

Saint Francis Xavier University

The ABEL Experience: A Lived Curriculum

by

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Abstract

The ABEL experience: A lived curriculum

This study examines the phenomena of lived experiences of students in an experiential-credit course taught at Sir John A. Macdonald High School. I believe ABEL (Adventure Based Experiential Learning) is an innovation, created from the benefits of a traditional educational experience, that can provide a new image of learning, leading and teaching. ABEL's curricular foundation is experiential education that includes adventure education, outdoor education and service learning that became the impetus for a new youth leadership course. The intent of the course was to develop youth leadership through experiential learning. However, the power of experiential education was further revealed by the service learning projects.

ABEL has confirmed the thought in many youth that they can become leaders and that they do have the ability to make a difference by serving. It is the power of this service learning experience that has brought this study to focus on the students, and the researcher's own experiences in serving and learning. Therefore, the purpose of this collaborative reflection was to examine ABEL, as an authentic and pedagogic form of empowerment for students. An in-depth understanding of the educational experiences of ABEL is possible by an examination of this shared phenomenon between myself as a teacher and my students.

Thus, what follows here is the telling of an educational adventure, a restorying, that will provide insights and a direction for ongoing experiential practice. Insights into the experiences of the students should provide experiential/service learning educators with an

opportunity to examine a rich educational interpretation of how an ‘ABEL type’ course can best serve students. I believe ABEL is an example in which service learning is not the program add-on but is a method of instruction founded in sound experiential and curricular practice. The curricular direction for the ABEL course is the development of youth leadership through initiative challenges, wilderness experiences and community partnerships. There is a need in educational research to understand the power of learning moments that our students and educators experience.

These learning moments were powerful and yet, to a large degree, not fully understood by my students or me. To reveal the connections of what was learned, experienced and formed as knowledge, the adventures had to be relived, told and retold, to advance our understanding of experiential practice. We all have a need for story and it is through the telling of our experiences that we can put shape to our own practices. This thesis confirmed for me that curricular experiences must do more than textual-knowledge advancement; they must empower students to reach their full potential. If the purpose of curriculum is to enrich the school experiences of youth and adults in the educational system, perhaps this can best occur when others are encouraged to lead, and challenged to be more fully engaged with the world.

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Chapter I- Introduction

The Experiential Educator

My soul is not asleep, it is awake, wide awake, with its eyes wide open. It sees things far off and it listens at the shores of the Great Silence. Rumi

What has happened to me, as a teacher, a person and a learner? Why is trying to understand my teaching practice so important to me? In a relatively short career I have experienced an educational adventure that I must process (Nadler & Luckner, 1992) to construct the learning links out of many pedagogic moments. I have only been teaching for nine years and in that time I have become committed to reforming my instructional delivery and curricular content so that it is more fully experiential. I believe as does Lambert (1999), that education is human engagement, and it is this shared process that I feel will promote and reconstruct a more positive civilization. The curricular experience must do more than textual-knowledge advancement, it must empower students to reach their full potential.

I wonder if this is why I am not satisfied with the current educational system. Perhaps, this is why it so important for me to improve what we have. For me, the challenge to these questions lies in understanding that to advance curriculum is to

develop as well the craft of teachers. If the purpose of curriculum is to enrich the school experiences of youth and adults in the educational system, perhaps this can best occur when others are encouraged to lead, and challenged to be more fully engaged with the world. I believe we must

transform the inevitably limited and schematic conceptions of school programs into the kinds of activities that genuinely engage students, ...create the environments that open up new vistas and provide for deep satisfactions, [and] make a difference in the lives that children lead. No curriculum teaches itself, it must always be mediated, and teaching is the fundamental mediator. (Eisner, 1991, p. 11)

One way to transform curriculum involves teachers in moving away from a traditional mode of teaching, and toward a partnership with their students in which they converse with each other as they create knowledge together (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). I believe that the best way to meet the needs of learners is to involve them in the co-creation of important questions, knowledge and shared pedagogical stories.

ABEL

In attempts to understand my practice, teaching experiences and pedagogic moments, I have utilized a process of experiential reflection. The following thesis contains both my own reflection, and the reflections of the students who experienced the Adventure Based Experiential Learning (ABEL) course at Sir John A. Macdonald High School. The ABEL course did not constitute a rejection of the current-curricular system; rather I believe that it has proven to be an exemplar for the way curriculum needs to be taught in today's schools. Although teachers have become increasingly successful at

fostering student growth, it seems that we have not managed to bring about widespread change in the traditional way we expect students to learn or in what we expect them to learn. I believe ABEL is an innovation, created from the benefits of a traditional educational experience, that can provide a new image of learning, leading and teaching.

ABEL has become a philosophy of learning and teaching that is shared by the teacher and the students within the course. As I teach and plan for the next ABEL generation of students, I am challenged to answer fundamental questions as to why I am doing what unfolds within my class. To understand my practice I need to find the source of these challenges in order to understand the purpose of my teaching.

A way to value teachers' practices is to give their experiences a voice, and to thereby capture their pedagogic moments. A telling of our stories can be a vital source to gain depth in the understanding of our practice. Two modes of expression for giving voice (Clandinin, 1988) to teachers are biography and autobiography. Denzin (1989) extends the biographical method to include life history, life story and narrative (p. 47). Life story was defined by Bertaux and Kohli (1984) as "an oral autobiographical narrative of the entire life span or specific aspects of life generated through interaction" (p. 217). They clearly argue that life story is unique in comparison to life history due to the former including data collection from other sources. Sources include, but are not limited to, interviews with others who are significant to the study, or private documents, such as diaries, that are related to the study. Life story is the framework that I intend to build upon to understand my ABEL experience.

The autobiographical method of life story will be adopted to represent the reflective experiences of those involved in ABEL. This adoption of biographic methods

is not a unique practice for educators (Abbs, 1976; Britton, 1970; Eisner, 1988; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). However, what makes this method distinct is the assessment of the ABEL experience as it was for the participants. Their stories are scrutinized for important intimate themes on a personal level, and pedagogical links are probed. This becomes a synthesis of ideas and information, a recording of the imagined and the real (Pinar, 1981). In a sense, this study, is a reflection of my professional growth in collaboration with my students as they developed academically through their educational experiences at Sir John A. Macdonald High School. Hence, this is a synthesis of our experiences, a reflective story-telling to gain and share understanding of what it meant for us to learn experientially in the ABEL course. To interpret the ABEL experience, I will explore our collaborative understanding of the experience (Grumet, 1980; Dominice, 1990). According to Butt and Raymond (1991), this collaboration can have direct and significant ramifications for the professional and personal development of teachers. The study validates the quality of the ABEL experience and through biography gives these experiences expression (Britton, 1971). Biographical Life story becomes the vehicle through which I will share the significance of ABEL with other educators.

I agree with Hateley's (1982) view of empowerment. Working with non-traditional teaching methods has positioned me on the fringes of the teaching community and I have come to understand that "[t]eaching experientially can be lonely" (Morrison-Shetlar & Heinrich, 1999, p. 10). Morrison-Shetlar & Heinrich expand upon the notion of the educational fringe as follows:

Teaching experientially is both exciting and risky-exciting because learners actively engage in their own learning and risky because the outcome of any

experiential exercise is never certain. Instructors, especially at the college level, who teach experientially live on this creative edge. That edge is made lonely by the fact that experiential teaching approaches are still viewed with suspicion in many departments and risky because promotion and tenure committees may value more traditional teaching methods. (p. 5)

My experiential approach to teaching does not involve a traditional transmission of knowledge (Cleary & Benson, 1998; Morrison-Shetlar & Heinrich, 1999). The deliberate avoidance of textbooks in ABEL and an ‘outdoor’ classroom within a school have afforded me freedom to explore the power of experiential education. However, this freedom has left me isolated from professional connections with colleagues. Thus, intentionally or not, my relationships with other professional staff have become difficult to invest in due to the extreme differences in our philosophical positions regarding curriculum and instruction.

The telling of this educational adventure has empowered me to share my stories with other educators. Most importantly, it has showed me that I can recognize the value of my practice even though I lack a professional association with my school, my board and the Nova Scotia Teacher’s Union. What I have gained is a shared learning experience with students and a small group of teachers who foster the notion of ‘group as mentor’ (Morrison-Shetlar & Heinrich, 1999) and who honor the methods that allow them to learn through experience. Our collaboration have brought about an emancipatory realization of finding voice (Grumet, 1981; Pinar, 1987). This thesis gives voice to the experiences of those involved (myself included) in ABEL to legitimize their learning. It also legitimizes our personal growth, and the social and academic accomplishments of the students.

Clandinin (1985) acknowledges teachers' positions as experiential educators because she believes that teachers are "active holders of knowledge, as well as agents in the reality of the classroom and the conceptualization of personal practical knowledge" (p. 9). To understand dimensions of my practice it became clear that I had to first examine my own personal experiences on a personal-professional level (Abbs, 1974). The challenge is to reveal why I teach the way I do and to end my wrestling of philosophies between the system of traditional education, and my current practice of experiential education in order to reform educational instruction for the benefit of student learning. I want to ensure that my students (and if possible other students) have meaningful educational experiences that enable them to articulate how and why this type of learning contributes to their spiritual, intellectual, emotional, social and physical development.

The Importance of ABEL

"Just why are we here anyway?" I heard this from a number of students when I first arrived at Sir John A. Macdonald High School in 1994. I have often heard students complain that school is pointless and unrelated to the real world.

ABEL was a response to student and community concerns. Through my collaborative planning in curriculum design with David Hubley (colleague at Sir John A. Macdonald), service learning and experiential education became the impetus for a new youth leadership course. Over the past six years, this course has become one of the main focuses of my career. Furthermore, my personal teaching practice has become connected with the work of many other teachers. This has resulted in informal action research (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993; Morrison-Shetlar & Heinrich, 1999) that has bound us together, and empowered us to support one another's attempts to incorporate an

experiential methodology into our own curricular instruction. ABEL has evolved from an extra curricular activity, into a credit course, entwining itself into the school culture and setting the stage for curricular reform (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999).

ABEL's curricular foundation is experiential education that includes adventure education, outdoor education and service learning. The intent of the course is to develop youth leadership through experiential learning. The starting point for the course is for the class to develop a sense of community through adventure programming (Ellmo & Graser, 1995; Glover & Midura, 1992; Burrington, Fortier, Frehsee, Henry, Mishra, Pichette, Taft, Thomasson, & Wilson, 1995; Rohnke & Butler, 1995; Rhonke, 1984, 1989, 1991; Henton, 1996; Cain & Jolliff, 1998). ABEL also challenges students to develop personally through outdoor/wilderness experiences (James, 1980; Simer & Sullivan, 1983; Miles & Priest, 1990; Cockrell, 1991; Drury & Bonney, 1992; Gass, 1995; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1996; Priest & Gass, 1997; Wurdinger, 1997; Graham, 1997; Andrews, 1999). However, the power of experiential education was further revealed to me by the service learning projects. Service learning can be rationalized as 'engaged pedagogy' (Warren, 1998).

[E]ngaged pedagogy emphasizes well-being- meaning that teachers are actively engaged in a process of self-actualization...[The] self-actualization process included not letting my voice of authority and experience silence the students' voices in struggles to understand...Experiential education is so important in building an engaged learning community because it puts the students' experiences, rather than the teacher's, at the center of knowledge construction.

(p. 135)

As students create projects that serve legitimate community needs, they also achieve academic outcomes. The community, the students and the staff member attached to the course conduct the evaluation. Students become empowered to do more within the community, and in turn, develop positive relationships that carry over into the school culture. Students serving in their respective communities, creating positive experiences for themselves and community members, have excited the staff members, who have sampled the practice of service learning because of the authentic ways students have learned course contents. ABEL has confirmed the thought in many youth that they can become leaders and that they do have the ability to make a difference by serving. The students create these projects in response to authentic community needs. They are thus empowered to improve the quality of life within their own community. When students are carefully guided, the instructor can also ensure that their academic skills are being developed within the project.

Service learning brings student-centered, experiential learning into the community and the needs of the community into the learning and teaching methods of the classroom. Course objectives are met by integrating real and meaningful community service into the methods of instruction and learning. Students explore the relevant application of their studies through real-life experiences...The community benefits by having unmet needs addressed by students who are provided the impetus and motivation for service through a facilitated structure for reflection and learning-the classroom. (Cleary & Benson, 1998, p. 124-125)

This experiential approach caught the interest of other teachers in my school, and has resulted in more students being engaged in service learning. It is the power of this

service learning experience that has brought me to focus this study on the students, and my own experiences in serving and learning. Students' journal reflections kept in ABEL, show that service learning was the most powerful form of experiential learning for them. My discoveries about service learning were consistent with findings on youth empowerment in the areas of helping/assisting, realizing the importance of caring about self and others, feeling like part of a group, and meeting challenges (Witman, 1995). This research revealed that the above-listed areas of empowerment are valued most in all adventure activities. Therefore, the purpose of this collaborative reflection is to examine ABEL, as an authentic and pedagogic form of empowerment for students.

Echoes From the Hallway

By an examination of this shared phenomenon between myself as a teacher and my students, I will be able to gain an in-depth understanding of the educational experience of ABEL. As with anything, it is how we understand our 'here and now' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962) that determines our role in society. Therefore, I wish to determine what roles have I created for my students and me in the educational arena and how is my arena experiential?

That question is for me the most important one I have to ask as an experiential educator. I suppose, in some regards, the way I teach in the 'here and now' is based on how I learned to teach, and ultimately how I was taught. Part of those answers lies in the statement, 'I will not teach in the ways I was taught'. When I was in high school, I knew there had to be a better way to work with students that would allow them to learn with passion. I agree with Rice and Brown (1998) as they make reference to hooks (1994) who

advocates curricular transformation. If the classroom is to be a place where students can become excited about ideas then

there must be space for emotion. “If we are all emotionally shut down, how can there be any excitement about ideas? When we bring our passion to the classroom, our collective passions come together, and there is an emotional response...” (p. 154, hooks, 1994, as cited in Rice & Brown, 1998) Because students must take on emotion-filled issues to be thoughtful, active members of the community, this aspect of teaching and learning is essential (p. 145)

When I was in high school, I did not have the words, or the confidence, to express my thoughts and feelings on this matter. Today I know that teacher-centred instruction is less likely to lead me, and my students, to deeply engaged learning when compared to learning that grows out of who students are and what they bring to the learning equation. I continually strive to provide room for student input and involvement in decision-making, but I still wonder how often we really empower students to take the kind of ownership that inspires a passion for learning? I believe that real passion for learning comes from within, and is kindled when students express their views about interests and issues that are authentic to them. Students need to be able to bring themselves to a learning experience that allows them to create a curricular event owned by them, which is a part of the very fabric of their lives. I have witnessed students becoming absorbed in such moments and their passion is the result of doing work that really matters in their world. An accomplishment of this type is a celebration of their passion and intelligence.

For me it comes down to what we value as education. As educators, I believe we should accept the passions of others and allow them to explore their interests.

[S]tudent success can be enhanced by providing opportunities for students to express their knowledge and understanding through a variety of modes and “intelligences”. Thus, by incorporating experiential education methods in our schools we can ...increase motivation, and achievement by appealing to a broader array of students’ learning styles, and reinvigorate curriculum by connecting more explicitly the school and the lived experiences of students. (Berv, 1998, p. 121)

Imagine the freedom for students who learn by their own strengths, intelligences or with passion by meeting academic outcomes as they learn experientially (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999). Can experiential education challenge the mainstream educational system? I wonder what might be possible if the educational system, that promotes and encourages life-long learning, accepted experiential reform?

Although we talk about changing the way lessons are taught in schools to capture the learning styles of our learners, this type of instruction is rare. In high school, there are limited links (Armstrong, 1994) to Gardner’s (1991) theory of multiple intelligences for educational instruction. This is evident in the following observation.

[S]tudents in public school classrooms are consistently engaged in writing, listening, or preparing for an assignment. But what passes for writing is often filling in blanks or writing short narratives. Activities seldom involve building, drawing, performing, role playing, physical movement, hands-on activities, or making things. School activity is frequently *restricted to the cognitive domain and within a limited range of sensory experience*. (emphases in original, [Lindsay & Ewert, 1999, p. 16])

Gardner is pushing the postmodern envelope by challenging us to acknowledge other types of intelligence that humans possess, such as the artistic, musical or the natural world. Experiential instruction could help support this educational reform.

The Telling

ABEL has motivated students through curricular experiences and has helped them believe that they can make a profound difference in their communities. ABEL has inspired many youth to understand their own leadership potential and their ability to serve others. Teachers are in-turn rejuvenated by students serving in their respective communities and creating win/win situations by learning academic skills to accompany their positive experiences.

I have always felt that my methods did not really have a place in the scope of what the majority of teachers would deem to be educational (Cleary & Benson, 1998). Many have commented that ABEL was recreational, extra-curricular, or educational play that lacked *solid academics*, and it was a program best left for the after hours. My *experiential practice* as an educator is grounded in educational theory, and I can look for direction for further curriculum development. I see my teaching as no different from the artist, the musician, the mechanic, the forester or the philosopher. I want to understand my world and my place in it. The search for meaning and truth is experienced through teaching. Thus, what follows here is the telling of an educational adventure, a restorying (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), that will provide insights into my curricular past, and a direction for my ongoing experiential practice.

Curriculum is a victim, as we are, of emerging notions of reality that must give way to the needs of an authentic self (Pinar, 1994). Doll (1993) envisions curriculum not

as a pre-established course of studies but rather a "passage of personal transformation" (p.4). In Doll's world no one owns the truth and we all have a right to be understood. We just need to take responsibility for our own meaning. We must interpret the experiences to make meaning (Norris, 1982) of our curricular recursion (Doll, 1993), by going back into our curricular experiences and making sense of them. We must deconstruct our notions of self by reflecting to create our own truths and to accept our own meanings. What is the role of the teacher in this multiple reality, multiple truths, and multiple understanding world of the learner? In my reflection, have I understood my place in the educational scheme? Do I have a clear direction? I know I am excited and nervous about the possibilities of the answers. This is the same feeling I have before any adventure. The adventure is never over until the *telling*. This thesis is in part the telling of my educational adventure. The adventure is experiential learning and the understanding we make of serving self and others in the communities in which we are privileged to find ourselves.

Significance of the ABEL Reflection

This study has hopefully provided insight into what made the experiences meaningful for these students. This may allow other teachers to adopt similar practices to ensure quality experiential alternatives in school-based curriculum. Understanding important experiential components of the ABEL experience can advance experiential practices in high school courses. The answers and insights shared by the students have allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my own practice by studying rich narratives from the students' perspectives of the curricular components of outdoor education, youth leadership and service learning.

Insights into the experiences of the students should provide experiential/service learning educators with an opportunity to examine a rich educational interpretation of how an 'ABEL type' course can best serve students. This may have an important impact on how I continue to teach experientially and for others who already teach experientially, as well as, for those who rely on more traditional methods. The theoretical connections made between curriculum and practice will shape how to approach teacher inservicing on service learning and experiential education. By understanding how the learning experience became lived-curriculum, I have become more sensitive to my own practice as an experiential educator. Furthermore, there is a need in educational research to understand the power of learning moments that our students and educators experience. I believe that our educational journeys (Huebner, 1975) should include experiences that are reflective, and that they should help us conduct a self-conscious investigation of our lives (Erben, 1996). These learning moments were powerful and yet, to a large degree, not fully understood by me or my students. To reveal the connections of what was learned, experienced and formed as knowledge, the adventures had to be relived, told and retold, to advance our understanding of experiential practice (Greenway, 1993).

The Reflection of an Educational Experience

As teachers, I believe we must acknowledge that the educational experience is inclusive of curriculum, policy, students, the community and the system. To gain insight into that critical element of currere, which is to understand the '*self*' through autobiographical reflection (Slattery, 1995), I feel we need to tell our own stories as part of the curriculum. Teachers can improve the quality of curriculum through theoretical advancement that develops their self-portraits, containing the experiences, myths,

dreams, and the creative imagination of teaching. We all have a need for story and it is through the telling of our experiences that we can put shape to our own practices.

It is plausible to understand curriculum as a strategy that transforms experiences into useable knowledge. Therefore, understanding our own autobiographies/biographies helps us develop our practice so that it is responsive to the needs of students and to ourselves. Journeying to create individual meaning from curriculum allows teachers to understand their world (Clandinin & Connelly, 1988). This thesis has become my reflective understanding of my teaching world through a biographic collaboration of student reflections and an autobiographical investigation of my praxis (Pinar, 1994). Being self-reflective and finding voice for our experiences allows us to make meaning from our currere. Noddings (1986) states that research stems from a common community goal, where the participants view themselves as involved members. Currere tries to make sense of the contributions those academics and the policies of the system have on the everyday life of individuals. Currere becomes the method for self-actualization. Dewey termed this the *self-encounter* (Hlebowitsh, 1992). Finding my own voice and guiding others in this search has helped us to establish our awareness of personal identity. Finding our voice has enabled us to link meaning to the experience.

Teachers must never lose sight of our own stories, for we too have currere. However, just because we have teaching experiences does not necessarily mean that we will achieve self-understanding. Experiences become meaningful when reflected upon (Grumet, 1976). To find our identities as teachers we need to tell our stories in a self-reflective process (Silvers, 1984). Teachers need to go inward (Macdonald, 1974, Pinar, 1974) to make sense of their educational journey and they need to share their experiences

so that others may learn from them. Curriculum becomes the process through which the student and the teacher can grow within the system. For Aoki (1990), the pedagogical relationship becomes an opportunity in which the “educator and the educated are allowed to dwell in a present that embraces past experiences and is open to possibilities yet to be” (p.114). By understanding our own identities we will be better prepared to understand why we want to immerse ourselves in a particular direction in study or life.

Connected knowing (Helle, 1991) is creating the language that transforms private reflection into public understanding. For this understanding to occur, we need to share and interpret our experiences (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993). I had the great fortune to be working with a progressive team at Sir John A. Macdonald High School. This team shared, explored and learned from each other's experiences. With out this informal action research, the site-based improvement plan for experiential learning and service learning would never have moved ahead with support and enthusiasm. We have learned from sharing our teaching lore (Goodson, 1992, Schubert, 1989, 1991, 1992). This sharing process has allowed us to grow and risk in our teaching practice. The lore of teachers creates an environment where risk is acceptable because there is trust to open our schools to the perceptions, views and ideas of others (Schubert & Ayers 1992). We are safe to grow as teachers and as life-long learners.

Understanding our roles as teachers, as life-long learners, is the needed insight to what is critical for each of our teaching practices. This manner of learning is a shared encounter of human engagement between the teacher, the student, the curriculum and the experience. I now realize, through reflection, that the creation and teaching of the ABEL course provided experiential learning for myself, as much as it provided experiential

education for my students. Research has given my reflective voice strength as I explored the origins in understanding experience through Dewey's writings.

Chapter II- Contextualizations

What is Experiential Education?

To situate more fully my research inquiry, this chapter will explore the overlapping and intersecting notions of experiential education and service learning. I will explore how these theoretical approaches, rooted in Deweyan philosophy, have helped define my work in ABEL.

What is learning? How do we best learn? What are the best teaching/classroom approaches that will allow the learning to occur for each person? Will different modalities in the instruction enhance the learning of our students? These are questions that I have wrestled with from my first year of teaching. To date I have only partial answers and a deepened curiosity concerning how and why people learn. Before I began my career as a teacher I believed that the curriculum had to have a purpose, the classroom experience had to have meaning. However, my Bachelor of Education did not adequately prepare me to become the kind of teacher I wanted to be. I was in need of a teaching *style* that would fit me as a teacher/facilitator in the learning process and would suit my own learning preferences. When I discovered that mysterious component of education through experience, I knew I had found the theoretical explanation I was looking for. Experiential education was the key to my own learning and teaching.

As a teacher, I want to bring the learning experience alive for my students. During an outdoor experience in my first teaching assignment with a group of junior-high students, I accidentally overheard a term used to explain the wilderness experience. The term was experiential education. I thought this must be a misused term because all

learning is an experience. I was a new graduate; thus, my intelligence and new-founded degree in education afforded me an expertise that this outdoor leader surely did not have. I questioned our wilderness leader and he offered an explanation that made reference to John Dewey, along with theoretical connections to experience-based learning models. For the past eight years, I have pursued an incorporation of an experiential approach into my pedagogy. It seems so simple, you do and you learn. I am convinced that this is the best approach to learning, but I discovered that the theory for experiential learning is far from simple (Joplin, 1995; Durian, Owens & Owens, 1995; Carver, 1996; Priest & Gass, 1997; Lindsay & Ewert, 1999).

The developed framework that I use to guide the ABEL experience from a theoretical foundation is as follows. Experiential education is concerned with the process of learning the content being taught. Furthermore, it involves with the interaction between learner and educator, learner and environment, and learner and others. Experiential education develops the competency of the learner to integrate what is being taught with the actions that are required. It rests on the premise that the teacher is responsible for establishing the learning environment, placing boundaries on the learning objectives, sharing necessary information and facilitating learning. The learner is actively engaged in co-creating the educational process. Learning is not a separate experience but involves the entire person within the context of the learning environment, where the learner is challenged to move beyond what is known. Learning is evaluated mutually by the learner and the teacher (Chapman, McPhee, & Proudman, 1995; Kolb, 1984).

It is obvious that the theory is layered with complexities, possible meanings, interpretations, perceptions and numerous understandings of experience. Dewey made it simple, "...experiential education is nothing more or less than sound pedagogy intended to maximize the learning and growth of all participants" (Berv, 1998, p. 122). I try to keep it simple in the classroom, but the further I probe into the richness of the theory, the more I become compelled to learn, because the complexity of the theory is realized. The result is that I am analyzing each layer of complexity to strive to answer "what is learning?"

Experiential Learning and Experiential Education

The common ground between Dewey's philosophy and classroom practice is a struggle to achieve praxis (Huebner, 1975; Aoki, 1984; Eisner, 1985). What is the common ground between experience-based learning and academic-learning? Can both have a shared place in the educational setting? Can one approach be effective without the other? Do genuine experiences and academics enhance the learning when combined? How much of modern education is experiential? The reality in the classroom, from my experiences, is simple to articulate. Very little of the education/learning process is through experience. As Lindsay and Ewert (1999) argue,

teaching in...schools focused on the facts as found in the textbooks and not on more critical or creative skills such as drawing conclusions, applying knowledge, or creative writing...textbooks are regarded as an efficient means of communicating information to students but, in reality, deny or restrict responsibility for learning as well as opportunities for active involvement in the learning process...it is usually the experiences and thoughts of others that form

the curricular content of a public school education (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999, p. 16).

There is a difference between experiential learning and experiential education. Put succinctly, experiential learning is learning from a genuine and whole experience (Coleman, 1995). It can be private (personal) and may be concretized by self-reflection or mindful attention to what we have taken in (Coleman, 1995). It need not be formal or public or facilitated by an outside person. It happens internally. In experiential learning we assist a student to bring to consciousness what is subconscious and intuitive, using questioning rather than answering. As we do this we are acting as experiential educators. This is an empowering discovery in learning, and its roots can be traced to Dewey's philosophical beliefs.

John Dewey and The Roots of Experiential Education

Experiential education has been grounded in the theories of Dewey, but what is experiential education? How did the roots in the theoretical underpinnings of experience, from this 'Giant of the Progressive Era' (Knapp, 1994; Olson, 1999) become established in the very fabric of educational practice? The seeds of experiential education can be found in Dewey's still popular works such as, Experience and Education, The School and Society, The Child and Curriculum, Democracy and Education, and John Dewey on Education , to name just a few. Dewey believed that people learn by putting thought into action: primarily, by confronting problems that arise while engaging in activities that interest them (Dewey, 1938). He advocated that education should start with a child's interest in concrete, everyday experiences and build on that understanding to connect with more-formal subject matter (Dewey, 1902). To ensure connections to the intended

learning are made and that the curriculum has relevance, the student participates in experiences drawn from community life and occupations. The curriculum is constructed around exploratory themes, and the student progresses through exploration and discovery (Dewey, 1902). The experiences the students' have are supplemented with more specific work in the subject areas (Dewey, 1900) of language, science, history, geography, fine art, math, music and industrial arts. Furthermore, Dewey considered schools to be an engine of democracy. The role of schools is to allow students to learn citizenship through practice (Dewey, 1916). Rhoads (1998) brings this concept of citizenship back into curricular theory by the development of the 'caring self'. This becomes possible for students when they are encouraged to refine their critical thinking so that it is based upon an ethic of care for others and when they are guided into acting for the common good. By having genuine experiences that are carefully tailored to instruct the curriculum and meet the needs of the student, connected learning (self to knowledge) is not left to chance (Dewey, 1916) and youth are enabled to take their rightful place within our society.

By experiencing an authentic education Dewey believed that not only would the students learn but, once they were ready for the adult life, they would be better prepared to meet the challenges of the day and to make improvements in their world. On this premise alone one could argue for the inclusion of experiential practices within traditional-educational strategies.

A Taxonomy of Experiential Education

The following is a taxonomy of experiential educational approaches: 1) Outdoor Components- adventure education, outdoor recreation, environmental education (Priest & Gass, 1997; Miles & Priest, 1990), 2) Community Components- community-based

education, service learning, internships, apprenticeships, mentoring, adult education, creative and expressive arts (Kinsley & McPherson, 1995; Stanton, Giles, Jr., & Cruz, 1999), 3) Classroom Components- project approach, cooperative learning, writer workshops, whole language, learning labs, peer tutoring, peer mediators, expeditionary learning (Sakofs & Armstrong, 1996; Cousins & Rodgers, 1995; Mednick & Cousins, 1996). This is not an all-inclusive taxonomy, but it does cover a popular range of experiential practices used in schools and institutions of higher learning. Once we recognize the essence of experiential education, we then can recognize it in all its expressions. One way to approach this is to take all those fields that are being called experiential education and search for their commonalties.

Definitions of Experiential Education

Learning is a process to make sense of an experience (Dunlap, 1998). The following are some of the working definitions that are found in the field of experiential education. "Experiential education is a process through which a learner constructs knowledge, skill, and value from direct experiences" (Journal Advisory Committee, 1996). "Experiential education is socially and culturally constructed, but rendered unique by each imagination... a term for how I and others translate personal and collective experience into revelation; it is also a metaphor for "seeing" phenomena from different angles and vantage points" (Luckmann, 1996, p 6).

Quite simply, experiential education is education (the leading of students through a process of learning) that makes conscious application of the students' experiences by integrating them into the curriculum. Experience involves any combination of senses (i.e., touch, smell, hearing, sight, taste), emotions (e.g.,

pleasure, excitement, anxiety, fear, hurt, empathy, attachment), physical condition (e.g., temperature, strength, energy level), and cognition (e.g., constructing knowledge, establishing beliefs, solving problems). Experiential education is holistic in the sense that it addresses students in their entirety—thinking, feeling, physical, emotional, spiritual and social beings. Students are viewed as valuable resources of their own education, the education of others, and the well-being of the communities of which they are members. Although formal educators become senior members of learning communities, students share in the process of teaching, and teachers actively continue to learn from their experiences with the group. (Carver, 1996, p. 9)

This definition helps us to see what a quality education could be like for students and teachers, but implementing such an approach is far from simple. Experiential learning goes beyond the naive assumption that learning happens only because you do something! How did the theorists and practitioners get to this point in their understanding of experiential education? Once again, it would be best to turn our attention to Dewey.

In the earlier grades, the values and beliefs of Dewey seem to be practiced but as youth progress through our public education system we seem to remove the effective element of doing something as a part of learning (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999). What is learning? How do we best learn? What are the best teaching methods? Will the instruction enhance the learning of our students? The answers to these questions seem to change as students progress through their schooling. This despite a common belief shared among educators that the curriculum has to have a purpose, the classroom experience has to have meaning. ABEL has provided me with a way to re-ignite experiential learning in

higher grades. ABEL is a course where students can learn by doing, make connections through reflection and create a curriculum with the purpose servicing community.

Understanding Experiential Education

There is a move in educational policy to bring the learning experience alive for students, through the implementation of a new vision of learning (The Nova Scotia Department of Education and Culture, 1997). To achieve this, a journey into the educational past, clinging to a theoretical thread from the Progressive Era, can provide some insights in understanding the power of experiential learning. One insight, taken for granted is the notion that you do and you learn. As stated earlier, learning by doing can prove to be highly effective as a classroom- instructional tool but the theory for experiential learning is far from simple. The theory is layered with complexities, possible meanings, interpretations, perceptions and numerous understandings of experience. Dewey's eloquence made it simple, the simplicity for classroom application is appealing, but the further one probes into the richness of the theory, the more there becomes a compulsion to learn 'what is experiential learning?' and 'what is experiential education?'. This becomes the challenge to "educate the whole child not to just pass on the socially-constructed products of society" (Dewey, 1938 p.18). By examining Dewey's thoughts, values and philosophy in educating youth it will be clearer to see how his theoretical position grounded itself as the orientation of experiential education. For Dewey the experience is explained as *felt*, which is not objective and the aim of knowledge is to challenge the problematic events in the world to make changes by applying that knowledge (Dewey, 1964). The importance in education, within this philosophy, is not the right answer but how the student tried to effect the change. This is

a direct connection to experiential education because the goal for the experiential educator is allowing students to apply what they know and to make connections from the new experience to find a resolution in their challenge (Crosby, 1995).

Joplin (1995) establishes the paradigm of experiential education in the following process: challenge, support, feedback and debrief. This model asserts that “[e]xperience alone is insufficient to be called experiential education, and it is the reflection process which turns the experience into experiential learning. Joplin (1995) refers to this process as an ‘action-reflection’ cycle”. This model has connections to Dewey, Lewin and Piaget (Lindsay & Ewert, 1999; Delay, 1996). When Joplin’s model is compared to others in the field of experiential teaching (Carver, 1996; Durian, Owens & Owens, 1995; Kolb, 1994), one will discover many similarities with the focus on the learning activity, action, support in the activity, feedback, and debriefing. Dewey (1938) theorized and put into instructional practice the importance of reflection. “There should be brief intervals of time for quiet reflection provided even for the young. But they are periods of genuine reflection only when they follow after times of more overt action and are used to organize what has been gained in periods of activity in which the hands and other parts of the body beside the brain are used” (p. 63). Joplin’s model is explained as a cycle that is a continuous spiral of experiences.

Kolb (1984) extended the spiral analogy into a model that depicted experiential learning as a cycle as well, but one through which the learning could become transferable (Priest and Gass, 1997). Kolb theorized that experiential education was weak because students were unable to apply their experience-based knowledge in new situations. In short, they were unable to apply knowledge outside of parameters of the learning

experience. Kolb's model supports the use of concrete experiences and observations. The reflections help students form abstract concepts and personal generalizations. They involve the testing of implications of the learned concepts and transferring of the connected knowledge into a new-concrete learning experience. The inability to transfer knowledge and apply it to new experiences would leave an educator questioning the power of the experiential approach if what students learn in school were to have little to no carry over into the real world. What does this mean for the supporters of the experiential philosophy? As Dewey (1938) intuitively knew, "every experience lives on in further experiences. Hence, the central problem in education based upon experience is to select the kind of experiences that live fruitfully and creatively in subsequent experiences" (p. 27).

The Experiential Learning Environment

Dewey pointed out during the Progressive Era that learning is a social relationship (Pinar, 1996). This relationship presents itself in the form of the environment that individuals find themselves to be in, and the interactions with those who share the environment with these individuals. The learning emerges when the experience allows for a social harmony (Bell, 1995). The environment created by the experiential educator follows this framework established by Williamson (1995).

- to provide students with the skills necessary for coping with a changing world;
- to teach students how to solve problems;
- to provide students with challenging and real learning experiences;
- to meet the individual needs of the students;
- to help students learn how to communicate effectively with each other;

- to prepare students for living in a society founded upon democratic principles. (p. 26)

This is a standard framework for developing and designing curricular-based experiential lessons. It is easy to see the Deweyian influences beyond the philosophical orientation.

To further examine the influences of Dewey, the principles of experiential education, established by The Association for Experiential Education and published in 1996, need to be examined. This list is not in its entirety but some of its principles have been selected to demonstrate the theoretical underpinnings of experience from Dewey's position in education.

- Experiential learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis.
- Experiences are structured to require the learner to take the initiative, make decisions, and be accountable for the results.
- Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.
- Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully, and/or physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is authentic.
- The results of the learning are personal and form the basis for future experience and learning.
- Relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others, and the learner to the world at large.

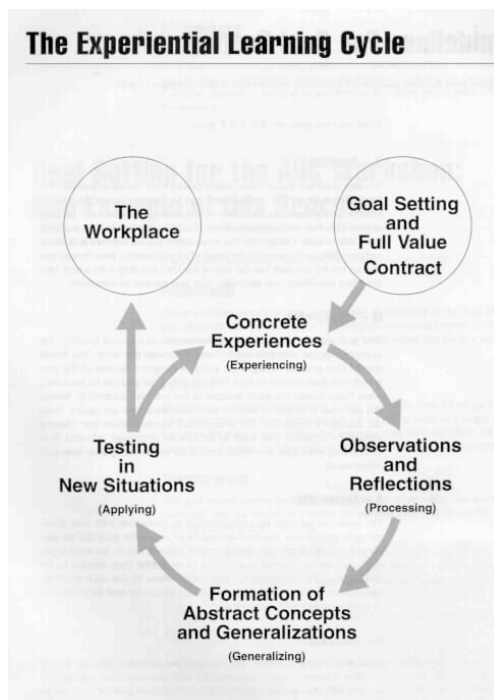
- The educator's primary roles include setting up suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, insuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process.
- The design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes. (A. E. E. Journal Advisory Committee, 1996, p.7)

The idea of experiential education has been transformational. From Dewey until the creation of experiential associations (examples being The Association for Experiential Education and the National Society for Experiential Education), there has been the realization that a well-led learning endeavour does not just happen to the student. Dewey has taught us that the experience needs to be created, nurtured and reflected upon for the benefit of the student's learning. Meaningful education is not something that can be easily packaged. Dewey was confronted with the same theoretical and philosophical challenges that face current practitioners of experiential education and all teachers concerned with providing quality educational experiences. To still be struggling with the definition of experiential education shows that we have not become complacent in our professional goal of improved practice. John Dewey's influence is still providing the philosophical orientation that guides our quest to understand how the learner learns and experiences knowledge. Dewey stated that experience is *felt* and that the challenge of the problematic nature of our world is what drives the intellectual to push boundaries of understanding in the quest to develop life-long learners. As our understanding of education, experiential or otherwise, evolves, we must never lose sight of the origins of

Dewey's words that he shared with us as educational gifts, the echoes of meaning he made from his experiences.

The Experiential Learning Model Used by ABEL

The model used by ABEL is based on adventure programs designed for practical-knowledge transfer through a learning cycle (see diagram) founded by Project Adventure (Gillis, 1991).



There are four elements in this cycle, and a learning process may begin at any point. Note that although the page is flat, implying that the cycle is also flat, in reality you should think of this as a spiral coming out of the page towards you - each time you travel around the cycle, you begin again at a higher level of learning (if you *are* learning that is).

Experiencing- the event

Experiencing happens whenever you do something, which makes use of learning to date, and by doing, you may well figure out how to do it better. You attempt something, and some evidence is available which indicates levels of success. A great deal of information is available to you (the 'doer'), but its interpretation will be biased according to your previous experience and existing skill.

Reflections-the what?

Reviewing happens when you reflect on your own (or other people's) past attempts. Depending on how successful you (or they) feel about the action experienced, you may seek ways of improving next time. These ways may include getting advice, reading a book, or accessing guidance in other ways.

Generalizing-so what!?

Concluding happens when you start to gather these other inputs or theorizing about a possible model that describes what is happening. They may be your own original thoughts, other people's original thoughts, some ideas gathered from reference material, or a model offered by a teacher or trainer. This phase tends to build understanding.

Testing-now what!

Planning usually precedes action. It may be based on your experience to date, models derived or the reflective reviews of others. Your planning may focus on a particular aspect of the 'doing', or may be a comprehensive and detailed plan of action. Planning may not be either overt or explicit, but implicit and to a degree sub-conscious.

And so around the cycle again...

The more practice you get, the better you get at whatever it is you are trying to do (adapted from Project Adventure, Gillis, 1991).

Understanding Service Learning

Service learning has been termed the modern reform that is the vehicle for achieving the goals of education and youth development (Bhaerman, Cordell & Gomez, 1998). Bhaerman, Cordell & Gomez state that service learning is consistent with the goals of systemic educational reform that is attempting to change the very fabric of how students learn in school, making it attractive to policymakers, administrators, teachers, students and community members at all levels. The hopes of this reform rests with Waterman's (1997) findings in curricular outcomes of improved academics and positive social involvement for learners. The above partners in educational change are supportive of this instructional reform because of its potential to have a positive effect on the school environment and curriculum. However, this simple-experiential methodology is being complicated by the magnitude of funding and the large range and number of interested

parties applying for the money (Stanton, Giles, Jr., Cruz, 1999). With the numerous and varied agencies within the United States promoting their particular philosophies and practices of service learning, the tenets of this educational theory may be becoming blurred. I believe ABEL is an example in which service learning is not the program add-on to gain funding but is a method of instruction founded in sound experiential and curricular practice.

The curricular direction for the ABEL course is the development of youth leadership through initiative challenges, wilderness experiences and community partnerships. The purpose of service learning for the ABEL students is not to justify a mandate, fulfill funding requirements or satisfy political aspirations. Rather, service learning is utilized in ABEL as another experiential approach that can provide authentic meaningful learning experiences for students.

Service learning is an instructional strategy, a philosophy and a process (Kinsley & McPherson 1995). The numerous perspectives involved with the development of the service-learning methodology present mixed philosophies: volunteerism, community service and service learning (Morton, 1995). "Service-learning combines service to the community with the student learning in a way that improves both the student and the community" (The National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993). The Act provides a further framework with the following criteria. Service learning:

- Is a method whereby students learn and develop through active participation in thoughtfully organized service that is conducted in and meets the needs of communities;

- Is coordinated with an elementary school, secondary school, institution of high education, or community service program and the community;
- Helps foster civic responsibility;
- Is integrated into and enhances the academic curriculum of the students, or the education components of the community service program in which the participants are enrolled;
- And provides structured time for the students and the participants to reflect on the service experience

This set of guidelines competes with other related definitions. Stanton (1990) views service learning as "an approach to experiential learning, an expression of values--service to others, which determines the purpose, nature and process of educational exchange between learners (students) and the people they serve, and between experiential education programs and the community organizations with which they work." The editors Giles, Honnet and Migliore (1991) theorized further by linking service learning as a program type and a philosophy of education.

As a program type, service-learning includes myriad ways that students can perform meaningful service to their communities and to society while engaging in some form of reflection or study that is related to the service. As a philosophy of education, service-learning reflects on the beliefs that education must be linked to social responsibility and that the most effective learning is active and connected to experience in some meaningful way (p.7).

The Alliance for Service-Learning in Educational Reform published a working definition that was founded on the National and Community Service Act of 1990 and has become

the favored of definitions among practitioners of service learning (Kinsley & McPherson). The Alliance's definition is summarized as follows (p.126): service experiences are those that

- Meet actual community needs.
- Are coordinated in collaboration with the school and community.
- Are integrated into each young person's academic curriculum.
- Provide the structured time for a young person to think, talk, and write about what he/she did and saw during the service activity.
- Provide young people with the opportunities to use newly acquired skills and knowledge in real life situations in their own communities.
- Enhance what is taught in the school by extending student learning beyond the classroom.
- Help to foster the development of a sense of caring for others.

Thoughts on Service Learning

The practice of service learning leads students to places they may not have had the opportunity to experience. One could argue that service learning is the curricular practice that can achieve hooks' (1994) and Warren's (1998) "engaged pedagogy". We become the guide/facilitator for our students' adventures. Service learning can be as much an adventure as a programmed initiative or wilderness expedition. Thus, as educators we can achieve edges (Nadler, 1995), curricular peaks for students that will become pedagogic moments to be weaved into the fabric of the students' educational experiences. We can create, with our students, educational journeys that are meaningful and powerful. This educational instruction allows the student to take responsibility for

the learning and they can authentically direct their learning experience with the teacher becoming a partner, a guide as the student experiences currere.

With this reform in curriculum delivery increasing we can imagine the potential numbers of involved people serving our communities. What a profound difference this would make in the qualities of our lives. However, we cannot wear blinders when adopting any reform, for the experience of doing service learning as a teacher has revealed potential pitfalls. We must avoid service learning for the sake of service. Creating unneeded community collaborations can be disastrous. All service projects must be created out of a genuine need deemed important by the community and the student. We cannot presume we know the needs of a community. Service learning is intended to build relationships by drawing on each other's assets through capacity building, allowing communities to be successful with today's challenges (Hatch, 1998; Sergiovanni, 1994). Learning will occur when the classroom, the community, the students and the teachers involved legitimately care for one another's vested interests (Noddings, 1992).

Another challenge in bringing this reform to a successful adoption in our schools is the issue of mandated service. Should our students be given the choice to do or not do service learning? Forced service learning can be viewed as a weakening of the experience for the reluctant student. It is that weakening I want to avoid in my teaching practice. When I first practiced service learning with my students, the power of the experience moved me to want the entire curriculum of the school taught using service-learning strategies. My view has moderated from those earlier-experimental days. With too much service, we may inadvertently miss academics and with an over focusing of academics, we will miss the human qualities in the learning process. Change is a healthy

process but forced change is as harmful as no change. A community of learners needs to buy into any reform on their own terms. The challenge is for the practitioners of service learning to keep sharing the experiences and to be patient for the shift in attitude to occur.

Cairn and Cairn (1999) report that service learning is a pedagogical movement that cuts across the curriculum and is not an academic discipline. Service learning is a tie that strengthens the method and discipline. This tie brings the agent of education and the benefactor of education together through a process of genuine learning. The student is an active partner in this process by creating community links. Life-long learning is the common goal of many educators. Therefore, it is critical to accept the view that the most important outcome in education is what our students do with the knowledge and skills they have learned. Grumet (1976) reminds us that currere “is what the individual does with the curriculum, his active reconstruction of his passage through its social, intellectual, physical structures”, achieved through reflection and interpretation (p. 111). I want to achieve what Dr. K. Ryan describes as our role as a teacher: “Leave your students a legacy that will remain constant throughout life: To know the good, love the good, and do the good.” In other words, I want to have my students experience an "education that makes a difference." This is what motivates me to continue teaching using service learning. I want to ensure every student of Sir John A. Macdonald High School experiences one meaningful act of learning through service before they graduate. As well, I want to continue sharing the service experience not only with my staff, but also with others who invest time with youth and care about how they teach. A powerful way educational reform will gain momentum is through the sharing of educational practices of others and by questioning our current practice (Bryant, 1996). I have been questioning

my practice since the first day I walked into a classroom. To date my experience has been an adventure in finding those answers.

Dewey's philosophy is a critical element in understanding my motivation to discover the answers that will allow me to become a more experiential educator. Dewey's influence is rooted not only in my beliefs of a quality education, but also in my daily classroom instruction- the teacher facilitating the experience, and cultivating the curriculum, shaping it to be experiential learning for the students. The question of what is learning will always challenge me because the classroom variables are so numerous for students. However, a constant, regardless of the uncontrollable factors is the quality of what is learned and how the experiential educator creates this experience. Service learning is an authentic curricular application of the experiential model used by ABEL. Service learning is the key to reforming traditional approaches by making education richer and fully experiential.

Chapter III- Literature Review

The Hopes for Service Learning

The hopes of a service learning reform are not limited to making traditional education experiential. Rather, service learning can improve the quality of the education experience of the student, the school and the community. Service learning instruction seems to provide a reconciliation between mainstream education and experiential education. This chapter will explore the roots of service learning and the current practices of this educational reform. The body of research examined in this literature review will reveal the promise and the realities of this experiential instruction for the classroom.

During this past decade there has been unparalleled growth in interest in service learning for educators (Yerkes, 1998). Yerkes informs us that this period of methodological development in experiential education, is forcing educators, school and board administrators, community members, and corporate leaders to redefine the relationship between students, their respective communities and the schools. However, Yerkes reminds us that “As a pedagogical tool, service learning is certainly not new to experiential educators...it is an idea with a long history and an imprecise definition” (p. 117). Wade and Saxe (1998) state that the “current interest in service learning is not a new phenomenon, but rather a reconceptualization of a rich legacy of civic involvement throughout the history of social studies education in the United States (p.332). Berv (1998) supports Yerkes in the claim of growth by stating that service learning has proliferated many programs outside of mainstream education and that the practice of service learning has “begun to carve out a place in more traditional school settings” (p. 119). Berv further postulates that service learning has provided a bridge between

experiential education and established pedagogical practices in education. The need to formally combine service and learning is critical because “volunteerism and experiential education are often seen as student affairs activities that are peripheral to the academic pursuits of the students” (Cleary & Benson, 1998). Service learning enhances the mainstream educational environments by lending a community orientation to education and opening the societal dimension of experiential education (Conrad & Hedin, 1995). This attempt to connect and blend our approaches in educational delivery can be viewed as reformist or progressive and as an attempt to teach as Dewey intended learning experiences to be.

Couto’s (1996) discussion of liberal education reinforces the above view. “Service learning, when done properly, infuses the humanists traditions of ... education with the call of the progressive tradition for democratic practice and reform” (p. 80). Berv (1998) makes reference to Westheimer, Kahne and Gerstein’s (1992) report on experiential reform for schools in the nineties. Berv writes,

Some recent literature on school reform provides grounds for optimism that there are ways to reconcile effectively experiential education methods and mainstream education... the growing acceptance of the need for systematic school reform has created an atmosphere conducive to experiential education and the benefits that that can accrue from incorporating experiential education methods into more traditional settings. (p. 120)

For Westheimer, Kahne and Gerstein (1992) experiential methodology could unify curriculum and invigorate pedagogy. Experiential education can take the student and the teacher on learning adventures outside the school, which go beyond wilderness settings.

Service learning is the manner in which schools can explore the community for pedagogical moments that provide for meaningful educational experiences. As Gadamer (1992) states,

It cannot be known in advance whether the experiences to be had en route may outweigh the journey's end in their eventual importance and impressiveness. Nor can one know in advance whether the journey may change one utterly, in body or in mind. In this particular sense, it is clear that life itself is an adventure. (p. ix)

Service learning in educational settings may very well be the academic expedition in life's adventure. The objective of service learning is to allow a "dynamic partnership between educational institutions and communities that results in the mutual benefits of learning and meaningful service" (Schaffer & Peterson, 1998).

For educators involved with service-learning methodology, we, at times, become so concerned with policy, curriculum or budgets that we lose sight of those students we are intending to serve and the adventure of the learning experience. We may think our outcomes are being achieved because supporting literature states particular results will occur with an appropriate use of methodology. As well, in education reform, there are numerous perceptions that need to be evaluated from the students, school administrators and board members, and community members involved.

Based on the literature and personal observations, there is still a need to validate the outcomes of citizenship, community development, and academic improvement. All too often, in our search to provide the best education for our students, we implement a methodology without a full understanding (Stanton, Giles, Jr., & Cruz, 1999). There is a tremendous amount of conflicting data (Lisman, 1998) based on the experiential research

into the areas of academic and civic outcomes. We need further study into these outcomes before we can make any conclusive claims. By furthering the knowledge base, we will be able to better determine effectiveness of projects, service-learning models, evaluation and reflection techniques that may ensure that outcomes are realized. For citizenship to occur, I believe our youth must experience community, at their level and in terms they can understand. The important question for me is whether or not civic mindedness is transferred into the daily lives of our graduating students after they leave the school setting. For the claim of improved academics, we must be assured that the course outcomes are aligned with the experiential outcomes of a service learning methodology. Connecting service to learning can enhance academics due to the authentication of curricular materials. It can provide an active learning process, rather than a passive, instructor centred, abstract approach (Cleary & Benson, 1998).

Nevertheless, there is still some uncertainty that deeper community awareness and active citizenship will be achieved by our students. As I practice this experiential methodology I try to achieve course instruction using the best practices and standards in quality service learning (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Alliance for Service-Learning in Education Reform, 1993). I have witnessed service experiences that show that the learning experience can be more important than the debate over academics and civic mindedness. With my students we experienced moments that allowed the curriculum to live in our hearts and intellect as powerful pedagogic moments.

Growing Roots of Service Learning

Service learning, as a teaching and learning methodology, is growing throughout educational organizations (Howard, Gelmon & Giles, Jr., 2000; Berv, 1998; Bhaerman, Cordell & Gomez, 1998; Mann & Partick, 2000). This practice in education has caught the attention of many educators, policy makers and community members involved in school reform (Smith, 1994; Lisman, 1998). The need to document the impact of service learning on teaching and learning is of prime importance to the development of this educational field. It is argued that service learning is part of the answer to what ails our public schools and communities (Lisman, 1998).

Unfortunately, ...youth are not immune to apathy. Since the mid-1960's, there has been a growing concern about young people's involvement (or lack of it) in the social and political lives of their communities. "Charges of increased privatism, hedonism, and aimlessness among adolescents have become commonplace among findings that they feel powerless in relation to the larger society and have no sense of fulfilling a significant role in it. (Conrad 1991, p. 541, as cited in Wade & Saxe, 1998)

By connecting schools and communities, I believe teachers can provide authentic-learning experiences for students. I am convinced that these experiences can result in improved academic standing and retention, along with a deepened understanding of democratic principles (Dewey, 1916) that contribute to citizenship within our communities.

Service learning is still a relatively new teaching strategy in the education community and has a limited history among practitioners (Stanton, Giles, Jr., Cruz, 1999). Sigmon (1995) discovered the roots to service learning in the Morrill and Homestead Act Initiatives (a focus on rural development and education) of the Nineteenth Century. However, he traced the theoretical origins to the philosophy of John Dewey (1938, 1990, 1916, 1964) and the practices of William Kilpatrick- the project method learning that met real community needs during World War I (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, Taubman, 1996) and Alec Dickson's (Dickson, 1976)- Community Service Volunteers, founded in 1962. During the late 1950's, teachers engaging students in meaningful community experiences, used service learning methods in the practice of citizenship education. However, "teachers (and administrators) ostensibly opted for the more passive, lecture-worksheet approach to citizenship education over service-learning. It might be more accurate to state that service-learning did not survive the leap from theory into practice" (Wade & Saxe, 1998, p. 338). The notion of service and education did not resurface until the 1970's and 1980's in an effort to combat student apathy and community disintegration (Wade & Saxe, 1998). However, Sigmon (1995) reminds us that service learning never really made an impact on the educational front until President George Bush Sr. signed the National and Community Service Act in 1990.

This pertinent service legislation committed federal funding for the development of service learning in American public schools and institutions of higher learning. The availability of target funding has benefited numerous agencies, groups, educational programs and educational institutions (Kinsley and McPherson, 1995). All are claiming to be practicing service learning or intending the adoption of service learning as an

instructional strategy. Here is a brief list of some of the benefactors of this educational reform: The National Youth Leadership Council, Learn and Serve America, The Campus Compact, Vista, The University of Utah, The University of Michigan (Michigan Journal of Community Service Learning), The University of Minnesota, The National Society for Experiential Education, and The University of Colorado. This growth in service learning as a reform has earned it the title, "the sleeping giant of school reform"(Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995).

Difficulties and Paradoxical Research

As service learning grows, it has been argued that it lacks direction and it is not backed by the necessary research to support wide-spread classroom reform (Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995; Lisman, 1998; Stanton, Giles, Jr., & Cruz, 1999). However, it can also be argued that service learning is the answer to what reforms are needed for our public and school communities as we approach the postmodern era (Slattery, 1995). Waterman (1997) supports this line of justification by stating that school and community connections, with the teachers becoming guides of the educational experience, can provide authentic learning experiences for our students. These experiences have the potential to result in improved academic standing and retention, along with a deepened understanding of democratic principles that contribute to citizenship within our communities.

Educators have asserted that service-learning may positively influence the following aspects of student development: academic skills, problem solving skills, critical thinking skills, ethical development, moral reasoning ability, social responsibility, self esteem, assertiveness, empathy, psychological development,

civic responsibility, political efficacy, tolerance and acceptance of diversity, specific skill acquisition relevant to the service task, and career goals and knowledge. (Wade & Saxe, 1998, p. 341)

Given the fiscal investment and the dramatic shift in methodological practice, the need to document the impact of service learning on teaching and learning is of prime importance. Past research has been inconclusive and conflicting in regards to the stated outcomes of service learning. This leaves current practitioners searching for definite answers and questioning current research and methodological practice. This dilemma is described by Kraft & Kielsmeier (1995).

Very little, if anything, has been proved by educational research...the analysis presents unique problems to researchers, problems that go beyond the usual assortment methodological snares. The fundamental difficulty is that service is not a single, easily definable activity like taking notes at a lecture. An act of service may be visiting an elderly person in a nursing home, clearing brush from a mountain trail, conducting a survey of attitudes about recycling, or participating in a vast array of other activities-each with different potential effects...any service activity has a wide range of plausible outcomes. (p.77)

If the research into the practice of service learning has proven to be inconclusive, we must question and challenge the energy and financial resources being committed. As well, it is important to ask how we can enhance the classroom practice of service learning to fulfill the intended outcomes.

Service learning reform, as a new educational system, may have placed blinders on the practitioners of this educational change. The vision promotes public involvement,

networking with community partners, a radical change to how we teach and evaluate, and a revitalization of the roles and responsibilities of administration to pursue responsive policies (Kahne & Westheimer, 1996). This lack of hard research allows the political agents to gain and maintain public popularity and keep funding responsibility intact for these sweeping reforms while outcomes remain unclear. Lisman (1998) argues that there is a lack of theoretical grounding for the existence of the service-learning movement. "Consequently, the service-learning reform is in danger of being co-opted by academic traditionalism, which could vitiate service-learning's social transformative potential and academic gains" (p.74).

The current approaches to the implementation of service learning as a instructional strategy have been the voluntarist model, the charity model, the experiential education model, and the justice model (Kahne & Westheimer). Kraft (1998) clarifies the service learning definition with the following.

When they [service learning methodologies] are carefully tied to curricular objectives, contain academic content, involve the student in reflection, and contain an evaluative component, they can be considered service learning. If these components are missing, they fit more comfortably into community based-learning or volunteerism. (p. 140)

Thus, one has to question the current approaches of service learning and wonder which approaches are most effective and why. Policy makers, along with all involved members of this reform must create a vision for this educational change that will give it direction and legitimacy as an instructional method. Service learning must be viewed as a process, a philosophy and an instructional strategy versus an intrusive program or experiential

project (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Alliance for Service-Learning in Educational Reform, 1993, Wade & Saxe, 1998). As a method of teaching and learning, it provides a real audience and purpose for learning, an excellent entry point to learning styles (Gardner & Hatch, 1989; Armstrong, 1994; Campbell, Campbell, & Dickinson, 1994; Gardner & Walters, 1994) and an opportunity for the application of academic concepts through experience and reflection (Goodwin, 1995).

The Short Comings of Service Learning

The service-learning method has the potential to realize higher academic standings and improved community involvement. Stanton (1994) explains that service learning intentionally creates contextualized opportunities, based on assessed community needs. The authentic learning environment would lead one to conclude that the intended outcomes of heightened civics and strong academic improvement would occur. However, past research leaves one doubting the outcome of this experiential approach. The theory may in fact be sound but the flaws lie with the practitioner (Gulati-Partee and Finger, 1996). We would then need to question the standards and practices of effective service learning.

Most established standards and practices have been set by agencies promoting quality service education. A few of the involved agencies are The National Youth Leadership Council, the Commission on National and Community Service and The Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. As an epistemology, service learning is philosophically tied to experiential learning theories and learning models (Berv, 1998; Cleary & Benson, 1998; Cleary, 1998; Dunlap, 1998; Schaffer & Peterson, 1998). As well, one must recognize that there are distinct differences among service

learning, volunteerism, and community service (Strage, 2000; Vogelgesang & Astin, 2000). Service learning is directly tied to academic skills and curriculum outcomes. The experience is meaningful and planned to ensure that the learning is not accidental. For effective service learning, Kolb and Dewey argue that reflection is a critical part of the evaluation process. Another critical element in successfully incorporating service learning into the curriculum is to have the students involved in the planning process. The teacher is always a constant facilitator throughout the experience but the student takes ownership of the project and their involvement in the community. The teacher monitors the application of academic outcomes. The ability to control the quality of service-learning instruction is difficult when the adoption of this practice is occurring at an alarming rate. Thus, the standards are left to the practitioner to follow or ignore.

Another possible barrier to achieving the desired outcomes of service learning could be the wide philosophical scope. The implementation of instruction and evaluation of service learning may be questionable (Conrad, 1991). Many teachers and schools think they are engaged in or practicing service learning (Zlotkowski, 1995), but when examined in the light of established standards of service learning their efforts are a practice of voluntarism. Many well-intentioned institutions of higher learning and schools practice community service not service learning. Thus, one questions the fulfillment of academic outcomes. No one can fault the enthusiasm of teachers, community members, administrators and politicians for wanting their students to experience service learning and for them to enjoy the benefits this reform can offer. However, the intentions become frustrated when service learning principles are diluted, or ignored to accommodate the logistical realities of a school. Schools sacrifice principles of service learning in order to

secure some of the lucrative funding available for service learning. This compromises the standards in service learning practice and the educational outcomes of the course.

Practitioners may incorporate a service learning component into their curriculum without fully understanding the methodology, thus further decreasing the chances of achieving the outcomes of citizenship and higher/improved academic standing.

This lack of understanding in the service-learning reform can lead to more ingrained difficulties. Kahne and Westheimer (1996) raised a series of pertinent questions in their article, *In The Service of What?* This research was based on a year-long study involving twenty-four K-12 teachers partnered with a university-based effort to promote service learning in the local schools. The questions they raise are challenging, and force practitioners to question their instructional use of service learning. The questions are:

- What values do service learning curricula models seek to promote?
- What kinds of social and political relations do they ask our students to imagine?
- What kinds of relationships develop between students and those they serve?
- What kind of society does service learning lead students to work toward?

(p. 594)

These are challenging areas in which to discover answers when they are combined with the following questions, "What about the people being served? Will the community members being served become stigmatized because of the service? Will the service performed create a reliance on the service, not allowing that particular group to become self-sufficient?" The complexity of service learning transcends the challenges of classroom instruction. Regardless, I believe the students in ABEL experienced more than

the achievement of curricular outcomes in a traditional-educational setting. My service learning goal is to understand the perspectives of the students as they discover *self* within their experiential learning and situate their learning in relation to provincial curricular outcomes.

This educational edge is best expressed with Slattery's (1995) statement on the condition of education in the postmodern era.

Creating stimulating learning environments is not dependent on the latest technology. Teachers do not need to be actors, bankers, magicians, or technicians to interest young people in education. Teachers and parents are encouraged to become mentors and guides who will inspire students to seek wisdom and understanding as part of a community of learners. (p. 97)

Slattery stresses that in the postmodern-era, education will need to remove the traditional borders.

Active community involvement in environmental projects, health and the social services, and ethnic preservation will become a priority. The borders between the school and the community in the postmodern curriculum will be dissolved, and thus, the quality of reverent relationships will replace the quantity of correct answers on tests as the focus of education. (p. 96)

Modern or postmodern, service education must be refined in practice to ensure quality. Furthermore, the implementation process must be considered evolutionary (Fullan, 1991). A process of this magnitude must be cognizant of research results and the necessity of strategic planning to experience effective change (Bryson, 1995).

It was concluded from the early eighties to the mid-nineties, that there was a need for an in-depth examination of academic enhancement and increased self-efficacy (Miller, 1994). The following studies have revealed that the outcomes have not been achieved to the degrees stated by the supporters of service learning. Miller's (1994) study revealed a shortcoming in students fostering improved social attitudes. Furthermore, the outcome of improved academic performance was not always realized. Miller could only conclude "service learning experiences can potentially provide a rich opportunity for helping to achieve student and faculty goals at the university level" (p. 35). Smith (1994) questioned the most pervasive and taken-for-granted tenet of service learning, the outcome of citizenship and civic responsibility.

The analysis revealed that the theme of civic responsibility/civic participation/citizenship is the most frequently articulated intended outcome at the national level, for both the national policymakers and a national organization. In contrast, students in both a case study and a pilot study barely mentioned notions of citizenship in describing the effects of their service-learning activity. (p. 37)

Jeremy Cohen (1994) furthers Smith's analysis in his examination of service learning in post secondary institutions. Cohen's research focused on the academics and civic connections of university students.

However, the information is also disquieting. As literally hundreds of schools take up the banners of community service, difficult questions are being raised as to what it can and cannot accomplish...It will not take long for critics of community service - both on the faculty and off - to realize that participation in service is not a panacea. Service will not in and of itself teach students citizenship, make them

tolerant of each other, improve their grades or qualify them for professional school after graduation. To allow the expectation to surface that community service has these powers is to raise false hopes among students, faculty, donors and the community we want to serve. (p. 103)

Learn and Serve America, performed a comprehensive study involving high school courses and programs that reported insignificant impacts on academic improvement (Melchior & Orr, 1995). In terms of self-esteem, many studies reveal negligible gains for students (Kraft, Goldwasser, Swadener & Timmons, 1993; Krug, 1991; 1982; Cohen, Kulik, & Kulik, 1982). When political efficacy and social responsibility is examined the studies demonstrate inconsistencies in potential outcomes. Conrad and Hedin (1981), along with Newmann and Rutter (1983), discovered limited gains in this area of social responsibility. These limitations are also reported in political efficacy studies by Alt and Medrich (1994) and Conrad and Hedin (1989).

Several studies were able to qualify this experiential-teaching tool as a meaningful educational experience. In a report on educational and service outcomes (Greene & Diehm, 1995) and an exploratory evaluation of forty-eight faculty from sixteen different disciplines from across the United States (Hesser, 1995), results indicated that service learning has the powerful benefit of experience by actively engaging faculty and students in a learning cycle. However, the reports do not provide the hard evidence through detailed research into the achievement of intended outcomes.

Kendrick (1996) and Hudson (1996) that academic courses should experiential components, however, Kendrick discovered only slight improvements for the students engaged in service learning. “Despite its limitations, my study is consistent with the

findings of others-there is much value in the service learning technique...I would argue that service-learning's power is demonstrated precisely because the benefits are apparent even for a large course with minimal integration of the service experience” (p. 80).

Hudson's work complements Kendrick's findings. Hudson did not measure dramatic improvements in academics and community connectedness, but he did observe some gain, even in comparison to other studies that reported significant claims in academics and citizenship. Hudson reveals that he experienced student empowerment within his course and there was "a substantial positive difference in the quality of the course" (p. 90). The practice of service learning, as tracked over a few years, seemed to yield a higher quality of student experience, but the student's ability to achieve some of the academic outcomes remained questionable.

The Promise of Service Learning Fulfilled?

The quest to realize the promised outcomes always seemed to elude the educator and the students involved in service learning. Early research presented mixed findings and the studies on academic improvement presented promise for academic improvement for students. Dewsbury-White (1993) examined integrated service with classroom academics and discovered greater subject gains for the students. Cohen, Kulik, and Kulik (1982) and Hedin (1987) conducted separate meta-analyses on tutor-service programs. Both studies revealed that students grew academically from their involvement in the tutoring process. Alt and Medrich (1994) confirm the potential outcome of self-image and student confidence. Furthermore, Melchoir and Orr (1995) report significant gains for senior high students in personal development and their understanding and involvement in social responsibility. Important findings concerning service learning as a

teaching practice are to be found in the studies specific to self-esteem and competence. Conrad and Hedin (1982), Hedin (1987), Hamilton and Fenzel (1988), Newmann and Rutter (1983), Waterman (1993), and Yates (1995) reported demonstrated gains in the outcomes promised by service learning.

Research of the late 1990's has indicated that service learning can be a worthwhile instructional strategy (Cleary & Benson, 1998). The most significant study in support of service learning as an instructional approach for our public schools came from Eyler, Giles and Braxton (1997). This comprehensive collection of data was based upon surveys of 1500 students from twenty different colleges and universities. The thrust of the study indicates that participation in service learning has impacts on the intended outcomes.

Service-learning programs do appear to have an impact on student attitudes, values, skills and the way they think about social issues even over a period of a semester. These findings are even more consistent in arts and sciences classes. While the effect is significant, it is small; few interventions of a semester's length have a dramatic impact on outcomes. What is impressive is the consistent pattern of impact across a large number of different outcomes; service-learning is a consistent predictor and often the only significant or best predictor beyond the pre-test measure of the variable. Service-learning does have impact on our students; our next task is to identify more clearly the types of service-learning experiences that make the greatest difference to students. (p.13)

Bullard and Maloney (1997) studied an example of a service-learning model that combined a "seamless integration of course content with meeting the needs of the

community. The combination of student enthusiasm, to work with their skills and knowledge while at the same time analyzing these in class sessions has created a quality educational" (p. 120) experience, for those within the course and those being served.

The positive findings of the past two studies are supported by the on-going work by Astin and Sax (1996; 1997). They report that the service experience has positively affected and contributed to student growth in the areas of civic responsibility, academic achievement and social competencies. Cleary and Benson (1998) utilizing this study argue for the purported benefits of a service learning methodology that is carefully integrated into the academic components of a course by making reference to the national research that was conducted by The Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California.

Los Angeles demonstrated through national research that even when accounting for many characteristics that predispose students to engage in community service, thirty-five out of thirty-five outcome measures explored in the study were favorably influenced by service participation...At Colorado State University, student outcomes from service learning have supported these findings. (p.124)

Why has the research taken a number of years to finally demonstrate a solid service-learning practice? Has this reform movement experienced the implementation dip that is theorized by Fullan (1991)? It could be possible that practitioners of service learning have grown through their experiences and are now able to provide quality educational instruction that incorporates service learning. Is it also possible that seasoned practitioners, to meet the experiential outcomes, have altered traditional courses? Osborne, Hammerich and Hensley (1998) challenge experiential educators to not sit back

on their laurels knowing that more research is a vital necessity. They suggest questions that need further examination, to assess what is still unknown. For example, 1) what types of service experiences will make the strongest connection to the outcomes?, 2) to what degree should service be integrated into the course rather than as a separate project?, 3) what is the timing at which the student engages in a service-learning course, the amount and types of reflection?, 4) how many service hours, and what prior training for the service experience is appropriate?, and 5) what evaluation techniques should be used? These authors conclude that service learning has pedagogical potential.

Ultimately, effective service-learning research will not lead to a prescription for how service-learning "should" be done, but rather will illuminate myriad methods for how service-learning "might" be done. Similarly, it is unrealistic to assume that service-learning research will ever lead to a precise picture of the effects on students. Service-learning experiences and outcomes are as variable as the students themselves. (p. 11)

If the variables are too difficult to control is it possible to conclude that service learning is the educational reform that many have been relying on and searching for? As with any educational practice, control and implementation of service learning resides with the power of the educator (Osborne, Hammerich & Hensley, 1998). Even with the documentation of effective practices and standards for service learning, the instructor must decide which skills and abilities to foster in their students and what types of service experiences they should encounter (Wade & Saxe, 1998).

In light of supporting research for the practice of service learning, there is still emerging evidence of current service-learning practice that does not support the

outcomes. Practitioners are producing results that are in line with Mabry's (1998) research. "Although successful as a form of civic education, the academic value of service-learning is yet to be established, and we are just beginning to learn how practices enhance student outcomes" (p. 43). Therefore, the quest is still on as teachers, policymakers, administrators, and community members strive to determine the benefits and drawbacks of service learning.

A Summary of Thoughts

Service learning is still a relatively new field of educational practice and research. There is still confusion over the definition of service learning. The research to date has not been conclusive and the variables for research are vast and hard to control in a consistent manner (Wade & Saxe, 1998). It seems more questions have emerged from existing research, indicating a need for more conclusive research to validate the impact of service learning on citizenship and academic outcomes. All too often, in our search to provide the best education for our students we implement methodologies without a full understanding. Current findings do offer indications that this modern reform can provide some common principles of school social systems and community connections, school/community partnerships, school culture and school governance, higher order thinking/decision making/problem solving skills, the application of knowledge, the integration of curriculum through instruction and assessment, the integration of academic and applied learning, the active engagement of life-long learning, authentic indicators of what students know and can do, and a common ground for students, parents, community members, school officials, and politicians.

It is not surprising that self-esteem and social responsibility are the best-documented and soundest in research findings, “given the fact that the primary motivations for teachers and students to engage in service-learning are for self development and meaningful relationships” (Wade & Saxe, 1998, p. 346). It could be possible that service learning is an attempt to recapture the idealism of the 1960's (Lisman, 1998). The difference is this potential reform has a values component added into the curricular outcomes for our students. This strong learning component complements an equally strong service ethic.

Those interested in educational change question whether service learning will permeate into the school culture. Will the shift in educating our youth by a service learning methodology convince the community of the authenticity of its' praxis, or will it remain on the fringes of educational reform? One of the many potentials of service learning is it's ability to stir the possibilities of educational revitalization and capture the interest of teachers and students alike.

Strage (2000) reminds educators that the “richness” of student experiences can be realized when students and teachers reflect upon their service learning experiences. Current literature fails to provide a qualitative understanding of how to prepare students for responsible acts of service learning. Student reflections on the ABEL course provide significant insight into this gap in experiential practice. To reiterate an important consideration for exemplary practice in service learning practice, the instructional approach must be more than a project add-on or an experiential project, service learning must be a process (Honnet & Poulsen, 1989; Alliance for Service-Learning in Educational Reform, 1993; Wade & Saxe, 1998). ABEL has revealed that the process is

best understood first from students' self understanding not just the implementation of service learning instruction.

Boyle-Baise & Fuller (2000) concluded, from their qualitative study of service learning in preparing teachers for multicultural education, that research needs to be intensified and redirected. "Knowledge about what really happens is a necessary and first step for all of us" (p. 63). Eyler (2000) argues that to improve the quality of practice in service learning, researchers need to learn what surveys do not reveal and "design measurements that are convincing" (p. 13). ABEL is a contrast in practice to Eyler's statement that "the learning activities and reflection that practitioners assume take place actually are often not occurring for students. There is a belief in the power of real world experience, but little guidance on how to increase the ability of students to learn from experience" (p. 13). The findings from the ABEL reflections will advance our understanding in the following areas of needed research. Eyler (2000) indicates some critical research directions to be types of preparatory activities, community support, reflection techniques, project design and student engagement.

If we assume that service-learning is context-driven, and idiosyncratic to the student, the site, and the program, then we need data and analysis that focuses on the details of the people and the process. While there have been a few qualitative studies in higher education that focus on important issues...very few have provided the depth and long-term coverage to show detailed impact on participants, institutions, and communities (Shumer, 2000, p. 79)

Thus, we can learn from the students' stories how ABEL has created a learning community that prepares them for their roles as service learners (Warren, 1998).

Chapter IV- Methodology

Orientation

In this chapter, I will describe the methodological orientation of this study. This study examines the phenomena of lived experiences of students in an experiential-credit course taught at Sir John A. Macdonald High School. I have used a qualitative approach to explore the ABEL course as the students (for their academic year) and teacher (over six years) experienced the curriculum. The narratives are from six selected students who agreed to share their impressions, understandings, connections, and biographical stories of ABEL. Biography is critical to this phenomenological investigation. The importance of this study is to discover the essence of the experience for each person involved (Merriam, 1998). Merriam states

that there is an essence or essences to shared experiences. These essences are the core meanings mutually understood through a phenomenon commonly experienced. The experiences of different people are bracketed, analyzed, and compared to identify the essences of a phenomenon, for example, the essences of loneliness, the essence of being a mother, or the essence of being a member in a particular program. (Patton, 1990, p. 70, as cited in Merriam, emphasis in original)

The challenge for this study is to determine how the ABEL curriculum allowed the student to “move [their] consciousness... toward the world, not away from it” (Pinar, p. 405). Phenomenological methodology connects the researcher to the experienced context of the ‘life world’ (van Manen, 1986) of students involved in the ABEL curricular approach to experiential education.

As I carried out my research I asked myself, “What am I trying to live out through experiential teaching?” For me, the craft of teaching involves an active reflection upon the personal, professional, spiritual, and intellectual aspects of my praxis as a teacher. For Dewey, education, experience, and life are inextricably intertwined (Dewey, 1938) through the sharing of knowledge and the primary importance of guiding others in their educational journey. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) indicate their interest to Dewey by the following, "In its most general sense, when one asks what it means to study education, the answer is to study experience...Experience in this view, is the stories people live". In the journey of experiential education, the researcher continually questions the aims of experiential instruction in the learning process for students. I therefore ask myself, “Has service learning allowed the students to learn in the context of who they are/were? What did the curricular experience in outdoor education mean for the students in this class? What importance was there to learning and experiencing leadership through experiential initiatives? How did the students’ personal experiences (their interests, passions, achievements) make their encounter with the curriculum more meaningful?” This phenomenological understanding can be realized through autobiographical telling of their stories, as "translating an experience into a story is perhaps the most fundamental act of human understanding" (McLaren, 1993, p. 206). However, the methodology of this study went beyond the recording of student stories, by exploring the uniqueness of the group experience in ABEL.

Voices as Lived Curriculum

By gaining access to student stories, I achieved a deeper appreciation of the reality of my own 'life world' (Pinar, 1996). As a teacher employing an experiential approach to teaching and learning, I explored how I could more fully live out experiential teaching in my professional learning and development. By actively reflecting on my practice I learned about the richness in my own identity as a teacher and am now able to share these insights with other teachers (Smits, 1996) interested in developing an experiential methodology.

Gadamer helps us to think about the possibilities for being and understanding when he describes the reflective capacity as that which allows the naming of the experience through language ... It has led me to question the relationship between self and the experiences of reflection, and the way that enables understanding of teaching in more than a limited technical sense. (p. 20)

I wanted to give voice to my experiences as a teacher (Miller, 1990; Grumet, 1990), who instructs and learns in collaboration with the students involved in the ABEL course. As I reflected upon the interviews, which I conducted with the students, I came to think of my writing process, therefore, as a form of connected knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994).

To understand the meaning of experiential learning for the students, I needed to discover the 'inside' reality of these experiential events through phenomenological hermeneutic inquiry (van Manen, 1990). A hermeneutic inquiry is a purposeful act to grasp the uniqueness of the experience as lived by each student. "The rules for the understanding of meaning are constructed actively by those who dwell within the

situation” (Aoki, 1988a, p. 411). This was a personal investigation of students as they lived the ABEL experience. Thus, I need to employ a phenomenological sensitivity as I unravelled each story of the students from the multiple-curricular moments in ABEL.

Stories as Reflections for Meanings

The stories involved a blending of student reflections along with those of the researcher. The resulting thesis has become a story (a portrayal of my stories, and the students' stories, told as one-story, the ABEL experience) of theory and practice in experience, a lived praxis (Smits, 1997), of experiential education. I have therefore chosen to present the research as ‘reflective story[ies]’ (many stories within a group experience). The story[ies] are grounded in layers of understanding that place each story into its situated context within the ABEL experience. My reflections involved "attending to multilayered narratives, ones that also extend beyond the self that is narrowly conceived in the discourse of reflection" (Smits, 1997, p.17). The first layer of story telling required me to contextualize the ABEL course and its growth from an extra-curricular activity, to a credit course, as I was challenged to employ an experiential methodology into my teaching practice. In the second layer I transcribed the biographical accounts of the students' experiences in the course, and aligned these with my own autobiographical account as the teacher/researcher. The third layer enabled me to bridge the first and second layers into a reflexive relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), one in which the telling, the living and, the retelling of stories formed a hermeneutic circle (Smits, 1997). The fourth layer was reserved for the experiential learning connections made by the students and the teacher so that ultimately we were able to transfer this connected knowledge to our future lives. The aim of the study was to explore the

meanings created by the layers of experience through a consideration of the following questions: 1.) What does this mean for me as a teacher engaged in experiential practice? 2.) What does this mean for the students experiencing an experiential curriculum?

Currere as Lived Curriculum

"Gadamer emphasizes the importance of remaining open to experience in our encounters with the world as a creative way of being in the world. Hermeneutics is not about the recovery of existing or previously inscribed meanings, but the creation of meaning" (Smits, 1997, p. 17). My methodology made connections with a "practical pedagogic orientation to children in their concrete lives" (van Manen, 1988, p. 411). It was hoped that the reflective biographical stories from the selected students would reveal the degree to which this experiential teaching approach helped them to make connections to their *currere* (Grumet, 1976). Currere is a method and a theory of curriculum that transcends educational and social science research by focusing on the educational experience of the individual as told by the individual to reveal what the participant understands of the events (Grumet, 1976a). For Grumet (1976b) "Currere is a reflexive cycle in which thought bends back upon itself and thus recovers its volition. (p. 130-131) Thus, currere becomes a research "strategy devised to disclose experience, so that we may see more of it and see more clearly." (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. vii) In short, currere is simply curriculum meaning from the participants connected understanding (Pinar, 1994). What did the students, and the teacher, in the ABEL course experience? What were the learnings for each of them? What did they walk away with as a personal curriculum/currere? More specifically it was hoped that the research would indicate the students' 'here & now' during their pedagogical moments. The experiences of service

learning, the importance of outdoor education and initiatives needed to be considered if this study was to be a holistic representation of the ABEL course. Furthermore, I needed to be clear about how the examination of this phenomenon would reveal the impacts made on these students and their lives.

In accomplishing a practical self-understanding of the experiences, I hoped to gain a strengthened theoretical connection to the student's place in the world (Jardine, 1987). The examination of student *currere* by this method involved an individual examination of the shared educational experience of each student. The experiences, as told by the students, were captured in reflective texts which focused on what they understood to be their educational journey through ABEL. Their reflections were "grounded in context...to depict and comprehend...the subject's past upon the educational experience of the individual in the present"(Pinar, 1996, p. 416). Huebner (1975) considers such reflections to be a *valued activity* in educational curriculum. One which he explained as follows: "The fullness of the educational activity, as students encounter each other, the world around them, and the teacher, is all there is. The educational activity is life-and life's meanings are witnessed and lived in the classroom" (p. 227-228).

Gadamer (Pinar, 1996) asserts that our language tells us who we are now, who we once were and who we hope to become and, "everyday speaks to us, suggesting who and what we are as human beings" (p. 421). It is within language that the story for each student can be found if the researcher is careful and sensitive. I wanted to continue to develop curriculum as-a-lived experience. Through reflective understanding to see the student's experience, I wanted to develop a pedagogic eye (Pinar, 1996) that would be

insightful about the ABEL experience. I hoped that this thesis would be a pedagogical act of thoughtfulness that would be sensitive to the context of stories told to me by past students (van Manen, 1991). From a Hermeneutic perspective, I was interested in discovering the "quality of meanings" (Aoki, 1991), for each story.

The Methods for the Study

This research study was intended to be a qualitative inquiry utilizing a descriptive-interpretative research process. At times, the research process became an explanatory study as I attempted to answer fundamental questions I brought to the study. The primary methods of data collection were in-depth-reflective conversations (Friesen & Orr, 1996; Eisner, 1998) with each participant, and document analysis (Denzin, 1989; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Merriam, 1998) of past journals, written assignments, photographs and responses from the ABEL course. Furthermore, I generated study-specific documentation through a pre-interview reflection by providing each participant with photographs, samples of work (responses from past evaluations, journals or models built as responses).

I eventually selected six students to participate in the study: Brian, Jimmy, Skye, Robyn, Kevin and Robert. All of the participants were graduates of Sir John A. Macdonald High School, in the Halifax Regional Municipality, where the ABEL course was conducted. The participants ranged in age from 18-22, and their academic ability, personal interest and social interests were diverse. They were all from different years of the program's history at Sir John A. Macdonald High School.

Brian was academically a high achiever. He was socially confident and assured in a variety of settings. Currently, he is studying engineering at the university

under-graduate level. During high school Brian was an active student council member. This student's leadership has continued with his involvement with the engineering society in his program.

I will always remember Brian because he was one of the first students at my door wanting to sign up. He was so keen and focused, this gave me a sense of confidence that I needed to continue with the development of the course. Brian's leadership was immediately obvious in his organization of people, events, equipment and detailed tasks. His ability was almost uncanny in this area of experiential education, as he regularly anticipated many of my needs as his teacher.

Jimmy was very different from Brian. Academically, Jimmy was an average student. Socially he was rebellious by constantly defying the rules and he proved to be challenging to work with at the high-school level. He was a disruptive student (in subtle ways) and had difficulty in taking the course and the role of leadership seriously. Jimmy was my test.

I was not too sure if I wanted to work with him. He was always testing me, saying things on the fine-line of appropriateness. He never went far enough to receive a punitive sanction but he did push sufficiently for me to discover that I felt unsure about him being in the course. There was an attitude about him that was hard to describe, but I could not turn him away either. ABEL was created for all learners/students.

I think I saw more of me in Jimmy than I want to admit. Jimmy remains involved with youth as a volunteer in our community and his current occupation involves a great deal of responsibility in working with youth and institutional rules. He has continued with his studies in the field of therapeutic recreation at the university level.

Skye was the responsible and conscientious member of her class. Academically, Skye was a top student but socially she was shy in comparison with her school-life involvement. Her quiet personality placed her in the background of “goings on” at school. Skye was the quiet one. When she spoke you naturally made the effort to listen. She presented a confidence and precise efficiency in her approach to tasks.

I was not very sure about her people skills. From the start I was uncertain of her connection to the group or the course for that matter. She did not seem to become excited at the prospects of adventure, or about the group she was about to be committed to.

She became one of the leaders of her class by modeling (her actions set the tone for the group). She demonstrated her ability to lead through a commendable work ethic. She continues to this day to volunteer in her community by providing first-aid services with the Red Cross as an instructor and she is pursuing a biology degree at university.

The contrast to Skye was Robyn. Robyn performed well academically but she was the outspoken and assertive member of her class. Robyn was hard to place for me. At the first of the course she seemed noncommittal and always at the edge of what was happening. It was almost as if she was never sure of what to do but instead watched and took the lead from others. It was as though she was waiting for approval. I always wondered what brought her to ABEL. However, when Robyn became comfortable, her true self emerged.

She was the group motivator and moral advocate for her class. Currently her interests have lead her to studying outdoor recreation at university. Based on our last conversation she has not involved herself with any community organization nor has she actively volunteered to any degree.

Kevin continued with his belief in service and volunteerism after senior high and ABEL. He furthered his community involvement at the national level by working with Katimavik. Upon completion of this program he hopes to attend university for post-secondary training in elementary education.

I was surprised when Kevin arrived in ABEL. Now, I thought, this was a kid who was way out of his element. I did not want to judge, but ABEL was about putting yourself “out there” and this young man would not even say hello without looking at you. Well, I thought, if I do my job right there is progress and opportunity to be had for this guy.

Kevin had an average-academic performance during his high-school career. He was a shy and socially withdrawn young man. He seemed to find social settings awkward and he did not appear to be at ease within his class until later in the school year.

Robert fit into his class immediately. I was not surprised to see Robert on my attendance list. This was the ‘action man’. He had energy and drive, and I knew he was here for the great outdoors. Schools were not made for people like Robert. He needed freedom and activity. I was confident that he was going to have a great year. He was the class member naturally in-charge of the social-morale status of his class. He was energetic, and a ‘doer’ by all accounts. He had an amazing, outgoing personality, that was well suited not only to the one-to-one interaction, but to large-group gatherings as well. As long as he was working with people Robert was at ease.

Academically, Robert was far from comfortable. School for him was a constant struggle. He remained at a below average performance. Robert entered the military after high school and did not involve himself with any community movements.

To determine if they were interested in taking part in the study, I contacted the participants by telephone, letter or email. Once they expressed an interest, a consent form and a reflection package were mailed out to them containing "Study-Specific Documents" that I had prepared. "The specific purpose for generating documents is to learn more about the situation, person, or event being investigated" (Merriam, p. 119). The reflection package contained picture(s) of the students during their year in ABEL, journal snippets, quotes/student responses used in the ABEL course or samples of past in-class work. "Such documents can tell the researcher about the inner meaning of everyday events, or they may yield descriptions of 'rare and extraordinary events'...personal documents are a reliable source of data concerning a person's attitudes, beliefs, and view of the world" (Merriam, p.116), and they can serve as a way to stimulate student reflections. They brought the consent form, along with the reflection responses to the scheduled interview. I asked participants to respond to the reflection package during the interview to focus their thoughts, feelings, and memories of their ABEL experience. The documents allowed for a sharing of ideas, philosophies and experiences within the ABEL course as an expression of self from the student and the researcher.

The reflection package generated positive feelings and memories of ABEL that allowed for engaging and in-depth conversations about their experiences. Each interview was taped and dated, and the identity of the interviewee was changed to ensure confidentiality. After each guided-conversation was taped, they were transcribed. The written story was made available to the participants to ensure that their meaning and intentions were accurately captured in the transcript. The transcribed stories from the students formed the basis of my research text.

Collective Reflection and Analysis

To summarize, methods for the study of personal experience are simultaneously focused in four directions: inward and outward, backward and forward. By inward, we mean the internal conditions of feelings, hopes, aesthetic reactions, moral dispositions, and so on. By outward, we mean existential conditions, that is, the environment or what E. M. Bruner (1986) calls reality. By backward and forward we are referring to temporality, past, present, and future. To experience an experience is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way. (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994 p. 417)

Embedded in each thread of commonality, I included my own reflections on the experiences. I too experienced these events and formed my own understandings of the ABEL experience. Clandinin and Connelly (1994) substantiate this by stating "It is important, therefore, for us to understand the autobiographical quality of our own experience, the events and their temporal duration called up as we read and make meaning of the event" (p. 417). I looked for the links from my practice as an experiential educator, to my personal history as a teacher and person in the world and my relationship to the classroom that is inside and outside of the school. My reflections in this process aimed at revealing what I learned as a teacher, and as a person. The value of these educational experiences from the student's perspective were embedded into my own understanding. This provided me with a grasp of the ABEL experience by showing what each student felt they really experienced.

The *telling* which follows in Chapter V involved a reflective process that represents the story[ies] of ABEL. It is a narrative that focuses on the four directions of

personal/experience research. The narrative is a rich portrayal of a high school course that infuses an experiential philosophy into the culture of a school. The experiences and transformations of students and their teacher are captured through participant interviews. Each interview is a unique story of adventure, wilderness and service. When combined with my own insights as the researcher, the reflections comprise a phenomenological analysis of the ABEL course.

Chapter V: The Experiential Story[ies]

The Reflection

We called it debriefing. “Okay folks, circle up and let’s put this into perspective.” Just how many times have I said this to my ABEL students? Now here I am trying to facilitate my own learning experience. I wish John Dewey or Kurt Hahn was leading this debrief, helping me process the adventure and connect my telling to the ‘here and now’. I trust the reflections of my students as they trusted me during the ABEL year. I need to give voice to my own experiences. ABEL is about youth leadership and I could not separate myself from this self-discovery of leading. Thus, ABEL is also about my leadership, my teaching and my personal life. As my students were learning to lead, so was I.

Before me are many diverse discussions on ABEL, giving a unique perspective on the ABEL experience. ABEL is experiential leadership and Sergiovanni (1992) reminds me that at the heart of any form of leadership there lies the individual’s beliefs, values, dreams, and commitments. “It is the person’s interior world which becomes the foundation of her or his reality” (p.7). How has ABEL contributed to that foundation? During this debrief, I will take the position once again as the teacher, facilitating the discussion and bring the curriculum alive for my students. I will give my students a voice to those experiential moments by collectively ‘restorying’ ABEL.

I have realized through this research how powerful experience can be. McIntyre (1999) argues that the power of the experience captured immediately is more authentic than subsequent accounts of the same experience. I believe that the experience can retain

authenticity if it is enhanced by reflective discussion. Exploring the depths of these events can become authentic because the researcher has experienced the power of the event along with the participants. I too have a ‘genuine memory’ (Greenway, 1993) of the events. It is a restorying to access the past for authentic experiencing.

By reflecting with my students I believe I can come close to the ‘real’ understanding of ABEL. ABEL was an adventure because it allowed life to be felt holistically. The students in ABEL did not just take a curriculum-based course in adventure leadership; they lived a curriculum adventure. I remember the dusty little office where this adventure started. David Hublely and I just wanted to take a group of kids on a hike. It was to be nothing more, just a walk in the woods. This is what I tell the kids at the start of every ABEL year. This adventure begins with a walk in the woods.

I start the year with a walk in the woods adjacent to our school and we discuss the historical roots of the course. I focus the discussion on leadership, strengths, weaknesses, cooperation, decision-making, critical thinking, problem solving, communication, commitment, community, passion, serving and self. I would read the following passage from Donald Schön’s (1990) address at Queen’s University, the ‘Experiential Teacher’s Paradox’.

It’s as though the teacher said something like this: “I can tell you that there’s something you need to know and I can tell you that with my help you can probably learn it. But I cannot tell you what it is in a way that you will understand. You must be willing therefore, to undergo certain experiences as I direct you to undergo them, so that you can learn what it is that you need to know and what I mean by the words I use. Then and only then can you make an

informed choice about whether you wish to learn this new competence. If you are unwilling to step into this new experience without knowing ahead of time what it will be like, then I cannot help you. You must trust me. (p.66)

I think I was reading it more for myself; I think I was trying to learn to trust myself in leading this adventure. I was on my own with a group of kids, no chalk board, overhead, textbook or department. All that I had with me for this first journey were, Dave, the kids and a belief of what learning could be.

In my mind I have taken all the transcribed interviews and have found a comfortable spot around the fire, just close enough to see. As I read, I let my mind explore once again the emotions, pedagogic moments, growth and memories of ABEL. As I go inward my students join me. I see their smiles, hear their voices from around the fire and I am living ABEL again through their stories. Sitting with me are my students as they were then and as they have sat on numerous occasions before, ready to process another learning adventure. Ready to tell their experiences, they are circled-up, sharing the pull of the coals at night, their eyes burning with the smoke. That smell is so distinct. They are the ones who made ABEL. Every one that I have invited to this latest fire embodies some elusive element, a part of the spirit that made ABEL an exciting, engaging experience. I wish I could have talked to all of them, but... Tonight's fire has a purpose beyond nostalgia. The purpose of the fire is to serve us for one more debrief, to process the adventure, to capture our words and the meanings in order to understand the ABEL experience.

The Attractions

The attraction to teaching this type of course is the great unknown. I know that is why my energies were originally funneled into the development of ABEL. I was teaching a course that I wanted to take when I was a student in high school. The irony here is I was the student in the first few years. I was learning how to lead adventure activities, lead out-trips, and develop service learning projects on a personal level with the Canadian Red Cross and the Lions Club. Dave and I have said many times, “it would be so much easier if we would just teach.” We were referring to the traditional versus the experiential experiment. However, there was more to ABEL than just teaching; it was about living. It was new and there was an excitement experiencing something at the edge of the classroom.

Just what was it for the students? Dave and I would ask many times when we talked about the kids “Why ABEL?” The following sections contain the preconceptions of the ABEL course and these reflections will be probed for deeper meanings. It seems that ABEL meant different things for participants involved with the course. ABEL meant for me living through an authentic practice of teaching and learning. For my students, they saw something that regular classes did not offer.

Brian: ABEL, The Edge of an Adventure

I remember when it started that it was going to be a bunch of students going for a hike or something similar, then it evolved. In January, 1995, when I found out what it was really going to be, here was this opportunity to do all the similar things [like the] outdoors, service. I'd been involved with in Scouting (and really enjoyed), only now I was going to be able to do it with a group of like-minded people, who would presumably

have the same level of commitment to it that I wanted to put into it.

Here is this opportunity to be involved in something that is out there on the edge, breaking new ground. As far as an adventure, in some ways it was, although not in the more common sense of the word. When I think adventure, the first thing that comes to mind is people doing white-water rafting or something like that. What I really meant by edge / adventure is that I had the feeling that for at least the first year and a half that we knew we were onto something good, but we really didn't know what it was or how to formally explain it.

Jimmy: ABEL , Convenient Fun

I was not doing it to learn. I was there to have fun. It fit my time slot. I could not take gym because my knee was screwed up. I had a great schedule. I had a free [period] at the end of the day. I liked the classes I was in and with ABEL being in the same time slot as gym; I did not have to rearrange my schedule.

I remember talking about it with [other students] and they said they were going to take ABEL. It looks really cool. I said screw that. You have to do stuff on the weekend. I had important things to do on the weekend like play paint ball. I thought it would be cool if we got to get out of school. That attracted me. We also would get to go camping and I was kind of into camping then, not to the extent I am now.

I also remember sitting out at gym class, seeing you guys on the field doing that thing where you all try to get on the square and the square gets smaller, that initiative. They looked liked they were having fun. I wanted to have fun and I heard rumours of cool trips that we could get to do.

Kevin: ABEL, The Outdoors

One of the big things that attracted me was my brother because he had done it the year before and the things he told me about. He did not really tell me much about the leadership qualities. He just told me we would be going camping, canoeing and stuff like that. Being in the outdoors, which is something I was really interested in. Pretty much when I got into it that was what I wanted. I wanted to get back into the country setting of life. It gives you a chance to get out of the classroom. You are not always in the classroom, sitting in the same desk, at the same table.

The first reason was to be outdoors, to be camping out in the woods and stuff like that, which was the end of the ABEL. It was to just experience the outdoors. The next thing you know when I get into it, it is helping others, learning more about myself, which made it even more enriching to me.

Robert: ABEL, Something Not to Miss

I picked ABEL because it was presented really well when I heard about it. It sounded like it would be fun. There was an adventure to it. You did not know exactly what was going to go on, but you had an idea that you would be in the woods, you would help out in the community. The outdoor stuff is one of the things that attracted me to ABEL. It sounded like it was going to be a good time, something you did not want to miss.

Robyn: ABEL, A Break From The Routine

Everything I did [I did] well, but I didn't feel that anything that I was doing was anything that I wanted to for the rest of my life. I studied math, but I was okay at it, I wasn't a mathematician, but I worked at it and I did well and in my other subjects I did well. I always liked the outdoors, I always liked camping, sailing, we always did a lot of

that stuff as a family. I thought that I would take something like ABEL that would be more relaxed, or I thought it would be more relaxed. It was just not so academically challenging. I would be able to have something to look forward to, you know what I mean. Like school would be hard, but right in the middle of the day I had ABEL, I would go to math, I would have ABEL, then I would have chemistry, so it was kind of a break between things.

I think something that was fun, it was different than everything else, but I think I thought that it would help me be better in everything else too, because I wouldn't be so stressed out and panicky about everything all the time. So I didn't take it for any other reasons, but I am glad that I took it now. I took it basically for an outlet. Like I just said, something easy, get me away from all the hard work of science and chemistry and school in general. It would just be something that I wouldn't have to think about, or have to work hard at it, get a good mark, bring my average up. I enjoyed it sure, yeah, I mean, all I thought it was pretty much outdoors stuff and now, when I look back I think wow, I am really glad for that course, it is the best thing I did in high school.

Skve: ABEL, Something Different

I had heard about it already before the course selection through [another student]. I have always been into the outdoors and love doing different things. I looked for ABEL during the course selection. I thought it would be really neat and different. I got the feel of most of it beforehand. Some of [my friends] were so jealous. They wanted to do it so bad and they were kicking themselves now. They liked doing stuff like that and they did not realize what the course was. Plus, some of their parents would not let them take it because they felt it would not be worth it. I have always been involved with not just

the academics at school. I like sports. I ski. I horseback ride. I dance. I was never a one-track person. I don't sit inside all day. Then I heard about ABEL.

Even the more academically inclined members of the student body were attracted to this course. For this I was glad because I remember wanting to have a course that challenged the thinking of all students, but in different ways. Hence, I really wanted a cross-section of kids to emerge naturally. Course selection allowed this to happen. The method of students selecting their courses for the year brought together an undetermined group of people motivated by their own reasons to enrol within something that was on the edge of traditional education. Each of these voices revealed that they shared a desire to learn and experience school as an adventure. They were attracted to an unknown, the possibilities of exploring the wilderness and an understanding that they would be outside of their classrooms working within the community.

What is the ABEL Course?

It seems those attracted to ABEL are looking for something new in their school day. This is a course engaging students on a different level, reaching well beyond the scope of academics. We created an experiential course, complete with a well-designed curriculum and I have explained the course hundreds of times to parents, board members, other teachers and students. I know the ABEL students have explained the course to each other, their peers, the community and parents and each time the variation is something different. ABEL was described, explained and defined as it was experienced. Just what is ABEL? I have found myself explaining the course using my students as the illustrative

example. ABEL is my vision about how my teaching practice is satisfied. This is what I imagined teaching to be, learning and living through experience.

ABEL is a course where action replaced the desk and the 'outside' became the classroom. It was a course that became a community of learners. It was a state of mind, where I could become the teacher who I always wanted to be. It became a class where I was safe to explore outer and inner worlds and to share my discoveries with the others through reflection. ABEL meant risk, growth, excitement and an adventure in learning. It was an evolving story of people and their experiences we called school. In the following sections the students define some of the inner-meanings of ABEL for themselves.

Brian's Vision: ABEL as Inner Growth

I think that there are a couple of levels to it. At the core is the ... self-confidence thing that I explained [before]. The next level is that this "thing" (I'll call it thing, I don't have a good word to sum it all together) is delivered to students through the vehicles of service-learning, initiatives, leadership, and partly the outdoor component. Finally, the third level is ... the learning ...

The other type of learning comes from within. This is the more profound type, in a way, because it encompasses a bunch of self-realizations. For some people this happened to a larger degree than to others because you have to be open to it for it to occur. I think that this type of learning about oneself is a cycle that is significantly harder to continue. It requires those stimulating type experiences of the sort we had in ABEL to keep going.

Now that doesn't cut it for an explanation, because I know there was more to it than that. The problem is putting my finger on it. I think that there is more to the outdoor component than that, I just don't know what it is.

The other reason is that very few people, if any, that I encounter have experienced something like ABEL. It is much easier to explain something when you have something to compare it to. Learning by doing, yes. However, not everyone gets the opportunity to learn this way and to experience that inner growth. Most school-learning is book oriented. [This course] may be more difficult to put into words if they haven't been experienced by the participants before, but the ideas are there and are (relatively) easy to understand. Concepts in a course like English, where you're asked to pick out the themes in a book, or Chemistry, where you're trying to understand covalent bonds, can be much more difficult to put into the context of everyday life.

ABEL is a course, which brings together leadership, service-learning, and the outdoors to create experiential learning experiences for the participants. Students learn leadership skills like taking initiative, planning, organization, and communication through doing service-learning projects and solving problems. ABEL is a bit difficult to explain when you get away from all of the terms and just talk about what the different events and experiences. I find it hard to make people see the value in what all of those things bring together. Most times people seem to think that it is a bunch of kids going camping and doing some projects in the community. Without explaining all of the learning / benefits reaped from doing those events, people are a bit lost because many of them have never heard of learning that way.

What did we all go through? I think we all went through a pretty intense period of personal growth. When you sum up all of the experiences, there were a lot of different things that people had to deal with. Learning how to work with people to get things accomplished, learning how to deal with being out of their "comfort zones," learning how

to communicate, etc. For me anyway, I found that continuously pushing the envelope meant that you had to adapt to new circumstances and ideas. I found that you were either able to adapt and were successful, or you couldn't adapt and failed. Either way there was the opportunity to learn from it. I find the best lessons came from my mistakes, because you don't ever forget those or at least you hope you don't.

Jimmy's Vision: ABEL as Belonging

You became part of something. I became part of the group. It was not just me who did it, although I contributed something greater than myself. I was part of a group. It was valuable to us. What was ABEL? You can say what you did [within the course], but the feelings are hard to describe. The words are two-dimensional, but the experience was three-dimensional. [For the rest of the class] I do not know. I think it would be similar. I think everyone would have a little something different. The feeling of accomplishment, the sense of well being, self-confidence, the rush of doing something good. [The accomplishment for] everyone. You all did it. It is similar to being on a sports team and you win a game, but better.

Kevin's Vision: ABEL as "Stepping Up"

I think I have a good sense of what ABEL did. I think ABEL for the entire year was an opportunity for you to step up, become who you wanted to be, speak your truth, break away from stereotypes, and who is who and who does what. You became a member of a group who cared and shared with each other, supported each other, hiking, paddling, in the woods, in the cold, to the point no one could understand unless they were there.

Robert's Vision: ABEL as 'Doing to Understand'

I can explain it one way, but someone else in the group would explain it another way. They may add something or leave something out. Everyone got something different out of it. ABEL is probably one of the hardest things I have ever had to explain. It has to be experienced. It is something you have to do in order to understand it. I cannot put words to it but I know how it felt. [You] felt different after everything you did. Everybody had almost the same general feeling. Like, my feet are sore but now I am having such a blast, or I cannot feel my fingers but I am having fun. [We are] probably really good friends because twenty or thirty years down the road when I have a conversation with someone I was in ABEL with, we will understand what no one else will. If there had of been even one different person in the class, ABEL would have been completely different. If I had not been there, the whole experience would have been different. Whether it would have been good or bad, no one really knows, but it would be different. It made you feel like a team mate, like you were needed.

Robyn's Vision: ABEL as 'Being Valued'

[shaking her head] They can't understand it. Because they have to be there, you have to be part of it. It is like if you would have told me a week before I started ABEL, I would have said yeah, yeah, okay, ha ha. If you are not part of it, you can't [explain it!]. The incredible thing about it is, that because you are part of it... you feel that you are valued, that the group needs you. That everything that we do as a group and everything that is accomplished, it makes you feel so good and you are so proud, you want to keep doing things. You want another challenges and you can do it. You can do anything when we are together. You can express it, [others] are not going to have the same kind of experience.

If you do well at a test, then you can say to somebody, that felt really good, they understand how you feel, yeah, I got 98 on the last test, they understand how you feel, they know what that feels like. Most people haven't had that kind of [ABEL] experience. Most people don't ever hit that point, they never come together and they are never really part of it that way. I think. They can't understand it. It is an experience, an adventure. We were able to describe to each other, we were able to say yeah, okay I got it, I understand what you mean.

Oh yeah, a serious feeling. You can describe to them [feelings], but unless someone felt that way, there is no way to tell how you felt. They can't understand it, they can say, "yeah, that's cool, you got to do that and got to do the web that must feel pretty good." Yeah, but they don't hear me, and they can't understand. They can understand to a point. Like I told my Dad about it a lot because he was really into what I was doing and the outdoor part of it. But when I got into the more adventure stuff, I think he understood more than anybody because I told him everything that we did along the way. So he knew where we started, and he knew what we got and how, but he tried to act like he understood, but... I don't know. I had to tell somebody, so I got excited to tell him, but then I just realized that you don't get it, you don't understand, something like that. If you don't take it and if you don't teach it, then you don't understand.

The feeling of being in a group that values you, to the sense that you can be yourself, say anything, do anything, and they will respect you. And you feel the same way about them. That everybody all wants to be there, everybody needs it, has enthusiasm for the whole group.

Skye's Vision: ABEL as Learning About Feeling

I have pictures from everything. I share them with everyone and try to explain ABEL to them. [Trying to explain] the way you feel when you are doing it, but no one can know until you do it yourself.

[W]e got to go out and do so many things and share it with a lot of people who will never in their life have a chance to do stuff like that. Even if for five minutes... for [me], it was the aspect of feeling versus the textbook. I would come home and share the feeling or what I experienced and try to put words to it. Some people got it and some didn't. Every day was a building of feelings, or a new feeling, and then coming back and sharing or telling the story. It was always changing, always growing. There was always learning.

These are the words I wish to use when explaining ABEL to other educators. Clearly, from the reflections, the students' experiences take on the deeper meaning that ABEL was a time of personal growth. ABEL became a 'place' where students valued the community they created. In this community each member was honored for their strengths. They supported one another when they risked by 'stepping up' to a learning opportunity or shared personal feelings that resulted from the experience. Students were able to experience understanding by 'doing' and then connect the lessons to their understanding. ABEL became a course where it was safe to be genuine and to explore the personal growth from the ongoing curriculum.

Kidston

I witnessed personal growth to varying degrees for my students every year during the ABEL/Kidston Adventure. Kidston was the annual-leadership retreat for ABEL away from the school. Every September I would take my students to the next level of

challenges. September was a time for excitement, anxiety, as they moved beyond the, same old same old, to enriched academic and personal growth. Kidston is another chance to hone the experiential craft, to make the learning experience profound and more meaningful for my students.

During the first few weeks of the school year, small initiatives and challenges are designed to allow the style and personalities of the class to emerge. Once the group identity began to emerge it would be time for Kidston. Dave and I would create an experiential program full of leadership initiatives. This program challenged the group and developed the team. The program taught the students about who they were (at least it open them up to learning about self and each other).

This was the first really big trip for ABEL and it seemed this was where the students' awareness of self truly began to emerge. This is where they discovered a truth or truths about themselves and the group. There was a magical element to this trip that eludes and excites me when I try to explain it. Every time Kidston was mentioned, ABEL students would stop whatever they were engaged in to ensure they did not miss what came next. Each student was always ready and willing to interject his or her piece into the Kidston conversation. They would give you that look and I could see it in all their eyes, a shared knowing and an understanding. We went through it 'together' was the theme of the Kidston discussion. No matter where we were in the year, everyone always referred back to Kidston as a pivotal experience in their learning.. Why? What happened at Kidston? The following stories are of the experiences of Kidston from the perspectives of my six participants.

Skye's Experience of Kidston: Reaching Community

It was the first thing we got to do together away, and out of school. We got to do so many different things that we had never done before. We spent three full days together so you got to be a family type thing. You got to know each other and do different things together. It was the start of what roles you were going to take through the rest of the year. It was interesting to see how spending three days together would be instead of two hours a day or on a half day hike.

We never really got into any big, storming fights. The only time we were frustrated was after the bog [initiative]. Nobody was angry, upset, mad, yelling. You could say we reached community, we could fight and still love and take care of each other, still disagree with each other.

We could not have had ABEL without Kidston because that was the time when we started doing everything that made us become a group and take our roles. I think one of the really neat things is that after everything there was [there was] the first snow of the year in October.

Robert's Experience of Kidston: Providing a Place

"If we did not have Kidston, ABEL would not have been the same". Oh there is a lot of truth in that. During the Kidston weekend, we were put through so many different things and as instructors, you guys understood that we were frustrated, but we did not understand why we were frustrated and it just wasn't the same. We got muddy. We were mad, happy and going through a lot of different emotions. I remember thinking, "Am I ever going to make it through this? Oh man, I am having such a blast". I guess you really have to experience it to understand it.

I have been a part of a team, like playing hockey and soccer. I am in the military now, I can say I have felt like that because of all I went through there. You go through a lot of stuff and you end up talking to people you don't know that well, being all stressed out, you tell each other personal things that you never thought you would tell anyone else before. I got the same feeling as what I did in ABEL. You have a different trust for them. You are comfortable around them. I guess it gave you a place.

Kidston was very important. Kidston was the backbone. It was the kick off to the half-time show at the Super Bowl, you know what I mean. Kidston is where it happened. If we did not have Kidston the rest of it would not have been the same. Exactly. It definitely would not have turned out the same.

Jimmy's Experience of Kidston: A Creation of a Family

Kidston was "the experience" for ABEL. It set the tone. It set expectations for the rest of the year, for the group. We became a group. We were not really a group up until then. I could go up to any member of that group now, and chat with them, and it would not be a fake conversation. I am genuinely interested in every one of their lives. I care about them as much as I did then. I do not know how that is possible in a high school credit course. It is pretty rare, but because it was not in the school. The environment was key. I was not in that soul killing, mind numbing, asbestos ridden hell of conformity- a good description of SJA.

I spent the rest of the year trying to recapture Kidston. All I wanted to do was go back and do more initiatives. I was not interested in teaching service projects to mentally challenged kids. I wanted to go have some fun and do more games. I did not want to see people identify trees. I figured that was payment for my experience at Kidston. I mean

later on there were valuable life skills I learned. All the social barriers that people build up were slowly broken down over the course of three days. We were dirty and smelly, yelled at each other. All those social barriers that normally would take years to accomplish. It was pushed to the extreme and therefore it worked quicker. We were so much together that it was hard not for these things to happen. I think it is dangerous because it is a rather false reality. You have to be able to bring that back to life. I was and some members were. I think some people like [Student] he saw something, liked it and wanted to be a part of it and was part of it, but then when real life took over, he stepped back into his own world. I think that was one of the reasons I liked him because he did to the extreme of what I did. He would poke fun at the group and the whole idea of ABEL, but he was still there, getting something out of it.

I think there is a lot of importance to Kidston. I say it is critical to understanding that elusiveness of why you could not put a finger on it, why you could not explain it to other people. Because it is not a frequently occurring phenomenon, so therefore, there is no word for it. If something does not occur a whole lot, then you don't need a word for it. You don't need to communicate what happened. You don't need to describe it because it doesn't happen very often.

If I did not have Kidston I would not have committed myself to a lot of things. I probably would have screwed up a lot. I would not have come to class. The reason I did come to class was because I wanted to see those people. I enjoyed being with them. They were fun. I don't know. Maybe we did not become anything. We stopped putting up social barriers. That is what drew it to me maybe because it reminded me so much of my experiences at youth camp. I did some crazy shit there, which was not stuff you do at

camp. Like you could have social misfits in real life, but once they go to camp they are the best. They are in a totally different environment.

I think people valued my contribution to the group. I was respected by the group. I was cared for by the group and supported by this group. They were like my family. It was a creation of a family, yeah. It was better than a family because you had rules and expectations set out. Families are dysfunctional because there is no one there to enforce the rules. You could go to hell and no one is going to say anything about it with a normal family. With ABEL, we set expectations and set rules. Chances of success, of achieving a better family, were greater.

I had a role in this family and I was safe to be what I wanted to be. Yes and I could step outside that role. I was not trapped. I could test the limits and I could take on more responsibility if I chose to, or I can be more immature than I normally was. This was better than being on a team. Yes. On a team, you have a set role. With ABEL, you could switch roles depending on the task at hand. There was more variety and more opportunity to do different things.

Oh it was way more than a normal class. There were people in my other classes who I did not even know their names nor did I care to know their names. In ABEL, I knew everyone and all about them. Some more than others obviously. With ABEL you were able to form an identity. You could experiment and decide if that was for you or not. It was a safe environment to decide what was right for you. Even if you screwed up it was all right. It was all right because you were still learning.

Brian' Experience of Kidston: A Place of Risk and Support

At Kidston the group bonded and realized a few things. One was that we needed to communicate to accomplish things. Another was that a little planning at the beginning of a task or initiative made the teamwork come together much better. We also learned about everyone's personalities and to some extent what their level of commitment to the group was. What happened at Kidston was that a possible three weeks of getting to know people were compressed into three days. It set up the group for the rest of the year.

For me, I felt that the main thing I took away from it was learning about everyone's level of commitment and their work ethic. Although it was early you got a feel for where people stood. It all came down to knowing who you could depend on to deliver when they said they would. This evolved more as the year progressed, but I think that Kidston really initiated it.

I think we came to Kidston as a class and left as a group or a unit. We had the same bond that a team has, but I hesitate to call us a team because a team implies that everyone has specific roles, which we didn't in ABEL. Family? I've been beating my head against the wall trying to figure it out and the only other thing I can think of is "well oiled machine" although at times that term would definitely have been the wrong one to use.

People cared about the well being of the members of the group. Not just in the physical sense of avoiding injuries, but also in the emotional sense of getting along, supporting each other, and respecting each other's opinions. I think a large part of the respecting others opinions came out of the initiatives that we did at Kidston. Especially the fallout shelter [discussion-based initiative]. It also came out of living together during

the various outdoor trips. Looking back on it, I don't remember that family part being developed/strengthened outside of the trips. Perhaps that is where the importance of the outdoor component gets rolled into ABEL.

I think the explanation of ABEL from the student's perspective has been fine, but I think the problem has been on the receiving end. The right words have always been there, but like you said, because it is school very few people believe that that supportive, collaborative environment could exist there. Lots of people politely smile and nod, but I don't know that many really understand.

The main thing that makes risk a problem for people is that they fear the consequences of failure. With the support network that ABEL provided, the fear was not as daunting because there was always someone to help set you back on your feet and help you to learn from your mistakes. This is perhaps why students were more willing to take risks.

Kevin's Experience of Kidston: A Community of Equals

Everyone was getting on an equal playing field. Well, like a lot of people were from two different worlds kind of thing. There is the school and then the outside life. Like in school, you have the people who are popular and they only hang around with the people that are popular. There are just different classifications of people in the world. The clicks, the popular people, the sports people. When we came into Kidston, the clicks were still there and then when we played the games, everyone is running around and acting like idiots, having fun. We were doing all the same things. After that as the game goes on, you start to evolve, making funnier sounds and different things like that. It is just like being on a playground because you could play with any kid you wanted and did

not have to worry about being rejected. It is like through elementary school, any kid will play with you, but as you start to get older the cliques start to form and your best friend from primary would not even talk to you when you get into high school.

[At Kidston] I was speaking up and I realized that I had things to give, like caring, helping out people. I realized at Kidston when the time called for it I could do the leadership as well as being reliable, shooting out different ideas, things like that. We were in the ABEL-state of mind for forty- five minutes or an hour and five minutes. However long the class was and then after the class it was back to your cliques or group. At Kidston, we were there three days, which gave us more time to open up. It has to be a time where the group can open up to each other and spend a lot of time. Kidston was important for ABEL it does not have to be Kidston, but it has to be something like Kidston.

Get the relationships built and get some strength there so that when Kidston is over you don't have to wait till the next ABEL class. You don't have to worry about them brushing you off because you are not in the same crowd as they are.

The initiatives were challenging enough for us starting out. Now the Web [initiative] we did not find that challenging as we seen it. We did not see that it was that challenging as the last initiative for Kidston, but the thing was that we had gone through so many initiatives that we did not realize how much of a group we were starting to form. We were trusting people to lift us up off the ground and put us through [openings made of rope]. With the gorge [initiative], we were swinging across the gorge to get everyone to the other side as well as the water. It was trial and error. At five o'clock in the morning, we were being woken up, had no breakfast, and into the woods we went. People starting

expressing they were not happy with it because they had nothing to eat and they had just woken up and this was the first thing they were thrown into. At the same time, when you look back, you got to see who that person is first thing in the morning.

You realize they are not always the peachy person they seem to be throughout the day. Just because throughout the day they are fun loving and look like they are on top of the world, never having a bad moment in their life. Then, first thing in the morning, with no breakfast, going out into the woods, and it is this is what you have to do. After a while, you start getting cranky and hungry and don't worry about what anyone is thinking. You just start expressing pretty much who you really are. Not to say that you have been hiding it, but if I don't eat this is how I act. You get to see all sides of them.

You say that Kidston provided the opportunity for the class to become a community, to touch base on becoming a community. We started with the community standards and building the standards. We started to form our community, and everyone was voicing what it was that they needed from the other members of the community.

Robyn's Experience of Kidston: A Place to be Yourself

[Kidston] was the first time everybody was contributing ... I stopped at one point during the web and just looked around and everybody was so enthusiastic about the whole thing, like right in that moment, that was all that mattered! Just getting everybody into this web. It was just a bunch of ropes, who cares if we do it or not, but I don't know, everybody did. They were so focused and so...we have to do this. Why, why did it even matter, like who cares what we thought, who cares if we have to start over again, why did accomplishing this matter at all to anybody. Where is it going to put us, but every single person was [saying], "Okay we got to get it this way, lets try this, okay how about if we

do this.” Everybody was cooperating, everybody was offering ideas, they listened to each other, they were talking about, they were saying what they actually thought, not what they wanted to hear. It felt good. I probably was my [true]-self. I think everybody was themselves, everybody was saying what they thought, doing what they thought. No one trying to be cool, or trying to do things to make them fit in, or do what people wanted them to do, they were just, look at me, take me for what I am, if you don’t like it, go to hell. Yeah, it was great because when everyone is doing that, then everybody was respected, so when I see somebody doing that, even though I may not like the way they are, I respect them because they are doing that.

No I think that is what the meaning of family was. Everyone was part of a family at that time. I think everybody, even the people that didn’t [commit]. There were people there that weren’t as into it as I was. [student] was very into it, I was into it, [student] was into it. But there was people there that probably didn’t care as much as we did, but they stayed and I think that they never let on that they were into it as much or they said as much, but they did.

Maybe ABEL could have been the same without Kidston, that trip was the best, but ...it would have changed the experience of everything else. If you took Kidston away from me, everything from then on we expected [would be different]. [Kidston] had an impact on me. I just think that because I was in a very special group, and we would have felt that.

Going inward requires practice in order to make sense and put words to what is experienced. How are we to make sense of transformational experiences, those definable moments in learning and life? Reflection allows us to go backward to support our

venturing forward. ABEL was a community of equals, regardless of who the students were. ABEL was a place for students to be ‘themselves’ and to try new roles in discovering identities. This takes a considerable amount of risk, but ABEL became a safe place, with the support of peers to try. This peer group became ‘family-like’ in their quest to learn the curriculum. They created an environment of respect and caring based on open-honest feedback. This ‘family of students’ kept each other accountable to their commitment to learn and grow as leaders; they became a community of learners.

The Connection-Our Identity-Our Uniqueness

Being connected to a group and having a place is important for all members of society. This holds true for teams, peer groups and families. The whole notion of family was pivotal to our learning as individuals in ABEL. At first I found it surprising that the ABEL students explained their connection in this way. However, it started to make sense. The feeling I would have everyday working with these kids was different from my other classes. There was a connection, a ‘thing’, or a feeling between us. It was how I felt as well. I was a part of this group of students and my ‘big brother’ role was to facilitate some transition into the real world through a youth leadership class. I was still a teacher, a facilitator, a guide, and to some degree a friend, but the kids were right in that there was this family-like bond between us. They valued me differently. ABEL altered the student/teacher relationship just as it changed the student/student relationships in the class. It was as if we created our own ‘community’ that existed solely on our terms.

I have only experienced this feeling of family in minute degrees in groups outside of my own family. When I reflect on my involvement with Lions or the Canadian Red Cross, I see an interesting distinction between the two. I am committed to both from the

vantage point of serving but I feel more connected to the Red Cross. It is here I have found a role that has given me a place where I can exercise my talents, the support to try to grow within the group and it is here where I am surrounded by diverse personalities who care for who I am. I feel I have a place and it is here where I focus my passions and energy on the personal level. I have found purpose with a group of my peers.

Finding purpose within the curriculum, that is shared and supported personally among your peers, is a rare and unique experience to have in school. By being in the course you were bonded with a group of people who understood and cared for your success and development as a person and a student. The following narratives are the participant's views on the uniqueness of ABEL and the importance of this connection for the students within the course.

Kevin's View: The Extraordinary

[ABEL] was a chance to do something that no one else was doing. In grade eleven, there were only eighteen students out paddling in a canoe. It just gave us a different playing field than the rest. I liked it [unique identity] because there were other people who did not want to go for it. We were out there canoeing, kayaking, jumping-off poles. We were doing all these different things that a lot of them would not do.

When you look at kids our age, there are a lot of stereotypes because we are a generation where we live by music, swearing, good for nothing. We turned it around being kids that are out there on a Saturday morning unloading Christmas trees off a truck. We volunteered. We were doing things at the schools, like helping out kids who are having stereotype problems at Sir Charles Tupper. We are not like the stereotype says we are. Like when we were at the CIRA Conference, people said okay this is the

ABEL class, the founders are David and Andrew, where are they. They are not here.

Well, who is running this thing? We are. It just kind of opens peoples eye.

[ABEL] opened my eyes to see what [my strengths] were. Those strengths that were not that strong, I could build on them. Being open-minded. I would listen to what others had to say. It allowed me to listen to more than just the person's opinion. Like this one hear sounds great so lets go with it. Then, I started to learn that that one there sounds good too and that one and that one. So lets just bring them all in and kind of think of them instead of getting one person's opinion. It allowed me to think more into mind. It allowed me to see my weaknesses. [Like] my caring. I care a lot about people and I would do anything for them. Yes because I was not doing anything to look after myself. I would carry other people's problems and stuff on my shoulders too much. I would care so much about them and not realize what I would be doing to myself, like putting some ones weight on my back for them to get over an obstacle. I could get them over the obstacle and not realize that down the road if I were to keep doing it, then it would hurt. I realized this in ABEL.

We were ordinary people doing extraordinary things. We were just regular 'Joes' and we were pulled together in this one class. I was this shy little guy who would not stand up for himself in public kind of thing and I look back now and I do not know how I could stand living my life. If I was who I was back then, I do not know how I could have gone to Katimavik, how I could have got a job, how I could do this or that. We were just everyday people turned around and making things of our lives. We were doing things, getting out there in the community, doing whatever it is we wanted to do.

Brian's View: Taking ABEL Into The Real World

I really enjoyed the outdoor experiences because I think that my strengths in the outdoors were something that I was able to contribute to the group. With the skills that I'd learned while I was with the Scouts, I found that I was able to deal with my own gear easily and therefore give others a hand with their stuff. Whether it was getting a fire going, scouting out a stream, or just helping hump gear around. [Student] is another person who immediately comes to mind in fitting into this role.

To a certain extent, yes. I mean that as people, were already interacting with our environment / community on an individual level, where the boundaries are unclear, and the further you push out into unknown areas, the more uncomfortable it gets. ABEL allowed us to have an environment, which was much more limited [controlled], that we explored and defined as a group. As individuals, it was much easier to explore what that environment was due to the support from our peers. Then we were able to extend that 'micro-environment' or framework out into the community, be it the service learning or the adventure programming, to make it easier to do those activities. As individuals there were some things that we would never have done alone without that micro-environment.

Jimmy's View: ABEL Was Opportunity

I think I played a role in ABEL. If we were taking it too seriously, I would be the one to remind people that this is not real life, not life and death, and I think that was somewhat expected of me, to be the smart ass and goof around, and I enjoyed it. I was happy to fill that role. I was also pretty good at stuff. Any of the initiatives. I was not a take-charge kind of guy like [Student] who was very vocal, verbal. I like to sit back and see how things are going and then offer my opinion and then try and solve the problem.

They are all good guys. We had some cool people in that class.

I knew my personality was not dependent necessarily on the acceptance of others. I believe in myself. If someone cannot agree with me or rejects me, I can say, “the heck with them”. I think family is important. Before ABEL, I would tell people to screw off if we did not see eye to eye. After ABEL, I was able to handle that better with greater confidence.

ABEL gave me an opportunity to try to be a leader. Before ABEL I never had the opportunity. ABEL was one big opportunity. You were always saying to us, “Now you are going to lead the group”. You would see that one scenario would suit my talents and give me the opportunity to lead. I was not in it for personal glory. It was great especially if you succeeded. It made me more confident to be a leader and not be an overbearing leader. It taught me how to lead by example, lead more subtly. It showed me different ways to lead. I remember we studied different styles of leadership. I could influence people and teach about my ideas, my values without actually beating someone over the head with it.

I think acceptance was high. When we were making up rules and said no smoking. We had to change our rules for one person because they smoked. I liked that. It challenged other people’s methods of thinking. Most of the class was achievers. I loved the fact that [Student] was in our class because he was not an achiever. He challenged the way the others saw the world. The whole concept of [Student] was foreign to them.

I would irritate people on purpose. I would be politically incorrect on purpose. ABEL showed me the value of respecting other people. My risk was that I would become like them and I did. I had become what I despise. My risk was my becoming an achiever.

They supported. They liked me. I entertained them. They encouraged me to try things. I was an advocate for the losers of the class. I liked variety and conflict and difference of opinions. I think sometimes we were a little too hard on each other. There was a certain way to behave within the group that was expected. It happens with every cult. ABEL was just another cult. It was inevitable. It all emerges in any culture the norms and values.

It was removed from the real environment but it was real life. Like you could not go to ABEL half-assed. You had to give it everything. If you did not, people would call you on it. You would not get anything out of it. I could go to other classes and turn my brain off. School seemed to be a waste of time. ABEL was not a waste of time. I had to challenge myself and do stuff I did not want to do. I got so much more out of it because of that. It was the way it was set up. You had to be there for yourself. So, you actually had a place in the world where you could give. You had values.

Robyn's View: Experience in Discovering Confidence

Yes, you will say that you taught us, but you will say no, you did it yourself... but we would have done it on our own and it wasn't just the experiences. We did learn ourselves from the experiences, but you also helped, when you reflected on it, you would say a lot of things that was teaching. We experienced things in a different way, the things that you said. So you were a teacher, and an instructor a facilitator, a guide, a helper. You were part of it, you were part of the program, part of the family, like everybody else was.

I think that when we first started out, my confidence was definitely low, I got a lot more confident about what it was I had to offer, just feeling that I had something to offer. I was confident that the group needed me, before I wasn't. I realized that I was to leave then the group, wouldn't fall apart, but it would be affected, it definitely would change

the group. I was confident that there was something good about me, that people liked, people needed, did I have something to offer to the group, yeah, I am important. That was a good feeling and it also made me more confident and not with just ABEL, not just with that group, but outside of ABEL. I knew that I had something to offer them, so there was something good about me and knew what I could offer other people, why couldn't I offer it to other people and not just them [ABEL]. So it helped me in putting myself out of my comfort zone. I feel confident to do that, and it built up my confidence enough so that I was more willing to do that, rather than I don't really want to do this, but I can. It may be uncomfortable and it may be challenging, but it will be good for me and I can do it. Like, the canoe trip for example, some days I was thinking, yeah, a couple of years ago, I probably would have been a lot more nervous to just go and do it, but now I know I can do it. You are telling me that you are going to have to be in a group or whatever, and I'm thinking, that's going to be interesting, it is going to be challenging, but I can do it. I am confident, I know, whatever happens I will be able to do it.

I didn't have to worry about if I say this, how they were going to react. It was that kind of thing. If someone said something that didn't make much sense, you would kind of go, okay, yeah, we would laugh it off, it was funny, it didn't matter. I never felt stupid, I never felt like I wasn't one of the group and I never felt like okay, I don't want to be here, I shouldn't be here, I feel uncomfortable. It was always, they accept me, I can do what I want, I can say what I want and I accept them. It was such a mutual feeling for everybody, everybody had a huge acceptance thing, everybody feels the same way and you know that everyone that is there is there for all the same reasons you are there, but love it as much as you do. So they wouldn't give it up for anything in the world, so they

want you there because you want to be there, you want them to know that you want them there.

[During another Student's climb we stopped our own] because we cared and we knew that she cared. Both she and us [Robyn's other climbing partner], we cared and we wanted her to know, we wanted her to do it and wanted to see if she could and we wanted to help her out. We knew that when you have support from somebody else it makes a huge difference. I don't know, maybe she could have done it on her own, but I think us being there and her knowing that we were there, supporting her and cheering for her, helping her along, would have given her a lot more strength. And a lot more courage. I think she always looked to the group for a lot of support and I think it took her a lot farther, the fact that we were there for her. It was a little extra.

Yeah, you can do it individually. You can work at it and say this is for me. And you can decide that even though you are together, that you are on your own. Or you are up there by yourself, but...you can look at it that way or you could look at it, yeah, I am up here, but everybody down on the ground is looking up here. You know what I mean, but even though they weren't, they were there... Yeah, I think that was the best. Everybody else wanted you to succeed, and another member of the group was up there and they were walking from this pole to this pole, I was down there going yeah go. I wanted them to get there as bad as they wanted to get there, as much as I wanted myself to do it. You wanted them to do it because it was just not fun if it was not crazy [the Pamper Pole]. If you go up there one at a time and then you did it, you did it, you did it, I don't know. I think you kind of, even though you could look at it individually, you kind of say this is it, everybody is supporting everybody. Everybody understands everybody, cheering

everybody. That's what made it close, encouraging somebody else. So you have to, individually that way you have find what it is about you that is going to get you through this and it was different for most of the people.

[Camp fires were the best] because we talked about the whole day. What we did, what the good points were, what the bad points were and it was fun, telling jokes, telling stories, reading and it was warm and dry and you would talk about what we did today and what we were going to do tomorrow, it was nice. It was kind of a chance to talk. It gave a chance to get more personal. We would talk and open up to each other somewhat and talk about more personal things. So it was nice. I would say that was typical at the camp fires out of everyone of our trips, yes. It wouldn't be the same trip. It is kind of like a time where we reflected on everything of the day...

Yeah, it was during that trip [Kidston], that you too each one of us aside and talked to us, and I guess that I was not as confident as I was before that trip. I think a lot of people - like I thought that. A few certain people had really important roles within the group. It wouldn't work without them, but then to other people it didn't matter so much. I think I learned that. I thought I was one of the people that thought, yeah, yeah, people like me, I had a few good ideas, but I didn't think that I was that important. I wasn't like upset about it. I wasn't sad, but I just didn't think that I really, really mattered that much. You took me aside and you said, "I am always looking around, thinking about what other people are thinking, wondering what they are thinking about me." And, "That I never recognized how everyone else looked at me, cause I am always saying, yeah, that person did a good thing, that person said a good idea, wow, that's a great idea, however, I never realized, that because maybe even though I didn't say that much, that my role was

not less important, but it was as important because people looked at me and accepted me and accepted my ideas, and thought wow, that's a good idea, I didn't think that I had that much pull. Yeah. I knew what value means, but...Yeah. It didn't click, I didn't think, but now I would confidently say that they needed me, but that's how I feel.

I kind of figured that, before I thought, that I didn't realize that that they must realize that, the people that I think are important, know that they are important, but I also realized that I was important. I figured well, they are probably just realizing that too, and they are probably looking at me and saying the same thing. Well she plays a big role, but I think everybody realized that at the same point that they had a role in this group, they need me and I think that's really important. If you don't feel that you are important then you are not going to give it 110%. If you have an idea, should I share it, it doesn't really matter, they can do it without me, but then I realized that no I have an idea, it is a good idea, it's my idea and I will say it.

Skve's View: Trust in People-The Group

I had more of a role in a big group than I thought I could. I have always been self-confident and have always said my peace. If I wanted to do something, I would say it. When I was in a group, I was overwhelmed and I might let someone else do it. When all of us were together and we did stuff, then I did not have a problem doing more or speaking more.

[At High Ropes] It took so much from everybody to get her to actually do it, but when she finally did it was such an accomplishment for everybody, mostly her because she got up the pole. That was the biggest thing when she got up there. It was huge for her and everyone else because it was something she had taken a year and a half to do. It was

something everyone had to do to get her to be confident enough and have enough confidence in the group that nobody would make fun of her or laugh at her because she was scared. It had to be something that we all did together to get her to that point.

Yes some of the experiences I would not take back for anything, but some times you have to watch out for other people. If they are not comfortable and not feeling safe, there is no point to the experience. I remember we had to write down something about our strengths and weaknesses. I always want to be the leader and if we were doing something as a group, I would be the one to say this is the way we are going to do it. I had a problem with other people leading me. It really did not have anything to do with confidence. I had to believe in my leading, emotionally and physically. A strength and weakness I have is that I trust people easily. Physically, no problem. If someone says I will catch you, okay alright.

[Referring to a student] They were glad he came, but felt they did not really know him because he never involved himself. That last little bit, he sort of lit himself on fire. He all of a sudden came to be. I think because when we were talking he realized we did not include him and he got a little upset. Even though it was he who did not include himself. We were all comfortable with one another, and decided to accept him as well. He was very nice but very shy and that is why he did not participate. That was one thing about [Student], he came out and said, "I want to say something." He said, "I don't feel good in the group." It took a lot for him to say that and I was glad that he did. I think I realize the whole time that he was not as involved as everyone else was. I did not know if he wanted to be or not. For him to say that was an accomplishment

At least, everybody had a connection to the group somehow. There was a bunch of us in the middle that all got along and would do anything together. We would sacrifice for anything. There was nobody that was an outcast.

Robert's View: The Self-Esteem to Give

Everyone had a role and a duty. It was not necessarily dictated to you. People volunteered. [Remember] maybe ABEL was like a family. The way we had respect for each other. You respected the things others could and could not do. We told stories and hung out, but just things we talked about made it fun. [You could be yourself] because no one would make fun of you for saying something. People always wanted to hear what you had to say. With ABEL, people respected you every time you did something, it didn't matter whether you could or could not do it. You were giving 110% and some people would pitch in more to help out than others, and that was okay.

[Missing the final trip] I kinda felt like I let the team down. You have to work as a team but think about yourself at the same time for the future. Oh, it definitely would have been different [if I was a part of the final experience]. How? I do not really know. I would have learned something different from there. I would have learned a million more things than I probably learned at Eatons, but I guess Eatons was a learning experience too.

It gave me self-confidence while I was doing the initiatives. As soon as we saw one person fall behind, we wanted to help them out. Other places you don't get to do that kind of stuff. Like if you don't understand an isosceles triangle and you cannot understand it, you are not into it. Now that I look back I definitely know I learned stuff. At the time, I probably was not sure what I really learned just that I did. I think everyone

is still in the process of learning. You gained confidence from all the physical things you had to do. At the time, I thought they were all just physical but really they had to do with the mental aspect. ABEL definitely gave me more self-esteem because once again you felt like a family, like you are wanted. You want to help out and have all these experiences. I most definitely learned more about leadership, like when to keep my mouth shut and when not to, when to listen to other peoples' ideas, like the way you would hope they would listen to yours. I used these skills a lot in the military, just by calming everyone down, listening to what people had to say, helped play as a team, helped everyone come together. It gave you more confidence when you contributed an idea to help finalize something. We were given the chance to lead.

Yes, it made me a bigger person, a stronger person in a mental sense. I had the determination for instance to get myself to the gym every day. It made me have a lot more respect for people. I now sit back and listen to what others have to say. I don't belittle people for what they cannot do. I remind myself that there are things I cannot do. [Acceptance] Yes, and even with the strengths they did not have, there was a way we could joke about it which would sometimes boost morale. Everyone was accepted. Well, I experienced every emotion. I was happy, sad, frustrated. Sometimes I would just laugh because I was having such a good time. Other times you would experience all emotions.

Everyone was worried about what everyone else thought at first. Like they are older than I am, they think I am not cool enough to do this. You were worried about being accepted and whom you would get along with. You wanted to be accepted so everything would work out. Yes, it was definitely give and take. I don't know how to explain it. Everything was a challenge, through the initiatives. It challenged me as a person, as an

individual, and also as a team. You had to work together. You had to bite your tongue when you wanted to tell off the person next to you. You always pondered things, like the different ways to do things, who was going to do what and why. The whole thing was a challenge. There was honesty with people when everyone was in the same boat. They were relieved that they had just accomplished something and they did not know whether to cry or laugh. I guess everyone felt they came under the same level and you felt you could open up to someone a little more and tell them the truth about something, tell them something you might not expect for the fact that you are at that level of emotion. Just in the beginning because there were people who knew each other already and that is whom they felt safest with. Towards the end, there were no cliques. [ABEL] made you feel like a person. No, ABEL was more than a clique. I look at a clique as being people who don't want to associate with anyone else. They want to stay in their own group. ABEL was not that. Everyone was accepted. People had their differences but they were definitely pushed aside when there was a task at hand. We would have debates and differences but no one was fighting. You felt safe. You did not have to show off. You would not let yourself get behind. You worked together and did your part. You just had to be yourself. You have to experience it.

For each of my students ABEL was a discovery of what was needed by each of them. To some degree, what they learned for themselves became lessons they told to the others. This sharing created a unique connection for the students. These shared lessons made the ABEL experience a rich curriculum. They learned that they could take their skills into the real world (the community) and that they had the support to attempt these moves. For some it was the issue of confidence and trust. This can be view as confidence in self and

others, and trusting self and others. ABEL was an opportunity to experience a curriculum that was far from traditional, an extraordinary set of events tailored to meet the needs of the group. One of the needs was to care for the self-esteem of all the students. This positive outlook of self and others opened up more opportunities for the students to give of themselves. ABEL gave them confidence that they could give not only for the class community but also for others in need outside of the ABEL class.

The Accomplishments

It still amazes me today to think back to the number of hours that were experienced outside of the classroom. This includes the types of service learning projects that were delivered in the community, and the out trips that contributed to the growth that we all witnessed for each other. I was proud. I have bragging rights. I would keep saying to myself, “look at what these kids can do...” I just hoped they understood the importance of what they were doing. Evaluations and debriefing are limited tools. The transference will determine what the student valued when they are away from ABEL.

As ABEL was being developed, it was a deliberate act to program for the real needs of teens from our community. The challenges had to be right or we were going to lose the benefits of experiential teaching. If the course was intended to develop youth leadership, then the challenges had to do just that. If it was too easy what was the point. If initiatives were too hard this would be boot camp, not the learning opportunity that I valued. The students had to gain a sense of who they were, face real challenges, and develop real skills working with others in realistic settings. They needed to create a sense of self-purpose, and to have an understanding of what they could offer a community. Students need to experience what it means to foster their greater self, and to serve and

lead each other. This must occur before they can serve within the community. The events to achieve this had to have real importance. The experience had to have weight that superseded marks. ABEL had to provide tangible accomplishments for the individual, the group and the community.

Brian: Accomplishments as Proof

I think that accomplishment is at the core of ABEL. I think that perhaps the most important thing that ABEL does is it lets students know in a concrete way that they can do something. That feeling, that you can do a project or event that has a real impact, is an enormous boost of self-confidence. Part of that comes from the initiatives, part of it from the service learning activities. I think that it can only occur once you actually go through the experience. I don't know that there is any other way to evoke that feeling.

For me anyway, ABEL and some of the other things I've been involved with have led to the sentiment of "Hey, if I can pull that off, what is to stop me from doing this new project?" I think partially what I meant when I said "that state of mind" is that I did have some of that sentiment before I came into ABEL, that ABEL provided a strong enforcement of that message, and that it is something that I am aware of today.

The other part of "that state of mind" are the outdoor and leadership components. I love the outdoors and I like projects that give people the opportunity to experience leadership.

I think the initiative part came out of the fact that there was more responsibility on us in ABEL to deliver compared to other extra curricular activities - even school work. At least with school work you were pretty much guaranteed of getting a reminder

about things that were due, but if things didn't get done in ABEL, events and projects didn't happen.

Skye: Accomplishments by Working With One Another

The major thing for me was when [Student] and I did the vertical playpen. We were the shortest people there. The only two females that did it and we got to the top. It was hard. It was really hard, but that was such an accomplishment. First of all, you are working with someone else. Your whole class and everyone else are watching, wandering whether you will make it or not. We thought maybe we would only get halfway up but that did not matter. We thought it would be fun. It took everything, emotional, physical, not just the brain working to solve a math problem. The vertical playpen took strength and someone else to keep you going.

Jimmy: Accomplishments Were Shared

Yeah. Looking at the initiative and thinking it is impossible and then succeeding, that is such a rush. A good rush of endorphins. It's a rush because it is an accomplishment. If you look at it literally, not much [was accomplished]. We allowed ourselves to be drawn into the scenario of the initiative, like with the gorge, and we used our brains and accomplished something that was humanly impossible. Because we did it made it important. It was important to us. The group decided that this was something we wanted to do. That was a big part of it. You became part of something. I became part of the group. It was not just me who wanted it.

I remember when you were talking about the boundaries. I remember you saying; "you are here until you finish", and we accepted those boundaries and worked within them. Though I know it now but did not at the time, you probably would have caved. You

probably had a limit of six or seven hours, and then you would have said you failed. I remember thinking we are here until we finish. We are not getting breakfast until we finish this. I was really drawn into that. I embraced those rules.

Everyone would have a little something different. The feeling of accomplishment, the sense of well being, self-confidence, the rush of doing something good. Not for [me], but everyone. You all did it. It is similar to being on a sports team and you win a game, but better.

Robyn: Accomplishments of a Group

Because everybody wanted to do the [Web initiative]. Everybody challenged our roles entirely, but everybody had a place, everybody came together and everybody was focused on one thing and everybody wanted something really, really, really bad and we all wanted the same thing. They wanted to accomplish something. We wanted to succeed, we wanted to feel it. [And we did] because we felt proud. For us. [For] our accomplishments. [What accomplishments?] Yeah, but we did it together.

Kevin: Accomplishments as Connected Learning

Challenged in high school? Not really because I could figure out a different way to learn. Because sitting there and having someone just throw it at you like this is what you have to learn. For some people it becomes really hard, but if you can learn it in a different way then it makes it a lot more easy. [Referring to the service learning projects] you construct the image in your head of how you would do it, but now you had to produce it, make the real thing. Now you have to figure out how can I make this. I know how to make it in my head, but now I have to make it in real life [to represent the experience].

Robert: Accomplishments of a Family

Like when we had to get up early in the morning, walk through the woods to an area where there was a gorge [initiative]. I was looking at the gorge one way and other people were looking at it another way and as the light turned different, you could actually see. While looking at it, we did not think it could be done, but it did actually happen. ABEL was an escape from every other class. You were concentrating on what you were doing. Your adrenaline was going in ABEL. Other people who were not in ABEL did not understand it. They would ask me about it. You were like a family that was accomplishing things. ABEL was an accomplishment. Yes [something you could be proud of].

The constant thread linking each of the participants' stories is the notion that accomplishments were important and valued in the ABEL class. So often we do not allow real challenges to confront students as a part of their daily-school work. Sometimes the academic challenge needs to become more engaging, and the solutions in ABEL resulted in a felt connection of being proud. Accomplishments take on a special meaning when they are part of a shared event, in which the students demonstrate that they are capable of achieving results. This strengthens the already existing bond that has grown within the class. The risk of success or failure within a 'challenge' (adventure initiative, backcountry trip or a service learning project), are experiences that contribute to the growing sense of family or community that the students related to. This group cohesiveness provided the initial support for the development of self-confidence and when left to their own devices the students were able to make connections on their own. They could recognize what strengths they were able to bring to a 'challenge'. The power

of these challenges and the heightened acknowledgement of importance for accomplishments presented itself with in the commitment to service learning projects.

Service Learning

I appreciate the research into the outcomes for service learning but even now those outcomes do not seem as important as what I witnessed with my students. I believe the research needs to focus more on the quality of the service learning experience for the student and the community. A focused teacher will ensure the academics will remain intact. The creation of a service learning project should be a direct link to a definable moment for the student. Preparing students for these moments takes time.

It is my belief that reality changes ever so slightly each time an event has been reflected upon. I have had countless reflections in the area of service learning that my students were involved in. The reflection during the planning, the delivery and post project revealed learning connections to the course material, a greater understanding of community, an enhanced value for the purpose of service learning as an experiential instructional tool. However, it was the growth of the person, the student in front of me which surprised me. Many of my students saw service learning as an adventure, and an accomplishment, more important than school-related outcomes.

There is a magic and energy that comes with an appropriate service learning project. For me this is still the most rewarding form of evaluation I have performed with my students. Genuine marks, from an authentic curriculum. When a service learning project is unfolding I re-experience that same enthusiasm I felt that wintry day in the woods with my junior high school students and my outdoor leader. I feel there is an edge

to this type of learning and teaching that I have never been able to replicate in a traditional-educational structure.

I am convinced that you just cannot do service learning like a traditional assignment. Students need to grow into the experience by having time to discover who they are. They must reflect on various roles that they had the ability and opportunity to try within a subject area. They need to discover their roles, passions or what they feel they have to offer. They need to discover strengths and the ability to work through a weakness with another person. I believe it is a matter of building a team, a family, the group or community first. If a student has not understood or experienced community (which is not an uncommon situation in today's society) how can the teacher expect them to serve within an entity of which they have no authentic understanding. Service learning needs to give our students 'connected knowing' in that the project will be an accomplishment in academics, personal growth, and community improvement. The following are the participant reflections upon the meaning of service learning.

Kevin's View of Service Learning: Opportunity to Put Myself Into the Projects

I needed something [to help develop effective service learning projects]. If it was not ABEL it had to be something else that would get me to open my eyes to realize this. That is what I needed. I needed a reality check that I could do this. [Service learning] let me put what I learned to work. Like what I had learned about myself. It allowed me to take that and pour it into another project.

[Before] I would sit back and I contributed very little from my own mind. I would go with a lot of what other people would say. When we did the figure of eight, trying to figure it out in the field. We tried and we tried and I said what I thought would work

once and then no one went with it or I did not say it again or did not say it loud enough but you heard me. Afterwards, when we did a debrief on it, you said if I had spoken up and let them hear it that it would have worked. I stopped worrying about my opinion. If it did not work, then fine we will try another way. A lot of it is trial and error through the initiatives, so why not take another stab at it.

I realized that someone wants me to speak up. I realized that what I want to say needs to be heard and that I need to say it. I may not have all the right ideas but I do have ideas, the same as what [Student] would have. Maybe even if hers did not work, maybe mine would have. I could turn it around from just that classroom and put it into my friendships with others.

Jimmy's View of Service Learning: Not a Priority

Oh, the make work project. The service project. I really did not want to do it because it seemed like a lot of work. I spent the first few classes goofing off and then we realized we had to get something done. We came up with the program in one class. I remember writing a play with [Student] and [Student] doing the spoof of for "What it is worth?" by Springfield. We got to put on the play for different schools. Well, you had ownership of [the project]. You were proud of it. I will tell you where [I learned to serve others]. It was when we did the unloading of the Christmas trees. I did not want to do it, but I did it, and in the end I got satisfaction out of doing it. I was helping out those guys. I think it was also because it was tangible. We moved trees from point A to point B. There was a definite result. I was actually hanging out with my friends and we showed that it could be fun when everyone pitches in. I definitely learned to serve, to combat that selfishness that every teenager has.

[The Tree Project] was a great and entertaining for the kids. Q: Did the kids learn? J: Some [learned] did and some did not [learn]. We involved the kids in the play so I think the chances for them to learn were greater. [Service learning] was not going to happen [without ABEL]. I did not want to do it even with ABEL, but when we made the learning fun, it was okay. I made the learning fun for the kids. I created experiential moments. It was a good time. I did not fully understand the impact it was having on me then. I knew I was learning stuff. I can track. I can take anything we did in ABEL and I can say that this had this impact. I can track the impact ABEL had on my life right up until now. I was not aware of what ABEL was to me then.

They got a lot out of it because I created ABEL moments for them. There are three parts to the experience: Anticipation, the experience itself and then reliving the experience. ABEL got better as I relived it, although there is a certain element to being in the moment and all that stuff. I did not appreciate it for what it was, but if I had, I think it would have taken away, like if you over analyze something or if you value them too much then you are limited. So maybe it was good that I was not thinking about it too much.

I was telling you I did not care about my mark, give me whatever you want to give me. That was my program. I created it. You did not give it to me. It was mine. Yes. I like that that we developed it. It was kind of like how if I created a program for the Outdoor Center, I had a lot more interest in it.

Robyn's View of Service Learning: As Important

[The service projects would have been] different [without ABEL]. There would have been a different person doing them. No I'm not [the same]. No way. Yeah, but I don't think the same way, I don't have the same confidence, I'm not the same person, I changed completely. I don't have the same reasons. Before ABEL, I wasn't thinking that way, I would have just done it and I would have even been looking at like, okay, what am I going to get out of this?

[Before ABEL] I wouldn't have [engaged in a service learning project], it wasn't me, it wasn't something that I would think about, it wasn't something that I had the confidence to do, to go in there and say yeah, I am going to help this kid. But if you don't recognize that [role] in yourself, you are not going to be able to share it with anybody else. I didn't, so it might have been there, but until I could go out and see if I could do it.

Okay, the teacher's conference, it was awesome because we got to show people about ABEL and tell them about ABEL and get people to teach it if they want that's the point of the conference. Something that I really wanted to do and the whole group really wanted to do because ABEL matters so much to us. We wanted other people to be able to experience it, we wanted to tell people and show people what ABEL was like so that other people could experience it.

[The service learning] was important, because what it has done for me. It is still important to me and it changed me so much that, yeah that's okay, that's fun, I wish everybody else could have that too. It's affected me so much to the fact that it is so

important that it took some others to help, your priorities changed, I wanted to share this experience with other people, I wanted people to experience this.

If I had to [do a service project before ABEL] I would have, but it would not have lasted very long. No. We wouldn't have had the confidence, we wouldn't have known how, we wouldn't know what to say. When we did the conference we knew what we wanted to do, and we knew what we were going to feel and how we were going to do it. Everybody was prepared. We all got to pick topics that we were really into and we got to teach it. In the beginning it wasn't like you think you have to have experience it, you have an experience that you couldn't share. Yeah, you could do it [without ABEL], but it wouldn't be any point doing it. It wouldn't be the same.

Robert's View of Service Learning: An ABEL State of Mind

Lost and Found [Service Project]. We broke up into teams within our group and we each had to explain how to survive if you ever got lost in the woods. We worked together as a team. We read the book and went over everything. We did winter survival where we stayed outside all night, built shelters and campfires. We actually did it ourselves so we could explain it better to others. I learned a lot that day. It was fun because I got to teach kids something that I had learned and experienced myself. Well, hopefully, so in the event that one of them got lost, they could at least survive. It makes you feel happy in that you helped someone. Yes, but you gain more on the end as a person. I know that I can take what I learned here and apply it to other things.

I had a role. They definitely experienced an ABEL experience because they were working with us as a team. They got to crawl under their desks and tuck their pants in their socks, and not move around. They actually got their experience. I bet you it

changed them in some way. It probably gave them some self-esteem too when they got to participate. I guess they were given a role and a place. It is learning to get along, sharing moments with that person, and respecting each other within the moment. I think if we all got back together as a team we would get on that island (Survivor). The whole ABEL team would win the million dollars. I don't think there is any way you could vote anyone out in our group.

[Before ABEL Lost & Found] probably would have done it the night before. I am very good at procrastinating. I would not have experienced it beforehand. I would not have done my share for the project. The others in my group would have done all the work and I would have copied off them. I would probably have ended up failing it. It would not have been the same. Yes, to do it successfully [we needed ABEL moments, Kidston]. Yes, [it still could have been done] but it wouldn't have been of the same quality at all. To do it effectively yes [you needed the ABEL state of mind]. I always reflect back on ABEL. Even in the militia, I reflect back to things I did in ABEL, and it helps me with the initiative at hand.

Skye's View of Service Learning: Service Takes Experience

[The Sir Charles Tupper service project] would not have worked [without Kidston]. No. [We] could have, but they would not have got anything out of it. No, because it takes the experience we had to have it in our mind. It was the ripple effect, like what you do carries on to other people, which carries on to other people and so on. If you are involved in something and you have fun doing it and you have the experience, then other people will feel the genuine, authentic feelings that you have and the fun you are having. It you just went in textbook style and talked about it, they will either forget about it or say

how does that relate to me. Their learning would stop there and they would not have gotten anything out of it. There was a piece of the [ABEL] experience and the authenticity in every project we did, just different levels. All our projects took planning, but Tupper was like a three-day ABEL class for these kids. Yes, and it is genuine and if you act on how you really feel, you can't go wrong.

The rest of the year would have been very different because the experience at Tupper had so many up-points and you got to see how your work and how people worked together, what it resulted in these kids and how much they changed. To be able to experience something like and to see how you can affect someone, gives you another level of confidence to bring back to our own group. [For the rest in the class] I think the core of it would be the same, you get to see your efforts and see how your efforts come out in the end. That was the first time we got to offer our knowledge and what we were to people we did not know. At the beginning, we were kind of leery and hoped it was going to work. We got through it and realized we could have an affect and a role in other people's learning.

Brian's View of Service Learning: You Needed ABEL

[laughing] No, I think ABEL is a bit more than an outdoor course. I was pretty excited at the prospect of being with all of these people who had the same interests. That doesn't occur in many of the classes in high school. Most students are looking to get credits to graduate or to get into university.

You needed the outdoors to get to the service, just doing the service itself was not enough. The outdoors and adventure built the group, allowed you a place to grow safely, the service allowed you the opportunity to put yourself, the curriculum of leadership to

the test in a place where it mattered. I wanted to think awhile about this one because I didn't want to get led into it, but the answer is yes. That statement really sums up the ABEL experience and connects the last piece of the puzzle. I don't really know what to add to that, as it is quite complete in itself.

[Service learning] For me it made the material / evaluation feel more relevant in comparison to other subject areas. It wasn't some abstract English concept, for example, but rather a direct application of stuff we had learned. There is also the rewarding aspect of it in that we knew that we'd just shown 200 kids what to do if they're lost in the woods [Lost & Found].

The initiatives and outdoor ed. definitely cultivated and developed leadership skills, but in relation to the service learning, it was more the knowledge and experience that we gained from being out there. Almost all of our service learning projects were based on the outdoors and the environment. That previous outdoor experience provided a lot of confidence in knowing what the heck you were talking about when you went to deliver a program. So yes, there was certainly the belief that ABEL had something unique to offer the community. I can't think of a group that would be better equipped and have the ability to deliver the service learning projects that we did.

As we discussed [before] I don't think that ABEL would have been as effective at the service learning at the beginning of the year. We needed time to come together as a group, to develop that supportive network, and for people to learn and gain confidence in their abilities. Without that time we would just have been a group of acquaintances trying to do service learning. I think that some service learning would have taken place, but it wouldn't have been nearly as successful.

I think the quality would have been lower [if all we did was service learning projects] for the same reason above: we wouldn't have been able to develop ourselves individually and as a group first. The energy, commitment and belief largely came out of having a sense of community and the confidence in oneself to deliver these projects. Finding situations where ABEL could uniquely fill a need that existed helped the sense of community. I think that there was more commitment to Mysterious Encounters Earth [MEE], than there was to the March Break camp at BLT. With MEE there was an environmental/ outdoors slant to it that was not present at the BLT project. Because of our outdoor interests and the outdoor ed. that we did during the year, ABEL was more effective in those areas of service learning.

To a certain extent yes [you need to create community]. I mean that as people, we already interact with our environment/community on an individual level, where the boundaries are unclear, and the further you push out into unknown areas, the more uncomfortable it gets. ABEL allowed us to have an environment, which was much more limited, that we explored and defined as a group. As individuals, it was much easier to explore what that environment was, due to the support from our peers. Then we were able to extend that 'micro-environment' or framework out into the community, be it the service learning or the adventure programming, to make it easier to do those activities. As individuals there were some things that we would never have done alone without that micro-environment.

I tried to come up with an analogy, but no real success. It's sort of like being outside at night when it's really dark. When you're a kid you don't go out. As you get older you venture out a bit more. When you're with a group of friends, you all explore the darkness

a bit more and you discover that you can go out there together and everything will be alright. Eventually you are okay with going out there by yourself. In the beginning you saw a place where you didn't want to go and you would never have gone out there on your own. ABEL shows you that with a few forays out into the darkness with your friends, that it isn't such a big deal and that you can go out there without needing them.

ABEL has showed students that they can experience service learning. They approached community needs knowing their strengths and abilities. For service learning to be effective, students need to be prepared for the responsibility by having them experience roles, and by allowing them to develop themselves, as they create a genuine community experience. It became clear that the students valued being prepared and this gave them confidence to commit themselves energetically and passionately to their project. Service learning enabled them to transfer their skills and knowledge and thus to test the authenticity of the curriculum. ABEL was essential for quality service learning to occur for my students. It allowed them to develop an ABEL 'state of mind' that prompted them to share their positive experiences through the 'ripple effect'. When the students witnessed the impact, they were empowered because they experienced the results of their efforts. This empowerment was due to the ownership and pride they had for their creations. The accomplishment of the project was tangible for my students. The success of service learning experience was based upon a caring ethic and the students knew intimately, that support was always available from their classmates. ABEL invited students to the challenge and adventure of serving in the community.

Embers

I have waited to have this debrief with my students for a long time. I was not disappointed. They always managed to reveal more to me educationally. Looking at the embers and listening to the echoes of their story, I know I experienced an amazing educational journey. “I could not see the beauty of the journey until I truly looked at those who were with me.” I do not know who said that but they are right. It is the people, not the curriculum, which makes the educational journey an enriching adventure, an experience that is lasting in our growth. My goal, when I was in the developing stages of ABEL, was to have a course that mattered, a course that would impact my students deeply. As I stir the embers I want to bring some light to the truths I learned from the reflections.

The students of my school wanted something new, an exciting curriculum challenge. Our reforms need to go beyond the latest edition of the course text. As educators we must stop putting a new face on the same curriculum and instruction and call it change. We need to hit the core of reform where it impacts the intellect, the emotions and curious natures of our children. Imagine educational reform built on an outcome of fun, family support, and experiential challenges.

Profound educational experiences need to be reflected on actively and continuously. The research supports this and my practice confirms it. What we need to do in our reflections is to allow the students to explore themselves within those pedagogic moments. The learning connections cannot be limited to the outcomes of the course. The reflections must be tuned to the students demonstrating their growth and accomplishment. By understanding ‘the what’ of the experiential moment we can better help them

establish the learning links for transfer into future real-life events.

Learning about their potential roles within a supportive-safe group will only help foster self assured identities outside of the environment that was developed to facilitate possible roles. Trying new identities involves risks and challenges. Risk did not lead to failure in ABEL. However, risk-taking was integrally connected with growth for each student within a group. ABEL prepared them for the adventure of learning experientially in school, within their communities and within themselves. They learned the value to learning in all arenas and discovered that the adventure was in connecting it all into a continuous experience.

Experience is key to forging our identities. The ABEL experience created a group identity of community, peer-group, or family complete with it's own values, respect, care and commitment for one another. It is here the students learned to serve self, one another, and the community. Within their group they learned support and discovered confidence to try service learning. They learned the importance of being able to both lead and follow within a safe but challenging environment.

The ability to lead at any level gave the ABEL students a sense of accomplishment. Their achievements were real, their experiences were tangible and their learning was authentic. This success for the student was established over the period of the school year. Achievement took the form of working together on initiatives, creating their unique community, and implementing their service learning projects. Preparation for effective service learning is a timed process. The teacher needs to lead the student to the event and through the event with the support of a trusting group who understand the potential of the experience.

This support in ABEL was defined within each of the stories. The students prepared for their involvement with the community as a leader. Brian referred to this preparation as ‘risk’ but with the support of his peer community. Therefore, ABEL became a source of ‘inner growth’ for Brian. This personal development carried over into the ‘real world’ for the students where they proved to themselves what they were capable of through the accomplishments of service learning. The community became a place for adventures and edges in learning.

The edge that service learning offered students was key to the development of self. Robyn realized that as much as ABEL was a change from the daily operations of school, ABEL became a place where she was valued and could be ‘herself’, free from peer pressures. The accomplishments she experienced with her group allowed her to discover confidence. The discoveries Robyn made during ABEL experiences and the numerous ‘group accomplishments’, had a deep and lasting impact on her person.

Robert phrased this impact as a ‘state of mind’. This mind set created the space for Robert to make the learning connections ‘by doing’. The accomplishments gave him a ‘family-like’ connection. The encouragement that Robert received from his group contributed to his self-esteem opening him to opportunities to ‘give’ his services within the community and fulfill his need to learn by an experiential approach. Robert had the sense before committing to the course that it was going to be an experience he was unwilling to miss.

Jimmy’s conception of the course was that it was merely an opportunity to have fun. However, he revealed that ABEL became for him more than just a good time. He experienced ‘belonging’ with a makeshift family that shaped his very future. ABEL

became an important community association for Jimmy. It is within the care and respect of ABEL that Jimmy learned the value of service and was able to take ‘pride’ in his accomplishments. Jimmy also acknowledges that the success of service learning and of ABEL was due to a ‘shared’ effort of the entire class.

Kevin understood his ABEL class as a ‘community of equals’. A course that would allow him to explore the outdoors also gave him the chance to ‘step up’ and take a powerful role within many extraordinary-learning moments. Experiential learning moments through adventure activities, the outdoors and service learning made it possible for Kevin to achieve a ‘connected knowing’ for himself. The connections were individual and group understandings of ABEL experiences.

Skye also valued her accomplishments as group achievements. For her she was able to ‘reach community’ with her class. This allowed Skye to ‘learn trust’ among the people in ABEL. She indicated that it was the ABEL experiences that prepared her for the transference of academics into the community through service learning. Without this prior experience base to draw from, service learning would not have been the same. As difficult as ABEL is to explain to others, it was something ‘different’, it was a course that gave its participants ‘feelings’.

Chapter VI- After the Fire

The Morning Light

It seems that things look different for me when I wake to the morning light. It is almost as if the night has continued to reflect for me while I slept. There are still echoes of my students' stories in my mind. I know I will always carry these stories with me in my experiential teaching. I have used the threads from my students to design a teaching practice that allows me to be the kind of teacher I want to be. My experiential method of teaching is not a traditional transmission of knowledge (Cleary & Benson, 1998; Morrison-Shetlar & Heinrich, 1999). Even during my earliest teaching days, I envisioned a classroom where the student and the teacher would share the learning experience. I have achieved this relationship with my students. I still imagine subject material that could be experienced, a class where we "got to do". As a teacher, I have learned to teach authentically-experientially by the creation of the ABEL course.

The *telling* of the ABEL story has become my reflective process in the form of thesis writing. I have discovered that the ABEL course helped me to blend my personal and professional philosophy in education/learning. ABEL provided an infusion of educational reform into the culture of a school. The ABEL course was the impetus for powerful student experiences and the transformation of a teacher. I have discovered some aspects of what the ABEL experience meant for my students by exploring their experiences, understandings and meanings. I gained a shared understanding of how ABEL has shaped the student and the person.

This study has provided insights into what made the experiences meaningful for the students. This will hopefully allow other teachers to adopt similar practices to ensure

quality experiential pedagogies in school-based curriculum. Understanding the student experiences allowed me to gain knowledge about my role as a teacher engaged in an experiential learning modality. Insights into the experiences of the students provided me with a rich educational interpretation of how the ABEL course served each student. This will have an impact on how I continue to teach. The theoretical connections made between curriculum and practice will shape how I approach teacher inservicing on service learning, outdoor education and adventure education. By understanding how the learning experience “came alive” has sensitized me to my own practice as an experiential educator.

My study, has drawn upon phenomenological insights of autobiographical and biographical (Graham, 1989) understandings of the experiences that were shared or unique to those involved with the ABEL approach to life-long learning. Denzin (1989), in biographic storying, considers sincerity, subjective truth, historical truth, and fictional truth as the standards by which work of this nature can and will be judged. The conclusion that Denzin draws is that there is a blurring of the line between fact and fiction, a question of honesty. Denzin makes the reference to Satre by noting, “If an author thinks something existed and believes in its existence, its effects are real” (p.25). In short, Denzin’s view is a theme of fiction and truth combined to tell life story as, “a narrative, storytelling form, which gives it the flavor of fiction, or of fictional accounts of what happened in a person’s life” (p. 42). Gusdorf (1980) argues that autobiography is a historic chronology of a person’s experiences and it involves the effort of the autobiographer “to give the meaning of his own mythical tale” (p. 48).

Is an accurate account of the events possible if 'life story' is told from a particular moment in time and the elements of the story are influenced by the views of the autobiographer (Graham, 1989)? Weintraub (1978) defines this moment to be the "point in time the course of life is seen to have connecting lines that were previously hidden, [in which] a new direction becomes clear where only wandering existed before" (p. 48). Thus the autobiographic/biographic exploration can present a 'life map' from recollections of the past. This revisiting of an individual's past experiences, through conscious reflecting to reconstruct the meaning of the experience may present a more truthful glimpse of the past events than the first examination of the experience. Grumet (1980) believes the purpose of the autobiographical examination of past events is to recapture personal educational experiences and raise consciousness to a reconceptualized life.

This thesis has provided a way for me to explore an accumulation of self-knowledge, and to make connections to form the basis of connected knowing (Helle, 1991). This process of rebuilding understanding from the experiential dimensions of educational events is one of recomposition and reinterpretation of these events from the words of the students and teachers involved in ABEL. I have gone beyond a mere superficial telling of a collection of stories around an educational experience. According to Gunn (1982), autobiography goes beyond other forms of narrative to reveal the "cultural act of reading the self." (p. 31) Heeding Graham's (1989) warning, I have tried to ensure that this thesis is more than just nostalgic enthusiasm, which simply recaptures the glorious moments of past educational events, by engaging a "rigorous interpretive scrutiny" (p. 103). The *telling* has become an effective method that is rational, reflective,

analytic, energetic, and intentional (Grumet, 1980). Telling the ABEL experience contextualized my practice and gave voice (Clandinin, 1988; Bullough, 1989) to both my student's and my own experiences. I am still in search of answers to the nature of my practice by seeking to understand my 'here and now' as a teacher practising an untraditional-learning approach. My storying process involved the "selection of incidents from a life arranged and linked with respect to an outcome so as to render an intelligible account of how that outcome came to pass and as a disciplined way of interpreting a person's thought and action in light of his or her own past" (Berk, 1980, p. 95).

A Relighting, a Rethinking, a Re-education

The service learning movement has become an entity unto itself gaged by its growth at amazing rates (Howard, Gelmon & Giles, Jr., 2000). One could argue that this movement is out of control and that the implementation is occurring at rates that force one to question the quality of the practice. Bryson (1995) urges us to utilize a strategic planning approach that can become a learning tool for teachers, administrators, policy makers, community members and politicians, to help them ascertain what the priorities are and how they can be best accomplished. This need to gain control and to improve our understanding of teachers' practices in service learning prompted the University of Utah (Fisher, 1999) to create their own strategic plan. This five-year plan has taken into account the threats and issues that surround the implementation of service learning. By conducting focused research into the practices of effective service learning, their vision is grounded in the changes they want to make in this experiential direction.

Carlson (1996) informs reformists that reliance on quality research has never been more important than it is now, when the realities of society are forcing current systems to change and reform.

The problems of poverty and providing adequate educational, health, and social services will no doubt become a major issue for the late 1990's and early in the next millennium. Continued collaborations between and among social and educational service institutions will need to be a high priority. Greater prevention of educational, social, and medical problems needs to replace the higher costs of expensive and ineffective cures. We can no longer afford to write off a third of our youth. With a shrinking youth population available to our future labor force, every child is needed to build a healthy and robust society as we move to the third millennium (p. 311).

He further challenges the agents of educational change to "consider what new policies and practices are needed to enhance the learning opportunities of all children (rich and poor), their parents, and their communities in the future" (p. 312). The methodology of service learning, if implemented and properly researched, may create the bridge between change/reform and sound educational practice that is needed to meet the demands of modern education.

The students in ABEL wanted 'real-life challenges and the opportunity to contribute to the solution processes affecting their communities. For them to assume roles of responsibility in service learning they first had to experience community. Many of them needed to discover their abilities and the confidence to share these skills with others. This element of self-discovery takes time and is a process of risk. The need for a

supportive environment is critical for a student to try. This environment must allow students to be their 'true selves', by giving them a 'place' to experience 'inner growth'.

This preparation of self-understanding is what the practice of service learning needs to incorporate to help encourage positive learning experiences and quality service learning experiences. The literature review clearly revealed a need to examine how educators prepare students for service learning and ABEL is an example of how students can be prepared for community involvement, and academic accomplishments that are experiential. The participants viewed ABEL, as a 'family' of typical youth, sharing 'connected knowing'. Regardless of how we view our educational system as it continues to evolve in practice, ABEL has proven to me that the need to care is still central to the needs of many students.

Postmodern education must be responsive and challenging to the needs of our students but to never lose sight of the community that can be created by our youth. Service learning is an experiential classroom instructional tool that could very well serve the students of today by refocusing our research attention in the areas of efficacy, commitment to service beyond school, and improved academics. This shift towards a more curriculum based design in creating meaningful service projects makes it essential that students are properly prepared for this type of learning (Eyler, 2000). This extends the learning beyond the traditional measurement of tested outcomes by relying on reflection. More (1999) has revealed reflection to be *all important* to ensure that the learning was transferred from the experience to the students 'knowing'. My thesis clearly demonstrates the importance and power of restorying the experience to make connections from the learning (even well after the event). Even now I wonder if my students were

feeling a similar power of reliving their story when they were engaged in meaningful service learning? The direction to be taken next is to explore how students are feeling during and after significant service learning experiences.

Reflection is the pivotal element for successful experiential teaching and learning. The aim is to take reflection practices and recreate the service learning experience by reliving those moments in the classroom. We need to bring the outside classroom into the traditional school setting. I need to revalue my view of what I do as a teacher and how my students learn not to be on the fringe of education. Can I bring the best of my ABEL course into my traditional courses and maintain an effective-academic practice? If only I was allowed to have a campfire in the centre of my classroom.

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