

Exploring the Influence of the ROC Integrated High School Program

by Scott Caspell

I could see ignited in the eyes of my students the fire burning in me. I could see that the changing of hearts and minds had begun. . . . [Integrated] Programs . . . are vehicles to give kids back their own sense of power, their ability to connect, to feel compassion for others and the planet. They re-inspire kids to love learning, to think critically and to connect with the Earth that is their home — their home that is in dire need of their compassionate touch. (Hood, 2002, p. 34)

Introduction

Stemming from my personal experience, numerous conversations with other educators, and information from relevant literature (Horwood, 2002), it is apparent that the majority of students in Ontario have limited access to outdoor, experiential learning through the formal education system. I believe that investigating the effects of existing outdoor, experiential programs can be instrumental in promoting more opportunities for holistic, outdoor, community-oriented learning. As such, my senior honour's work investigated the influence of the Roots of Courage, Roots of Change (ROC) Integrated Curriculum Program (ICP) on participants' lives. More specifically, I interviewed 13 students who participated in the ROC Program between 1994 and 1997 to help determine what influence, if any, their involvement in the program had on their lives. This research project contributes to the call for longitudinal research to support ICPs (Horwood, 2002; Russell & Burton, 2001). The research was qualitative in nature, consisting of semi-structured, non-formal phone interviews.

Integrated Curriculum Programs

The ROC ICP was founded in 1994 at the Mayfield High School in the Town of Caledon, Ontario. In the ROC Program, students work towards a pre-established curriculum package during one high school semester. In the 1990s, the ROC students had the opportunity to earn credits in English (journalism), Environmental Science, Physical Education and Geography. The different subject areas were blended together throughout the day, thereby working to eliminate the fragmentation between the curriculum and students' learning that is often produced by discipline-specific courses.

Numerous ICPs incorporate experiential, project-oriented learning that involves the school's local ecological and social communities. This teaching approach serves to create "real life" experiences by integrating structured learning with the students' lives outside of school. Many people, myself included, learn best when the subject matter is relevant to their lives, as well as when the learning involves the whole person — mind, body and spirit, or the cognitive, affective and physical learning domains (Priest & Gass, 1997). In this way, ICPs — like a great deal of experiential education — provide students with the opportunity to more readily grasp concepts and skills being taught, which can lead to a sense of enjoyment and success throughout the learning process.

Findings and Discussion

Interview respondents were randomly assigned a number of 1 through 13 to maintain their anonymity. In the interest of concealing the identity of the research participants, all respondents are referred to in the female

gender. Text appearing in italics preceded by a “Q” indicates the question that the respondent is answering.

An Overview of the Respondents’ Impressions of the ROC Program

The following passages (from respondents number seven and three) are representative of a number of responses to the interview question, “What do you feel the overall influence of the ROC Program has been on your life?”

R7) “It was, to a very large degree, very close to a life-changing experience — partially due to the teachers, the classmates and the curriculum, but also due to the length [of the program]. . . . I feel I came out a different person . . . [and] a lot of it had to do with how I thought. I think differently [about] my impact on the world, and how I interact with people.”

R3) “I loved ROC! It changed my life. You know those . . . important turning points? ROC was one of those; I think all children and people should experience something like ROC. . . . ROC helped me become more engaged in my life, but also in the broader Earth community. I feel that because of ROC . . . I’ve been more adventurous [and] I’m not as afraid of making my own decisions. All because of these experiences that stemmed from ROC . . . I’m more willing to step outside my ‘comfort zone’.”

The last sentence from respondent number three is interesting in that she acknowledges that it was not only the experiences in the ROC Program that influenced her life, but also the “experiences that stemmed from” her time in the program.

While the above responses present positive feedback about the overall influence of the ROC Program, the following two responses offer interesting developmental perspectives:

R5) “[The ROC Program] occurred at a time of life when I was formulating my self-identity, and I definitely think this experience helped me find my sense of self, and it definitely gave me more confidence in lots of ways.”

R9) “[It’s] hard to say, since there have been other large influences since. It’s very difficult to figure out fully. [The ROC Program] has affected the way I think, and the way I spend my time and resources. In that way it was the tip of iceberg, whetting the appetite. And that goes a long way with people when they’re 15–18 years old.”

These two respondents indicate that they were in the ROC Program at a time in their lives when adolescents are “formulating their self-identity” and are highly impressionable. Another interesting point that the ninth respondent raises is that it is hard to discern the influence of the ROC Program in particular since there have been so many other significant experiences throughout her lifetime. This indicates, as was to be expected, that respondents’ perceived correlation between their time in the ROC Program and any outcome needs to be considered in relation to their other experiences.

When respondent number one was asked what she felt the overall influence of the ROC Program had been on her life, she gave the following response, which contrasts with the positive responses cited above:

R1) “Uh, I hadn’t really thought about it very much. The ROC Program provided a larger environmental awareness overall. . . . I’m not sure what else.”

For clarification, I interpreted respondent number one’s comment that “she hadn’t really thought very much” about her time in the program as an indication that the ROC Program had a small influence on her life; however, it may be that this respondent found it difficult to express her thoughts about the ROC Program in a verbal manner. As such,

this respondent may have been able to provide a more detailed response if she could have expressed herself in another communication medium, such as poetry or story.

Links to Post-secondary Environmental or Outdoor Programs

Post-secondary program selection is one of the largest tangible influences that participants attributed to their time in the ROC Program. I cannot, of course, infer that the ROC Program was the only reason that these individuals took an environmental or outdoor-focused post secondary program, since some of the respondents entered the ROC Program with pre-existing outdoor experience and an interest in the environment. Yet, as the following responses indicate, a number of respondents correlate their experiences in the ROC Program with their post-secondary program selection.

R4) "I ended up taking Environmental Science at university, which I can directly relate to my time in the ROC Program."

R10) "[The ROC Program] definitely steered me more towards what I took in university. I wasn't too sure before [the program] what I was interested in. . . . I went and did a degree in Environmental Science"

R8) "I don't think I would have gone to university if I hadn't gone to the ROC Program. I was more interested in technical skills and probably would have gone into the trades . . . had it not been for the ROC Program."

R5) "I went to . . . university for outdoor recreation"

(Q) *Do you relate going to that program to your time in the ROC program?*

(A) "One hundred percent."

While influencing students in their selection of a post-secondary degree is not necessarily the goal of the ROC Program, these cases demonstrate that the program did just that.

Links to Current Professions

Respondents number 12 and 2 indicated a direct correlation between their time in the ROC Program and their current profession in the environmental field. Respondent number four indicated that she works for an environmentally focused non-governmental organization, yet she did not correlate this with her time in the ROC Program. Respondent number six indicated that, although she had already selected her post-secondary academic path before entering the ROC Program, the interpersonal skills and technical outdoor competencies developed in the program are quite useful in her current career. In another case, when asked if she was able to identify any life decisions that she now relates to her time in the ROC Program, the 11th respondent stated: "Well, the irony is that I am now in a job in the environmental field that actually builds on everything we learned in ROC, although there was not a conscious decision to do so."

Worth mentioning is the fact that the interviews did not specifically inquire about the respondents' career choices. Consequently, it is unclear what several of the respondents do for a living. Therefore, out of 13 interviews, four people indicated that they are working in the environmental field, although only two directly related their career choice to their time in the ROC Program. Another respondent (R13) replied that she was now teaching at the elementary level and that the ROC Program cultivated or strengthened her interest in teaching.

While these respondents are not necessarily an accurate representation of the entire ROC alumni, I believe that their responses can be interpreted as a strong indication of the influential nature of the ROC Program. Not only do these individuals working in the environmental sector indicate the influence of the ROC Program on their lives, but I would suggest that their work also has beneficial ecological and social implications as well.

Environmental Influences of the ROC Program

Wiersma (1997) asserts that “most practitioners within the current educational system have created boundaries between school communities and ecological communities” (p. 11). The interview responses suggest that the ROC Program offered a unique educational approach that blurred the boundaries between ecological and human communities. As a result, the ROC Program not only integrated the subject areas, but also the more-than-human world into the program’s assignments and teaching strategies (Wiersma 1997). Nine respondents indicated that the ROC Program cultivated in them a stronger environmental awareness. The following passage from the third respondent is representative of many of the responses about environmental awareness.

R3) (Q) *What was the overall influence of the ROC Program on your life?*

(A) Awareness. And it helped me become more interested in learning, being engaged in my life, and the interconnection of everything.

Many of the responses do not, however, indicate whether the individuals have adapted their lives and behaviours to live in accordance with such an environmental awareness.

The interviews were also structured to inquire about specific skills, interests or life decisions that the respondents relate to their time in the ROC Program. Still, only a few respondents correlated their experience in the ROC Program with tangible examples of what could be deemed environmentally responsible behaviours. Respondents R9, R2 and R3 indicated that they had altered their consumption habits and a number of other daily habits to be more environmentally friendly, either completely or partially due to their experiences in the ROC Program. I now believe that I should have structured the interview questions to include questions that

more specifically inquired about environmental action and environmentally responsible behaviours.

A number of respondents commented that the program helped them develop a stronger connection with the natural world. Orr (1992) notes that firsthand experiences in the outdoors are influential in fostering connections with the Earth, which he further relates to environmentally responsible behaviour.

Other Life Decisions Influenced by the ROC Program

When asked if they could identify any skills or interests that the ROC Program cultivated or strengthened in their lives, R8 and R12 responded with the promotion of healthy, active, outdoor lifestyles. R10 noted that the ROC Program inspired her to travel more, which she reported she has done since her time in the program.

Personal Growth: Intra/Interpersonal Development

Intrapersonal growth

Priest and Gass (1997) propose that intrapersonal skill development includes the following components: “new confidence in oneself, increased willingness to take risks, improved self-concept, enhanced leadership skills, increased logical reasoning skills, and greater reflective thinking skills” (p. 20). Similar to the ICP that Russell and Burton (2001) investigated, I found that respondents consistently indicated that there was a significant opportunity for personal growth in the ROC Program. The following excerpts detail what respondents had to say when they were asked if they felt there was an opportunity for personal growth within the ROC Program.

R11) “Oh yeah, totally! It was different for everyone. The atmosphere was conducive towards helping you get to know and understand yourself better. . . . I learned

basically who I was, what is important to me, how I want to treat and respect other people.”

- R9) “I do — quite a bit of opportunity; personal journaling . . . was very conducive to personal growth.”
- R6) “Definitely. I think that’s one of the big things that I did in the program. I was not a social person; it was difficult for me to interact in a group setting. It was a good experience for me; it helped me grow as an individual. I learned about handling myself in a group.... I learned a lot about myself....”

Even the individual who offered the least amount of support for the program still had the following to say when asked if she felt there was an opportunity for personal growth in the ROC Program: “Yup, definitely in terms of the team building stuff I was mentioning; not only with that but with the journals and other assignments made us step outside of your usual shell and try new things.”

Four respondents (R11, R2, R9 and R1) indicated that their personal journaling through the ROC Program fostered personal growth. Journaling was likely important to this many respondents because the act of reflecting on their experiences and recording their thoughts helped them internalize and learn from their experiences.

I believe that the elements of intrapersonal growth, noted above, are beneficial and desirable for all people to develop and strengthen. In this research, increased self-confidence, an increased willingness to take risks, and enhanced leadership skills were cited by respondents as benefits of their time in the ROC Program. I will venture to suggest that well-developed intrapersonal abilities can significantly contribute to an individual’s sense of contentment with their situation in life (i.e., feeling of success or happiness) as well as their emotional, physical and mental well-being.

Interpersonal skill development

One of the main influences that respondents attributed to the ROC Program involved interpersonal skill development. Priest and Gass (1997) note that interpersonal abilities involve the following areas of skill development: “Enhanced cooperation, more effective communication skills, greater trust in others, increased sharing of decision making, new ways to resolve conflicts, improved problem-solving skills, and enhanced leadership skills” (p. 20). This section will draw from respondents’ comments that fit into these skill sets.

- R6) “So the thing I’ve used most [from the program] is learning about myself, how I function in a group, and how to deal with others in a group — to realize peoples’ strengths and weaknesses, and how to use different leadership skills to bring out the best in people.”

The following respondent articulates a number of interpersonal characteristics that were part of her experience in the ROC Program.

- R11) “The thing about the ROC Program is . . . [you are] with a community of people that you may or may not like, and you need to maintain a personal level of functioning; yet you also need to interact and be part of a larger community, more like the real world. In programs like ROC, students need to live cooperatively with people through conflict and celebration.”

In his book *Ecological Identity: Becoming a Reflective Environmentalist*, Mitchell Thomashow (2001) refers to interpersonal skills as “process knowledge,” which he asserts can help people effectively share information, solve problems and help resolve conflicts. Thomashow (2001) postulates that the skills associated with process knowledge are necessary for people of all career paths, including those working in the environmental field and what he refers to as “ecologically

responsible citizens” (p. 173). Following Thomashow’s line of thought, if an individual’s interpersonal skills are underdeveloped, that person will be unable to effectively relate with her family, peers and colleagues; thus she will unlikely be successful and content in her personal and professional relationships. In this sense, well-developed interpersonal and intrapersonal skills can be thought of as the foundation that can then support healthy and respectful relationships as well as, potentially, meaningful and socially and environmentally conscious life work.

Specialties of the ROC Program?

One of the objectives of this research was to gain an understanding of those aspects of the program that helped create the opportunity for meaningful experiences or personal growth. The respondents listed a number of elements that contributed to their enhanced learning and enjoyment of the program: (1) authentic, “real world” learning; (2) the experiential teaching approach; (3) and, the role of the teacher.

Authentic learning

A number of respondents talked about how the learning in the program was much more relevant to their daily lives than normal classroom learning. In many instances, this was a result of the activities, assignments or field trips involving their local community. The following excerpt highlights the importance that a number of respondents attributed to authentic learning experiences.

R3) “The learning was relevant. When we visited the water treatment plant we learned this is how our water is cleaned . . . or these are relevant things happening in our community, or . . . [this is] how our life impacts these things. This type of learning made it really tangible — not in a text book or in far away places. . . . It was a powerful experience!”

The previous respondent’s reply supports Sobel’s (2004) assertion that locally focused, experiential learning contributes to the participants’ perception of its authenticity. The following statement by Sterling (2001) also relates to a number of participant responses: “If we want people to have the capacity and will to contribute to civil society, then they have to feel ownership of their learning — it has to be meaningful, engaging and participative, rather than functional, passive and prescriptive” (p. 26–27).

Sterling’s thought implies that once individuals are engaged in their learning and their local community, then they can begin to think of themselves as part of something larger than themselves, including the social and ecological aspects of the Earth community. Judging from the comments of the last several reported interview respondents, it appears that the ROC Program was fairly effective at engaging students and making the learning process more meaningful.

The experiential teaching approach

Although there were no questions in the interviews that specifically addressed experiential learning, there were a number of responses in this area to warrant its own section in the analysis. In addition to personal growth and interpersonal skill development, experiential learning was the third theme that Russell and Burton (2001) interpreted as being important to the students in their study. The poignant response from the ninth respondent indicates why she felt the ROC Program offered beneficial learning opportunities.

R9) “The whole approach to learning and testing [in the ROC Program] seems to me to be much more beneficial [than in regular courses]. We all learn in multifaceted ways, and it’s arrogant of the education system to utilize one way of learning and assume that all students can learn that way. . . . [The ROC Program] sets students up to win once they leave

program, setting them up for a new approach in the typical classroom learning.”

The ninth respondent speaks to several important facets of a holistic, experiential education program, including how the teaching approach was more conducive to reaching people with different learning styles. A number of respondents indicated that learning in an experiential manner was one of the most meaningful elements of the program. Many respondents mentioned that the experiential approach to learning was enjoyable, and a much easier way to learn; however, respondents were often unable to articulate why this was the case. Ellsworth (2005) shares her thoughts on experiential learning, and why we may find it so difficult to think about it intellectually:

No one, no “I,” can access this place of [learning] because what we experience as “I” emerges from it. This is why we cannot explain “how” we have come to knowing. This is why pedagogy teaches but does not know how it teaches. We come to a knowing only as we emerge from a realm of sensation/movement that is ontologically prior to cognition. (p. 167)

Ellsworth’s passage expresses the importance of teaching strategies and pedagogy. This research supports Ellsworth’s assertion that it is not only the knowledge being taught, but also the learning experience — including the learning environment and involvement with co-learners — that has influenced these respondents’ personal growth and development.

The educator

A third factor that influenced the learning and personal growth of the respondents was their teacher. The following highlights what one respondent thought of her teacher’s style and philosophy:

R9) I really liked [our teacher’s] style and approach, and this program in general. It honed the skills that people have and encouraged them to further develop these skills. This kind of program enabled truer testing and learning that encourages growth.

I interpret this response to suggest that the philosophy and abilities of the educator also play a major role in the influence of ICPs. The experiences of the ROC Program were apparently rooted in an “eco-centric” approach that encouraged students to examine their personal beliefs, their relationship with other humans, and their influence on the world around them.

Concluding Thoughts

The findings of this research indicate that the ROC Program had a varied yet relatively influential effect on the participants’ lives. It is not surprising that this research supports the findings presented in Russell and Burton’s (2001) study: that experiential learning as well as interpersonal and intrapersonal skill development were consistently cited by participants to be a major influence in their perceived success and enjoyment of the program. This research indicates that the ROC Program facilitated meaningful — and in some cases measurable — benefits and influences, as described by its participants 9–12 years after their experience in the program.

While the excerpts from the interviews are a strong indication of some of the tangible (e.g., university selection) and intangible (e.g., interpersonal skill development) ways this program influenced students, the fact remains that ICPs compose only a small proportion of students’ lives. Although in ICPs the quality, rather than the amount, of time spent is of primary importance, increasing the duration that students spend in such programs appears necessary. Even though there is a growing body of literature citing evidence as to why students should have the option to learn in an integrated, experiential manner (Horwood, 2002; Russell & Burton, 2001), there is no

indication that a movement in this direction is occurring. As Horwood (2002) notes, integrated, holistic, environmentally focused learning is simply not currently an option for most students in the Ontario public school system.

Academics and practitioners need to support the continued evaluation and adaptation of our research methods, as well as our educational theories and practices, in order to reflect research findings and the dynamic nature of the learning environment and our students' needs. For those who support the learning outcomes attainable through ICPs, we need to continue to promote, fund and otherwise ensure that similar learning opportunities are available to as many people as possible.

What is needed is a desire from educators to provide such learning experiences, to find the necessary resources to do so, and to work through the details and challenges of operating such programs. As Kittle and Sharpe's (2005) case study of three ICPs that have been running for 10 or more years indicates, there is hope that ICPs can "overcome, and navigate through this changing educational climate" (p. 12). The findings of this research support previous efforts that demonstrate the benefits of ICPs with the hope that, as Horwood (2002) articulates, "Whatever the future for holistic education . . . I have confidence that we are among the guardians of a good idea that, even if it fades for a while, will resurface and persist, like a fertile seed" (p. 4).

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