



Andrew Lines



Growing adolescents into adults

Andrew Lines shares the story of how The Rite Journey program was developed to help schools meet the developmental needs of young people.

It wasn't long into my work as a secondary school teacher at an independent school in South Australia that I began to see evidence of a generation of young people grappling with a changing society.

The boys at school were showing a number of problem areas including bullying, sexism, racism, homophobia and anger management. Many had family problems. These areas of concern were evident in the playground, within the boys' social interaction in the classroom and also, disturbingly, were clearly articulated in the students' writing and class discussion.

The sports stars and musicians these young men admired exhibited an inappropriate treatment of women, excessive drug use and other socially destructive actions. With further exploration it became apparent that not only did these students have no appropriate male role models among their cultural icons, or in wider society, but that often there was no consistent respected male presence in these boys' lives at home that could help them learn to be a responsible and respectful male.

The female students were struggling with issues of their own. An increase in the prevalence in eating disorders amongst junior high school students reflected the increased pressure these girls were feeling regarding their appearance. Non-uniform days presented staff with challenges regarding the nature of girls' skimpy and sexually-oriented attire, and the statistics regarding increased risk behaviours including drug use and sexual activity were alarming.

A further issue was the increasing focus on technology, both in the classroom and in young people's lives in general. I was concerned by the decreasing human connection and real (as opposed to virtual) interaction that these young people were experiencing. My own discussions with students in my classes reflected what the rest of society was noticing, that young people were spending more time in front of a screen each week than at school. Adolescent relationships were increasingly vectored through some technological device such as a mobile phone or computer, and a large slice of these students' life education was being delivered by those who did not have a vested interest in their wellbeing or health.

While observing these problems in my students, I found there was very little in my own adolescence from which I could draw parallels. The generational differences in today's adolescents are well documented by academics and social commentators. For example, the Carnegie

Corporation's report, *Great transitions: Preparing adolescents for a new century*, found that 'adolescents are facing demands and expectations, as well as risks and threats, that are both more numerous and more serious than they were only a generation ago' (Carnegie 1995). The report identifies five trends of recent decades that have affected adolescence:

- The changing family
- The shifting nature of work
- The gap between early reproductive capacity and adult roles
- Dominance of the media
- Diversity in the population.

The report also notes that 'millions are growing up under conditions that do not meet their enduring needs for optimal development. They are not receiving the careful, nurturing guidance they need – and say they want – from parents and other adults'.

That adults are perplexed by adolescent problems and how to deal with them was confirmed by the parents of my students, who were concerned about both the increased pressure on their children and also about how they as parents could best help their child. The students themselves acknowledged the pressures they felt and, when given the chance to consider this, were able to articulate the lack of guidance given. It was at this point that I began to consider how schools might

provide an education that assists adolescents in navigating their way through such a crucial time of life.

Steve Biddulph's call (Biddulph:149) that 'teachers develop a co-parenting and mentoring role in boys' emotional development (so that school is an extension of family, and the 'whole boy' is the focus and aim)' resonated deeply with me. I sought to implement a program in my school in which I could spend some curriculum time broaching topics with the boys on being a responsible adult male.

In deciding at which year level to pitch such a program I was influenced by an address by Peter Ellyard (2004) on 'Learning for success in an emerging planetary society':

'I propose that Year 9 be totally reconstructed. The traditional program should be scrapped and replaced with a comprehensive Preparation for Adulthood program [...] On the threshold of adulthood young people mostly lose their commitment to learning the traditional fare which is offered to them. However, there is much they want to learn at this critical time in their lives, when they are leaving childhood and are anxious to learn about the mysteries of adulthood. What they want instead is to learn how can I become a successful adult?'

It was my own experience, too, that it was with this age group that the standard models of learning and teaching failed to engage or meet the majority of students. Therefore I decided to create a Year 9 program that would aim at guiding adolescents toward responsible adulthood.

In designing such a program I was working within some practical constraints. My school did not own

an outdoor education facility, it was a low fee school and there was no intention to reconstruct the Year 9 curriculum. The challenge was to create a low cost program that would have minimal impact on school curriculum but maximum impact on the students.

Initially I implemented a term-length course for boys, but soon realised that not only were the girls requiring such a program but also that a far deeper experience could be had by the students if the program was sustained over a whole year. Research has since found that 'the best (school-wide boys' development) programs are integrated into the school curriculum and involve substantial and weekly contact over a year or two. Shorter programs than this appear to have little effect'. (Currie 2008)

With the added time available it became possible to expand the program content, with same sex classes and teachers. Ellyard's suggested elements for a 'Preparation for Adulthood' program (Ellyard 2004) were embraced:

- Nurture their own self esteem
- Respect others, including parents and elders

- Initiate, nurture and maintain successful relationships
- Develop healthy and sustainable lifestyles
- Become enterprising self-actualising individuals
- Become leaders of self and then of others
- Become lifelong, learner-driven learners
- Create career paths which bring economic and social security
- Understand that individual rights should be balanced by reciprocal responsibilities and service to others and the community
- Respect and know how to nurture the environment and other species
- Respect and tolerate other cultures and religions, particularly Indigenous cultures.

To these were added concepts such as gender identity and construction, sexuality and relationship, maintaining wellbeing and promoting well-becoming, stillness, silence and solitude (surviving without technology but with ourselves – incorporating a 24 hour solo camping



The solo camping experience provides opportunity for stillness, silence and solitude.

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experience), establishing and maintaining friendships, dealing with feelings and risk-taking. A significant mentoring program has also been incorporated to expand the adult connection with each student.

It was also important to explore how best to engage Generation Y students, and Michael McQueen's 'four keys' have been an integral part of implementing the program: Put Relationship Before Role; Use Stories to Make Your Point; Adopt a Facilitator Role; and Use Positive Affirmation and Recognition.

From this content five outcomes arose: consciousness, connection, communication, challenge and celebration:

- **Consciousness** – the importance of raising a young person's awareness to the issues that they might currently be facing as well as the skills and understanding that are required to navigate their way through beginning adulthood.
- **Connection** – acknowledging the importance of relationship over role. Encouraging a number of threads of connection (with self, teachers, parents/caregivers, mentor, Spirit and the world). Providing the all important ingredient of time to allow these connections to build and strengthen.
- **Communication** – understanding self-talk; communication and listening with others appropriately; prayer; hearing stories of adults' experiences; having students share their stories and experiences.
- **Celebration** – acknowledging the transition into beginning adulthood; teachers and parents providing ceremony and celebration for the students as they are the 'elders' in our society.
- **Challenge** – providing physical, social, emotional and spiritual challenges as learning experiences and as a rite of passage.

Each of these outcomes is explored within term length topics: Relationship with self; Relationship with others; Relationship with Spirit; Relationship with the world.

The final step of the process, and potentially the most unique and important, came about with the acknowledgment that there could be a deepening of a student's experience of this program by incorporating some form of ceremony and celebration. Hence the name of the program, The Rite Journey.

The importance of providing a form of rite of passage or initiation for young people in contemporary society is recognised by many experts in education and psychology. Ellyard, Sax, Grant and Biddulph all clearly extol the virtues of rediscovering such a process.

Much time was spent on formulating how the celebration element of the program would look. I spent time in conversation with local Indigenous elders as well as exploring other traditional rites and initiations. The advice at this point was that it would be best to create a process especially for the 21st century young person. The 'seven steps of the hero's journey' were developed and became a template for forming the rites of passage. These seven steps include a variety of celebrations some of which involve just students and teachers. Others include parents/caregivers and mentors.

In its final form The Rite Journey appears in the school setting as a 'subject' and typically consists of three lessons per week (or approximately 120 to 150 minutes) for the duration of the year. Along with this curriculum time there are the seven 'ceremonies' that occur at various points throughout the year to celebrate the young person's passage on this journey.

The program had an extraordinary success when implemented in our school. Feedback from the students was brimful of gratitude: 'Thank you for helping me to understand myself and others', 'Thank you for helping me to unlock a piece of



Physical challenge to remain centred, grounded, focused.

myself', 'Thank you for everything you have taught me. I will never forget any of this'. Other memorable moments of acknowledgement have included the entire cohort of Year 9 girls vowing, at the conclusion of their girls' solo experience and adventure camp, to be 'true to themselves' and not to 'put on an act for the guys anymore'.

The feedback from parents has been equally rewarding. One parent wrote of his daughter:

'Throughout Year 9 her questions and observations about life and people grew in frequency and depth. Initially I felt challenged by some of the questions she asked because it entailed a shifting away from our adult-child relationship, and I had to meet her with greater seriousness. This of course is the point and the achievement of this program. My daughter had the framework and support to help her move through the threshold of adolescence and beyond the ambiguities and awkward stances of not knowing who she was in relation to the world and the people in it. She developed an honesty and

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earnestness that placed her firmly as a human being to be reckoned with. It was a great experience for her and for us, her family, to see her mature throughout the year. The silence and inner anxieties which often accompany this awkward stage of development were left in the dust and so has a momentum and courage arisen which gives us great confidence in the years to come.' (Garry Gilfoy, in a personal communication to the author.)

It was clear that The Rite Journey had much wider application than simply in my own school. A training package for teachers has been devised and boys' and girls' guidebooks written that are instrumental in directing conversation in class and in exploration of the year's topics. A two-day training session for staff guides them in creating their own seven ceremonies to reflect the context of their school and student cohort along. This session also takes staff through the teachers' guidebook and the various methodologies used.

Ian Grant, author of *Growing great boys* and *Growing great girls*, suggests that the one remaining 'community of connected souls' where the task of helping young people to adulthood can be accomplished is within schools. I believe The Rite Journey proves his case. While The Rite Journey evolved from a distinct need I saw in the students in my own classes, its success has been repeated in varied school settings and I have been delightfully surprised and honoured at the national and international interest and acclaim it has attracted. ■

The Rite Journey is now in place in a number of schools in South Australia with more schools in Australia and overseas to be trained in 2009 for implementation of the program in 2010. Some of these schools include: Immanuel College, SA; Luther College, Vic; Unity College, SA; Willunga Waldorf School, SA; Maryborough State School, Qld; Tatchilla College, SA; and King's School, Seattle, USA. Further information is available at www.theritejourney.com.au.

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Sharing with the talking stick.