

# Canoe the Murray Down...

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Every adventure begins with an idea...



In December 2008, with my three young children in tow, I made the trip across to see the folks for the summer break. Driving through the Yarra Valley at dawn, past the ragged crags of the Grampians and the wheat silos of outback South Australia, we turned off into the tranquillity of the Adelaide Hills in the late afternoon. How many times have I made that journey in the last 13 years?

It has been tradition since I was young that our family and friends go on a canoe trip for a few days over the New Year break. We dusted off the canoes, packed the food and I chatted with the old man while making dinner in the kitchen, in preparation for the following day's travel. I got the customary questions: yes, the renovations were progressing (slowly); the children were loving school (mostly) and the class teaching was going great (although it consumed me).

I had taken on my class near the end of grade three and they had been inexorable in those early months, following two years of interrupted teaching with an assortment of 'temps'. Now I recall it as a blur, such is the challenge of commencing with a class halfway through the cycle. But they were responding and I found that I was establishing a culture I liked. I wanted them to develop a keen interest in learning and life. I always thought school and education should be

fun, so humour was very much part of the fabric of my classroom.

Dad and I were in the kitchen: we talked about the unrelenting nature of main lesson, how to manage challenging students and their parents, as well as discussing Steiner's pedagogical indications for 12 and 13 year olds. I had done some reading and I was drawn to the cultural changes of Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> Centuries, a theme for class seven. To think that within a few short decades, the veil of medieval Europe was lifted by the work of iconic individuals such as Luther, da Vinci, Copernicus and wondrous explorations by the likes of Columbus and Magellan. I could see exactly how this transformative time in history would marry up with the personality of my class as they grappled with the coming of adolescence. They were beginning to explore external relationships and internal identities like they were trying on new clothes. There was the desire to go out and take to the high seas of life without having a sea-worthy vessel, let alone knowing the art of navigation. If only they could learn to captain their own ship ...

"Why don't you build a fleet of canoes with them?" my Dad broke into my tumbling thoughts. "They could make their own boat, individualise it and name it". For me that was a light bulb moment. It set off a series of events that would

1 Steiner, R (1996) [1919] *The Foundations of human experience*, Hudson (GA 293, appendix to lecture 1, August 21, 1919). Hudson NY: Anthroposophic Press.



unfold over the following two years. It was more than an idea; I felt compelled to act.

Over the following days, the idea solidified. It could be a year-long project culminating in an expedition. I would integrate the project into the class seven curriculum wherever possible. The children could raise funds, work in pairs to design and build their craft, keep a construction journal and research the canoeing traditions of different cultures. It involved design technology, woodwork, maths, measurement and problem solving, research, documentation and journal writing, group work as well as outdoor education. The plan was there.

I sent off a flurry of emails and roped in trusted colleagues to create a team.

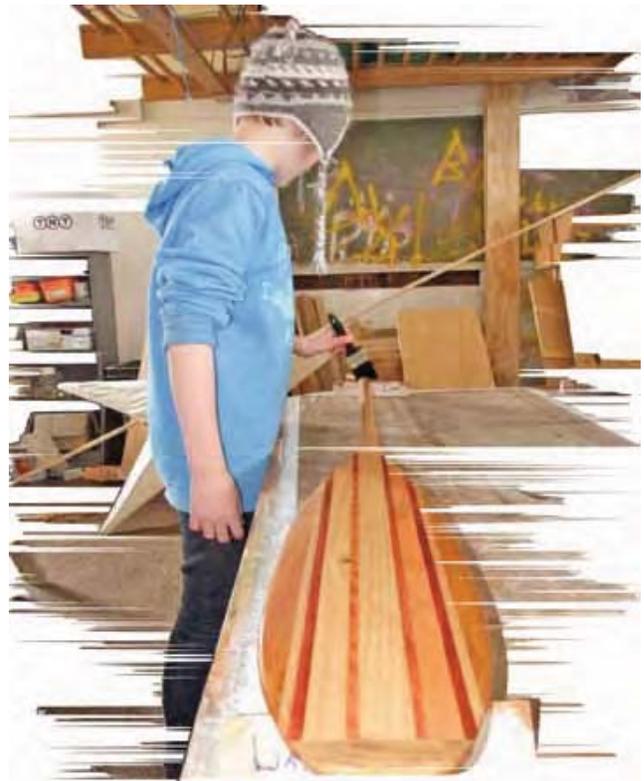
School management required an overview, budget and pedagogical rationale. Why do they always require a pedagogical rationale? Sometimes it's just a damn' good idea!

The team costed the entire project at \$20,000 including PFDs (life jackets) and a heavy-duty trailer for transportation. The students raised over \$1,000 within two weeks. They had to plan and implement a fundraising idea as part of the Business Maths main lesson in class six, then deposit the money into the bank account I had set up. Young entrepreneurs busked, led pony rides, worked as gardeners, ran sausage sizzles and cake stalls; two students even ran a magic show for the primary school in lunch time. That was a hit! We tallied the various contributions as percentages over a series of lessons. The school put up the remaining money for which I

am thankful. The project could begin in earnest.

We decided to have 12 fiberglass hulls manufactured and complete the rest of the building ourselves. While we were waiting for the hulls from the factory, Tom began by making paddles. He owned a portable mill and had worked with timber for many years, so his knowledge of local timber industry was useful. He sourced local timbers from the mountain ash forests that surrounded the school and acquired some reclaimed jarrah for a contrasting flash of red in the design. His love of timber had an osmotic effect on both the children and myself, and the entire class launched into their work with vim and vigour. It is wonderful to see students engaged and inspired, for in these moments, no discipline is required; they teach one another and the lessons run themselves. They could see the relevance and meaning in what they were doing and were excited to be able to express their creativity in something that was functional. I like to think of this as a 'living curriculum'.

Quickly the paddles took shape. The blades were constructed from laminated strips, all unique in design. The handles were moulded



for customised grip, and the shafts were spoke-shaved and sanded. Pride stirred in the group as the varnishing revealed the beautiful contrasts of the timbers Tom had selected.

The hulls were transported from the factory to the tech shed one cool autumn afternoon. They sat there stark and silent, like beached whales. They were just a fibreglass shell, glossy and white, with nothing to characterise one from another. The thought struck me that in years to come these shells would carry hundreds of children through Australia's interior as Captain Sturt had done when he looked for an inland sea in 1829. But for the moment they were indistinguishable - a blank canvas waiting for their maker's mark.

I paired up the students and assigned them a hull. They looked perplexed; I could see the look in their eyes. "You expect us to get in one of these when we have finished and spend 10 days on a river? Good luck!" Nevertheless, their faith in their class teacher won through and they began the process of building their own craft.



The school had an industrial workshop with all the machinery we would need: a thicknesser, sanders, lathe, power tools and the like. Plus there was an assortment of traditional hand tools which would allow us to really 'will' the boats to life. Tom machined strips of ash and jarrah in preparation for the early classes. Gunwales were constructed to firm the sides of the boat.

Bulk heads were created for floatation. Designs were developed for the triangular decks at the bow and the stern of each canoe. Finally the thwarts were attached which solidified the craft. This work progressed slowly over a series of months which included a dedicated crew of students and parents on Tuesday evenings, in addition to the weekly classes. There were some challenges along the way, moments sent to overwhelm the HR officer, but before long the class had invested too much of themselves to abandon ship.

Finally, in late November, it was time for sanding and varnishing. Again the magnificent colour of the Australian timbers shone through. The students had been thinking of names for each craft during the construction process. While attaching carrying handles and rubber noses to the bow and stern, they were granted the opportunity to inscribe their chosen name onto the thwart with the school's engraver: Glyder; The Spartan; Ol' Faithful and The Kraken were some of the words burnt into the wood.

Each canoe was far more than the sum total of its raw materials. These pieces of timber and fibreglass, rope and screws had been worked, manipulated, played with until they came together in the elegant shape of a canoe. Not only were these raw materials suddenly a vessel of function and artistry, the naming somehow brought the object to life. The very act of naming allows us to give identity, from which a personality can emerge; stories could now embed themselves, history be created. All sensed this moment.

Nothing promotes completion like a self-imposed deadline. For us it was, December 9, 2010. This was the day we were going to formally hand the fleet over to the school. I had invited guests to witness this occasion: the parents, staff, other classes and a journalist. We bought a bottle of non-alcoholic bubbles to christen the boats (even though we had no mast). I gave a small speech thanking Tom and Christian who were instrumental in realising this dream.

It is important to mark such moments in time. I have come to believe that teenagers want to

contribute and feel valued, and it is our job as parents and teachers to provide the framework for this to take place. The same can be said for acknowledgement upon successful completion of a worthy task or goal. Seeing the class standing proud and tall had inadvertently become a 'rite of passage' moment. They had been diligent and committed and seen the job through. We had all left our mark and I felt as proud as punch.



When finally it was time to pack our gear and make the long trek up to the Murray, the class was full of excitement. I had used several of my lessons in school to prepare them for the expedition. They waterproofed their equipment and carefully prepared a menu to last 10 days. However there was an unpleasant irony that prevented the expedition's departure: after a decade of drought, the Murray was in flood!

Now, in 2012, I have recently completed my second expedition with my former class. There is something very special about leaving the bustle of daily life behind and the pull of computers, emails and technological communication. Likewise, the class relinquish their mobiles and iPods, allowing life to be distilled to its true simplicity: journey in the day, prepare food and shelter in the evening, sleep soundly at night.

Because we are so 'time poor' in this modern age, we try to reach our destination as soon as possible. The journey itself is simply a means to an end. Yet canoeing, like walking, affords us the opportunity to slow down and take in our surroundings. We open our senses and engage

with the country we are journeying through. Transportation becomes an activity in its own right. For us the days were filled with bird life that seemed to speak to us and we felt with wind and sun upon our backs. Our paddles manipulated the water and aided us on our journey down a river that has carved its way through the heart of the Australian over millennia.

In the evenings we sat around the fire for hours sharing stories. On any given night, we could discuss the dilemmas of adolescent relationships, the pressures of school and home life, parents, teachers and peer pressure, or share tales of travel and adventure. I remember one conversation about image, identity and advertising that was insightful. The ukuleles were also popular, interspersed with a round of joke telling.

As I look back on my years in the classroom and the opportunities embraced, I know this work brings immense challenges but gives one a lifetime of richness. Class teaching can be a fertile bed where inspiration and creativity can take root if we allow it.

While this project fostered concrete skills and knowledge, it was the inadvertent learning that added so much value: a sense of fulfilment, appreciation, community. Also, lessons in goal setting, time management, achievement and a taste of adventure. These are tools and experiences that cannot be measured. They are stowed away and recalled for when they next find themselves captain of a ship that is a little lost at sea.

So I finish with an appeal: inspire your students with a vision, set them a goal, harness their collective will and embrace an opportunity. ♦

