

The Art of Mentoring

How can learning be fun and interesting? How can we rekindle appreciation of nature?

by Chris Helander

There are many people who say our current model for learning is ineffectual. Parents and educators are asking how do you reach young people who seem apathetic and unmotivated to learn. In old cultures before schools, books, and grades; people learned by being mentored. Using stories, ceremony, games, and survival skills everyone and everything was a teacher. In the modern model of education learning is force fed, sitting in chairs, listening to an adult spouting out information to be memorized. Modern children learning this way are trained to get their knowledge by memorization of someone else's knowledge. They do not learn how to develop the questioning mind or follow their hearts to learn from their own experiences.

We have all heard about the studies done on the modern human brain which show we only use 10% of our brains. Recent studies show an alarming further decrease to between 5% and 7% thinking power. Could it be due to getting our information almost entirely through visually focused stimulation? These same studies done on people living in aboriginal cultures demonstrated brain use at 60% and up to 70% in the healers and trackers. Could it be due to using all their senses to get information about their world, which means using all of their brain to learn? These people

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have never sat in a classroom, they don't read or write yet they use far more of their brain than the modern educated person. In aboriginal cultures not only the parents and extended family of the community are the mentors but nature itself is understood as a powerful and infinitely wise teacher. By observing nature we learn from the trees, from the animals, and from the birds. In our modern culture we learn almost exclusively from books, and lecture, while our young people are more inclined to learn from T.V.

At Coyote's Path Wilderness School one of the skills we mentor to others is the art of survival skills. When I first began to teach, I taught as I had been taught in school. This was the "show and tell" what I knew about survival skills method. One of my mentors, Jon Young of Wilderness Awareness School, in his Art of Mentoring workshop, calls it the "drag and brag" style of teaching. After I had taken his workshop I asked Jon to come to Portland to teach a weekend of nature skills at Oxbow Park. I was at my teaching station telling my students

everything I knew about the Cedar Tree. Jon walked by, stopped and listened for awhile and then asked me "Are you asking them lots of questions?" I answered yes, but after he smiled and walked away I realized I had only asked a few questions of my students. I was deep in teacher "show and tell" mode. Giving answers even before I was asked a question. How much more meaningful would the experience have been if I had them find the answers by saying the following:

- Everyone come over to this tree and smell the branches.**
- Now smell the bark.**
- Which one smells stronger?**
- Has anyone ever smelled this tree before?**
- Why do people put it in their closets?**
- Do you think that works in the woods too?**
- So what could you use this for in the woods?**
- How could you use it in a shelter?**
- Could you put it on your skin?**
- Go ahead rub a little bit of it between your fingers?**

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(continued)

What does it smell like?

How does it make your skin feel?

Does this tree grow in real dry places or wet places?

So do you think it needs to have defenses against burning?

If that's true would it catch fire easily?

If you needed to get firewood in a survival situation what tree would you look for?

How could you tell this tree from other trees?

Do you think this tree grows everywhere or does it like a certain kind of environment?

Look up under it, can you see the sky?

Do you think rain gets through very easy?

Would this be a good place to stay dry?

This questioning has called in many of their senses engaging more of their brain. They have answered the questions, not me and in the process they have learned many things about the Cedar tree by linking one bit of information to the next bit of information, and on and on. Deductive reasoning demands a conclusion that all roads lead to Rome. For the questioning mind learning never concludes because it is an endless journey with an infinite number of destinations.

Mentoring is the art of developing the questioning mind. The questioning mind that asks of nature; what happened here, what does this tell me, and what does this teach me. This questioning encourages a concentric process rather than a linear process. The linear process dead ends when the answer is given too easily. Concentric thinking teaches relationships, how one thing leads to another, to another, and then circles back again. Like nature; in circles and cycles. All of our senses have evolved to communicate and learn from nature. We are hard wired to learn with all of our senses in this way. Once you begin to think in this way and apply the questioning mind to your life outside of nature you will soon find not only teachers in nature but in everyone and

everything around you.

For more information about the Art of Mentoring workshops contact:

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SARAH BIDWELL: MY FAVORITE EE ACTIVITY

My favorite activity is "Let Them Eat Cake" from Facing the Future: People and the Planet Curriculum Guide. This is a very effective and interactive activity for demonstrating the inequitable distribution of resources around the world. Students are divided into world regional groups (i.e. Asia, Africa, Europe, etc) and given a slice of cake relative to their regions' share of global resources. The Asia group (about half the class) gets only a sliver of cake, while the one person from North America gets a quarter of the cake! Students really see how consumptive Americans are relative to people around the world. You can download the activity from their website, www.facingthefuture.org.

Sarah Bidwell

