

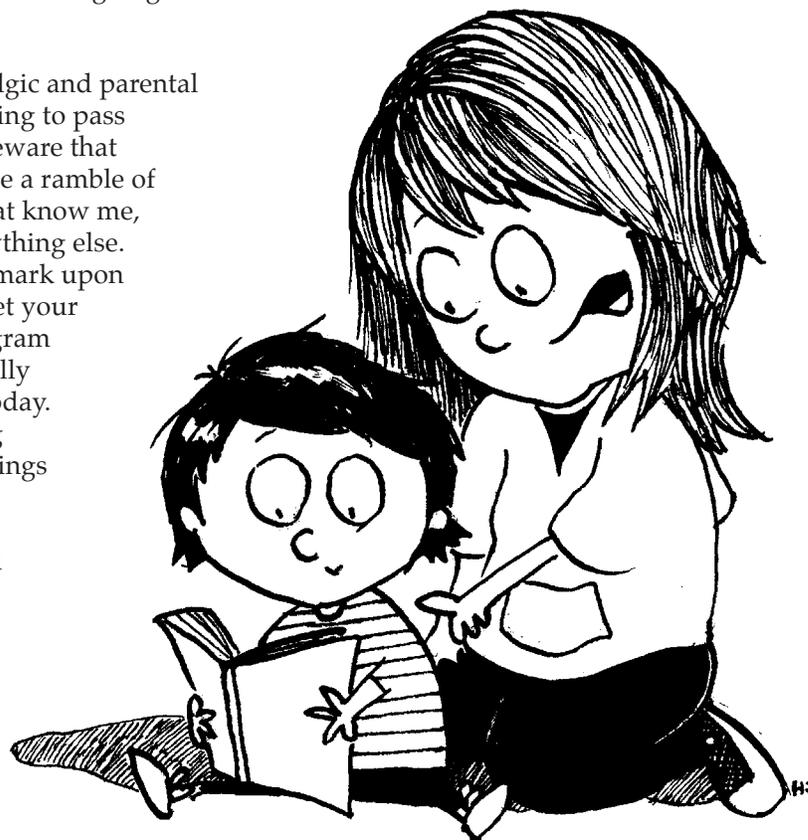
Terra: The Evolution Solution

By Bruce Murphy

A long time ago in an outdoor education wetland far, far away, I used to write for *Pathways*. I was short on experience but long on ideas. Now some 17 years later, as a teacher of an integrated program, I feel like I am long on experience but short on ideas. Much of what I teach was influenced by an integrated gathering at Bark Lake, back when Bark Lake was still a provincial leadership camp. With so many integrated teachers all in one place and just having finished my first year as a teacher of an integrated multi-credit program, I went in as a sponge ready to soak up as much as I could. The result of that gathering was huge and influential in the development of my ideas and my teaching. It is my fondest hope that this issue of *Pathways* and some of the ideas written here may prove helpful. If you are considering developing a program, prepare yourself for the most enriching experience of your life. My first piece of advice is "hang on!" because it is going to be an incredible ride.

In many ways I feel nostalgic and parental as I am writing this, wanting to pass advice along. So reader beware that what follows is going to be a ramble of opinions, but for those that know me, you would not expect anything else. The first thing I would remark upon is how important it is to let your program evolve. The program I first started was drastically different than what it is today. It started out as a tripping program with lots of readings on the likes of Sigurd Olson and Grey Owl, a mixture of what we called environmental English, outdoor education, physical education and biology. Now I am teaching what my friends like to call a "bird course." I teach my students

about birds and bird banding, and they, in turn, teach visiting Grade 4 and Grade 7 students about birds and bird banding at a place called the Hilliardton Marsh. It is a mentor program that makes administrators, parents and students all happy. Win, Win, Win! When I started the program I had no idea that I would become so involved with bird banding at a local marsh developed by Ducks Unlimited Canada, nor did I have any idea of developing all the partnerships that have contributed to our success, and yet it happened without a plan. So let your program evolve. Some of my program's evolution came about because of the advice from school administration as we have worked toward finding better matches for what "we do" with curriculum expectations. As a result, the courses I teach now are all different from the courses I started



with. My current principal tells me when I finally get it right it will be time for me to retire!

Another emphasis for me was to bring skills, passion and experience to what a program becomes. The biggest influences in my program came from working at Project DARE, working in the Junior Ranger program with the Ministry of Natural Resources and taking outdoor education with Bob Henderson at McMaster University. All of these influences have shaped my program. When I see successful integrated programs, I can see how all the influences of people's passion come to the forefront time and time again. The key is to find the right curriculum connections that allow these programs to evolve. The students will reap the benefits. The beautiful thing about multi-credit courses is that no two are alike, and each one reflects the strengths of the teachers, the local geography and circumstances. For example, because Ducks Unlimited built a marsh 20 minutes from us, we could see the potential it would have for visiting classes. I know of a school in New Brunswick that has a marsh right beside the football field—it was a perfect opportunity to develop a program. You will make the links to allow your program to flourish.

This moves us to perhaps the most complicated and perhaps most challenging part of many integrated programs—partnerships. In my case we have partnerships with at least ten different organizations. Each partnership is unique. Some help with funding, some help with expertise and training. Each partnership evolved as the program did. We have been very fortunate to have had great support from our local Ministry of Natural Resources and Ducks Unlimited Canada. Some partnerships are very formal with lots of documentation, and others are less formal. Naturally, liability is a big concern, so as you develop partnerships you will need to be very clear about this. In fact, I would say that if anything has changed in the years that I have been teaching, it is liability concerns. But some partnerships can help with this. We have developed an organization that is like

“a friends of the marsh.” This organization has taken on the responsibility of liability for all of the activities at our marsh that involve students and the general public outside of school times. Activities such as banding owls in the evening with my students and the general public would be an example of this.

Even though my attempt at describing the wonders of teaching an integrated program is in no way complete, I thought I would save the best for last—the students. I feel the program we have developed over the years has a formula that allows the students to be the best they can be. Over the years I have enjoyed fires with some incredible young people, and they constantly inspire and elate me. When my program really works it is because of the influence the students have on one another. I would suggest the book called *Islands of Healing*, with a chapter on “the no discount contract.” I have discovered that when a group buys into the notion of no put-downs, there is a shift in thinking. When the culture of “burning” one another turns into a culture of support, the things a group of high-school students can do is incredible.

For me now the last part of the evolution of a program that has lasted 17 years is looking for the next teacher of the program. The exciting part about this is that I know the program will, of course, evolve with the strengths and passion of that teacher. In a world where we like to see things move in full circles, it would be wonderful to see one of my past students take over the program. If I am really lucky the new teacher will allow me to form a partnership and volunteer as long as I promise not to be a liability issue. Good luck with your program, and if you are looking for any partnerships, do not hesitate to give me a call. We are always looking forward to the next bold step in our evolution.

Bruce Murphy can be found regularly with students and the public in “the marsh.” Murph has been teaching in the New Liskeard tri-town region for over 25 years.