

Paddling Tandem: A Collaborative Exploration of Outward Bound Canada's Giwaykiwin Program for Aboriginal Youth

by Greg Lowan

In the Spring 2007 issue of *Pathways*, I described the initial motivations behind my master's research into Outward Bound Canada's Giwaykiwin Program for Aboriginal¹ youth (Lowan, 2007). I subsequently completed the study and this article summarizes its results.

The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of youth participants, instructors, community members and program organizers with Outward Bound Canada's Giwaykiwin Program through qualitative collaborative ethnographic inquiry (Lassiter, 2000) under a lens of decolonizing Indigenous education. I also followed a reflexive research model (Lotz-Sisitka, 2002), exploring my own experiences as an instructor with the program over the past two years. Brookes (2006) highlights the importance of internal critique within the field of outdoor education and the worldwide organization of Outward Bound specifically. It is my hope that this constructive reflection on pedagogical practices and program structure will result in enhanced program quality for both Giwaykiwin students and instructors. The results of this study may also provide insight to other programs in the emerging field of culturally based outdoor education.

As a person of Francophone and Anglophone Métis, Norwegian and German ancestry, I first became involved as an instructor with

the Giwaykiwin Program in the spring of 2006. The program was founded in 1985 by Outward Bound Canada in response to a recognized need for programming specific to students from Indigenous backgrounds (Outward Bound Canada, 2006). Giwaykiwin aims to integrate Outward Bound and Aboriginal philosophies and traditions. Its participants come from a variety of backgrounds – some are referred by social service organizations, while others enrol with the support of their families or communities. Communities or organizations may also request contract courses. Giwaykiwin courses typically consist of a 10- to 15-day canoeing or backpacking expedition and may include rock climbing and ropes course activities and a Sweatlodge ceremony. Aboriginal Instructor Development courses have also been conducted.

Simpson's (2002) discussion of Indigenous outdoor environmental education as a means of cultural survival provided the framework for my literature review. Simpson provides guidelines for creating culturally relevant and authentic learning environments for Indigenous students of environmental education. These include: supporting decolonization, grounding programs in Indigenous philosophies of education, allowing space for the discussion and comparison of traditional Indigenous and Western epistemologies, emphasizing Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, creating opportunities to connect with the land, employing Indigenous instructors as role models, involving Elders as experts, and using traditional languages when possible.

¹ In order to recognize and honour the importance of certain cultural terms and concepts, I will follow Graveline's (1998) example by capitalizing them in this article. These terms include: Aboriginal, White, Western, Indigenous, Elder, Métis and Sweatlodge.

Widespread loss of land, language and cultural traditions along with higher rates of health and social problems for Indigenous people worldwide are commonly identified as the results of European colonialism (Battiste, 1998; Graveline, 1998; Simpson, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). According to Simpson (2002), supporting decolonization – addressing the lingering effects of European colonialism – is a key consideration for contemporary Indigenous education programs. Battiste (1998) also states, “Aboriginal peoples throughout the world have survived five centuries of the horrors and harsh lessons of colonization. [However,] They are emerging with new consciousness and vision” (p. 16). The revitalization of Aboriginal languages, epistemologies and pedagogies, recognizing the importance of the land, privileging Indigenous voices, the involvement of Elders in education, and Indigenous control of Indigenous education are key factors in the decolonization process (Battiste, 1998; Simpson, 2002).

In this study, I examined the implications of decolonization for Outward Bound Canada’s Giwaykiwin program. I was interested in how the research participants’ experiences with the Giwaykiwin program compared to contemporary decolonizing literature.

Methodology and Methods

The historic misuse and abuse of research conducted with Indigenous peoples has been well documented (Lassiter, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). A history of positivist anthropological and ethnographic approaches has left Indigenous peoples wary of researchers generally, especially non-Indigenous researchers. Many of my research participants are Indigenous and I structured my methodology and methods with concern for their treatment.

This study took a collaborative ethnographic approach (Lassiter, 2000). Collaborative ethnography challenges the researcher to go

beyond simple member checking – simply verifying findings with the research participants. In collaborative ethnography, the researcher and research participants discuss the *meanings* of the findings. Research participants are also given the opportunity to participate in the production of the final product so that their voices emerge more authentically in the text. Lassiter proposes that this form of inquiry produces work that is accessible to a wider range of people outside of the academic world and, most importantly, to the research participants themselves.

Nine adult participants who had participated in various Giwaykiwin programs over the past 15 years were involved in this study. The primary method of data collection consisted of informal 30- to 60-minute tape-recorded interviews. Three Aboriginal participants had been students. One of these former students had also worked as an assistant instructor on non-Aboriginal Outward Bound courses. Four participants were former Giwaykiwin instructors who self-identified as “White.” The remaining two participants were program administrators who also self-identified as “White.”

Significant Findings

Several interesting themes emerged in the interviews and follow-up conversations. While the research participants provided significant constructive feedback for Giwaykiwin, they also described positive experiences with the program.

An interesting contrast that appeared in the findings was non-Aboriginal instructors’ perceptions that students were having positive experiences with the cultural and ceremonial elements of their courses when, in fact, the students interviewed described generally negative experiences. Their experiences ranged from feeling uninformed during rituals such as the offering of tobacco to feeling socially and culturally threatened during Sweatlodge ceremonies. In addition,

when asked to describe their own experiences with ceremony on courses, the instructors often focused on their perceptions of their students' experiences, positioning themselves as outside observers or voyeurs rather than participants.

Echoing contemporary scholars (Rosser, 2006), the students interviewed also emphasized the cultural and regional diversity of today's Aboriginal youth. There was also a recognition of the broad diversity of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal instructors and staff members at Outward Bound.

Issues of White privilege and dominance (Ellsworth, 1989; McIntosh, 1989) by non-Aboriginal instructors also emerged strongly in the findings. Similar to Ellsworth's (1989) critique of contemporary critical pedagogical environments, it appears that the very structure of Outward Bound's Giwaykiwin courses continues to privilege mainstream Euro-Canadian norms through the dominance of the English language and Western culture in a program originally intended to provide culturally sensitive learning opportunities for Aboriginal students.

Concerns were also expressed by the program administrators about instructor development and training. These concerns included a *perceived* lack of qualified Aboriginal instructors and inadequate preparation of non-Aboriginal instructors.

Despite the frustrations and issues expressed during the interviews, former students all expressed having positive interactions with their non-Aboriginal instructors at different points during their Giwaykiwin experience. They also related positive experiences with overcoming the physical, emotional and social challenges that they encountered during their time at Outward Bound.

Based on the findings, with reference to contemporary decolonizing literature (Battiste, 1998; Graveline, 1998; Simpson, 2002;

Tuhiwai Smith, 1999), it can be safely stated that the Giwaykiwin program does not reflect contemporary theories of decolonization. As one program administrator stated, "Giwaykiwin courses are simply those that work with Aboriginal students. Giwaykiwin courses are primarily rooted in Outward Bound Canada's traditions and philosophies with varying degrees of Aboriginal cultural content."

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, I have developed six recommendations for enhancing the Giwaykiwin program. A current that runs through all of these recommendations is the fundamental importance of a more localized approach to program design and delivery.

1. Increased involvement of Elders and other community members

As Simpson (2002) and others (Battiste, 2005; Graveline, 1998) suggest, the regular involvement of Elders is key to any successful Aboriginal education program. Elders provide us with wisdom gathered during their long lives as well as a link to cultural traditions and historical perspectives. Participants in this study recognized the importance of this concept and called for increased Elder involvement on Giwaykiwin courses. Some suggested that Elders should accompany Giwaykiwin courses on significant portions of their expeditions. This kind of extended contact would provide students and instructors with the opportunity to learn from Elders, the most qualified cultural teachers (Battiste, 1998; Pepper & White, 1996; Simpson, 2002).

Increased cultural awareness training

Several non-Aboriginal instructors suggested that they could have been better culturally prepared. One study participant suggested that Aboriginal awareness workshops could

be a part of annual staff training. Ideally, cultural awareness training would be delivered by qualified Elders or respected cultural teachers from specific communities' perspectives prior to instructors engaging with their students.

3. Increased Aboriginal instructor development

Several participants highlighted the ongoing challenge of attracting and maintaining a pool of qualified Aboriginal instructors. They identified two possible solutions to this problem: recruiting and training future instructors from partner First Nations' communities and actively recruiting other Aboriginal people for Instructor Development programs. I also propose that if courses are designed and delivered with greater input from communities, more opportunities be made to select instructors based on criteria other than those used by Outward Bound. Selecting instructors based on standard adventure industry norms such as certifications may exclude highly qualified cultural teachers and leaders. Perhaps Outward Bound could provide some form of safety and risk management training for those who are otherwise qualified to lead culturally based courses.

4. Restricting the teaching of cultural elements to qualified people

The former students in this study highlighted their frustrations with the ceremonial aspects of their courses. They stated that they often felt lost and confused, unsure of what to do while ceremonies were being conducted. Their suggestions for improving students' experiences included increasing dialogue between staff and students about ceremonies and not forcing participation. Pepper and White (1996) suggest that cultural teachings and ceremonies should only be delivered by people trained and qualified in the traditions of their communities. Based on this recommendation and the students'

experiences, I propose that ceremonies such as smudging and offering tobacco be restricted to senior community members and Elders. Whenever possible, these Elders should come from the same Nations as the students with whom they are working.

5. Recognizing the diversity of Giwaykiwin courses

Many of the research participants, staff and students alike, recognized the cultural diversity of their Giwaykiwin experiences. This included diversity within the Aboriginal students and staff members, as well as diversity amongst non-Aboriginal Outward Bound staff. This diversity must be considered when including cultural elements in Giwaykiwin courses.

6. Delivering courses in communities' traditional territories

Cajete (1994) emphasizes the importance of Indigenous peoples' connection to specific places and the profound influence of this relationship on the development of language, culture and oral history. Similar to Rosser (2006), many of the study participants expressed concern with the sharing of generic cultural teachings during Giwaykiwin courses. If these courses are meant to provide cultural teaching, they should be delivered in the traditional territory of students' communities, recognizing the inextricable link of Aboriginal cultures with specific areas of land. With diverse groups this is not always possible, however strong efforts should be made to embody this principle.

Final Thoughts

I hope that these recommendations will be considered in a collaborative and constructive spirit. The overarching theme that runs through all the study findings is the importance of grounding programs as much as possible in the culture and traditions of specific communities. Outward Bound may

achieve this by considering: epistemological orientations, how instructors are selected and trained, the involvement of local Elders and respected community members, honouring ceremonial traditions, unmasking White privilege, and recognizing the contemporary diversity of Aboriginal Canadians.

Throughout the research process I was impressed by participants' willingness and dedication to this study. They invested considerable time and thought, and I am very grateful. I hope these study findings will assist future program developers and instructors to develop and deliver effective and respectful courses.

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