



# **PASSAGES:** COMPANION GUIDE

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Passages is a film by Ryerson Student Affairs

I cannot teach anybody anything, **I can only make them think**

- *Socrates*

We collaborate with the structures of separation because they promise to protect us against one of the **deepest fears at the heart of being human** — the fear of having a live encounter with alien 'otherness,' whether the other is a student, a colleague, a subject, or a self-dissenting voice within.

- *Parker Palmer, The Courage to Teach*

Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our **power to choose our response**. In our response lies our growth and our freedom.

- *Viktor Frankl, Man's Search for Meaning*

Music exists in the **space between notes**.

- *Claude Debussy*

# SECTION 1

## I. THE MAKING OF PASSAGES: EXPLORING THE GREYS

In my attempts to contribute something meaningful to the intellectual lives of students, I am guided by the idea that it is the educator's job to awaken in students a desire to ask questions. The film called Passages is one such attempt. In contrast to the standard "how to succeed in university" account, I present a decidedly non-prescriptive interpretation of post-secondary success, what it means, and how students can begin thinking and asking questions about it. Following is a description of the development, intentions, and hopes with the film, a kind of guide for others on how it can be used as an educational resource.

My approach began in response to a call for the creation of "online modules" related to student-success. In keeping with that language, I began by adhering to a kind of "molecular" approach to the student-success curriculum – identifying the constituent elements of student-success and isolating those elements as stand-alone subjects. The topics I started to articulate were

not new, the reader would recognize them. In this case, they were identified through an iterative process of research and discussion among professional educators at Ryerson University. Through this process I articulated a particular assemblage of topics, organized into three primary categories, what I called Ways of Being (dispositions), Ways of Thinking (cognitive awareness), and Ways of Doing (skills). And within each of those categories, I named four main themes of student success within which I could explore the finer and more complex details (see Table 1).

In this way, each of these themes could be highlighted in a series of "online modules" according to the traditional tenets of linear, prescriptive instructional design. This is a common approach and the literature on student-success is rife with similar reductionist frameworks. Very quickly, I bristled against the inherent artificiality of this, the reduction of human experience into such a contrivance. And my preferred conceptual logic of education began to assert itself, a logic based on complexity thinking, and an aversion to the linear, Euclidean "textbook" approach to curriculum design and human learning. As a result, the educational design for the project began to shift and I turned away from "online modules" towards the more fluid medium of film. Let me explain further.

**Table 1. Proposed Student Success Framework**

Ways of Being (dispositions)	Ways of Thinking (awareness)	Ways of Doing (skills)
<p><b>Being inquisitive</b> curiosity, questioning, eagerness to learn, seeing other points of view, open-mindedness, seeking feedback, clarification, readiness</p>	<p><b>Thinking critically</b> analysis, argumentation, weighing evidence, discovering ideas, incorporating testimony, avoiding dogma, avoiding relativism, coping with uncertainty,</p>	<p><b>Planning</b> Organization, task-management, finances, balancing multiple responsibilities, prioritizing,</p>
<p><b>Being resilient</b> perseverance, grit, bouncing back, coping with challenge, adaptability, taking responsibility, growth mindset</p>	<p><b>Thinking empathically</b> vicarious understanding of other people, civic mindedness, creating relationships, honouring other points of view, helping others, understanding EDI,</p>	<p><b>Learning</b> finding ways to engage in deep, slow learning, while also becoming better at acquisition, study skills, memory, note-taking</p>
<p><b>Being resourceful</b> seeking help, building a support network, collaborating, solving problems, seeing opportunities, making connections</p>	<p><b>Thinking creatively</b> generating ideas, invention, ability to read and make discoveries, discernment</p>	<p><b>Practicing</b> achieving mastery, understanding the role of effort and practice, finding ways to apply learned skills,</p>
<p><b>Being self-aware</b> taking some control, self-efficacy, making healthy choices, motivation, having balance, conscientiousness, well-being</p>	<p><b>Thinking ethically</b> engaging in responsible scholarship,</p>	<p><b>Communicating</b> digital selves, workplace communication, writing, presenting, language,</p>

Students are inundated, the market saturated, with the text-book approach to post-secondary preparation. Chapter by chapter, students are given the black and white recipe for success. While this is no doubt helpful to students making the transition to post-secondary education, it belies something of the complexity and ambiguity of it all. Responsibly preparing students for a good and meaningful educational experience should, in my opinion, never be a "...forced march across a flattened plane..." (Ted Nelson, 1974). Learning is paradoxical and I see this, not as something to be resolved, but embraced. While certainly there is strong body of evidence that highlights a number of factors emerging again and again as important for student success, there is ample room for interpretation of those factors, what they actually mean, their complexity when viewed as a whole, and the ways in which students can fruitfully turn their attention to them. Text-book prescriptions for success fail to accommodate this complexity. Besides, I felt strongly that yet another addition to this molecular, modular approach would add very little that is new or interesting to the world. Students are already amply supplied with the prescriptive lists of "necessary skills", the stuff, by virtue of its ability to be measured and quantified, so favoured by a narrow,

learning-outcomes approach to curriculum design. Film, on the other hand, is a superb medium to capture some of this ambiguity and complexity and help students move beyond the simple encounter with lists towards deeper inquiry. So, the critical decision was made to move away from the creation of “online modules” and towards the creation of short films, with each film focused on a specific theme from our “student-success framework”. In this way, the curricular approach remained essentially the same, but the medium for presenting that curriculum changed. I hired two documentary filmmakers, Jordan Kawai and Van Wickiam, graduates of Ryerson’s film school, well-versed in the language of the medium, to help me with this project, and together we embarked on this approach to pedagogy that departed from traditional models of instructional design. My underlying goal here was not to expound, but to explore, through the medium of documentary-style filmmaking, a number of recurring student-success themes, to scrutinize the contours of these themes, wrestle with them, problematize them, and question them. I wanted to hold them up to a certain light and see what could be revealed. No “learning outcomes” were defined.

Given that significant change in approach, a “chart” of topics seemed out-of-place. But, I still saw its value as a heuristic – broad and loose, open to all kinds of interpretation, allowing for the kind of penetrating exploration I sought without being boxed in too tightly. The categories are there to simply bring a modicum of order to a complex set of ideas, a way to proceed through the thicket of educational thinking and student experience. And, while this framework helped Jordan, Van and me to imagine some conceptual threads for the films, the tension of the molecular approach still lingered. Despite having this new, more organic, nuanced approach to the subject matter, the problem of treating each topic as its own isolated part remained. We were continually faced with the tension of the documentary, free-form filmmaking process bumping up against a strict curricular approach to the subject matter. It made less and less sense to force the folks on screen, subjects of the documentary, into the prescribed narrative of the specified topics. Rather, we preferred to let folks simply engage in authentic conversation about their experiences as students or educators, their genuine thoughts and feelings unfettered by the boundaries of specific topics. So, in another moment of departure from traditional approaches to instruction, we decided that, rather than a series of short, topic-specific

films, we would simply create one long film. With this, our conceptual steady shift away from the molecular towards the whole was complete.

This new, one-long-film approach brought us closer to our philosophical ideal about the complexity and nuance of educational thinking and student experience and our desire, not to flatten or schematize that experience, but to simply document it. It also allowed the filmmakers to tell a kind of story, weaving together through the compelling medium of film, an interesting collage of students and educators talking about what’s meaningful to them, a less reductionist way of exploring the rich territory of “student success and readiness”. If textbooks were defining the blacks and whites, we were intent on exploring the greys.

## THE TITLE

Titles are important. We have grappled with this, and toyed with several ideas. In the end, we have settled on the title *Passages* because, in that single word is captured layers of meaning and interpretation that convey something of our purpose. It’s a title that, hopefully, conveys to viewers that we are inviting them to watch the film, not as an indoctrination to specified learning outcomes, but as a way to prompt thinking. *Passages* can be thought of in many ways – the provision of access, an avenue, an entrance, a threshold, a pathway, a channel; or it can be thought of as a part of something bigger, a piece, a chapter, an excerpt, an episode; or as a transition, a conversion, a crossing, a departure. There are many meanings and what gets conjured by the viewer will be, no doubt, varied. This is in keeping with our purpose.

# SECTION 2

## II. USING PASSAGES – SOME IDEAS

We hope that Passages will find its way into a variety of learning situations. It should be abundantly clear by now that the film does not lend itself to the measurement of specific, neat learning outcomes. While I would not preclude any possibility, I would suggest that it makes little sense to see the film as a stand-alone learning object with predefined internal outcomes that are easily understood and measured. Rather, the film is best conceived as part of some broader learning context – a way to initiate thinking, discussion, and reflection. It may be helpful to hear about how we intend to use the film with students in the context of Student Affairs programming at Ryerson University as a way to trigger ideas for use in your context.

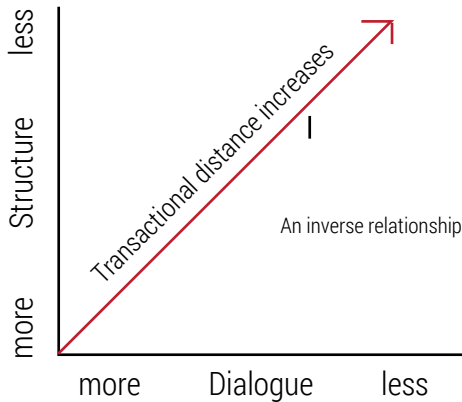
It's not complicated. I will, in whatever ways that make sense, ask students to view the film. I will provide little in the way of advanced organizers, preferring to simply let the film speak for itself for each viewer. I want to make the film widely and freely available to students – incoming first-year students, students in transition, students poised to graduate, students in between, students in residence, students thinking about career options, students who struggle, students who thrive, students with disabilities, students full of confidence, students full of doubt. I want to invite all students. But, as I mentioned, I do not want the film to act as any sort of last word on any subject. Indeed, I see it very much as a kind of first-word, meant to initiate thinking, questions, inquiry. Its ambiguous nature demands that further discussion follow. So, the film will be a part of a broader Ryerson Student Affairs "curriculum" that will play out according to local context. The Career Centre,

for example, may convene groups of students to talk about the film as a way to get them probing more deeply about their career aspirations. The Centre for Student Development and Counselling may organize group sessions that use the film as a backdrop to discussions about personal concerns. Health Promotion may ask students to view the film and join discussion groups to reflect on approaches to wellness at school. Student Learning Support may organize post-film seminars that facilitate discussions about the skills and dispositions related to academic success. Housing and Residence Life may use the film as a kind of "common book" program to engage newly arriving students in discussion around transition issues. And so on. The film, in other words, will act as homework in a broader, blended learning curriculum.

This very simple approach can, of course, be duplicated in any context. The film could become part of class discussions or seminars, could be the subject of further inquiry in a research project, could become part of first-year seminar courses, form a part of academic orientation activities, be the subject of online discussions in D2L course shells – the possibilities are endless. But, and this is key, the film is the first word, not the last, an invitation into more reflective, "slow" thinking (see Daniel Kahneman) on the subject of being a student.

Finally, and somewhat in contrast to the above, I have also created a more granular curriculum path for students that extends from the film itself – a set of specific topics for discussion based on the original assemblage mentioned earlier – Ways of Being, Ways of Thinking, and Ways of Doing. Following will be an explanation of this curriculum in hopes that it can be made useful to others.

Figure 1. Transactional Distance Theory



## STUDENT LEARNING SUPPORT READINESS CURRICULUM

The renowned distance education theorist Michael Moore articulated the theory of transactional distance in education, describing the relationship between “structure” and “dialogue” in an educational setting (see Figure 1). Putting it simply, Moore suggests that as the structure of an educational enterprise increases, dialogue decreases. Less dialogue means more transactional distance or “cognitive space” between the learners and teachers in a given setting. The (over) simple conclusion is that we should aim to increase dialogue by reducing structure. Naturally this has a limit. We cannot reduce structure to zero and expect the educational setting to be conducive to learning. So, we strive, as educators, to strike that balance. And move the dial according to the context – perhaps more structure for “novice” learners, and less structure for the more advanced. Our film can

be a piece in this arrangement - as part of a tight structure as in the Student Learning Support curriculum pathways shown in Figure 2, or as part of a looser structure in which the film simply acts as the subject for facilitated conversation in the tradition of a book club or “Common Book” program. The film is itself a very loose structure that may (hopefully) disorient viewers. That disorientation, left unattended, may linger as mere disorientation. This is why we recommend making the film a part of some more structured educational enterprise where that initial disorientation can be seized upon, explored more fully, and, perhaps, resolved.

Figure 2. SEQ Figure \\* ARABIC 2. Student Learning Support Curriculum

	Online Resources	Seminars				
<b>Ways of Being</b>	Being Inquisitive	+ Being Inquisitive	+	Reflection	=	<b>Ways of Being Complete</b>
	Being Resilient	+ Being Resilient				
	Being Resourceful	+ Being Resourceful				
	Being Self-Aware	+ Being Self-Aware				
<b>Ways of Thinking</b>	Thinking Critically	+ Thinking Critically	+	Reflection	=	<b>Ways of Thinking Complete</b>
	Thinking Empathetically	+ Thinking Empathetically				
	Thinking Creatively	+ Thinking Creatively				
	Thinking Ethically	+ Thinking Ethically				
<b>Ways of Doing</b>	Planning	+ Planning	+	Reflection	=	<b>Ways of Doing Complete</b>
	Learning	+ Learning				
	Practicing	+ Practicing				
	Communicating	+ Communicating				
	View the film Passages					SLS Curriculum Complete

Simply and finally, we hope that the film acts a kind of catalyst for thinking about school. Its purpose is no more heroic than that. We hope that students, educators, parents, and administrators, will watch the film and be nudged here and there in their thinking about what it means to engage in an education. And then we hope they'll watch it again.

## POST-FILM QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

- What, if anything, surprised you in this film? (What were your expectations?)
- In what ways does this film make you think differently about your own education? (Or does it?)
- What questions emerge for you from the ambiguity of the film? (Are you disoriented?)
- What do you think the title "Passages" means? (What would you have named the film?)
- With whom, or with what ideas did you identify? (Can you see yourself in this film?)
- What stayed with you? (Why do you think that is?)
- What voices are missing from the film? (What were you hoping to hear?)
- In what ways is the campus a character in the film? (Did you notice the locations?)
- What is the purpose of this film? (Something different today, than yesterday?)
- Wait six weeks (or some period of time) and come back to these questions.

## FOUR QUESTIONS OF READINESS

And, finally, if you screen *Passages* for students, it may be worthwhile engaging them in a conversation about readiness - a notion that lies at the heart of the film in many ways. I have tried to capture some of my thoughts on readiness in my Open Letter to Students, transcribed below.

*Dear students,*

*I extend to you my heartfelt congratulations for beginning, or being in the midst of your post-secondary adventure. It's a bold and big step in your life and I wish you all the best however you choose to take it. And, like all big, bold steps, this one will require of you some deep thinking about whether or not you are ready. Now, this is a thorny question: Am I ready? We never really know for sure. There is no On/Off switch of readiness. Readiness is not a state of being but, rather, a process of growth and setback and struggle and triumph. It's idiosyncratic. And, you'll figure out your own way, I'm sure of that. But I do want to leave you with these four questions that I think will help you to begin.*

### **1. Is there meaningful purpose behind my pursuit of higher education?**

*Naturally there are obvious, instrumental reasons for being here – the satisfaction of good grades, making social and professional connections, the increased likelihood of a successful career. All of that is important. But it is also important to identify something even more meaningful in your pursuit of this, something that evokes history and civilization, humanity and peace. By pursuing your education, you are participating in that most profound and noble feature of the human experience – learning; learning for the sake of learning, learning to liberate ourselves from the shackles of ignorance, learning to advance the principles of goodness and peace in the world. Yes, this may seem lofty and pretentious, but why not? The pursuit of an education is not a trivial thing. It's an ancient and beautiful human ritual and now it's your turn to take part. Remember that and hold your head high.*

### **2. Am I driven, at least minimally, by an impulse to learn, to know, to grow?**

*Your pursuit of higher education is, no doubt, motivated by various things. But, firmly in that mix should be an innate curiosity about the world, a desire to know things, just for the sake of knowing them, an itch for knowledge and ideas and insights. You should have at the heart of your educational experience a desire to know something more about the world when you go to bed*



than you did when you woke up. You should be driven, not by answers, but by questions.

**3. Can I accept that my pursuit of education is going to be a deep and unsettling challenge?**

Learning is difficult. It requires, at times, a reckoning with new ways of understanding the world that conflict, sometimes deeply, with our current ways of understanding the world. In some instances, this will mean having to abandon old ways of knowing so that we can accommodate the new. This is a messy, gnarled, uncomfortable process that can be a kind of grieving. It's what learning is, and if you don't encounter it in this way, you're not doing it right. Often, the process will be difficult, it will be challenging, unsettling, uncomfortable. It will require effort, and perseverance and resilience. This discomfort you will feel at times, is not equivalent to being treated unfairly. It is simply a necessary, inevitable part of the process. Do not waste your energy trying to avoid that discomfort. Go through it. Now, this does not mean that the institution providing you with this education is beyond reproach, beyond critique. Absolutely not. By all means take a critical approach to your education and towards those traditions and institutions that provide it. This is what moves us forward. But, in that critique, be armed with something more than mere complaint.

**4. Can I be resourceful, and advocate for myself?**

Your ability to be independent, to find solutions to problems on your own, to persevere through challenges – these are all important dispositions to have. They make you strong. But, the true hallmark of the strong person is the ability to recognize the need for support, the need for help, the need for guidance, and the wherewithal to seek that support. It means knowing where to go for help, how to ask for it, and how to fruitfully accept it. An education is not a solo trip. It involves others in front of you and behind you, those whose help you need and those for whom you can provide it. Accept both responsibilities.

Let those questions sit with you. Think about them. Talk about them. Return to them. I hope they help in some way. Good luck everyone – enjoy the ride.

Sincerely,

-John Hannah





**Learn more about the film at**  
[passagesfilm.ca](http://passagesfilm.ca)

**Contact us:**  
[studentaffairs@ryerson.ca](mailto:studentaffairs@ryerson.ca)

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