Learning 4 life: Experiences in 'classrooms without walls'[1]

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> *This generation is experiencing a detachment and loss of connection in their relationship with the physical world*

Introduction

The term, 'classroom without walls', captures the essence of the Year 9 *Learning 4 life* program at Gilson College.[2] For those teachers who have experienced the behaviour issues of typical Year 9 students and their lack of connection with the traditional curriculum, this article may come as a welcome relief. The program requires time and effort, but the rewards that flow from a well structured and implemented experiential education program more than compensate for the effort and work involved.

The wider social context

The world of 21st century adolescents is both exciting and challenging. Never has there been a time when so much is possible, on one hand, and so many limitations on the other. They can explore every square metre of the earth while sitting in front of Google Earth, and yet are told it is unsafe to walk in the local park alone, ride their bikes without a helmet, or travel in a motor vehicle without their seatbelt on. In his book, *Last child in the woods*, Richard Louv uses the phrase, "nature deficit disorder" to describe the feeling of detachment and loss of connection this generation is experiencing in their relationship with the physical world.

Experienced teachers tend to agree that working with young people aged from 14 to 16 offers unique challenges. The physical and psychological changes they are undergoing are exacerbated by the prolonged periods they are required to spend in classrooms designed for conformity and uniformity; alien concepts to the adolescent mind! Having spent most of my teaching life of 25 years working with this age group, I can personally attest to the preceding statement. Kids in this age group are incredibly challenging to work with; however, making connections and forming relationships can bring some of the sweetest rewards imaginable.

Experiential education—some foundational concepts

"Learning by doing" is another name for experiential education (Vadeboncoeur, 2002). While this is a valid description, experiential education has come to include aspects of constructivist education theory for a number of reasons:

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Opportunities are nurtured, for learners and educators to explore and examine their own values (Adkins and Simmons 2004).

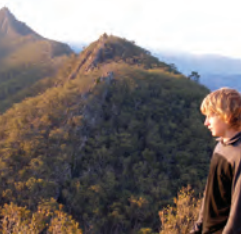
The traditional model of schooling is based on what Freire calls the "banking approach" to education. In this model:

> …the teacher deposits information into the student, so that the student can then withdraw information when requested. Traditional education rests on the premise that the teacher has the information and imparts this information to students and then evaluates the students' performance. By extension, traditional education is based on the teacher being in a power position in relation to the student in terms of the possession of knowledge and the evaluation of learning. This traditional approach to education can be seen across the educational process from pre-school to doctoral programs (Itin, 1999).

This has been referred to as "just in case" learning, as opposed to a "just in time" learning model, where information and understanding occur on the basis of need and interest. Although, undoubtedly, there is information we all need to know, learning *how* to learn is even more important, and of life-time benefit.

While researching the possibilities for an experiential education program for our Year 9 students at Gilson College, I came across many approaches. These ranged from the simple 'add on' model of outdoor education programs such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award offered in many schools, to the full-blown model of Geelong Grammar's Timbertop. Picking my way through these, I benefited from speaking to a number of the co-coordinators and providers of such programs.

The approach we eventually decided on, at Gilson, grew out of the work of Kurt Hahn.[3] It seemed that a program based broadly on his four 'antidotes' to the six 'declines' of modern society's



1 Toby—sunrise, Cathedral Range

[Photography: Tony Robinson]

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youth, would be an appropriate model to follow. The aim is to provide opportunities for young people—often disengaged from the traditional curriculum, to find purpose and discover a love of learning. This occurs through experiences of life in the 'real world', where one is likely to get cold, wet, scratched and blistered; far from the vicarious experiences gathered from textbooks, videos and computer screens, in the typical classroom.

It is important to note that the specific experiential method chosen does not really matter. There are, however, some consistent characteristics at the core of all successful experiential education programs. Under the watchful eye of caring, interested adults, the programs should include real-life experiences that provide challenges offering success or failure, and opportunities to serve others voluntarily. It is through these undertakings that participants develop self-confidence, independence, and responsibility—qualities we would want all young people to develop.

While many such programs are aimed at disengaged and socially challenged youth, Hahn's program was originally aimed at young people from a privileged background. A major aspect of this program is that all youth need similar opportunities if they are to better understand their place in the world; realizing and moving beyond being mere consumers and working towards an understanding of their life's purpose.

Hahn notes six 'declines' of modern youth—a decline in fitness, initiative and enterprise, memory and imagination, skill and care, self-discipline, and a decline in compassion. He goes on to outline four 'antidotes' which have since become 'pillars' of the Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme. They are fitness training, expeditions, projects, and service.

He also offers seven methodological premises that underpin the outcomes of experiential education programs:

1. Give children opportunity for self-discovery.
2. Plan for the children to meet with triumph and defeat.
3. Ensure the children have opportunity for self-effacement in the common cause.
4. Provide periods of silence.
5. Train the imagination.
6. Make games important, but not predominant.
7. Free the children from the enervating sense of privilege.

Gilson's Year 9 *Learning 4 life* program—genesis and realisation

Almost four years ago we embarked on a proposal for an alternative to the perceived Year 9 'curriculum desert'—at least in the minds of the students! Our college is situated in one of the fastest growing outer-urban residential localities in Australia. Families in the area are ethnically and economically diverse. The families of the 69 students that have just completed Year 9 in the 2007 school year represent 12 ethnic backgrounds and most of the world's major religions. While on one hand the challenges of such diversity are enormous, the possibilities, on the other, are extraordinary.

Reflecting on the 'nature' of our school, the needs of the students and the principles of experiential education, we began a process of open consultation with interested teachers. Given enthusiastic support from the head of school, the principal, and the college council, a viable wide-ranging experiential education program for Year 9 students emerged; with a five-year implementation period. The proposed program included four major components:

- Expedition learning—a bushwalking expedition to central Tasmania;
- Exploration learning—a trip to the outback;
- Service learning—a STORM CO[5] type trip to a Victorian region; and
- Enterprise learning—a labour intensive business venture.

There is also a spiritual dimension to the program. Through taking part in *Learning 4 life*, students are encouraged to develop a deepening understanding of the human-divine relationship—between self and the Creator, together with exploring and examining important personal qualities and values. These include participation and involvement; responsibility and reliability; initiative and integrity; and independence and self confidence.[6]

Gilson's experiential education program is deliberately progressively challenging. It incorporates training and opportunities for personal growth; with the first step being expedition learning. In Term 1, various day, overnight and longer training camps prepare participants for a five-day expedition to the largely untracked wilderness of the Walls of Jerusalem National Park and the Central Plateau World Heritage Area of Tasmania. It is in this environment that each group of students, under the supervision of a teacher and also a guide, has opportunity for self-discovery by meeting with triumph and defeat through periods of silence and freedom from the enervating sense of privilege. The remainder of Semester 1 is dedicated to preparing

> ***"Experiencing life in the 'real world'—where one gets cold, wet, scratched and blistered—allows young people disengaged from the traditional curriculum to find purpose and discover a love of learning"***



2 Year 9 group at Mortlake Common

[Photography: Gilson Collection]

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> *Gilson's experiential program is deliberately progressively challenging*

for a public presentation of the students' learning experiences. This takes the form of an evening when each individual student is provided with a 'space' to display and discuss their learning in front of peers, parents, teachers, and invited guests.

A second component of the program, while not originally in the proposal, is an urban learning camp. Students from Gilson College travel to Melbourne City where they meet with students from three other Christian schools in Melbourne. Last year we had over 150 students in groups of eight to ten, completing various assigned tasks that required them to find their way to significant sites around the city. Each evening all students would return to the Melbourne Discovery Centre, where sheets were handed in for assessment and students could mix and meet with their counterparts from 'sister' schools in the region.

The third and final component of the program in 2007 involved service learning. For the past three years we have organised a service learning camp at Warrnambool, in south-western Victoria. While there, we have worked on various projects in conjunction with the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Warrnambool City Council. Projects included bird hides for the Orange Bellied Parrot; ocean-view walks; spotting rare and endangered birds such as the Hooded Plover; finding and documenting occurrences of rare, endangered plants; and weeding, planting and replanting native flora.

In 2007, students made a significant discovery! While searching for native orchids and the endangered Matted Flax Lilly, they found a previously undocumented species of Leek Orchid. The Department of Sustainability and Environment's fact sheet for this plant has a picture of the students responsible for the find and a note about how a group of students from Gilson College were involved in discovering it.

Students also participated in STORM Co type activities. These entailed face painting, ballooning, puppeteering, and clowning and magic—at local shopping centres, aged care facilities, and as part of after school care programs. In addition, we gave students an opportunity to make contact with a non-profit organisation in the local community, to volunteer their services for a few hours each fortnight. This proved to be very successful. Groups, consisting of three to five students, worked out public transport routes to help at kindergartens, primary schools, and sporting facilities, and to assist with clean-up activities at local waterways, parks and gardens. Our hope is that this will introduce the students to the whole spectrum of service learning and environmental experiences, which should impact on their values choices and character formation.

The results

The reality is that the third year of the implementation period has just drawn to a close. We successfully survived last year with 69 participating Year 9 students and could not have achieved this without the hard work of three full-time Year 9 teachers, help from many committed colleagues and assistants, and a fully supportive college administration. The trust and support from a sometimes 'bewildered' group of parents and students should also receive mention.

Besides the fun aspect of the program that enables students to 'escape' the classroom and enjoy life 'how it was meant to be', there are obvious positive changes in students who participate in this program. At present, evidence is mainly anecdotal but comments such as the following are noteworthy: "These kids seem so mature. They actually seem





excited about the things they've learned at the places where they've been;" or, "What have you done to my daughter? She used to be quiet and reserved. Now, she is talkative and has opinions of her own!"

Students themselves also comment on how they have changed through the experiences they have undergone. From the query, "Can we go camping, again?" to the comment, "I'll never again go to a place where there are no toilets!" When asked whether they enjoyed their experiences, the answer is invariably, "yes". The answer is the same when asked if they would encourage others to participate in the program. And one receives an overwhelmingly positive response when students are questioned, if they would be interested in assisting future Year 9 students.

What conclusions have we reached, so far? We say with confidence that all Year 9 students change as a result of participating in this program. They grow in maturity, display more positive attitudes and behaviours, and examine or reassess their values system. However, the extent of this change, and its lasting effect, are questions that can only be answered in the long term, through more detailed research.

Would I recommend this program for your school? Probably not. However, what I would recommend strongly is a contextualised, experiential education program that is appropriate for your school's socio-economic environment. Knowing your students, parents and community is essential and all staff must be familiar with, and supportive of the program and what it seeks to achieve.

Finally, it is imperative that the school administration gives more than just tacit approval to the program, but fully and overtly supports it. Indeed, *all* key players must be sympathetic to the outcomes of the program if it is to be successful. Programs of this kind will not survive, in the long term, simply on the enthusiasm of one or two committed staff members.

I am of the firm belief that all students will benefit from experiences that broaden their self-understanding and self-confidence. *Learning 4 life* provides unlimited opportunities for this to occur. Without commitment to programs of this type, Christian schools in general, and Seventh-day Adventist schools in particular will find it increasingly difficult to demonstrate their 'special character', and to fulfil the reason for their existence. Experiential education through service, enterprise, exploration and expedition is one method through which the students in our care may become "…thinkers and not mere reflectors…" of others' thoughts (White, 1903, p.17). TEACH

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Endnotes

[1] Coined by Marshall McLuhan almost five decades ago; see Carpenter, E. & McLuhan, M. (1960). *Explorations in communication: An anthology*. New York: Beacon Press.

[2] Gilson College is a systemic school operated by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. It provides Christian education from K-12 and is located in Taylors Hill, an outer north-west suburb of Melbourne.

[3] Summaries of Hahn's philosophy and working examples, can be found at James Neil's website, http://www.wilderdom.com

[4] Hahn proposed these in the late teens and early twenties of the last century and little appears to have changed in the past 100 years!

[5] An acronym: **S**ervice **T**o **O**thers **R**eally **M**atters. See the previous issue of *TEACH Journal of Christian Education* for an article that looks at the service orientation of STORM Co programs.

[6] The extent to which students learn and embrace these values is the focus of a doctoral research program currently in progress.

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3 Declan, Carly Smoker (teacher), and Patrick—Walls of Jerusalem expedition

4 Aaron, Kevin and Richard—Warrnambool service camp

5 Kara and Kimberlyn—Walls of Jerusalem expedition

[Photography: Chris Cowled]