

Alternative Education, Not Alternative Location

by Anna-Marie Mills and Kevin O'Dwyer

Silvercreek Outdoor Education Centre has been operating since 1982 under the auspices of the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board through a lease agreement with the Credit Valley Conservation Authority. The 1400-acre property captures the Niagara Escarpment within the Credit Valley watershed and provides a multitude of outdoor experiences. Historically, the Silvercreek Outdoor Education Centre has delivered outdoor experiences that extend and augment curricular opportunities for over 30,000 students in Grades 4 to 12.

Recently, the Dufferin-Peel Catholic District School Board has expanded these curriculum-based outdoor experiences by establishing a satellite classroom from Archbishop Oscar Romero Secondary School to deliver credit programming using the outdoor environment at Silvercreek Outdoor Education Centre. With a pre-existing low ropes course, a recently installed high ropes course, and access to the Bruce Trail and Niagara Escarpment less than 30 minutes from urban Brampton and Mississauga, Ontario, the location just north of Georgetown is ideal.

The Adventure Based Learning Experience (ABLE) program is designed for students who require a non-traditional approach to learning with varied program delivery options or need a flexible learning landscape. While these senior students have earned between 17 and 20 secondary school credits, the regular secondary setting has not led to continued academic or personal success. Entering its second year, this unique experiential learning program provides students from Mississauga and Brampton the opportunity to “learn from doing” in an outdoor education environment while earning high school credits towards an Ontario Secondary School Diploma. The primary focus is on preparing students to

return to their community school, integrate into the world of work, or successfully transition to a post-secondary institution.

Most students in ABLE earn the following credits: Peer and Leadership Support (GPP 3O); Fitness and Recreation Leadership (PLF 4C); Church and Christ (HRE 4O); and Learning Strategies (GLS 4O). Some students will earn a credit in Entrepreneurial Studies (BDI 3C) through a blended mode of delivery; they combine the completion of an Independent Learning Course with practical experience in running the breakfast club, class store and other fundraisers. Above and beyond this credit package, students have access to other Independent Learning Courses.

As an experiential learning program, ABLE uses various vehicles of delivery (low ropes, high ropes, wilderness experiences, initiative tasks, breakfast club, food bank and soup kitchen experiences) to present students with deliberately designed learning experiences and challenges. Each student has an opportunity to develop a reservoir of skills through their experiences. Based on the work of Barry Bennett in *Beyond Monet*, students complete various assessment tools. The teachers use observation, assessment and facilitation to extract data and assist students in the process of self and group analysis, goal setting, language deconstruction, peer feedback and peer mentoring. From these experiences students recognize the skills that may contribute to credit attainment. Whether the experience is in Algonquin Park or in a science lab, students use these methodologies to acquire knowledge and apply it. They learn to use various assessment tools in the midst of experience, written assignments, video journals and verbal presentations.

The program also makes use of experiences that focus on leadership, communication, team building and co-operative learning. As a result, the ABLE program operates within a theory of group development that is based on Tuckman's (1965) familiar cycle of *forming, storming, norming and transforming*.

One approach to understanding how the ABLE program works is to recount a student's journey through this experiential learning environment. All the names have been changed to protect students' identities and some elements have been altered to provide a more composite example of a student experience.

Kara's Path

Students are referred to the ABLE program by guidance counsellors or administrators. Assessing whether a student's profile meshes with the program criteria occurs through a review of credit counsel summaries and his or her Ontario Student Record (OSR). After determining an initial match, the student is offered an interview. The principal receives a recommendation following the interview.

Kara's first interview was abbreviated — she was unprepared to be self-reflective and was pre-occupied with the slow pace of her watch. Although positive and extroverted, it was clearly a veneer. Five months later, with a cast on her foot, Kara's second interview revealed another semester mired by a behaviour pattern that left her frustrated and unable to achieve her academic potential. This interview exposed a more grounded candidate who self-identified a need for substantive change. Kara entered the program stalled at 23 credits, focused on graduating. She was a genuinely caring person and willing to extend herself to "help" others, however this help was often at a cost to herself.

In the forming stage of the class, the students bonded to the extent that peer pressure prevented them from moving into the

storming phase. Kara relied on her pre-existing pattern of conflict avoidance to placate any and all perceived sources of disagreement. Each event designed to illicit and provide opportunities to resolve potential differences was quickly managed by Kara to placate the source of conflict with altruisms such as "Can't we just get along?" or "I thought we were together on this." Her pattern of managing conflict in her life was now evident in the classroom. Unrecognized by Kara was the fact that other students were generating pressure through verbal and non-verbal conflict that reinforced her willingness to avoid conflict to the extent that she would modify her own behaviour to provide relief from criticism.

Being walked all over is a major problem in my life. It started in high school. I was made fun of in Grade 9 because I wasn't totally skinny like the other girls. A guy name Akeem use to call me all sorts of names, my (student) agenda got ripped up in the smoker's area at school — it was so embarrassing. Those incidents have created bottled feelings like was there something wrong with me. Why do they have it out for me?

– Kara

Her self-esteem was fed by her genuine caring but was also her trap. She would accommodate individuals' conflict to the point and frequency that she could not recognize what she personally stood for and was willing to engage in high risk ventures in order to "help" someone.

Then a boy named Ron came into my life. He didn't compliment me, he didn't have a job and he lived at his friend's house. What a man, hey, well maybe I can fix him. Maybe those were signs to say goodbye but, no, I wanted to help and that is what I tried to do. Wrong again and again.

. . . [W]e argued, he pushed me, I punched him and he turned around and

pushed me down the stairs. . . . I had to be different and look what different got me — six weeks in a cast and a foot that still hurts today.

– Kara

She was being manipulated by people in her life and now in the class. Kara's desire to be liked resulted in appeasement. A further issue existed because the class as an entity did not want to "storm." This behaviour stifled further development and kept Kara in the cycle of appeasing others. Both Kara and another student in the class were offered the opportunity to alter the behaviour of creating obstacles to interference. Kara accepted the challenge.

Kara's breakthrough moment was realized deep in Algonquin Park. With no place to hide, run to, or avoid others, she was forced to deal with issues stemming from class. Later, the class would identify the significant value of Kara's contribution. At that same time she did not give in to the pattern of lowering her own standards to accommodate and be accepted. She earned respect.

For me to succeed I need to set boundaries and limits to what will make me happy and not what I will tolerate. It is the only way I will grow into dealing with problems and actions I have made, whether right or wrong. People know now that I have set some boundaries and so do my friends, but I will have to re-evaluate my personal contract every once in a while.

– Kara

Kara achieved six credits in the span of a semester in ABLE and is currently in her first year of college, living in residence.

Beyond the government's focus on accountability, assessment and standardized testing, some of the more significant student success has yet to find a "strand." Fortunately, both ABLE students and teachers value the human face in education.

I believe that the goal of this trip (Algonquin) was to embed in our minds that not only can we accomplish over difficult situations but also a strategy on how to do so, especially with other individuals different from ourselves. . . . This trip put me in the most difficult, negative mindset and through the most physical torture I have ever been in, and even though my mind was expressing negative thoughts and feelings, my mouth was so trained it filtered and edited my negative thoughts into positive and well expressed communicated issues. This made cold hard facts sound like warm soft criticism and that has helped me as a person.

– ABLÉ student, 2007

The depth of these experiences goes well beyond credit attainment and initiates a process of lifelong learning.

Reference

Tuckman, B.W. (1965). Developmental sequence in small groups. *Psychological Bulletin*, 63, 384–399. (Reprinted in *Group Facilitation: A Research and Applications Journal*, 3, Spring 2001, 66–81. Retrieved 2 October 2007 from <http://dennislearningcenter.osu.edu/references/ GROUP%20DEV%20ARTICLE.doc>)

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