

*Passion: Intense driving feeling or conviction.*

*Practice: To pursue a profession actively.*

—Webster's Dictionary

# Passion & Practice

by Paul Whyte

*Passion is what makes us show up each day to do the best for our clients. Passion is what sustains us during the difficult times, through the funding crises, through the times you couldn't help that young person, through the moments you think it is time to hang it up and walk away. Passion is what brought me to this field and has sustained me, but on the days when passion runs thin, it's the skill in the practice that makes the difference.*

**T**his essay is a brief look at a journey that began with a passion which, coupled with practice, eventually led me to become a skilled worker. By sharing my story, I hope to encourage the strong of heart to maintain their passion for the work and seek ways to further examine their practice in the pursuit of excellence.

After school education is a complex web of numerous professional fields, including traditional and nontraditional education, psychology, and social work. Also part of this web is a mass of worker talent and an array of skill levels, professional degrees, and dedication. After school centers are staffed by all types of workers, from people working in the very programs in which they participated as members just a year or two before, to doctoral-level educators who have inhabited the field for years. People enter the field for many reasons and bring with them countless skills. As we move forward as a profession, we need continuous dialogue regarding the reasons why we are in the field and how to sustain excellence.

I first entered the field because of my passion and desire to effect change. Yet in the course of my journey, I discovered I needed greater skills. I initially plunged into the field of after school education in New Haven, Connecticut, while attending Yale University, by performing service work during my sophomore year through Dwight Hall, the community service center of the university.

During the course of my work with Dwight Hall, I became aware of the overwhelming situation facing New Haven's teenagers. They were confronted with extremely high rates of infant mortality, teenage pregnancy, and AIDS; deplorably low rates of high school graduation; and diminished employment opportunities. Learning the depth of this need, I felt I could help. I was not a trained educator by any stretch of the imagination, but I knew in my soul I could contribute. With my idealism and a conviction that I should give something back, I set out to create a program. Thus, with a strong desire to do

something, a few child development courses under my belt, and a small grant, I founded a teen program, Young Voices Initiative. This after school and summer program provided teens with skills to get jobs, inspiration to continue their education, and knowledge of their own and other cultures in New Haven.

**T**he initial development of YVI came more from instinct than from any theoretical base. The steps seemed obvious: interview the potential service recipients, review their ideas, recommendations and suggestions, and design the program. Through many grueling hours, three college students and I developed a reading and poetry curriculum, a life skills curriculum, and an athletic program. That first summer was great. It was challenging, tiring, and exhilarating all at the same time. Yes, I made mistakes, but they were insignificant compared to the successes we had with the students. Success also resulted in greater recognition by funders. From year one to year two our funding tripled, and with more money came more students and greater possibilities.

Young people wanted evening activities, so again it became our task to provide them. Then, the most incredible thing happened. Nearly all the young people attending the day program began attending the evening program as well. We were now spending ten to twelve hours a day with the young people during the summer. It was exhausting, but my soul was filled because this is what I understood the work to be about.

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But as the program moved into its third year, my inspiration began to wane. My desire for the work was still as strong as it was on day one, but the ideas were not coming to me as easily. It was agonizing. I didn't know what to do.

It became apparent that I needed to understand more about educational curricula in order to continue to serve young people. This realization led me to conversations with my mentors, who agreed with me that in order to continue to do quality work, I needed to learn more about education. Out of both conviction and pride (and some arrogance) I was naturally concerned about what would happen to my program without my daily presence. I built this program from the ground up, I cared deeply about the young people; who else could take care of them? I believed that I was a "trench" worker and that I was supposed to be on the front lines.

As difficult as it was, I had to face three harsh realities: passion alone could not get the job done; other programs were better funded to do the work; and (most painful of all) some other programs were doing a better job of working with teens.

**A**fter conquering my demons, I chose to return to full-time study, so I enrolled in a master's program at Harvard Graduate School of Education. This program offered a tremendous opportunity to reflect on my past practice and to name my work, and most important, to learn new skills and concepts to shape it. I began to see why some things worked at YVI and why others did not. I was able to see where I was simply reinventing the wheel and where I was being innovative. I learned the skills necessary to build a curriculum and ways to structure a program. I learned where I did a disservice to young people and where I made the right choices. Thankfully, I think I made more right choices than wrong ones.

Up until this time, I had been a good youth worker; now, I was making the transition to becoming a skilled educator and youth expert. My distance from the daily grind of programming gave me the opportunity to reflect upon my work and to refresh myself. I stepped back from looking at my program like a father looking at his child and thinking she could do no wrong. I started to identify some real areas where the program and my practice needed improvement.

**G**raduate school wasn't a magical solution, but it served as a framing tool I could use to think about my work and how to do it better. Now, I am an avid advocate for workers' finding opportunities to reflect on their practices. I encourage formal settings because they offer great opportunities to learn theory, but I believe there are great benefits in any opportunity for workers to discuss and learn about the work they do.

Revitalization was another reward of seeking further training. My energy to perform the work and to examine it with new eyes emerged from my being surrounded by people interested in making a difference in education, in the well-being of young people, and in personal growth. Having a shared interest with new people is not only exciting, it has many practical advantages. Organizational structure, program development, and (of course) funding can all benefit from greater skill. Despite how much we dislike the notion of funders driving our programs, the axiom is "the greater the training of staff, the greater is the funding possibility." Knowing what has succeeded before and what is going on in the field can enhance one's own work. Furthering my education and training has greatly aided my practice. I feel that I am light-years away from where I was when I entered the field.

I am confident about knowing how to provide quality services, and passion for my work is still strong, shaping my pedagogy.

As the field of after school education struggles for definition, we as individual practitioners must strive to provide only the best. To be able to do so means knowing what is happening in education, knowing what has worked and what has not. The "best" is sharing your success and learning from your own failures and those of others.

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For far too long, the perception has been that after school education was what people chose to do only when they could not find other work, or something done on the side as a volunteer. We must alter this perception. We are passionate, concerned workers, but we are also trained professionals. Ultimately, we must be committed to excellence. Anything less constitutes a disservice to our clients. Passion brought me to the field and sustains me, but training has made me a competent worker with the renewed confidence to do great things.



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