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In the Stretch Zone

by Liz Campbell with contributions from Luděk Šebek and Letty Sudds

*Imagine...
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This article shares the experience of stepping out of a 'rut' – out of 'safe', habitual modes and methods of practice. When Liz, Letty and their students stepped out of what they had become accustomed to within UK Outdoor Education circles and into a style of programme delivery in Prague that contrasted sharply with their experience, it had great impact, and gave them food for thought in terms of their own practice. They were struck, for example, by the value placed upon play for play's sake, and the opportunities for creative expression that their Czech hosts created within their programming. It is ever so easy – as Liz admits – to 'bottle out' of taking these kinds of risks, for all sorts of rational, logistical and emotional reasons. Here however, we see some of the upsides that can accrue to both those we are responsible for and also to us as practitioners, and as such Liz, Luděk and Letty's story stands as a clarion call for us – sometimes at least – to take the 'unsafe alternative'.

In April 2007 we decided to run the Urban Outdoor Education, third year undergraduate module in Prague instead of Birmingham. We teamed up with Luděk Šebek from Palacky University and suddenly we found ourselves involved in an international course with aims rapidly diverging from the rather tight learning outcomes that

we were required to work to for our module. We were committed, our students had all arranged their travel and as the day of departure came closer and we still had no idea of the programme I, for one, nearly bottled out. Letty and I had both tried to prepare for the course by reading about Outdoor Education in the Czech Republic but the truth was that neither of us really understood what a stimulating learning experience 'The Czech Way' would be.

Imagine:

- a different country, a different culture and a sprawling vibrant capital city which you had never visited before
- a staff team from Czech, UK, Finland and USA who had never worked together and only one whom we had met, briefly, nearly a year before
- 40 undergraduate students from eight different countries
- one jet-lagged day of preparation time in which we had to communicate in three languages combined with
- the pressure of having to deliver an academic module to our very articulate final year undergraduate students to whom every mark counted.

In his book *Silver Bullets*, Karl Rohnke suggests that '*individuals surround themselves with a 'comfort circle' something which prevents them from taking risks....but in most people the circle becomes too restrictive, giving rise to boredom, resistance to change and collective mundanity.*'

Stepping out of a rut at work and deliberately challenging yourself is never easy, even knowing that Rohnke thinks it might be a good idea! This experience was no exception but it has had a lasting and positive effect on our practice.

By the time we arrived in Prague we had managed to exchange an email and one Skype call with Luděk, but didn't have a clue what was expected of us or our students and only a vague picture of what might happen. For us the culture shock in those first few days was immense and yet we had promised our 20 students that it would be 'the experience of a lifetime'. The reality was that we had no idea if we could deliver and to a large extent it was out of our control anyway – not a comfortable place to be!

The first two days of the course took place in Roudnice nad Labem a small historic town about an hours train journey north of Prague with the remaining five days based in the centre of Prague. The course was planned using the Czech approach to experiential learning and programme design, namely Dramaturgy. A dramaturgy course consists of a series of 'Games' each one designed to stretch students in a different way; socially, physically, creatively, reflectively, and/or environmentally. The Games themselves lasted from a few minutes to a whole day and were not that different from activities which regularly take place in the UK. They included things such as strategy games, drama, social events, street theatre, problem solving, play, reviewing, and teaching in schools etc. They were mostly 'off the shelf' activities, often complicated and sometimes evolving into something else as they went along. The sequence and detail of the Games was decided at the very last minute in response to the perceived needs of the group, ensuring not only that every Game and course is unique but that the staff team are kept on their toes – sleep deprivation, perhaps, but no boredom or mundanity here!

The underlying aim of a Dramaturgy is for students to experience a series of highs and lows in each area of focus, creating intertwined waves of emotion, e.g. a social low, followed immediately by a physical high followed by a creative high. It is the amplitude of each wave which is seen as the important aspect in promoting personal growth, rather than the wave length or the order of the waves. It is also the amplitude of the waves which proved the most challenging for us, and for the first few days on our course evoked open rebellion from our students, as we all struggled to find meaning or relevance in what we were doing!

Andy Martin a New Zealander who has worked for several years in The Czech Republic suggests that the 'western' way of planning Outdoor

Courses limits the possible learning for students by pigeon-holing the aims into discrete areas such as Leadership, National Governing Body Awards, Personal Development, Recreation etc. but that the Czech approach to experiential learning and programme design, Dramaturgy is truly experiential because the courses are holistic and the emergent learning dependent on the dynamics of each course. The combination and sequencing of Games was important, but it was the style of delivery that was dramatically different particularly in following six areas.

Uncertainty

Often the students did not know when they would be coming back to their rooms, what they would need for the day, what they were going to be asked to do, when they would eat or sleep. Most of the staff knew most of what was going to happen most of the time, although things changed direction quickly and frequently. This was very new, at least to the University of Cumbria students and at first created tension, anger and resentment within the group as they pleaded for a tighter structure and more information. By not divulging the structure or timetable for the week, students were not able to worry about or question what was going to happen tomorrow or the day after. After a few attempts at questioning they realised that they weren't going to get the information they required until just before they needed it. With no answers, their questioning soon



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stopped, allowing everyone to concentrate on what was happening in the moment. We noticed this as a shift in power towards the participants, the activity and the 'here and now' and away from the facilitator who held the answers to what was coming next. This seemed to foster independence, as opposed to dependence, on the facilitator and allowed them to relax and accept the invitation to enjoy the moment and to be spontaneous and to play.

Creating an atmosphere

Many of the activities were framed in fantasy or were conceptualised by real life stories. The metaphors were explained immediately before the activity and great care was taken to create an environment appropriate to each metaphor. For example the students were picked-up in a Prague suburb and transported to Roudnice in a 1950s coach. They were welcomed there in a park under the cherry blossom by the whole staff team acting as waiters, all in period costume. There was music, tea, coffee, cakes, pastries and each student was presented with a hand made personalised log book. The attention

Remembering how to play, to share and to be spontaneous were at the heart of this course.

to detail conveyed a powerful message to our students who immediately realised that this week would be different.

Throughout the course careful attention was given to the environments in which we worked and relaxed. Maximum impact, maximum contrast and variety. The simple but functional 'eat what you need' meals served in the Roudnice Sports Centre against the 'eat as much as you can mentality' of a Tesco's hypermarket in Central Prague. The silence of the cloisters of a medieval monastery in moonlight against the hustle and bustle of the tourists on Charles Bridge at midday. The sound of 50 silent people gathered inside a historic building broken by a single person humming a pure note against the noise of the football protest march and accompanying riot police as they passed by one of our creative sessions.

Play and Spontaneity

Remembering how to play, to share, and to be spontaneous were at the heart of this course. Students and staff were constantly being challenged to view the world from different perspectives, to get in touch with their senses to drop the trappings and rules of twentyfirst century life and absorb themselves in the experiences that were offered. Dressing up was one way in which this was facilitated. We had access to 10 large boxes of clothes and many of the Games involved role play. Everyone had opportunities to dress up, let go of their inhibitions and to be someone they are not normally. It was fascinating to see how this worked both for us and for members of the general public in the large city environment. For example a group, running and pushing a colourful inflatable ball down a main street towards the Old Town Square, dressed up in evening dress at lunch time, seemed not only to be tolerated, but almost sacred - like the Fool at a king's court. All of a sudden we felt like we were on our own little island - right there, in the centre of Prague. Being and feeling so unique, enjoying so much foolishness and laughter together, created a deeper trust and openness.

Competition

Many activities were time limited and overtly competitive. Competition was used as a motivator and the students responded positively. One activity in particular was just about running repeated laps around a short marked course and beating the other teams. An 'eyes out', mostly anaerobic, team endurance event. It was one of the most popular of the whole week and released a tension which had been palpable earlier in the day. It was a turning point early in the course.

Dialogue

Nearly all the Czech staff were volunteers. These were not Outdoor Education specialists, these were professional people, highly respected in their own field, giving their time and energy for free. This diversity within the team certainly enhanced the programme. It allowed for a melting pot of perspectives and impelled us all to examine our values,





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attitudes and way of working. In the Czech Way, as with other experiential courses, there is clearly potential for manipulation, but unlike many UK courses one measure of the success of a course is the intensity and authenticity of dialogue between the staff team and the students. Staff themselves were mature people, authentic, honest, and determined to try to make some more sense of their own world, within and through the above mentioned dialogue in which values, attitudes, and habits were shared, questioned and re-assessed. This dialogue is a key part of a Dramaturgy and for us helped establish a partnership between the staff team and the students so that together we could continue to co-creating the course experience.

Responsibility for learning

Reflection was an integral part of the week, both as part of the activities and in it's own right. Students were presented with a framework but directed their own discussions and followed the lines of discussion which they felt were important. Students were encouraged to do everything and were able to drop out of activities if they chose. Some did withdraw from activities, especially at the beginning, but all returned and the group welcomed them back with open arms.

This experience was challenging on all sorts of levels, it jolted me out of my comfort zone and made me recognise that I often restrict myself to working with the familiar. It made me question if I should be challenging my 'clients' whilst staying in my comfort zone myself but most of all it reminded me that staff and students are all able to 'be in the now' and the realisation that we often forget to use this in our practice.

Bearing this in mind and by way of a summary, we offer some key questions for practice:

- How can we continue to push the boundaries of Outdoor Education in this country and really extend our students if we work within the safety of our own comfort zones?
- How can we maintain 'uncertainty of outcome', 'spontaneity' and 'creative freedom' when we work in a world that is obsessed with structured outcomes and safety constraints?
- Linked to the above point, we are often aiming for specific targets, outcomes or goals, so how can we value 'play' for plays sake and the freedom of expression it brings?
- Instead of being 'in charge', or responsible, and separate from those participating, how can we relinquish control enough to participate, enhance the dialogue between, and become learning partners with, our students and each other?

Finally the pictures and student feedback comments we received say more than words, but if you ever get the opportunity to experience 'The Czech Way' then go for it. It will be a different, powerful and refreshing experience. 'Presne' '!'. ■

Author's Notes

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All photos: Liz Stannard