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

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 -10⁰ 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 in1985 Sting urged us..."*If you love someone set them free.*" [1]

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,*" [2] while adventure may be an intrinsically motivating activity voluntarily entered into where the outcome contains a degree of uncertainty.[3]

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.[4]

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.[5] 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[4] with outcomes including leadership skills, group reliance, responsibility taking and personal awareness. Despite this there is some evidence that the provision of these experiences is decreasing;[4] if so then why might this be? Part of the answer may lie in the growing occurrence of 'overparenting' [2] or 'helicopter parenting'. [6] Helicopter parents, (first described in the late 1960s though probably extending much further back) who appear to continually hover over their children in a well-meaning desire to protect them from all forms of discomfort, have increased in number and reach. Despite intentions to the contrary overparenting can foster anxiety, stunt emotional maturation and suppress the development of resilience. Given that parents as a group represent major stakeholders in the outdoor learning sector, could their expectations have led to a corresponding inclination toward helicopter outdoor programmes and instructors?   Clearly positive outcomes are associated with the direct presence of outdoor professionals yet perhaps the intentional facilitation of autonomous adventures needs some revisiting. A good place to start may be some key domains of autonomy, the perceived ability to control what is done, when and why.   Are there aspects of our current practice where we as programme designers and facilitators currently assume control over who does what, where and when that might be meaningfully delegated? Are there occasions where we as facilitators may ensure a carefully managed progressive handover?

My aim here is not to prescribe, rather a call to reflection as to where outdoor provision may already be promoting and benefitting from autonomous adventure experiences as a by-product, where simple changes in current practice might enrich our participants experience and occasions where new programmes might be designed with a deliberate progression toward autonomy in mind.

Some reflective prompts regarding existing provision…

- In residential settings consider facilitating the dormitory experience progressively in terms of the amount of time spent there. Ask participants about their experiences of sharing a tent or dormitory – notice the stories they tell and reflect on how these might form a wider part of the programme?

- Young people are likely to resort to mobile phone technologies to insulate themselves from the discomfort of unstructured, autonomous experiences. Consider a progressive withdrawal or rationing of these and introduce more inclusive game opportunities such as packs of cards or age appropriate board games in the dormitory spaces.

- If evening programmes include activities such as wide games consider how far these might be designed with autonomy in mind or revisited with increasing amounts of autonomy during the programme.

- With regard to traditional forms of autonomous experience such as Duke of Edinburgh expeditions there may be a temptation to adopt a supervision stance that constrains the perception of autonomy reducing the potential impact. Clearly there is a duty of care and skill is needed to balance participant competence with foreseeable task demands.[4] 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.

- Non-traditional models of autonomous adventure programmes exist across the range of outdoor provision from the introduction of a small tent in the outdoor space attached to a nursery or the moments where a forest school practitioner steps back from a group of 6 year olds as they build and play in den. Are there ways in which these programmes might be developed to progress further?

For me Stings' 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

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