

Harnessing Our Collective Power: A COEO Adventure

By Mary Breunig

It had been a long time between COEO conferences for me when I boarded the boat to Camp Kitchi this past fall. I have typically been rock climbing with Brock University outdoor education students during the COEO conference weekend, but not this year. This year, I was enthusiastic to be joining current and former students and friends for a weekend of camaraderie and new learning. I felt warmly embraced as I stepped (rather hobbled, given my recent knee surgery) out of the dark and into the glowing light of the dining hall and welcome company of friends. I certainly don't attend many conferences these days that originate with a late-night water crossing in a boat filled with equal parts people and musical instruments. I was pleased that this one did and delighted to experience both of these engaged in harmonious activity throughout the long weekend.

I enjoyed drumming with Zabe and hearing about the uniqueness of each of our brains. I met for the first time Kyla, a therapeutic recreation student from my own department. I shared a breakfast table with Margot, with whom I am always pleased to spend time, and we smiled, enjoying the ever-infectious laughter of Bonnie. Former Brock student Justine Wilmot was at that same table and she talked to me about her experiences in the Queen's University program. Friend and former Lakehead student Meg Sheepway reminded me of the importance of taking life slowly and treating the gift of it gently. I very much enjoyed seeing Tim receive a leadership award and hearing all the accolades from former and current students and colleagues. A small group of exuberant people sat down at our lunch table on Sunday and I came to learn that it was Mike Elrick's family. What a delight to hear their stories, share in their enthusiasm and witness with everyone else the dedication of the dining hall.

It was my research of Mike's integrated curriculum program (ICP) that initially brought me to COEO and my ongoing research of that program and other programs that, at least in part, brought me back. I was pleased to be part of a panel, including Grant Linney, Stan Kozak and Kristen Brooks, and facilitated by Ryan Howard, that came together to "harness our collective" interests in environmental studies programs (ESPs) (one form of ICP). Based on the session attendance and participant responses, there appeared to be a high level of enthusiasm and interest in these programs. Our interactive panel discussion focused on the intersection of integrated environmental education theory, praxis and research in relation to ESPs in Ontario with a view towards new pathways and opportunities in the future. The panel members sought to explore how integrated environmental education research might influence teaching practices and policies and session participants added insights and posed questions related to these programs. For me, this form of panel discussion with the merging of others' insights is one example of the potential of harnessing our collective power to gain greater insights into our own work and praxes. Some of what I learned and were the outcomes of this participatory session included the following:

- There are pathways for new program development and research of these programs. The fall 2011 issue of *Pathways* provides excellent examples of past and current initiatives with a hopeful view toward the future (Stan Kozak provides some important insights to this point).
- There is work yet to be done regarding how and what gets communicated to the Ministry of Education and vice versa; more policy work needs to be done as one means to further encourage support

of and funding for these innovative programs (Zabe MacEachren does some related work in this arena). How does policy support programs and what policies serve to support programs, detract from them or further challenge implementation (e.g., Specialist High Skills Major – the Environment)?

- There exist many programs outside the province of Ontario and reading the fall 2011 *Pathways* was like meeting new colleagues for me – there are people doing great work out there that I have yet to engage with. Is there a way for us to coordinate our efforts? Is there a mechanism we should be considering for idea exchange?
- There are educative opportunities for researchers and practitioners to further collaborate. What should researchers be researching when they study these types of programs and how and to whom should results be communicated?
- There are stakeholder groups that are untapped resources. Grant Linney recently wrote about the important role that parents can serve as program advocates (Linney, 2011). During the conference panel session, we talked about the important role of boards, principals and school counselors as well as the role of research ethics boards, both at university and secondary school levels.
- There exists documented evidence of the successes and challenges of ESPs (Horwood, 1994; Russell & Burton, 2000; Sharpe & Breunig, 2009) but there is work yet to be done on how these programs influence students' choices about professional pathways and future lifestyle choices. There is some research to date about the ways in which program participation engenders pro-environmental attitudes and behaviours. There is work yet to be done regarding types of behaviours and many of us (Mary Breunig, Jocelyn Murtell, Ryan Howard (Brock University) and Constance Russell (Lakehead University)) remain curious to further explore what teachings and experiences lead to emancipatory pro-

environmental behaviours (e.g., making “just” food choices as a result of a deep understanding of issues of food security) versus domestic environmental behaviours (e.g., recycling).

I look forward to our ongoing work together as we harness the collective power of our shared ideas and experiences with respect to further developing ESPs, influencing policy, and collaborating into the future. For me, this year’s COEO adventure was about harnessing positive collective power from start (my entrance into the dining hall on Friday night) to finish (sitting next to someone playing “somewhere over the rainbow” on the harmonica as we crossed Georgian Bay en route home).

References

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Mary Breunig is an Associate Professor in Recreation and Leisure Studies at Brock University and President of the Association for Experiential Education.