

**Rites of Passage, Aboriginal Education and Learning for the 21st Century:  
Walkabout as a Radical—and Workable—Alternative**

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**Abstract**

The Walkabout Program is an alternative and experiential learning practice that helps students to develop necessary skills for authentic learning and real world preparation through the completion of six learning passages. This aboriginal-based program celebrates the vital transition—or passage—from adolescence to adulthood. The six learning passages include philosophical, practical, emotional/physical/spiritual challenge, career exploration, community/global response, and creative endeavour. Although its primary focus is to challenge First Nations educators to rethink status quo schooling, the Program has equally beneficial opportunities for all students.

Education designed as a continuous lifelong process requires an approach to teaching and learning suitable for such a long-range perspective. (Gibbons, 1990)

## **Introduction**

It is the primary intention of this paper to provide teachers, parents, students and decision-makers in any K-12 education setting a beginning understanding of a Walkabout program in order to consider their own set up and adaptation in their learning environment. The initial part of the paper will cover the foundation for the Program followed by a practical segment in order to grasp Walkabout's advantages over current schooling practices. In addition to this practical segment, I offer some reasons for why one might want to do something different than current schooling practice. The Walkabout Program is an alternative and experiential learning practice that helps students to develop necessary skills for authentic learning through the completion of six learning passages.

The six learning passages are:

- Philosophical — a passage that must deal with deeper issues that demand logical reasoning and reflection.
- Emotional/Physical/Spiritual Challenge — a passage that challenges endurance and stamina as well as beliefs.
- Practical — acquire a skill that enables the student to accomplish a task that previously required someone else's help to complete.
- Career Exploration — in-depth look at an occupation of interest.
- Community/Global Response — research and respond to an environmental issue.
- Creative — a passage that demonstrates a project in the visual or performing arts.

The Walkabout Program is based on the Jefferson County Open School, CO, experience as well as an interpretation of the Australian aboriginal custom. That customary practice saw the adolescent embarking on a solo journey lasting a lengthy period of time in the wilderness, his return indicating a successful venture and a vital transition from adolescent understanding to adult knowing (Gibbons, 1990; indeed, the inspiration for Walkabout for me initially came from Gibbons' work). This rite of passage challenges the youth in all facets of her/his being: spiritual, personal/emotional, physical and intellectual. It also challenges his ability to adapt, to apply and learn new skills for survival and amusement. Ultimately this was a test to verify that he was ready for the responsibilities and actions inherent in, and necessary for, being part of a community.

Although there may likely be readers who have come across the Walkabout idea before through the writings of Gibbons (1990) for example, nevertheless what is perhaps different or in need of further consideration is the challenge that Walkabout provides against the *status quo* of schooling especially, though not exclusively, for First Nations education. According to Gibbons (1990), education demands a broader perspective and practice if it is to be truly practical immediately and for continuation after one has completed formal studies. The Walkabout Program challenges the current practice of schooling through its experiential, learning-centered and individualized approach as well as in the infrastructure of day-to-day operations (Després, 1994, 1996, 1999, 2003). To build successful schools for First Nations and Aboriginal people is a grand ideal, but to do so in a way that appears to be useful within the typical confines of the current schooling practices in Canada or the United States amounts to little more than arranging

deck chairs on the Titanic. Current schooling practices and results are no longer adequate for the needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century contrary to what most educators think (Després 2003).

Marshall and Tucker (1992) note that, “most analysts now agree that the changing workplace demands not simply higher levels of mastery of the core subjects, but a different kind of education....Our curriculum reflects the needs of the economy of fifty years ago as does the performance of the average student” (p. 80; see also Chamberlain & Chamberlain, 1993; Contenta, 1993). Gibbons (1990) adds:

Criticisms, contradictory evidence, and suggested alternatives [to current practices of schooling] arise, but they are easily deflected by the authority of established belief and the sheer immovable weight of *what is*...With conditions the way they are in education, it seems that we are in just that position ourselves: so deeply steeped in traditional schooling that we seem unable to respond to the tide of effects pressing us toward a new paradigm of teaching and learning. (emphasis in original; p. 144)

The challenge to educators and decision makers for improving education is far greater than programmatic ideas, funding, strategies or cultural and curricular considerations, although these are of importance. Where these actions primarily fail is in giving primacy to schooling as the norm from the outset (see Goulet, 2007, for example) thereby furthering that entrenchment of the current paradigm (see also Cuban, 1984, p. 243).

In their article on Native American perspectives, Nelson-Barber and Estrin (2001) stress the importance of learning being associated with the student making a connection between what they explore and what they themselves bring into that investigation. They outline some of the problems that First Nations students face in their education. One

particular issue concerns the lack of success in academic courses. According to these authors, the student dropout rate in some First Nations communities exceeds 60 percent, and few continue on to careers requiring math and science backgrounds. According to Sparks (2000), students better understand concepts that are presented in an active, hands-on manner. If First Nations/Aboriginal schools are to be truly improved, then nothing short of a systemic change is needed, as cathartic as that seems and in fact would be. Indeed, a question to be answered is why a First Nations education system would want to follow a practice that is so out of sync with its culture.

Like Gibbons (1990) if we are to question the appropriateness of current North American schooling in preparing the adolescent for life after school and for adulthood we might also agree that, “the traditional methods seemed so wasteful since these methods failed (generally) to be relevant to the actual needs of the student such that...[n]o matter what we did, within the traditional framework...students’ interest waned and they seemed unprepared in the transition to adulthood” (p. 2). Walkabout evolved as a practical response to the lack of a truly representative “rite of passage,” one in which the formal education experience would truly prepare the individual “for the transition from dependent adolescence to an independent, productive adulthood” (p. xv), learning processes that “...could be used for a lifetime; responsibility, challenge and real-world projects not only [would lead] to the desired learning in compelling ways, but [also] to personal growth and the development of character” (p. iv). These processes include “goal-setting and planning, designing one’s own learning project, communicating, problem-solving, leading and participating in groups, reflecting in solitude, securing and

organizing resources, and evaluating one's progress" (p. xiv). As a viable challenge to current schooling the Walkabout Program embodies

responsibility, self-direction, time-management, study strategies, writing skills, journal keeping, interviewing and critical thinking. It models and encourages, through the advisors and mentors and its structure, the desire to learn, to achieve, to cooperate. It flexes with each individual while maintaining consistent high standards. It develops, motivates, completes and better prepares the adolescent for that inevitable transition to adulthood with the subsequent demands of society. (Després, 1999)

### **Infrastructure**

A Walkabout school on the surface might look very similar to its counterpart school in any neighbourhood. On the inside, however, students are engaged in discovery, meeting with advisors and mentors to discuss progress on their latest passage, chatting with their peer support group about comments they've provided on draft wrap-ups, sitting on council to discuss the logistics of a planned trip to Mexico for example where a group of students, parents and teachers will spend a week assisting a village erect their own school or church, attending classes that they've chosen in the previous semester, and so on. Students—young people—figure prominently in a Walkabout Program. Students are mentored and provided with a support network of a teacher/advisor, community mentor and a couple of their peers.

Each student negotiates a proposed project for each of the six passages (mentioned earlier), the underlying idea being that it will challenge them at a higher or

tougher level than they are accustomed to. Students are also honoured for their real participation in the governance of the school, in the selection of courses to be taught, and in the public celebration of their passage completions. Perhaps above all, these young people learn to become active members in the larger community in which they will take their places to serve, share responsibilities and promote the good (note the lack of emphasis on an economic, utilitarian purpose). Teacher/advisors perform multiple tasks. They are subject matter instructors, advisors on particular passage projects, overseers for service trips, leaders, mentors, researchers, advocates, fellow members in a learning community, models and examples. Parents play a proactive role attending to mentoring students, going along on trips, even teaching specific courses requested by students. Course work is geared towards student needs rather than prescribed curricula. Thus will a Walkabout school differ seasonally depending on the nature of student interests, advising and community input, and changing global demands. Governance in a Walkabout school is about shared leadership comprising a visionary servant leader whose authority stems from a desire to move forward, take risks, share managerial duties and direct while encouraging, engaging, modeling and demonstrating learning organization principles. Leaders and advisors are involved in research, improvement, and are proactive in on-going personal learning. Direction of the school consists of a council made up of the leader, teacher/advisors, students and representatives from the community—themselves committed to continued learning and modeling by example.

## **Practice**

Organization is important in order to achieve results and to bring order to potential chaos. The timeframe for learning and class work is determined by the needs of students and teacher/advisor and may change seasonally. Thus is a schedule for class work and lessons established and not for expediency or efficiency sake. Built into each day is advising time as part of the teacher/advisor's workload as well as passage work for students. The six passages will likely only be completed over the students' final three years of their learning program at the school, or about two passages per year given passage complexity, time and life demands and school work.<sup>1</sup> I am using "school" as a familiar term suggesting that there are aspects of the formal education system that can still be in place, albeit altered to fit Walkabout.

Walkabout students develop a proposal with their advisor. This proposal sets a course for self-directed learning and acts as a guide to maximizing learning throughout the passage process:

In meeting the demands of each of the six passages of the Program, the parts of the [proposal] should anticipate difficulties and challenges that the student will face and indicate solutions to explore. The [proposal] identifies the vision or goals of the student, the learning strategies to be used, acceptable demonstrations of achievement, and the roles of participants where applicable. The teacher/advisor needs to understand the nature of the project being undertaken, the anticipated learning outcomes, and agree upon the standards that will be used to evaluate the

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<sup>1</sup> Gibbons created a Walkabout version appropriate for younger students in the elementary and middle school grade levels.



outcomes. Even assessment becomes part of the overall learning experience<sup>2</sup> and proposal (Gibbons 1991). Students are required, and learn, to maintain a working journal throughout their learning experience. The journal is a sketchbook or record of thinking, learning, planning, action and reflection, [serving as a resource of ideas, reflections and solutions to problems]. (Després, 1999)

Although assessment comprises both formal and informal components throughout the student's learning experience, there are no quantitative markers that follow the student like monikers of supposed success:

Students are responsible for formative self-assessments to monitor their ongoing progress and summative self-evaluations that involve careful self-reflection and analysis of their learning experiences. Peer assessment takes the form of support groups [comprised of fellow students]. In these small groups, peers informally discuss and assess each other's passages providing ongoing support, suggestions and feedback. (Després, 1999)

Part of the role of teacher/advisors is to monitor

the student's self-assessment process through interviews, anecdotal records, proposal editing, and progress charts. Feedback [to students] ranges from informal interactions to formal structured assessments. Advising could also be a function of a mentoring team comprised of teachers and other supporters... This team works with the student to foster an environment that is caring, safe and effective for

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<sup>2</sup> That learning experience includes course work, passage work, advising meetings, journal keeping, working, playing and interacting in the community.

learning. Mentoring differs from advising in that an individual (or possibly a small group of people) serve as a personal resource person whose expertise is directly related to the Passage topic chosen by the student. Ideally, a network of individuals from the community would be available from which to draw. [The mentoring team teaches and guides] the student in learning how to learn and in how to achieve goals, [and the team plays a direct role in assessment]...The team is assembled based on the needs of the student and the [nature] of their goals.

Advising for each of the team members includes suggestions in time management, scheduling, writing properly, encouraging, and directing to individuals in the community who could work with the person as a mentor. (Després, 1999)

Upon completion of their passage, the student participates in a public sharing of his/her learning experience thereby gaining confidence, self-esteem, authority, responsibility and the public's admiration and acceptance.

### **Form**

The Walkabout program presented here comprises six learning passages to be completed by each student in conjunction with a teacher/advisor, a community mentor whose expertise is relevant to the student's passage needs, and a couple of peers who will commit to supporting the student emotionally and critically and by reading the student's drafts (proposal and final document of the passage experience, or the wrap-up). The Program runs parallel to course offerings which are determined semestrally and by student input and choice. Students also play an active role in the governance structure of the school thereby learning valuable lessons in leadership, respect, responsibility and

communication. They also benefit from the honour and respect due them that comes with collaborative decision-making.

## **Background**

As an alternative and experiential learning approach, the Walkabout Program began as an investigation into how education is “done” and how it could be done regardless of cultural setting largely through the influence of Gibbons’ (1990) work. In the course of the development of the program, research was conducted—that included an information-gathering trip to Jefferson County Open School near Denver, Colorado, USA—documents were created, government funding was attained, and one high school became a proving ground for this experiential learning program dubbed the “da Vinci Program” in honour of Leonardo da Vinci’s practice of lifelong learning. The demise of that short-lived program, however, had as much to do with the systemic trappings of schooling as it did with the resistance by the majority of teachers and senior administrators in the pilot school as well as by the district administration, a reification of the very insights raised earlier in this paper by Cuban (1984) and others. A similar program at Jefferson County Open School continues successfully since 1974.

## **Educational Relevancy**

Schooling in the context of globalization or personal needs at some point must contend with more than the rhetoric of relevancy. It must actually *do* something. The question of relevancy in education spirited the Conference Board to commission a research report on the restructuring of education. The report declares that, “the education

system needs to be different—and in fundamental ways” (Berman, 1987, p. 1).

Accordingly, Bill Clinton (1987), while Governor of Arkansas, insists in the same Conference Board Report that, “education must go through a second wave of reform which goes to the heart of the learning process—focusing on how schools are run, how teachers teach, what students do, and...the key success in the next stage of reform is to get people inside and outside the system [of education] to work in tandem” (p. 11).

Although the context of the foregoing is American education, similar educational practices correspond with Western education as a whole. Educators tend to focus on general knowledge as an adequate “preparation” for life after school (Busby & Graham, 1994). Garmston and Wellman (1995) note that the “high school ... serves as a striking form of an adapted—not adaptive—organism. Designed in another time, for the purposes of that time, the typical high school often shows a remarkable lack of flexibility” (p. 6). Peter Senge, author of *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, gives a caveat of sorts about the application of systemic thinking in education in an interview (O’Neil, 1995). He denies that schools are learning organizations (p. 20). At the same time he also identifies key principles that need to be in place in order for schools to become learning organizations. These are “where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Zemke, 1999, p. 49). These principles are in alignment with Walkabout practice.

## **Educational Purposes**

Concerning relevancy, we need also to examine the purposes or aims of education, or as Ebel (1972) was prompted to ask, “What are schools for?” (p. 3). Part of the difficulty of this discussion is the range of beliefs surrounding various articulated educational purposes, from school to government. What the role of education is to be in society is a question that has been raised throughout the centuries (see for example Hirst, 1970; Hummel, 1993; White, 1982). And that role of education in society bears out in practice, whether or not such practice is consistent with stated purposes. But what mechanism is in place—democratic or other—to ensure that education stays relevant to the needs of society and current in the world? At some point the importance of understanding those purposes will have a direct impact on the discussion of education, schooling and the direction for alternative considerations. Meanwhile relevant learning—a struggle in and for schools—demands a new model to avoid the established patterns of practice in schooling.

As an example of broad purposes of education determined in a democratic context, in British Columbia the government’s Ministry of Education list of educational goals include: “Intellectual Development,” “Human and Social Development” and, “To prepare students to attain their career and occupational objectives; to assist in the development of effective work habits and the flexibility to deal with changes in the workplace (Government of British Columbia, Ministry of Education, <http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/resourcedocs/k12educationplan/mission.htm>, accessed June 7, 2007).

According to Pai and Adler (1997), the purposes of education could be viewed as the “deliberate means by which each society attempts to transmit and perpetuate its

notion of the good life, which is derived from the society's fundamental beliefs concerning the nature of the world, knowledge, and values" (p. 4). However, another compounding problem in the articulation of education purposes is anthropologist Jules Henry's claim that: "School metamorphoses the child, giving it [sic] a Self the school can manage, and then proceeds to minister to the Self it has made" (cited in Contenta, 1993, p. 28). Part of the acculturation of young people is seen as recreating individuals in the image of a state ideal. Henry's comment sounds similar to Parkinson's (2002) article about the workplace and its accommodation of a generation of "tech-savvy" children where he states: "After all, the education we give our children, particularly in high school and beyond, seeks in part to renormalize their behavior into a model that we (and their teachers) are more comfortable with"

(<http://www.cioinsight.com/article2/0,3959,389112,00.asp>). According to Contenta, schooling is the practice of the hidden curriculum, which essentially is a curriculum of "submission." Students are constrained by it as much as they are trained in it. It is the enforcement of the *status quo*, dominant society's ideals, even if these are in contradiction (p. 179). White (1982) raises the problem of set curricula and materials as well as the systemic form and structure of schools. He asks: "Why have educated men [sic] all got to be of the same type, all with identical qualities?" (p. 125). In a study of Canadian schools and their culture, Contenta (1993) says this about how and what educational purposes are achieved:

While the home environment is a factor in reproducing inequality, schools themselves are working hard to teach children at the bottom how to stay there while teaching those at the top how to hang on to what their parents already have.

The process is skewed by a cultural bias that permeates schooling—from teachers to textbooks—and it is legitimized by the myth of meritocracy. Invisibly they combine to shape the self-image of young people, a message with the soul that spares no one, including the middle class. (p. 96)

Eisner (1983) comments:

Attention to the sensibilities in schooling has always been a low priority. The senses are supposedly bodily functions, somehow unconnected to the mind.

Feeling, or awareness of qualities, is supposed to rely upon soma, and educational experience is supposed to deal with psyche. The break between mind and body is further legitimated by the reification of cognition and affect. We tend to regard the former as linguistically mediated thought—kind of inner thought—and the latter as feelings that need no help from mind or intelligence. (p. 53)

These acculturation expectations and “personal side” draw attention to the purposes of education as a reminder that ultimately those purposes directly affect (young) people, and that determining what these educational purposes are to be, along with their effects, invites a continuous reexamination. We can see how these critical approaches to education’s purposes, such as connecting mind and body, might conceivably, if unexpectedly, be aided or threatened by alternatives that move education out of its own self-contained realm and into a larger world, represented by more than business interests. What is important here is to see how perceptions of the basic purposes of education, from both sides, can be at issue. Education purposes so far are evidently sufficiently varied as to render the discussion of education very complex. However, the solution is not to try to develop purposeful ideals or mutually acceptable educational purposes.

Related educational perceptions are drawn out by other writers, such as Gibbons (1990) who states that there are, among others, three “tendencies in schooling[:]. . . the tendency to cultivate failure, isolation and confusion. In the traditional paradigm all learning leads to the test and its proven success in it. . . While tests create pressure to learn, they primarily serve the needs of management and create serious downside risk for the learning of many students” (p. 147). What we see from Eisner (1983) and Gibbons is that although educational purposes may be established by legislation and practiced by educators, their articulation in practice leads to different ends. Contenta (1993) points out: “Schools came to reflect the hierarchical nature of workplaces and were built, organized, and run like factories. . . They were so similar in structure to factories that some, like Toronto’s Brant Street Public School [in Canada], were actually made to be converted to factories if enrolment declined” (p. 16). That is, the prototype of schools is factoryesque in its design and existential function. It seems dubious, then, that schools could be called upon as instruments of positive social change.

### **Transition from School**

An important point in the discussion of educational relevancy and purposes, especially in relation to the potential for alternative learning approaches, has to do with the transition from school to life outside school. Gibbons (1976) fathoms another compounding factor in the complexity of the system of education. He states: “The crucial issue of secondary education, and perhaps of all education, is how to promote the successful transition of youth from childhood and school to adulthood and the community” (p. 1).



Marshall and Tucker (1992) also implicate higher education for being responsible in part “for the problem in the schools.” In fact their conclusion is, “though higher education is in a better position to provide active assistance to the schools than most of society’s basic institutions, it has thus far failed to do so” (p. 212). Concerning these institutions of higher learning, Contenta (1993) charges:

The universities are perhaps the biggest stumbling block to ridding schools of academic disciplines. They remain the fortress of bureaucratic expertise in which academics jealously guard their turf—historians keep anthropologists at a distance and psychologists make sure no one mistakes them for sociologists. They pressure high schools to reflect this view of the world and, indeed, universities must shoulder the blame for much of the structured inertia of schools. (p. 202)

Education is obviously affected at all levels by the demands of higher education. Whether or not universities are responsible for as much as Contenta or Marshall and Tucker claim is another study. My point here is to emphasize that there is another influence in secondary education to consider, in addition to its relation to the world of business and work.

Again, these points regarding transition from school to the workplace demonstrate a range of opinions and observations of practices, which demand an examination of both the systemic factors of education and the corresponding perceptions of them. In the meantime young people continue to bear the system that likewise schooled their parents and grand-parents before them.

### **Toward a Solution: Return to the Walkabout Program**

The Walkabout Program emphasizes self-directed learning through guided instruction, advising, and practical experience as the student works through their learning experience. A passage is a passing, or transition, from one stage to another. For the Australian aborigine transition meant a social acceptance of having moved from adolescence to adulthood (see also Pallas 1993). In the Walkabout Program students become pro-active learners in their life adventure, educators become leaders, facilitators and models; community members become participant mentors and models; school becomes a learning and resource facility.

The Walkabout Program is more than an alternative approach to learning, more than just another curricular tampering. The Program stands as a viable challenge in education and to our thinking on schooling. The Walkabout Program arguably provides the most comprehensive and inclusive means for learning experiences for students in their on-going preparation for living on and in the world. Will we continue to repeat the same thing expecting different results, as the definition of insanity goes, or step out boldly and provide young people with the best possible chance?

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