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'G.S.E.C. Descent' and coaching with Threshold Concepts

In a previous article 'Becoming climber' (Ensoll & Towers 2020) we explored some benefits that unfolded when we teach 'trad' leading using a gentle progression of angle from easy scramble upward. This article will consider some opportunities and considerations that emerge when adopting a similar, progressive approach to an abseil session. *"So this is an article about teaching abseiling using grass banks, nothing new there?"*before I lose you the point is to identify and value some of the opportunities and underlying issues that this presents while considering a specific example.

What does good quality outdoor learning look like? Simon Beames and Mike Brown describe four hallmarks of high-quality adventurous learning experiences that we might use to design and audit our sessions: Mastery, Authenticity, Agency and Uncertainty (MAAU).

- **Mastery** encourages us to consider how far our participants have progressed, can they use these skills to solve new problems?
- **Agency** directs our attention to the extent to which participants feel they have control over what is done and when.
- **Authenticity** asks how far the activity or the setting feels realistic or meaningful.
- **Uncertainty** prompts participants to be drawn in wondering how the experience will unfold.

Figure 1. The MAAU Descriptors of Adventurous Learning.

Beames and Brown propose that we use these descriptors to help us plan and reflect upon our practice considering each while asking questions such as; what did the participants experience? how far did the activity maximise its potential in each area?

An audit of the common approach to abseiling (using the MAAU criteria) left me questioning my typical approach to running an abseil session prompting me to explore alternatives. Here I am talking about an abseiling session many mountain professionals will be familiar with where a group of students wait their turn at the top of a crag as, approaching one at a time, they are attached to an abseil rig and safety rope managed by an instructor at the top. Participants then, *hopefully**, descend the crag.

**I have to admit to encountering rather more refusals, participants who go to the top but are not able to descend, in my own sessions than I now think acceptable.*

In my practice these sessions might occur within the setting of a half day of abseiling or a full day of climbing and abseiling however informal research suggests that in other settings abseil sessions may occupy as little as 90 minutes as part of a busy day packed with 4-6 largely discrete activities.

So how might the MAAU descriptors be applied to the above session?

Mastery: participants gain little by way of mastery apart from finding they either can or cannot do the task.

Agency: the level of control is rather binary, do it or do not. Opting out can be a valid response but are there more nuances that might be brought out?

Authenticity: abseiling exists as a means of descent over steep ground and there is some authenticity in this practice however descending over short pitches with a top rope and figure of eight is a poor reflection of mountaineering practice.

Uncertainty: participants might experience quite high levels but it is typically rather a one hit wonder. With regard to those who refuse to abseil how far has the correct level of challenge been set, could a more progressive approach help mesh task demand more closely to participant capabilities.

Why do some participants opt out of abseiling sessions? A full exploration of this question lies beyond the scope of this article however I will touch on a couple of areas. Firstly choosing to opt out can represent an important act of agency so withdrawal should not be vilified yet how often might these same individuals have been afforded access to a task if it had felt more meaningful or achievable? Achievability is influenced by a new task's proximity to previous areas of successful experience, prompting coaches to value carefully stepped progression. It is possible to understand a participants readiness to abseil requiring the presence of a number of concepts (skills, knowledge and understanding) which need to be in place before a person can access the task. Threshold concepts are those which must be grasped in order to progress; they act as a kind of portal through which the learner must move in order to access the next level. The coach needs to ensure all these are in place and might therefore build a progression of tasks where each threshold concept is taught determining to only move on once the key concept is understood. For example building confidence in the rope before we need to fully trust its strength. How far might those who 'opt out' of a typical abseil session be missing key threshold building blocks?

In response to my critique of common abseiling practice I began to ask some questions: What if we adopted a slower approach and planned a journey where abseiling formed part of a wider range of activities contextualised within the journey itself? What if we designed a session around what 'mountaineers do' where progressive steps forward were informed by successful demonstration of key threshold concepts?

The first session name, '*Slow Abseiling*' didn't quite have the hook we were after, so we turned to B.A.S.E jumping for inspiration and '*G.S.E.C. Descent*' was born - best verbalised in a mock American accent reminiscent of the adverts of my youth for Marlboro cigarettes - under 40s might want to look up the Marlboro cowboy.

Venue & mode of travel: wherever possible the session takes a full day and involves movement between venues on foot or bicycle adopting the principles of carbon light adventuring. Areas of low fell, quarry and sloping woodland can all work well. Ideally each stage of the progression will take place in a new venue allowing for repetition while meeting the need for novelty.

Scene setting: Participants are told they are going on a mountaineering journey and paired up with the following kit: a harness, helmet, belay plate, prussic loop, screwgate, sling and crab each with a rope (typically relatively short, perhaps 30m) and additional sling and crab between two.

Learning points: At this stage I usually check they can coil and uncoil their rope.

Threshold concepts: What a 'mountaineer' is and does.

'G.S.E.C. Descent'

Gentle Slope. Typically a short, grassy slope or carefully chosen scree.

Brief

Working in threes, no harness used yet, some as anchors and one abseiler at a time descend down here. Two brace at the top holding the rope in their hands while the other clips the belay plate on, holds the crab with one hand before lowering down the gentle slope.

- Learning Points: practice at coiling/uncoiling – this should become super slick by the end. How to load a belay plate and lean back. Taking a braced position.
- Threshold Concept: "I can lean back on the rope and it will hold my weight even when I'm only using my hand to hold the carabiner. I can create a strong abseil position: leaning well back and upright."

Steeper Slope 1. Use a short but slightly steeper slope, the key thing is that the angle allows students to stand up to unweight the rope (if need be) and the context remains playful/not consequential in feel.

Brief

Sometimes mountaineers find they need to tie onto something strong like a tree and the steepness means they need to attach the belay plate to a harness. Rig a rope and abseil down here in your mountaineering pairs. You can teach a knot or leave them to improvise something that works but clipping to the harness and fitting the harness needs doing properly.

- Learning Points: Choosing a stout tree/anchor, linking a belay plate to a harness, controlling the rope in descent, standing strong/safely away from the belay plate.
- Threshold Concept: "I can lean back on the rope and trust the harness to hold me. I can set up and maintain a strong abseil position: checking no risk of entrapment from hair etc and standing strongly upright"

Steeper Slope 2. Use a longer slope at the same angle as the previous one ideally with a way to continue from the bottom. E.g. a woody ravine with a crossable stream at the bottom.

Brief

Sometimes mountaineers want to continue their journey bringing the rope with them, abseil down here looking after your partner and pull the rope through after you. Teach a pull through abseil set up using a sling showing the first person how to tail the second to provide additional safety.

- Learning Points: using a sling to set up a retrievable abseil, abseiling on two ropes, tailing.

- Threshold Concept: “I am comfortable trusting the rope on a longer slope. I set up and manage my abseil position with minimal prompts.”

Extension Task 1. Find a longer slope most or all of which would allow a participant to stand up if needs be but where the slope length requires a re-belay mimicking a multi-pitch abseil offering the chance to demonstrate using a cowstail. I typically use this if time or if the previous activity reveals the need for further reinforcement before we move to steeper ground.

Brief

Sometimes the rope isn't long enough to reach the ground so we have to re-belay. To look after ourselves when we are re-belaying we can use a sling as a cowstail.

- Learning points: transferring a rope onto a new belay and using a cowstail for personal protection.
- Threshold concept: I can handle the belay plate and prussic with some fluency while also maintaining good form.”

Extension Task 2. Find a slope with a short steeper part where the participant has to hang from the rope. The drop off made by a cutting for a forest track can work well here.

Brief

On steeper ground the first person might need safety cover as well as their partner. Use a prussic loop to safeguard this pull through abseil.

- Learning points: using a prussic to protect an abseil descent. Managing an edge when abseiling.
- Threshold concept: “I am able to manage the distraction of a prussic while maintaining a strong abseil position over a steep step in otherwise unexposed terrain.”

Crag ...do we actually have to go there? I have sometimes found the above is enough for a great session especially where other activities are included, but most days will end well at a crag or longer steeper descent. The participant should now be ready to build a simple abseil (using a stout tree) or clip a doubled rope into anchors you have rigged, set up a prussic, abseil down in good form without a safety rope* and provide cover for their friend as they follow. If they are not ready to do this then leave it for another day. Once they have abseiled on a short slab participants will be ready for overhangs etc. With the right group you might then consider overseeing the participants as they abseil as a means to access a quarry pool where the only way out is to swim.

Figure 2. A worked example of G.S.E.C. Descent

I have used this progression on many occasions with a range of ages and overall the feedback has been good however it does not do to mark your own homework so I will leave it to the reader to try the approach described here and audit it using the MAAU criteria to inform your thinking.

This article has used some facets of good practice (Mastery, Agency, Authenticity, Uncertainty) in outdoor learning to critique and reimagine an approach to an abseil session. Along the way we have considered a worked example of the role threshold concepts can play in the risk management and overall facilitation of a session. I hope that some part of this might be helpful when planning your next session whether this be a well tried classic or something more innovative.

**What...no safety rope? There are many reasons why skilled mountaineers don't typically use a safety rope when abseiling among these might be their ability to maintain a strong stance reducing the risk of entrapment to a low level and the use of a prussic or tailing to safeguard against an inadvertent release of the rope. The idea here is that we only put participants in a context where they really need to move well once they have demonstrated they are ready for this. The approach described above employs a competence model where participants only progress because they have demonstrated skill at the previous level. The session typically involves participants completing 4 and 6 successful abseils before they are exposed to the risks described here. If progression to steeper ground is not appropriate the participants will still have gained a lot.*

Sources for background reading:

- Beames, S. (2016) *Adventurous Learning: A Pedagogy for a Changing World*. doi: 10.4324/9781315736488.
- Land, R., Rattray, J. and Vivian, P. (2014) 'Learning in the liminal space: a semiotic approach to threshold concepts', *Higher Education*. Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 67(2), pp. 199–217. doi: 10.1007/s10734-013-9705-x.
- Peter, L. (2011) *Rock climbing : essential skills & techniques : the official handbook of the Mountaineering Instructor, Single Pitch, Climbing Wall and Climbing Wall Leading Award schemes* . 2nd rev. ed. Capil Curig: Mountain Leader Training UK.

Images



Shearing, J. (2020) Image of a short but *steeper* slope following the gentle slope.



Shearing, J. (2020) Image showing a p 'tailing' as the group descend into a ravine at the stage of Steeper Slope 2.



Hosie, G. (2020) Image demonstrating using a prussic and sling extension to protect a steeper section.



Shearing, J. (2020) Image of final abseil, a crag based pull through.