

Outward Bound Giwaykiwin: Connecting to Land and Culture through Indigenous Outdoor Education

by Greg Lowan

This past July I had the opportunity to work as an instructor with Outward Bound Canada's (OBC) Giwaykiwin Program. Along with a co-instructor, a peer-support staff member, and six high-school-aged students from Indigenous communities across Canada, we completed a 21-day course. Our focus was a 15-day flat-water canoe expedition following the Shining Tree route on the west Montreal River in northern Temagami, Ontario. The course was punctuated by a rock climbing day, a community service day at base camp, and participation in a sweat lodge ceremony.

According to OBC (2006), the Giwaykiwin Program was founded in 1985 in response to a recognized need for programming specific to students from Indigenous backgrounds. The Giwaykiwin program aims to integrate Outward Bound (OB) and Indigenous philosophies and traditions. Giwaykiwin means "coming home" in Ojibwa and signifies the program's philosophy of creating an opportunity for students to reconnect with their Indigenous cultures and the land. This concept would be supported by Armstrong (1987) who describes the importance of learning experientially on the land in traditional Indigenous education.

Giwaykiwin participants come to OB from a variety of backgrounds. Some are referred by social service organizations, while others enroll with the support of their families or communities. Communities or organizations may also request exclusive contract courses. On our course we had a wonderfully diverse mix of students from the west coast of Canada to Northern Quebec. Being of Miq Maq ancestry myself (New Brunswick), we represented Indigenous peoples from coast to coast!

The multiculturalism within our group created a unique learning environment. We had some students with extensive experience in the traditional teachings of their Nation and others with none at all. Some of our students were also raised in the Christian tradition. Ceremonies were a routine, but optional, component of our course. Some students participated daily in smudging (a purification ceremony) and the offering of tobacco, while others did so periodically or not at all.

For me, one of the most powerful moments of the course occurred at our takeout on the final day. A ritual that we had maintained throughout our journey was the singing of a drum song. The song is in Cree and English and speaks of leaving loved ones for an important journey. It is sung in four verses with each verse led by a different singer. This song resonated with students and staff alike as we had all left family and friends behind to embark on our three-week journey. We introduced the song on our first night and then sang it each night before bed and at the beginning and end of important portions of the course. On our final morning, we rose at five a.m. On the students' suggestion, we sang our song, and then paddled the final kilometres in silence. Upon reaching the takeout we broke the silence by singing one final time in unison. It brought me to tears. We had gone through an intense experience together, overcoming significant physical, social and emotional challenges. Our growth as a group and as individuals became clear to me at that moment. I was so touched to hear everyone singing together. Students, who three weeks earlier were too shy to speak in talking circles, were proudly singing our group's anthem in full voice.

A Rite of Passage

Drawing on anthropological research, Andrews (1999) examines the similarities between wilderness expeditions and rites of passage. On an expedition, participants are separated from their regular lives and are often able to connect in new ways with themselves, their group and the land through which they are traveling. Upon returning from an expedition, participants have often undergone personal transformations, similar to those found in people who have completed formal rites of passage. Andrews observes that the stages of separation, transformation, and reincorporation common in rites of passage are often part of wilderness expeditions.

Upon examining the structure of a typical OB long course as described by OBC (2006), the three stages of a rite of passage can be found. The beginning, middle and conclusion of each course are carefully structured and include rituals. Separation occurs on the first day of each course with the raising of a flag, the Blue Peter, which signifies the departure of a group from base camp. Transformation includes Immersion, Expedition, and Final when students are introduced to a specific mode of wilderness travel and eventually take responsibility for the expedition themselves. Courses conclude with reincorporation activities such as the ceremonial granting of commemorative pins and a banquet (OBC, 2006). Andrews (1999) suggests that both students and instructors often emerge from courses with a newly acquired sense of connection to themselves, their community and the land. On our Giwaykiwin course in July, some students also expressed a renewed connection to their culture.

Solo Learnings

Solitary wilderness experiences are an important rite of passage in many cultures. OB courses greater than five days in length typically include a 24- or 48-hour solo (OBC, 2006). While on solo, students are isolated

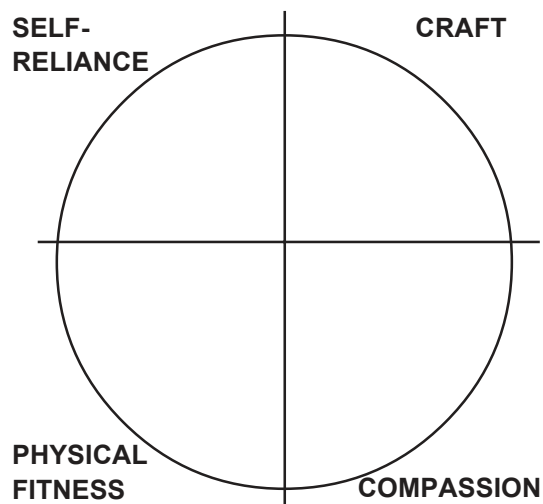
from each other and provided with sufficient food and shelter to survive. Instructors check in with each student at regular intervals to ensure their safety.

Prior to our Giwaykiwin course in July, I had the opportunity to go on solo myself at the conclusion of a staff trip. I wanted to experience an OB-style overnight solo for myself so that I could relate to my students' experiences. It was more challenging than I expected. Leaving my circle of friends with whom I had traveled for ten days to spend a night out in the company of black flies was tough! I had not realized how strong our groups' bond — our sense of community — had become and, initially, I felt very lonely and isolated.

However, I soon overcame my loneliness and took advantage of the opportunity for solitary reflection. Through journaling and fireside meditation, I worked through significant learnings and experiences that I had had on the trip. I also experienced an epiphany. While thinking about my upcoming Giwaykiwin course in July, I realized that OB's four pillars — physical fitness, self-reliance, compassion, and craft (OBC, 2006) — would fit well into a discussion of the Medicine Wheel. The Medicine Wheel is common to many of North America's Indigenous cultures. As described by Bopp, Bopp, Brown and Lane Jr. (1984), it is divided into four sections and represents, among other things, the connectedness of the four seasons, the four directions, the four elements, the four races of people, and the four aspects of balanced health (i.e., emotional, mental, physical and spiritual).

Examining OB's four pillars using the Medicine Wheel (Figure 1) provides an opportunity to discuss their interconnectedness. From the perspective of the Medicine Wheel, if you are very strong in one pillar, but ignore another, your wheel will be lopsided and out of balance. I used this concept to discuss the four pillars and the Medicine Wheel with our Giwaykiwin students in July. As previously

Figure 1. Medicine Wheel with Outward Bound's Four Pillars.



stated, this sort of integration of OB and Indigenous philosophies is a goal of the Giwaykiwin program. As Giwaykiwin instructors, we are charged with the significant challenge of balancing our own cultural experiences and teachings while recognizing the diversity of our Indigenous students, as well as incorporating the philosophies of OB.

Final Thoughts

Simpson (2002) and Takano (2005) have both expressed that, despite the existence of many wilderness-based Indigenous educational programs, there is a lack of examination of this important educational trend in the literature. My experiences with OBC's Giwaykiwin program and other Indigenous outdoor education programs have been transformational personally and professionally. I have also witnessed profound transformations in my students. Despite these successes, however, I am left with questions that I feel require further reflection. Some of the areas that I am interested in studying further include the successful inclusion of non-Indigenous instructors, recognizing and

balancing Indigenous multiculturalism in our programs, and the co-existence and integration of OB and Indigenous philosophies. I am currently exploring these topics, among others, through the course of my Master of Education degree at Lakehead University. In July 2007, I will be conducting action research as a participant-observer on a Giwaykiwin course on the Horton River, NWT. My hope is that this reflexivity in research will result in enhanced instructional practice and programming and also add to the body of literature on this dynamic form of education. See you on the water!

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