

We Know the Way – Do We Have the Will?¹

More on Innovation Transfer

The way programs in education and youth and human development are created, transferred or replicated into another setting, and evaluated are inadequate. The process attempts to parallel the scientific or medical model. There is a fatal flaw in this orientation. Unlike the elements or component parts that go into scientific experiments or medical procedures human behavior is dynamic, variable, and beyond control and our ability to predict outcomes at a level of confidence that is present in the “hard sciences.”

Presently one person or a group typically creates programs. They have component parts, which are supposed to be repeated in the same way each time (fidelity) and as a result achieve a high level of predictability pertaining to the outcome. This is at odds with how people behave in reality and how rites of passage are coaxed into emerging within a community, as I [have](#) described previously. We have to change our paradigm in order for rites of passage to become potent and fulfill its central purpose for individuals, their community, culture, and all their relations. They are not programs in the traditional way we view programs. They are more like an innovation that could be transferred and adapted to other settings in which the people and place have great influence. This gives rise to another set of navigational aids.

Confluence of Art & Science

Helping rites of passage emerge in communities and other settings is a challenge. In reality, programs can't be replicated in one setting exactly as they appeared in another setting. It would be nice if they could, but they can't. Everyone who works in these settings knows this. When moving education and human service programs into different settings than where they first began we need to think in terms of *innovation transfer* rather than *program replication*.

There are significant differences in rites-of-passage program orientations and practices. When coupled with the complexity of community dynamics the practice of innovation transfer is more viable than program replication. Innovation transfer is more in the domain of art rather than science (Blumenkrantz 1992). Recent articles ([Martinez-Brawley](#) 1995, Smale 1993, Rogers 1983) offer useful guidelines for the transfer of innovations to other setting. Schorr (1993) suggested that context matters significantly and "figuring out what's working in human services is not like figuring out what's working in the physical sciences" (11). Transferring innovations depends upon the ability of the outside partner to become attuned to what is not visible within a setting or community and to help people remember rites of passage. Just as with the limitations cited in the ethnographies in the last chapter intelligent observation must unearth what is obvious, but more important is what is hidden in the particular local context and culture. The outside partners needs to divest themselves of authority and step away from the mantle of *expert*. They must help their community partners articulate a vision for youth and community

¹ Excerpted pgs 180-185 Coming of Age the Rite Way:....

development through rites of passage in ways that can connect deeply with a broad constituency and compel them into action. It also has to do a lot with luck and *zeitgeist*, the spirit of the times.

Martinez-Brawley (1995) may have said it best when she wrote: "Knowledge use generates new knowledge, and the process of diffusion, which is itself a process of transformation, begins again. In the human services, knowledge application and use generate new knowledge. Any program generated through replication is, in the end, a new program that can again be disseminated" (679). In a sense, ideas take on a life of their own when applied in new settings. How does this fit, or not, with the evidence-based paradigm, which suggests that you can replicate a program in the exact same way in any situation or context?

Unlike a strategy to produce some predictable outcome in the physical sciences human service strategies do not lend themselves well to adoption through replication but rather work best within a context that promotes adaptation through information exchange. "Compatibility between the new idea and the values and beliefs of the organization is crucial to success. Compatibility becomes one of the major negotiating items as new ideas enter new organizational domains" (Martinez-Brawley 1995). Initiation and rites of passage focus on compatibility and integrating people, ideas, programs, or anything new into a setting. Sensitivity to the initiatory process can make a great difference in any setting or within any organization. Remember, the fundamental focus of initiation has to do with people's sense of being included or excluded from a group.

Rogers (1983) suggests that human service agencies fail to recognize the importance of what an innovation is called. "The perception of an innovation is colored by the word-symbols used to refer to it... It is the potential adopter's perception of an innovation's name that affects its rate of adoption" (228).

Uttering the phrase *rites of passage* in some communities can set off an explosion of unintended consequences. Initiation is a highly personal process for transmitting a culture's sacred information to the next generation. It is a very delicate situation, which in some instances does not yield to an outsider's involvement. [Asking](#), "How are the children?" and talking about youth development in general can lead to new ways for a community to think about raising their children. Listening to and exchanging stories can be a first step. It shows respect and at the very least one might be able to learn the nuances of a community's language and culture. At best conversations might open a door through which members of a community and in a more acceptable way can introduce rites of passage ideas. Or, something happens not even remotely related to rites of passage that moves a community into productive action on behalf of their children.

Having been described in the early '80s as the "Johnny Appleseed of rites of passage," I have witnessed seeds planted, nurtured by a community, and harvested into rich and powerful rites of passage that feed a community's spirit for decades. This has happened even when there were only one or two conversations. Seeds were planted. New possibilities emerged that would not have been perceived before.

There are no new paradigms, only the activation of old memories:

The very nature of innovation in the public sector has changed drastically in recent years. In the first part of this century, human-service agencies were innovative largely because they were new, and were addressing social problems that had not been responded to before by any kind of organized effort. Now, these institutions have matured in somewhat the same way that American manufacturing has matured—there isn't room for brand new service programs. The fertile ground for innovation, therefore, is enhancing, rethinking and expanding existing service programs (Backer 1988, 18).

Communities have the capability to help their children grow up well. They have been doing it for millennia. Over the last several hundred years huge changes have created many distractions from our central purpose of raising children. We forgot that *all children are our children* and it truly takes a whole village to raise them. No matter what the new program of the day is it can't replace the health-promoting relationships that children need to have with another person. Helping us to remember this and what our authentic assets, talents, and innate abilities are to utilize rites of passage is essential. People don't want to be told what to do or how to raise their children. They want to be respected and included in an authentic process of creating a better place for themselves and their children to grow up well. Through educational experiences community members can be introduced to the essential ingredients of contemporary rites of passage. Engaging them in a broad array of activities related to the initiatory process strengthens their understanding and sense of ownership to what emerges. "NIH — Not Invented Here" is a syndrome leading to the death of programs created in one place and replicated in another. Research (Blumenkrantz 1996, Woodard 1996) has documented rites of passage's potential to serve as a community-mobilizing vehicle on behalf of contributing to the positive development of children and the health of their community. That's the way it has always been.

**What would we be doing if institutions that mattered
in the lives of children were reframed as places of initiation? (P.186)**

Blumenkrantz, D.G. *Coming of Age the RITE Way: Youth & Community Development through Rites of Passage*. Oxford University Press (2016).