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Searching for Serendipity

by Martin Barry and Richard Ensoll

“The real voyage of discovery lies not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.” (Marcel Proust)

The 18th century writer and politician Horace Walpole is attributed with first coining the term serendipity to describe the act of discovering one thing where another was sought. Key to Walpole's definition was the involvement of both "accident and sagacity" where happy accident was thought to combine with wisdom and foresight to arrive at discoveries made through serendipity, e.g. Fleming's discovery of the antibiotic Penicillin whilst culturing other bacteria.

The field of outdoor learning is subject to a range of pressures not least of which arise from a fear of litigation while operating within a risk averse rather than risk aware culture¹. Alongside this awareness some concern has surfaced over what has been described as the 'algorithmic' approach brought to adventure 'programming' and the associated outcome-based thinking. In his aptly titled article *Losing my Religion*² Beames captures his journey from acolyte to critic of the outcomes driven model of outdoor facilitation to a more "*serendipitous learning*" approach where the participants are in greater control of their learning. Acknowledging the pressure against serendipitous approaches created by funding bodies who seek the reassurance of measurable outcomes, he proposes change in three dimensions:

- the use of journeys and 'broad' not fragmented adventures
- an emphasis on Place; interpreting and bringing the landscape to life
- learner negotiated goals

What might be being lost in these tightly bounded approaches where the end can encroach on the now? The intangibility of some areas of loss makes them hard to measure and consequently difficult to value. This article seeks to explore something of what might be lost in an over-prescriptive approach and consider how the concept of serendipity might offer a useful foil.

The search for serendipity in personal experience and professional practice

So if serendipity arises from a combination of careful planning and happy accident how have we experienced this in our own personal adventures and our professional practice? Hopefully some of the following examples will resonate and nurture your own engagement with serendipity.

Some years ago whilst undertaking a solo open canoe trip across Scotland, I was involved in a conversation which essentially centred on the question of how I was going to get back to my car after journeying from the west coast to the east. My simple answer was "I don't know" but at the end of the five day trip and after some good fortune associated with meeting some nice people on the journey, I made my way back via hitch-hiking in a quicker time than I could via public transport. The thought of positioning a car at either side of the country was just too costly in terms of a number of resources, while not knowing how I was going to get back to the other coast was part of the adventure, and one I embraced.

Arriving on a cold February evening having kayaked across to the Isle of Man from St Bees and expecting to camp on the beach, I was welcomed into the home of a local resident, fed and offered a warm place to sleep (and even made sandwiches for the return leg). I was prepared to camp but the welcome was humbling, unexpected, the most memorable part of the trip; the gesture being one I'll never forget. On other occasions (paddling around Arran in a building storm) asking for help and having it flatly refused can be frustrating, but ultimately it builds mental and physical resilience, and is part of the landscape of serendipity.

Experiences run the real risk of becoming sanitised or sterilised as a result of 'stitching up' all of the potential unknowns. Whilst cycling to work recently I met and rode with a cyclist who was travelling from Lands' End to John O'Groats who had chosen to follow a GPS and have a support vehicle with him at all times. I couldn't help feeling that his experience had been sanitised simply because the opportunity for him to interact with others to solve a problem or two, or to be open to a serendipitous encounter was all but extinguished. This was his choice of course, but I'm not sure if he knew what was being missed by setting the situation up so that the outcome 'box would be ticked'. His journey seemed to be based on products (vehicle, GPS, a multitude of back-up spares carried) rather than process (interaction and an unfolding situation). Although the support vehicle was utilised (and they often are on such ventures) it did seem counter-intuitive that cycling on a journey such as the one chosen required a van to be driven the length of Britain twice with the associated expense, pollution and carbon footprint. One solution is the use of the train or to consider hitch-hiking.

Both hitch-hiking and picking up hitch-hikers is seen as a risky and somewhat irresponsible activity which has declined in popularity in recent decades...just try asking how many under 30s you know who have hitched and compare this to the number of those aged over 30³. The reasons for this decline centres on risk aversion inflated by the media yet there is very little evidence to justify safety concerns, especially where simple risk management countermeasures are taken. If the risks involved in hitch-hiking are accepted the benefits might include gaining experience of a low carbon travel option, finding new levels of resourcefulness and gaining an appreciation of the kindness of strangers³.

Students on some Outdoor Studies programmes I teach are encouraged by the course to engage positively with open outcomes and welcome serendipity in their work and adventures. Second year students can opt for a module which requires them to plan, carry out and report on a self-led expedition involving a degree of challenge on physical, emotional and social levels. Past trips have involved 'searching for Dragons' in a remote part of Transylvania, following Cornish Ley Lines on barefoot and extreme portaging of canoes between a series of inaccessible mountain tarns. These students are encouraged to value the adventure starting and finishing on their doorstep and are asked to justify their carbon usage with hitch-hiking being one option for their travel. Needless to say, the high points of their expeditions often arise from the unexpected. On a more ad-hoc level, whenever possible Outdoor Studies students are encouraged to make their way to offsite practical sessions independently, making the most of the journey there by hitching, cycling, walking and so on.

The use of products-over-process forms the centre of a long running debate. Increasing use of technology in the outdoors may keep individuals safe in certain conditions (GPS in a whiteout is an obvious one), but may lead others into situations and mountainous terrain which otherwise they may not feel equipped to deal with. A critical example occurs when the inputted GPS track from point A to point B traverses steep ground.

Our feeling is that this increased use and reliance upon technology not only reduces encounters between individuals but also between people and place (for example when a mobile phone user becomes somewhat inoculated against their immediate surroundings). Research suggests that those using GPS to follow a route in an urban environment have much less memory of their route than those asked to navigate it with a map. It can also have damaging effects upon the environment; for example when walking on a GPS

track across sensitive ground, even though the path is just a few metres away and follows the natural contours and lay of the land. It has been suggested that being lost as a result of GPS failure or misuse is likely to be more serious than being lost as a result of being unable to use map and compass effectively⁴.

One definition of adventure is a 'journey with an uncertain outcome voluntarily entered into'⁵ but here we find ourselves in a bit of a paradoxical situation. Outdoor educators are paid to deliver programmes designed to meet particular predetermined outcomes whilst navigating through the punitive legal and cultural context in which we find ourselves, yet the serendipitous learning that tends to occur when we embrace uncertainty is highly valued. It is difficult to balance the pedagogy of predetermined outcomes (or 'Adventure in a Bun' as Loynes⁶ termed it) with the veracity of experiential and serendipitously-based learning opportunities, yet there is no shortage of evidence.

"Learning that really matters on an experiential programme is that which comes from the experience not prescription"⁷. Beames and Brown⁸ draw on this notion as they discuss the components which are the essential component parts of adventurous outdoor learning. These are mastery, authenticity, *agency* and *uncertainty*. Agency refers to the notion that the student needs to have ownership of the experience or task, and that uncertainty should be in the mix. Going back to the 1980s, the still well-regarded Spectrum of Teaching Styles⁹ encourages the teacher to give increasing amounts of autonomy and responsibility to the learner; a move towards the 'discovery threshold'. Going even further back, the work of Fitts and Posner¹⁰ in the 1960s centred on the classifications of skill acquisition and reported that the best performers were those who were able to work automatically (or autonomously) and had achieved this level of ability by working through a number of open tasks and varied, experientially-based challenges with non-prescriptive outcomes.

So what does this mean to us as outdoor educators?... It means that we may go out and about with our groups of young people without necessarily being completely aware of how the day or session might unfold if an emergent approach is adopted. Working in a Higher Education setting, it can be seen that the young adults who get up to some great adventures normally have to embrace at some point the notion that the outcome is not always certain and that a nod to serendipity bears fruit. Emergent teaching approaches have been shown to be more rewarding, successful and enjoyable, certainly in HE and outdoor education settings. Trying to encourage young adults on their outdoor course to 'go out and have an adventure' without recourse to GPS or smartphone and having any and all transport requirements stitched up is not always easy, but certainly one that we will always persevere with. ■

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