

The Axe Handle Academy:
A Few Words about the Model

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Let's start with the name. This is the most striking and puzzling to people. Why an Axe Handle?

The Axe Handle Academy is all about **models**. The Axe Handle is our model. The idea comes from an ancient Chinese poem.

How do you shape an axe handle?
Without an axe it can't be done.
.....
Shape a handle, shape a handle,
the pattern is not far off.
—Shi Jing

When you're using one axe to make another axe, you have the model in hand.

What does this mean for education? It means that the **teacher is the model for learning**. As teachers, we model what learning is all about. How to go about learning; how to explore; how to be excited about learning; how not to be afraid of learning something new.

The **teacher is the model for the learning process**. There are **other models** also:

- 1) The **bioregion** and physical community in which we live;
- 2) The **culture** (social & spiritual community) in which we live;
- 3) **Ourselves as communicators**: how we communicate with others.

For the present RSI project, the concept is described in detail in an essay by Ron and Suzanne Scollon called "The Axe Handle Academy: A Proposal for a Bioregional, Thematic, Humanities Education." It was first distributed by Sealaska Heritage Foundation in 1986, and was reprinted by Ray Barnhardt and J. Kelly Tonsmeire in their collection: *Lessons Taught, Lessons Learned: Teachers' Reflections on Schooling in Rural Alaska*. This outline is designed to accompany and introduce that essay, which most of you have in hand.

The most bewildering aspect of modern education is **change**. As teachers and parents, we don't know how to cope with it. The cultural and technological gulf between our parents and grandparents on the one hand, and our children and grandchildren on the other hand is greater than the gulf of thousands of years between Socrates or Confucius and our own parents or grandparents.

What is an **appropriate education** for our children? How can we prepare them for a world that is unknown to all of us?

A basic point we should make is that we see **no mainstream** and no backwater. Any village in Alaska is as much in the mainstream as any big city in the world. We can access other places through electronic media. We are no longer isolated. This means that other places can reach our communities as well, and some of the imports are not for the best: drugs, pornography, AIDS. Kids today have opportunities we never had. But not all of the opportunities are good. Kids today face risks and temptations that most of us didn't know at their age. How do we cope with these aspects of change?

To keep up with change, schools have been adding on this and that for years and years. Many people feel that education is now a hodge-podge, and is no longer coherent.

How can we make sense of it? The Axe Handle Academy is a proposal for a kind of education that we think would make sense in this world, not the world of the 1950s or 60s; a kind of education that we could bring about in Alaska over a period of a few years because it builds on ideas and practices that some teachers and schools are already using now; a kind of education that would genuinely give our children a sense of confidence and ability in facing the unknown world they will meet upon graduation (are are probably meeting even sooner.)

Let's turn to the essay. It turns quickly (p 86) to **three final exams** that most of us cannot pass at this moment. These are in the three areas of the curriculum around which instruction is organized: **Bioregional Studies, Cultural Studies, and Communication Studies:**

- **How well do you know your place?**
- **How well do you know your culture?**
- **How well do you communicate.**

The idea is that all people need to know all of this: how and where we live, how we function as members of our culture and community; how we communicate with others and cope with print, spoken, and electronic media.

In **Bioregional Studies**, science, math, and social studies are focussed on the bioregion.

Cultural Studies takes a thematic, comparative, humanities approach incorporating world literature, history, and philosophy. Alaska Native literature and other ethnic literatures are part of this curriculum, using a thematic approach, exploring such topics as: alienation and self-concept; pride and arrogance; conflict of loyalty; and others.

Communication Studies addresses the full range and implications of literate, spoken, and electronic communication.

As noted above, the **teacher is the focus** (p 92). We see education as learning to learn, not a mere accumulation of knowledge. We see education as learning how to deal constantly with new learning. The curriculum is complex and dynamic, not canned.

There is a great quote by the poet Theodore Roethke (p 92) "A teacher is one who carries on his education in public." This is where teachers come in as the models, the axe handles. When we teach students, we ourselves are the model of teaching and learning

that the student studies. Page 92 also discusses the Chinese poem that I put at the start of this outline.

In the Axe Handle Academy, students see teachers actually learning. Focus is on the learning of the teacher. The teacher is the model of skills in inquiry and discovery.

Communication is the heart of the educational method.

Cooperative competence is a measure of education (p 93). This means that it's more important to see what a student can do with a little coaching than what he or she can do without help. This is where learning takes place. Cross-age instruction fits well into this model.

Enlarging the future is the purpose of the Axe Handle Academy. We contrast preparing with planning. We can't really plan for the future, because we don't know what it's going to be. Preparing is being ready to accept what comes.

In the Axe Handle Academy we emphasize preparation of our students for a future that we cannot know by giving them a solid understanding of their place on the earth, their place and identity in society, and the ability to listen, observe, reflect, and then communicate effectively with others.

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I'd like to end on a personal note. Why did we get into this idea in the first place? Why are we pushing it? This came out of depression and concern that Nora and I and Ron and Suzanne Scollon were feeling and talking about in the mid 1980s. Why are kids killing themselves? What can we do about it as teachers and researchers?

We have books, but teachers don't know where to fit them in, and the great ideas of the past — either from Tlingit or Western or Asian tradition — are often not reaching the kids. There is also an attitude that Native literature — “the stories” — are trivial, irrelevant, antiquarian, marginal, children's literature.

We disagree. We see Native literature as serious, adult stuff. It's not kid stuff. It's literally a matter of life and death. That's why we're doing this.

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Some final, hands-on questions:

So, where is the Axe Handle Academy? It's more a state of mind than a place. We have no campus. It's really where-ever you are. It's your community, your home, your classroom.

What about materials and curriculum? We have some of this already: our books, our draft curriculum outlines on how to use them; our community retreats.

You have some of the materials already in what you're doing and developing.

And we need to come up with more, and talk about how to link them up in ways that make sense.