” education is not.

To put that into context, in 2018, just shy of 80% of school-age boys and girls in Ontario reported being injured in one of three locations: sports facilities, schools and homes or yards. Of those about a third were sports related, a quarter happen in school and the rest in homes, yards, streets, roads, parking lots and

other places.³ Statistics Canada report that in 2018 the Ontario death rate for children 5-9 years is 0.1/1000 population, for youth 10-14 the same, and for young adults 15-19 the rate jumps to 0.3/1000.⁴ Yes, ordinary school has a death rate. And yet those stats roll over us as somehow “par for the course.”

The renewed intensity of focus on school-based canoe tripping as a result of Jeremiah Perry’s tragic 2017 death on a high school canoe trip in Algonquin Park is understandable. But, as with Temiskaming, the vilification of canoes and canoe tripping in the aftermath of this tragedy seems off-target when this loss had more to do with questionable calls by the teachers involved, that were exacerbated by slipshod administration of a mainstream educational activity and complicated by the ham-fisted involvement of the Crown Attorney. Would the conclusions and public engagement and outcomes have been different if that unfortunate incident had been contextualized in the broader picture of risk, injury and death for school-aged children? Is it time for a system-wide conversation about risk?

The Big Blue Canoe might further argue that any education of consequence—learning dedicated to the building of human capacity—absolutely involves risk, meaning uncertainty. Great teaching whether in math class or on the trail involves an informed, caring and

compassionate educator taking students to the edge of what they know and inviting them to step into the unknown where powerful new learnings can be found. Good teaching involves building trust that allows students to take that step. Trust comes from shared educational experience and not necessarily from textbooks or fancy apps. Knowing where those learning edges are, what they are, who owns them, and how they relate or connect to the abilities and dispositions of individual students is where the artistry of teaching truly resides.

It just so happens that a canoe trip, as an educational proposition, presents a host of proven uncertainties for participants—edges that have to do with building character, learning new physical skills in what is for many a new and novel learning context, experiencing an unmediated encounter with the natural world, connecting to indigenous technology and ways of knowing that are as old as time, and exploring new social circumstances created by the necessary cooperation and teamwork on which effective paddling, camping and group problem solving are founded.⁵ It may be that Père Lallemand would say that the true pedagogical tragedy of Temiskaming was throwing out the risk-baby with the grotty bathwater of unconscionably bad teaching and risk management.

Instead of embracing and celebrating, examining, and refining risk in its infinite dimensions, and including our children as active participants in this discussion—activity that would surely build and gild human capacity to deal with existential threats like, say, a global pandemic that begets two-years of screen-soaked stasis masquerading as “school”—the knee-jerk response to tragedy has often been an attempt to excise this essential dimension from our children’s lives. Without the learning that comes from facing known hazards like weather, hard work, a difficult teammate, or a little pain and suffering on a portage—and the necessary educational leadership to help process

these lessons—our children may never develop the vocabulary or the emotional maturity to broach other consequential life-learning opportunities involving cultural or spiritual risks.

With outdoor risk as educational arch-villain, away went the incredible individual risk research lab called “monkey bars” in Ontario school yards (falls from which could cause concussions and broken bones that research showed could be reduced to near zero by softening the ground below with pea gravel or shredded tires—but “No,” said the lawyers, “they have to go”). That being but one example of a welter of efforts to keep our children “safe.”

And so too withered the potential of school-based canoe tripping which, if it wasn’t prohibited altogether by myopic educational administrators grasping for the robes of their equally uninspired lawyers, was regulated to a mere shadow of its educational potential. I think I hear Lallemand asking, “Where are the classroom teachers and the outdoor and experiential educators, who know the power and importance of risk? Where are the parents who aren’t bubble-wrapping their children, in leading a discussion on this topic?”

Maybe the Big Blue Canoe is saying it’s never too late, or maybe it’s *high time*, to have that conversation. Whatever the case, my quest to figure out an interpretive strategy for the Big Blue Canoe in the new museum continues. The other day, rekindling a connection that goes back to the years of research for *Deep Waters*, I reached out to Michael Mansfield, one of the survivors of Témiskaming. His life after that fateful day in June 1978, has been a roller-coaster of triumphs and calamities. When asked what that canoe might say about school-based canoe tripping, he replied without hesitation: “Heed the warning, but don’t stop.”

Endnotes

- ¹ Arabic for “God willing.”
- ² As quoted in *Deep Waters*, p.190.
- ³ Craig, Wendy; Pickett, William; & Matthew King. 2020. *The Health of Canadian Youth: Findings from the Health Behaviour in School-aged Children Study*, p. 76.
- ⁴ Mortality rates, by age group. Table 13-10-0710-01. Statistics Canada, release date 2022-01-24. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=1310071001&pickMembers%5B0%5D=1.7&pickMembers%5B1%5D=3.1&cubeTimeFrame.startYear=2017&cubeTimeFrame.endYear=2017&referencePeriods=20170101%2C20170101>
- ⁵ Bert Horwood’s 1992 research report, “The Goat Portage: Students’ Stories and Learning from Canoe Trips” is remains one of the best articulations of this. ERIC ED 354 127. RC 018 965.

References

Raffan, J. (2002). *Deep waters: Courage, character and the Lake Timiskaming canoeing tragedy*. HarperCollins, Canada.

Author and educator James Raffan’s affiliation with and affection for COEO began as a member of the Camp Kandalore staff team who helped to host the Outdoor Education Without Boundaries Conference in the fall of 1972, at which COEO was conceived. A faculty member with the Queen’s Outdoor & Experiential Education Program from 1980-1999, he has continued his work in experiential education mentoring youth in places including the Canadian Arctic and the Marshall Islands. His most recent book, called Ice Walker, is a portrait of humanity as cast in 30 months in the life of a female polar bear on Hudson’s Bay. In the works is a book called Echo Maker: Craig Macdonald and the lives that produced Canada’s most significant historical map that James is writing in collaboration with the Temagami Community Foundation and the Temagami Anishinaabe.



The Canoe/Kayak Trip as a Canadian Rite of Passage

By Bob Henderson

Aussies have bushwalking. Norwegians have hut-to-hut cross-country skiing. The Scots have walking in the Highlands, which isn't official unless they are fogged in for the day. In Polynesia, it's an ocean outrigger canoe outing. Hong Kong has sailing. These are all rites of passage for any age, connected loosely to national identity. What about Canada? Even though paddling may not be every Canuck's cup of tea, couldn't we claim this as part and parcel of our identity, or are such sweeping aspirations now passé?

To have a recreational cultural rite of passage tied to national identity, there needs to be a significant heritage-driven buy-in as well as large-scale accessibility in various forms from day outings in the town harbour to short point-to-point river runs and on to longer cross-country Canadian Shield trips or epic coastal distances. In other words, off to the cottage or to an arctic or mountain river: it doesn't matter. What does matter is accessibility: camps, schools, families, not-for-profit community programs, scouts, church groups, commercial companies: all play their part. Inner-city Toronto kids on the Humber River to rural Qu'Appelle River runs out of a Saskatchewan town community centre, to Indigenous youth canoe camps on the Idaa Trail out of Yellowknife: all this is important stuff for carving out a sense of national identity to recreational activity.

Isn't it already happening across the country and in countless local ways? Yup... but quietly, almost secretly. Could it be better in terms of accessibility? Yup...and this comes from opening ourselves to the full range of possibilities. Should we care? Absolutely. Just as the Norwegians are passionate about cross-country skiing, we should care that there is a genuine national identity piece associated with the uniquely Canadian idea of the canoe/kayak.

But wait. What is a rite of passage? Is it a clearly understood idea? There is literature on this. A rite of passage involves three aspects of agency. First, an individual has to understand that they are involved in something special. I know of a girls' summer camp that has three 50+ day canoe trips in a summer. I trust those kids know they are on a rite of passage. I've also co-guided some evening outings on the Humber River in Toronto out to Lake Ontario. I sensed some of those kids also understood they were involved in something special. Something Canadian. In both cases, we should acknowledge an Indigenous presence, then and now, on the land and water. We should acknowledge the brilliant adaptation to terrain and materials that the canoe/kayak represents thanks to Indigenous cultures across the huge breadth of the country, Mi'kmaq to Haida, Inuit to Anishinaabe.

Secondly, there must be an understanding that travel by day or month, near or far, is significant at the societal cultural level. That a summer camp and those parents of the 50-day trippers and the Humber River one-dayers should want and expect the potential for *change*; for something good, real, and special in the experience. It is like a vision quest experience. It isn't a true vision quest if you return to a society that doesn't want or expect any change. One's old normalcy returns quickly with this lack of larger aspiration. So, there has to be "buy-in" from camps, schools, communities, parents, and other supporters. There must be an understanding of a "good" — a certain potential wisdom garnered in the experience. And, schools can play a major role in such higher callings, whether the opportunities are provided through credit programs or extra-curricular outers clubs.

Finally, there should be, at the program and curricular design level, attention to

the very rich Canadian heritage implicit in paddling. Teachings about Indigenous canoe/kayak designs, past travels pre- and post-contact, canoe travel exploration: all of this is a start. Creating excitement for a mastery of skills and knowledge is a big part of the whole that is needed for rite of passage experiences. It cannot work if paddling is just a vague national icon that is getting tired and misused. One needs to feel part of something larger than themselves. Ecologist John Livingston speaks of “being part of a larger enterprise.”

In the midst of our growing separation from nature, paddling, and wilder places, we must better develop this notion of a Canadian rite of passage through paddling.

We must better develop a decolonizing mindset that rightfully places Indigenous canoe/kayak heritage into a central understanding for Canadians as water travellers.

Perhaps we, as a Canadian people, have a way to go to match Aussie bushwalkers and Norwegian skiers in embracing paddling as a passage, but done right, it is the fine Canadian quest we should embrace.

Bob Henderson has been paddling and guiding paddling trips of all descriptions for close to 50 years without losing any enthusiasm for the joys of those first paddle strokes with a new group.



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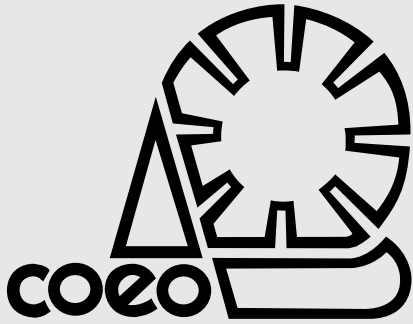
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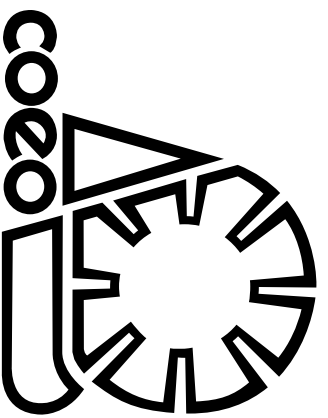
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