



The iEARN Walkabout: Passages for Youth Worldwide

An interview with Peter Copen

Peter Copen is the co-creator of the Walkabout Program (at Northern Westchester BOCES in Yorktown Hts., NY) with Eugene Lebwohl, and the founder and creator of iEARN (The International Education and Resource Network) with participating schools, teachers and students in over 125 countries.

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Q: When did you and Eugene Lebwohl co-create your version of Walkabout?

In 1977, as part of the Putnam Westchester BOCES (Board of Cooperative Education Services), a kind of magnet campus for youth in over 20 school districts who would be better served by a centralized service. Walkabout still continues after 32 years.

Q: What influence did Maurice Gibbon's original Walkabout article in PDK have on the curriculum?

At the time, Eugene and I wanted to create a program that served young, high school aged students who had lost their way in school and perhaps life. Maurice's article was essential. It generated a philosophical context -- for the Walkabout to act as a **rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood**. It also created the concept and outline of having discrete challenge environments and a presentation to the student's family and community at the end of the year as a completion of the rite of passage.



Q: Were there other influences?

Yes. In addition to our own passion to assist young people in this way we were deeply influenced by Outward Bound and

its central thesis that to accelerate the self growth of a student you need to put them in learning environments where they are challenged to go beyond their perceived limitations and learn that **they can make a meaningful difference** in their own lives and for others. It is incorporated into all of the challenge areas.

The other influence is the power of self-directed, experiential learning. We discovered research that said that a learner retains 10% of what they read, 15% of what they hear, but 80% of what they experience. We built in experiential learning as much as possible. (As a former businessman, it made more sense to invest in a product that yielded 80% rather than invest the same "capital" in one that yielded 10%!)

Q: Tell me something about the fundamental set up of the Walkabout school.

It is on the BOCES campus in Yorktown Heights, NY, away from the home school of the students. It is primarily a yearlong program for high school seniors who are bright, bored and interested in getting traction for their career or college. There are two buildings and about 50 students. The students need to be recruited from the member districts of the BOCES, usually by the Walkabout Director who has to visit and work closely with the guidance departments and the local school administration. The students need to apply to the Walkabout and then be accepted. There is a low student/teacher ratio of about 10/1. The school districts pay a fee to BOCES for each student that attends. This fee is reimbursed to some degree by the State Education Department of New York per a prescribed formula. There is no fee to the students or their families.

Q. What are your challenge areas?

Because it is a magnet school, students come from many different locations and from many diverse groups and clicks. Therefore, the first agenda is for students to get to know each other and the staff and to build a trusting community. This is done through Outward Bound-type group challenge games that bond the group and build self-confidence and compassion for others.

The first official challenge area is Wilderness Survival: A one-week, 21 mile, wilderness trip in the Catskill mountains in New York state in the Fall and a one-week hike in the Adirondack mountains in upstate New York in the Spring. The students are pre-trained with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they will need to be successful and survive the trip. The staff acts only as consultants for emergency and safety. The idea is for the students to experience their own self-sufficiency and overcome challenges themselves.

When the students return from this very powerful experience, they are coached to transfer their learning into more "real-life" experiences. The second challenge area is a Community Service project which lasts about 4 weeks. As in the Wilderness challenge, the students are trained with the knowledge, skills and attitudes they need to know about how to find, create and complete a project that gives something back to the community. Then they have to do it themselves.

The third challenge area is called "Applied Academics". It runs for two 10-week sessions. We coined that name because many students were turned off by academic subjects that they felt were not relevant or applicable to their lives. Every subject, whether it be in the domain of math, science, social studies, language arts, etc., needs to answer the question "how is this relevant and applicable to my life and career?" We used many creative and self-directed learning techniques to achieve our educational goals.

The fourth challenge area is a 9-week Career Internship. Students are coached in the knowledge, skills and attitudes of how to think critically about themselves and their careers, how to get an interview, communicate effectively with others, and how to assess their experiences.

The fifth challenge area occurs at the end of the school year. It is called a Presentation -- a symbolic completion of the rite of passage that is the Walkabout experience. Each student is required to make a 20-minute presentation to family, friends and community of what knowledge, skills and attitudes they have learned that have prepared them for college, career and life. It is a most moving and powerful experience to witness first hand.

Q: What are some of the positive outcomes that you have learned from watching your students go through this rite of passage experience?

- An enormous positive shift in self-esteem. (In year #3, the Walkabout students were formally evaluated with pre-post tests as compared to control groups in some of the local schools. The student's increase in self-confidence and positive attitudes towards school were off the chart. It led to the program being acknowledged as one of the top 40 experiential programs in the country by the U.S. Dept of Education. In my view, those results have continued.)
- The powerful experience of a diverse group of people who can come together as a supportive community and create a sense of family if they have a common purpose or goal.
- The teaching of effective communication skills (i.e. listening, assertion and problem solving).
- Experiential education activities that really work. One key example: we used speaker telephones in the classroom where students had to find an expert in the real world to "visit" the classroom and talk with the students about a topic the students were researching.
- A small student-teacher ratio is highly effective.
- Caring teachers who can balance love and discipline and understand that the responsibility for and consequences of learning lies with the student.
- The curriculum design – the sequencing and flow of the challenge areas themselves – has a built-in success factor because each module builds upon the previous one.
- Establishing the context early – the notion that you can do more than you think you can – and reinforcing it often is very effective.
- Having the Walkabout campus away from the regular school so students feel safe to try new things and create new ways of thinking and feeling about themselves and others.
- The effect on the staff – both professionally and personally -- is remarkably positive because of a) the profound difference they can make in the lives of the students, and b) the result of working in the context of "you can do more than you think you can". It is hard not to get happily tainted by the brush.
- On average, about 20% of the students are not interested in college at the beginning of the year. At the end of the year, about 90% go on to college because of their attitudinal,

emotional and intellectual growth.

- Years later, former students tell us how life changing this experience was for them and how it put them on the right track. They also share how much better parents they are as a result of what they learned from Walkabout.

Q: What were some of the challenges you became aware of?

- There is no job security in this model. Constant recruiting by the director is terribly time consuming, fatiguing, and uncertain. For example, if not enough students are recruited – meaning that the member school districts are unwilling to pay the fee to BOCES, -- then the program would fail. In fact, each staff person is given a pink slip at the end of the school year since their job is contingent upon the school districts being willing to pay for enough students to support the program. The fact that this program has survived for 32 years is testimony to the genius and hard work of the director and staff and, of course, the support from the school districts.

- Replication is very difficult because it is not a cost effective model if a school only looks at the cost per student. However, if the outcomes per student are considered in the formula, then it is a bargain.

- The world of Public Education is a challenge. Unlike the world of business, where if you want to be successful you build a better mousetrap, the world of public education is completely different. It has the responsibility of educating the masses at the lowest cost possible because the funding is based upon tax revenues. Additionally, it is a tenured system, which tends to protect mediocre or even bad teachers and not sufficiently reward the excellent ones. As a result, integrated, innovate change is a real challenge.

Q: Where can I learn more about this Walkabout program?

Go to: <http://www.pnwboces.org/walkabout/about/index.html>



Q: Tell me about iEARN (The International Education and Resource Network) and its relationship to the Walkabout Program.

iEARN was founded in 1988. It grew out of the Walkabout. Today it is a global network of schools and teachers, connecting through the Internet, in over 125 countries who work together on projects that make a difference to people and the planet. There are an estimated 2,000,000 students on line each day. It is the largest global network of

its kind in the world.

Q: How did it grow out of the Walkabout?

You may recall that in the 1980's there was a profound fear of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union that could have destroyed civilization on earth as we know it. In 1987, after the death of my father, I was moved to do whatever I could to help prevent a nuclear holocaust.

I had learned from the Walkabout that it was possible to bring together diverse young people to create a community and even the feeling of family. How? By having them work together for a common goal – a goal that was challenging to them – a goal that was

relevant to their lives.

I also learned that when there was a common, challenging goal that was relevant, that the students would open up and communicate with each other in a new way. They could experience each other's humanity and break through the veil of their own preconceived notions about each other.

It seemed natural and urgent to try to apply these fundamental lessons learned at Walkabout to the challenge of doing something – anything – to help prevent nuclear war.

Q: What specifically did you do?

In January of 1987 I left the Walkabout to devote my time to this project/mission. I knew that if I could find a way for Soviet and American teachers and students to come together around a goal that they would naturally get to experience each other's humanity. Then, it would be impossible for them to even consider dropping a bomb on each other.

But how would they do this? How could they communicate being so far apart physically as well as politically?

The first thing was to create an educational paradigm that made sense and then try to "sell" it to key educators in the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. What evolved was to have schools work collaboratively on projects of their choice (project-based learning) – projects that made a meaningful difference in the world. And do this as part of their educational process.

Schools would be linked by 3 levels of communication – levels that would be increasingly experiential:

- Electronic mail: for text messages (there was no Internet at this time),
- Video-speaker telephones: where students could see and hear each other in real time, and
- Physical exchanges and home stays

Q: What about service learning?

Each project had to satisfy a template. And one of the items on the template was "how would this project make a meaningful difference in the health and welfare of people and/or the planet". Additionally, the students and teachers in the US and USSR knew instinctively that they were taking a new and bold step to reduce the chance of a nuclear war

Q: Whom did you "sell" this to?

The first was the Commissioner of Education of New York State who opened the door with key people to identify 12 schools that taught Russian language. Second, was the President of the Soviet Academy of Sciences in Moscow, who opened the door with key people to identify 12 schools in Moscow that taught English language.

By the fall of 1988, 12 schools in each country had been linked to each other by email, video-speaker telephones and student and teacher exchanges. All schools were working on projects that made a difference -- projects of their own design.

Q: How did you do that?

The answer to that question is too long for this interview (smile) and involved the work of many dedicated people.

Q: What were the results?

This was intended as a 3-year, pilot project which hopefully would be expanded in the US and USSR. It was evaluated professionally by the New York State Department of Education and The Soviet Academy of Sciences. The results were extraordinary. They showed: "... the project helped students to improve their intercultural awareness and understanding; helped to increased the amount of time that students spent in intercultural-related activities such as discussions of social and/or political issues and discussions of international events; and helped to improve teachers understanding of international events and their involvement with causes for the betterment of society."

If you want to know more, go to: <http://iearn.org/about/evaluation.html>

Q: What happened next?

Because of its success, the notion arose to expand this model to many more countries on the planet – particularly countries where there was conflict and/or the potential for conflict. Before we knew it we had created a "field" that drew many different educators from a multitude of different countries. In just a few years schools in China, Argentina, Israel, Egypt, Spain and many others joined. And as I mentioned before, today there are over 125 countries involved.

Q: How has iEARN changed over the last 20 years?

First was the creation of the Internet, which allowed many more students and teachers to join at very low cost. Second, was the remarkable evolution of new media, which offered new, creative ways to communicate. Third, was the evolution of iEARN as a global organization with its own Constitution, Assembly, Country Coordinators and support systems including annual conferences held in a different country each year.

It has won many awards for excellence: (see: http://iearn.org/news/news_whatisNew.html)

Q: How was this a rite of passage in the sense that Walkabout was?

Most importantly, participating in iEARN gives the students and teachers the experience of a rite of passage from the adolescent thinking of being a secular, nationalistic, self-involved, person to the experience of being a responsible adult in a globally interconnected and interdependent world where collaboration and compassion are essential for the survival of the "human tribe" and the environment. It is a Walkabout for the 21st Century.

It also was a rite of passage for me. I had gone way beyond my perceived limitations. There were many times when this work seemed absolutely impossible. But co-creating Walkabout was also like that, having come into Education from a business background.



Q: How can I learn more about iEARN?

Go to: www.iearn.org

Q: What is your vision of the future possibilities for this work?

One word: Unlimited.

What do I mean by that? Well, in terms of service learning, the Walkabout at BOCES empowered about 50 students each year do participate in a service learning project that would not only build their self-esteem, but create a lifelong experience of having made a difference in the "adult" world. iEARN has already demonstrated projects where hundreds and thousands of students were and are able to come together to make a difference using the technology of email and the Internet. For two examples, see:

<http://iearn.org/projects/cleanwater.html>

<http://of2.iearn.org/media/112707.html>

However, there are an estimated 2 million young people on line every day. What if they could be mobilized to focus on one project?

Now let's create a larger vision: There are about 6.4 billion people on the planet; about half of them, or about 3 billion are youth. If only 10% of those youth were mobilized to collaborate on a service-learning project of their choice it would mean 300,000,000 empowered youth.

To continue this very possible example, let us say that a micro-lending project might need \$1,000 to change the life of a poor family (see: www.kiva.org for examples). That means that if every one of the 300 million young people gave the equivalent of 10 cents U.S. they would generate \$30,000,000. If you divide that by \$1,000, it means these young people, working together, could significantly alter the lives of 30,000 families.

Clearly, this model could apply to an unlimited number of service projects in the domains of relieving human suffering and healing the environment. It could also apply to the political arena. Imagine 300 million young people signing a petition on Global Warming and sending it to the Secretary General of the United Nations! And today, with the advent of social networking sites like Twitter, Myspace, Facebook, Youtube, etc. this work could all be done outside of the school setting.



Q: Is there a particular story you remember that illustrates this?

Yes. I remember visiting with an 8-year old girl in Washington State who was part of the Clean Water Project in iEARN providing clean wells to villages in Nicaragua that had no clean water. Each well cost \$200 to retrofit. Each student in her class gave 25 cents to the project. How? By building a haunted house out of cardboard boxes and charging their friends 25 cents to crawl through it and get scared. She was proud to tell me that her class had raised and donated \$325. (Through the network hundreds of iEARN students raised over \$10,000 to build clean wells.)

I told her of another 8-year old girl in Nicaragua who had written a thank-you email -- thanking the friends she did

not know for providing clean water to her village. And then she said: "... and now I do not have to walk 4 kilometers each way to gather water; and now I can go to school"

I asked the 8-year old girl in Washington State a rhetorical question: "Tell me, do you think you made a difference?" She looked at me with the look reserved for adults who ask the dumbest questions. "Duh," she said. "Didn't we provide clean wells to the villages in Nicaragua?"

And this was in 1992.

Let the good times roll!

Q: What if I wanted to get involved in iEARN? How do I do it?

Just go to: <http://iearn.org/join/index.html>

In the U.S. you can call Lisa Jobson at (212) 870-2693

iEARN is dynamic and growing and would value you as a member of this remarkable community/family making a meaningful difference in the world.

From the Maurice Gibbons Web Site
Self-Directed Learning

<http://www.selfdirectedlearning.com/index.html>