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The outcomes of autonomous adventure learning; or If you love someone set them free

by Richard Ensell

Case Study. February 2018. Northern Cairngorms

Sixteen final year undergraduate Outdoor Studies students worked in two separate groups to complete a three-day autonomous expedition exploring the Cairngorm plateaux on foot, sleeping in snow holes and in one case a bothy. Conditions were typical for this upland area and included avalanche prone slopes, periods of limited visibility known as white out and temperatures below -10° centigrade. A meeting point and communication plan agreed but given the open environment, limited visibility and limitations of mobile phones in cold remote conditions these were not to be relied upon.

Despite care in planning and preparing for this experience the lecturing staff acknowledged some anxiety as the groups set off. This task was authentic and involved real risk, would the students rise to the challenge? Could they justify the risks? Each group had the necessary skills, but would they use them effectively? How would the students function without the containment provided by their formal leadership, would they cooperate and solve problems inclusively?

Analysis

The students involved in this case study all returned and, overall, seem to have thrived despite challenging conditions with many reporting the journey among the most powerful learning experiences of their three-year degree programme. However, had there been an accident we might have expected the question: “Where were the lecturers?” How could we justify facilitating such an experience?

Commenting on the importance of autonomy in the development of healthy relationships in 1985 Sting urged us... “If you love someone set them free.”

This article explores the concept of autonomy and considers what this might mean for us as outdoor practitioners where we are seeking to foster such aims as personal awareness, responsibility taking, self-confidence and leadership.

Before we go any further, it will be helpful to define two key phenomena; autonomy and adventure:

Autonomy may be understood as “the participants perception of having some control.” Adventure may be “an intrinsically motivating activity voluntarily entered into where the outcome contains a degree of uncertainty.”

It’s notable that both refer to subjective cultural constructs which resist generalisation. That is a sense of adventure and the perception of control both exist mostly in the lived experience of each participant; if they believe they have control over an aspect of a given activity which they find exciting and uncertain they are probably having an autonomous adventure experience - whatever anyone else may believe. Therefore, in any group of outdoor learners we might expect to find those who would perceive the experience as an autonomous adventure and those who for various reasons would not. Despite the chaos implied by this understanding behavioural patterns exist and there is some evidence that the physical positioning of the leader is a significant variable.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the perception of autonomy is stronger when the formal leader is out of both sight and sound of the participants involved. It is therefore possible to imagine that the experience of sharing a dormitory or tent space with a group of peers might represent an autonomous adventure experience to a nine-year-old child hoping to
be involved in the ‘banter’. This perception might also apply to a six-year-old in a well-bounded mature woodland being encouraged by a Forest School practitioner to “Go and Explore” as well as, more traditionally, a group of Duke of Edinburgh students making route decisions during their final expedition. In each case there may be a risk management framework woven around them which seeks to minimise risk of harm and maximise the benefits. If each participant feels they have autonomy and are engaged in an adventure then so be it, if on the other hand the level of oversight is perceived as too restrictive the sense of autonomy may be lost, and with it some of the benefits.

One reason why a sense of autonomy is important is the potential to trigger an individual or groups capacity for self-regulation. The perception that a successful outcome lies in ‘our hands’ can release a group’s energy and focus to resolve issues themselves. For example, in a case of intra-group conflict where a formal leader is perceived as being absent the group may be expected to respond in a more authentic manner and achieve a greater boost to self-confidence should the outcome be positive. Or if a sense of autonomy is present in a context involving mutually perceived risk they might also be more likely to self-regulate to ensure good practice is applied to solving a meaningful problem ‘safely’. In both cases, there lies the potential for failure associated with all adventures placing a heavy demand on the skill and resourcing of the facilitator to harmonise task demands with known competence and available support mechanisms.

The beneficial role of autonomous adventure experiences such as the Outward Bound final expedition in the maturation of young people has been widely studied with outcomes including as the Outward Bound final expedition in the maturation of young people has been widely studied with outcomes including

The point here is to foreground the potential benefits associated with the perception of autonomy and therefore value these in any attempt to balance the risk equation.

For me Sting’s lyrics do not call us to abandon or cast aside others, instead they urge us toward a more subtle and considered release of our participants into their own potential through fostering a sense of control and responsibility over the planning and execution of intrinsically motivating activities. I hope this article has helped promote thoughtful reflection.

References

About the Author
Rich Ensoll works at the University of Cumbria where he lectures on the suite of Outdoor Studies degree programmes delivered there. He has worked as a freelance, primary teacher and centre manager and enjoys mountaineering, orienteering and canoeing. He is interested in trying to understand how outdoor learning works and would welcome comment and debate: rich ensoll@cumbria.ac.uk Photos from the author.