Minigrant Report from Maine

Boys’ Literacy Camp Sets a Standard

During the last week of July 2001, six freshman boys from Kennebunk High School, Kennebunk, Vermont, joined Ryan Mahan and Averill Lovely, teacher-consultants with the University of Maine Writing Project at Crawford Pond in central Maine. They were about to embark on a six-day wilderness experience intended to change their minds about the value of reading.

In addition to their gender and school, these boys shared another commonality: they had all failed freshman English. They were, as Ryan Mahan says, “the disenfranchised.”

What can be done to help such students? Jeff Wilhelm, director of the University of Maine Writing Project thinks he knows. His research has led him to conclude that one way to reverse negative attitudes toward reading among students such as these six is to put them in a situation where they must read in order to do something they want to do, to connect reading with a sought-after activity.

Acting on this premise, Wilhelm conceived the idea of a boys’ literacy camp that would put students into an environment where reading would become real. He applied for and received a minigrant from the National Writing Project to fund the camp. When the grant came through, Wilhelm contacted Mahan and Lovely, two high-school teachers who knew about and loved the outdoors and had a special interest in “bright kids who flunk English,” as Mahan puts it.

Here is Mahan’s account of how the camp progressed. “We were on the move. We canoed, hiked, camped, rafted the Kennebec River, and read, always for the purpose of connecting reading and doing. We read whitewater training manuals for the Kennebec, then we went rafting; we read how to read a field compass, then we went bushwacking up a mountain; we read about canoe safety, then we paddled our camping gear across a remote pond in northern Maine. We read topographic maps, cookbooks, car manuals, food labels, vegetation guides, and pamphlets on the history of Maine.”

All this activity was recorded on film and edited into a movie at end of the experience. A process that was preceded, of course, by much reading about how to shoot a movie and how to digitally edit one.

There were a few glitches. There were some “meltdowns” on a vigorous hike, for instance. “Next time,” says Mahan, “we’ll need to do a better job of getting the guys mentally prepared for these conditions.”

But there definitely will be a next time. The upcoming summer’s literacy camp will involve students from two high schools, more reading and writing up front, and some post-trip get-togethers.

Of last summer’s completed experience, Mahan says, “The guys surprised me every day. When the purpose was clear and they made decisions that counted, it was amazing to see the teamwork develop.” And developing right along with the teamwork was a new understanding of the importance of reading.