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Anecdotes: finding meaning in the stories we tell

'It's like dancing diamonds'

We came together for 90 minutes as part of an IOL webinar to explore what our anecdotes of 'best practice' might reveal about our profession. We were all sorts – educators, instructors, coaches, youth workers, health workers – an interesting bunch but a challenging start from which to find consensus with so many different activities, clients, environments and purposes. Yet there it was, amongst the stories we shared with each other about 'examples of our best practice' appeared several common threads in most and sometimes all the stories – the importance of reflection, autonomy, awareness, nature connection, creativity and, the standout theme, adaptability. So, we got stuck in to examining what the stories could tell us. Here's what we came up with.

Our first take was to explore what kinds of adaptability were going on.

Responding to the unexpected.

On the day the weather was cold with heavy rain showers; as the activity takes place with no set site or shelter provision, I decided to cancel the session due to the conditions and instead offered those who had booked a woodland 'nature' walk. I had a route sketched out; but before the start asked the participants if there were any particular topics they were interested in or how we might theme the walk. This way everyone would get to explore something of their choosing.

During the overnight camp, we suffered gale force winds that uprooted the tent. As the team struggled to resolve the issue, (the participant) remarked on how futile it had been for him to try and control certain behaviours of his past partners, and that they had always struggled against him 'in the same way this wind is blowing'.

Making the most of what, at first glance, might seem like a calamity had the effect of bringing leaders and participants together, perhaps levelling the playing field a bit and allowing the participants a stronger voice. It also resulted in the leader, having abandoned a plan, being more spontaneous, something with which participants resonated. Calamity also provided impactful moments rich in metaphor for one participant to turn into a reflection that helped him turn his life around. We think that not being in full control of every situation, even if we do have ways to retrieve ourselves when things are tricky, is a rich source of quality experiences.

Taking advantage of the moment.

The planned trip was to finish with a tiny rapid down a small shoot into standing waves. As I caught up with Emma grinning from ear to ear I could see her eyes fixed on the next bigger rapid and full of anticipation. We set off. When I reached the eddy, she was surrounded by other floaters, the safety team and her social workers. She was spinning slowly in the eddy, laughing. No one new she could laugh.

He stumbled and fell across a river crossing. Stopping to do some coaching on the side of the river following his fall, the coach was able to work with him on some values identification and consolidation with a short meditation session that encouraged him to connect into his breathing. Following the Retreat, the client remarked that returning home had been characterised by a clarity in decision making that 'the clean air of the Highlands' had allowed.

Spontaneity was part of the first two stories and was highlighted again by these two anecdotes. They highlight the value of paying attention and being responsive to the moment as well as the value of a team that has the resources and attitudes to adapt and pull together. Significant learning can be the result.

Respecting the diversity of participants.

They weren't the 'easiest' clients, but I felt I quickly 'got a feel' for their personalities, characters and individual requirements, through observation and questioning. To then be able to adapt my day, for them to gain the most out of it.

Provide an opportunity for realistic individual goal creation after the first shots and actively review. Utilise skills in games which promote differentiation opportunity according to assessed ability thus far.

Two stories from skills coaching contexts add to the first stories that also highlight the value of seeing each person as an individual and being able to respond, sometimes uniquely, to their needs and interests. We thought it was interesting that participants who stand out provoked these responses and that it would be good to pay more personal attention to those that don't always stand out.

Giving participants control

We decided on a model that enabled students to start each session, indoors in the classroom to record and reflect on the previous week, signpost their feelings for that day's session and a theoretical aspect to learn for that week.

The site has many pathways and every time a junction was reached I would offer a choice of route. We saw things like 'tree trunk foam' and miniature 'moss forests' on our journey and made tiny rafts from rushes to float on puddles. Exploring parts of the site few if any visitors ever get too, we even came across a small boat hidden under trees that maybe no one else on site had ever seen.

All the stories capture a shift in power from the leader to the participants. Either through circumstance or by design the uncertain, dynamic and creative situations drew out the agency of people who become more fully participants in constructing or making meaning of their experiences.

We went on to reflect on how the various qualities we had found in our stories were interrelated. In fact, we concluded that adaptability was intimately interwoven with other

qualities of our practice. Incidents provoked autonomy amongst participants, and creativity on the part of everyone. Reflection was spontaneous or deepened the learning opportunities for both leaders and participants and awareness all round seemed to be heightened by the need for immediate responses.

'I would say the experience of the practitioner enables the adaptability of the session.'

The stories also indicated that we had a view on what allowed us to be adaptable – and what could get in the way. We concluded that experience underpinned the confidence, creativity and range of the leaders' responses as well as enabling them to be clear about the boundaries of possibility: *'adaptation to client circumstance within boundaried programme but with flexibility to act within competencies and knowledge'*. Self-knowledge, knowledge of the setting and activities, and valuing prior knowledge of the participants were key: *'knowing the client base and expected needs to outcomes'*.

And what do we think gets in the way of serendipity, of going beyond the expected? It was having to work to predetermined outcomes set by institutions, funders and governments! Of course.

As one of us remarked, it is *'the agency of nature and ... the adaptability of the client as well as the instructor'* that we seek to experience and value. The essence of our practice, it would seem, remains person centred within a dynamic environment that has much to teach us when we are open to learn. You could read 'adapt' as readily as 'learn' in that sentence. It harks back to the eighties when 'learning to learn' was one of the profession's strap lines. As one of us said:

'I found two types of adaptability. One is in the flexibility of the practitioners and that were open ended about the outcome and were able to adapt their approach as events unfolded. The second was in the participant as they became more adaptable in their approach to solving problems and life in general as a consequence of engaging in the programme.'

Or, more poetically, as one of us quoted from a participant: *'It's like dancing diamonds.'* Perhaps this ethos is a key part of the glue that holds such a diverse field together as Outdoor Learning.

Authors: Di Collins, Victoria Foxwell, Adam Fry, Catriona Laird, Chris Loynes, Stu Meese, Dan Riley, Richard Smith and Jon Tylor.

Profile: The authors were participants in an IOL webinar in April. They come from various backgrounds in outdoor learning. The workshop was facilitated by Chris Loynes from the University of Cumbria.

Anecdotes as a tool for evaluation

'I have lots of evidence of our impact but it's only anecdotal.' In fact, the stories participants and leaders alike tell about their experiences are a significant source of evidence that can lead to greater understanding and convincing evidence of the impact of our work.

For this seminar, each participant was asked to send a short story of their best practice – no more than 250 words – before the session. These were shared with the group who were then guided through different ways to analyse this evidence. We hoped to find some meaningful insights. The aim was to have a better idea of how to turn 'anecdotes' into evidence of your impact. This can be a valuable tool for professionals and outdoor organisations seeking to develop their practices, build a community of practice and provide evidence of impact to stakeholders. In this case leaders provided the anecdotes. The same approach can of course be taken with participants' 'anecdotes'. Used this way they can provide a powerful tool for participants to reflect and share as well as a source of evidence of the difference an experience is making.