

In 2008, The University of Edinburgh hosted a conference entitled '360 Degrees on Expeditions'. Attended by leaders, expedition providers, academic researchers and policy makers, the conference established a clear demand for more focused enquiry into precisely these questions about learning on expeditions.

In 2010-11, Liverpool John Moores University, supported by the Young Explorers Trust (theyet.org) and Wilderness Expertise (wilderness-expertise.co.uk) funded that research project, and this article summarises the results.

The focus of the work was to gain a good grasp of what is known about expeditions from the youth development and learning perspective. Discussions in 2008 indicated frustrations with research that often stated the obvious or was published in such obscure places that it was very difficult to locate. Worst of all – frustrations regarding research that repeated previous research and did not 'build' or 'contribute' to the ongoing knowledge base. Furthermore, the project aims to develop an ongoing forum which develops 'practice-informed research' rather than the almost exclusive focus on 'research-informed practice'. The project is ongoing, and we are very interested in hearing members' responses.

WHAT IS AN EXPEDITION?

As we all know it's a 'journey with a purpose'. Our project was specifically concerned with youth development expeditions, which we chose to define as being over two weeks in duration, entirely self-propelled, and taking place either overseas or (in the case of the USA and Australia) at least out-of-state.

These expeditions are no longer a uniquely British phenomenon, but the roots of the movement can be traced back to that most British of enterprises, Scott's final Antarctic expedition of 1910-1913. Surgeon Commander George Murray Levick RN returned from an extraordinary ordeal to establish the Public Schools Exploring Society. He realised that young people (boys only, in fact – until 1980!) might benefit from an experience akin to what he had shared with his fellow Antarctic explorers. The first PSES expedition set off from Euston station in 1932 with the aim of surveying a wilderness area in northern Finland.

Since those early days, much progress has been made and the Young Explorers Trust now counts well over sixty organisations amongst its members. If these organisations share a common characteristic, it is

their adherence to an ethos which is not so far removed from that of Murray Levick's original vision – they strive to provide very high quality expeditions to overseas wilderness areas in the earnest belief that young people will learn and develop through their experiences.

We set out to review every study concerning these experiences since 1990. From an initial review of over 1500 items, we ended up analysing some 35 high quality studies in detail. What follows is a summary of our key findings – we've done the work so that these results are now accessible to a wider audience!

WHAT PRECISELY CAN YOUNG PEOPLE GAIN FROM GOING ON EXPEDITION?

We found that the personal growth which takes place on expeditions can be usefully summarised using this model:

- Upward to achieve one's full potential
- Outward to make contact and encounter others
- Inward to increase our awareness of who we are, and what we want, need, sense, feel, think and do
- Downward to touch earth, to be grounded and to connect.

We know that these outcomes are by no means universal and that the learning which takes place on expeditions is very varied and personal. However there were some specific outcomes which our study showed to be both common and well-evidenced. These are described in brief below:

- Confidence
- Resilience
- Sociability
- Ability to reflect.

CONFIDENCE

An increase in personal confidence is perhaps the best known outcome of youth expeditions, and the one which will spring most readily to mind for participants, parents and providers. The expedition experience is a series of freely chosen hardships, and it is the overcoming these hardships which produces an increase in confidence. 'I think other people will possibly look at me differently... it says something about you, that you have a certain character or personality that you'd want to do that.'

RESILIENCE

After an increase in confidence, an increase in resilience is the most widely discussed expedition

outcome. This is essentially the 'character building' of which the first youth expedition programmes were so fond. In the modern literature, there is some debate about the extent to which the lessons learnt on expedition transfer to more mundane situations in participants' home lives. Nonetheless, it is widely accepted that short term expedition experiences can produce a long term impacts.

SOCIABILITY

This is a complex set of related ideas encompassing feelings about others and practical social skills, ie behaviour towards others. The first kind of growth describes the emotive difficulties involved in the post-expedition period as relationships with old friends from home adjust and new friendships with other expedition participants grow in significance. This is a different phenomenon from the development of practical social skills such as increased facility for cooperating with strangers and not prejudging others.

Expeditions frequently involve close contact with peers from very different social backgrounds – something which can provide quite a challenge for the expedition leader! One surprising feature here is the very limited evidence for increased leadership skills. Often promoted as one of the outcomes for youth expeditions, there is little evidence to suggest this is something which young people learn.



FIGURE 1: SUMMARISING THE PERSONAL GROWTH FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WHICH TAKES PLACE ON EXPEDITIONS

REFLECTION

The research shows that both during and after an expedition, participants tended to increase their ability to reflect 'inwardly'. That is to say, they were able to think and talk about moral and metaphysical questions. What comes across strongly is participants' ability to turn this critical lens inwards during moments of calm and physical stillness during the expedition: 'When I stood on that peak, life suddenly felt real, I was in such awe of the landscape that I felt like sitting down and crying. I think a moment like that, you realise when and where in life you have gone wrong.' Readers interested in personal and social development through expeditions are encouraged to read Allison & Von Wald (2010) – details available on the website mentioned below.

HOW CAN LEADERS HELP EXPEDITION PARTICIPANTS TO LEARN AND DEVELOP?

We hope this section will be of practical use to expedition leaders when planning for an expedition. We do not wish to specify a causal link between any one leadership behaviour and a given development outcome. There is not the evidence to support that kind of claim and, as we have already seen, outcomes from expeditions are highly specific and individualised. There's no telling what young people might learn on your

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