

Chapter 5

A World of Adventure Education

Joseph Bailey

Linn-Benton Community College

Introduction

The global community is becoming more connected with each new technological breakthrough. Cultures are interacting in business and in multitudes of other ways. Intercultural exchanges are occurring at a frequency and depth that is unique to our time, and this situation requires a willingness to listen and understand and accept cultural perspectives. This is the situation of adventure education as it spreads across the world. Adventure education historically was an expression of colonialism. The Outward Bound model, for instance, was transplanted from Great Britain to Malaysia. It incorporated British ideas about education, philosophy of education, and instruction. These were offered to the Malaysian people, and there was little effort to incorporate Malay culture. Times have changed, and today those who would take an adventure education model into another culture are becoming aware that they must do so in a multicultural way, blending elements of the traditional model with elements derived from the particular culture of the participants.

This chapter is intended to be part of the continuing dialogue between cultures trying to understand each other. It is written in English, which has been the main language for discussion of adventure education in the world so far, yet this language carries embedded in it cultural assumptions, and this must be admitted. Unfortunately the work

of many who do not write in English are relatively unknown. There is limited appreciation in the English-speaking world of the thinking and practice of people outside of it. This must somehow be changed.

A Definition of Adventure Education

Adventure education involves a particular set of activities, often set in the outdoors. It uses kinesthetic learning through active physical experience. It involves structured learning experiences that create the opportunity for increased human performance and capacity. There is a conscious reflection on the experience, and application that carries it beyond the present moment. In this chapter, the definition of adventure education is based on the description of the experiential learning cycle of Kolb (1984), though admittedly this model is founded on cultural assumptions of the West. Also, a clear distinction must be made between adventure recreation and adventure education, with the emphasis in the former being on the enjoyment and satisfaction derived from an activity, while in the latter the social and personal learning is the key value. Priest and Gass (1997) provide a more detailed review of the definitions of importance here.

Adventure and Education

The very idea of incorporating adventure into education is puzzling from some cultural perspectives. In some countries, adventure may even seem contradictory to their educational goals. The culture of the United States supports and even mythologizes adventure, with the rugged and individualistic adventurer regarded in a heroic light. In Singapore, on the other hand, with its very structured and deliberate social system, one central goal of the educational system is to have all citizens working toward a common purpose, and the ideal is conformity to social norms. Stepping beyond the bounds of what is acceptable is not a desirable trait (Chew, 1996).

Adventure in the United States often carries with it the connotation of individual risk and divergence. In Asian countries there is a focus on the group and on convergence. Many adventure education practitioners have observed that U.S. participants have trouble with teamwork. Russians, on the other hand, work very well together, but have difficulty with personal initiative. Bill Proudman (1997, personal communication) was part of a program that brought members of the Association for Experiential Education from the United States to introduce adventure education to Russia. He observed that Russians could easily participate in a successful group jump rope exercise far beyond the level possible for most U.S. groups. Problems occurred when the Russians were asked to perform anything that was contrary to the norm, leadership, or group interest. At one point he asked the students to define experiential education, and they said, "Experiential education is what Bill Proudman wrote in the *Journal of Experiential Education*."

Dan Garvey's experience with a woman in India offers another illustration of these different cultural perspectives on the adventure education idea (1996, p. 27), and may help explain why the idea has not caught on in pre-industrial societies:

After I carefully explained how solos were often conducted within the Outward Bound framework, the wide-eyed woman slowly repeated to me, "You mean you take people into a remote setting, you take away their food and their shelter and ask them to survive for three days, and at the end of the three days, you collect the people, bring them back and talk about what it was like for them to be without food and shelter?" Then there was a long pause, and with the utmost respect, but with the most profound questioning, she simply said, "This is what you call education?" Having been to India on several occasions, I tried to imagine a woman who worked with the untouchable community in Madras, a community in which members spend a significant

amount of their time every day simply obtaining food and shelter. How difficult it was for her to imagine deprivation of these basic needs as being an educational experience that one would pay money to take part in.

The point here is that even the most basic assumptions that are taken for granted in one culture, may be inconceivable to people in another. The adventure programmer in India will need to find some other approach if he or she is to contribute to the growth of someone with such a different life experience than that of the programmer.

The Adventure Experience

Another challenge is to identify the activities which will be appropriate for a cultural setting other than the one in which conventional activities have worked well. The list of activities used in adventure programming is long: backpacking, canoeing, caving, climbing gyms, community service, desert trekking, kayaking, mountaineering, orienteering, rafting, raft sailing, rappelling, rock climbing, ropes courses, running, solos and others. The selection of activity may involve several factors including physical geography, native experience and expertise, and historical experience. The physical environment will obviously determine what can and cannot be done. If there is no snow, skiing is out. No mountains means no mountaineering, and so on. More subtly, the very approach to teaching may be influenced by the geography. For instance, the rugged terrain and consistently bad weather of the North Cascades in Washington leads to a style of leadership that may be called directive or even controlling. The risk is such that students must learn many skills before they can be trusted with their own safety. Some Europeans have observed that such a teaching approach doesn't change when the American instructor is working on terrain involving much less hazard. The tendency to be directive is still there. So, the geography is one factor that affects the selection of activity and programmatic structure.

A second factor is native experience and expertise. What do the people who live here do that might provide an appropriate cultural analogue to conventional adventure education activities? Karl Rohnke (1996, p. 7-8), for instance, discovered that games are highly prized by the Inuit people of Baffin Island. Most of the games occur in a small indoor space because of the climate. Maintaining a high level of expertise at the competitive games required putting up with considerable pain, as in cheek pulling. People stand side-by-side and pull each other's cheeks and the one who can stand the pain the longest is the winner. This may seem like an odd example, but the point is that cultures have their ways of learning and enjoying themselves, and such activities might provide a starting point for initiating adventure education.

Sometimes people may not wish to play the games conventionally used in adventure programs because they make them appear silly or threaten loss of face. Most games used in the United States would not work for the Germans, Italians or Turks for these reasons (Emiroglu, 1997, personal communication). Also, gender roles vary in different cultures. Kunz and Putnam (1996, p. 6) offer a good example from Russia:

The staff was excited about the activities . . . but in working with them over a period of time, a different issue emerged—that of leadership and control. Particularly among men and women . . . the core group, the men who had been taking the greatest roles, were unconvinced that women had anything to offer in this arena. It became clear that what was needed was some experiential learning! We asked if they would like to do an activity the following day in which the women took the leading roles and the roles that required the most strength. “Yes” from the women; cautious exchanged glances from the muscle-flexors. The next day, we brought the group together and asked them to do a Trust Fall activity in which the women would catch the men. Silence and dropped jaws. There were many, both men and women, who were hesitant, but the women who had spoken up the day before stepped forward and began organizing themselves as catchers. It was clear from their faces that this was a traumatic moment. Several of the women were tight-lipped, the men more so. No one stepped forward to be the faller. “You go first, Brian!” We had gone through a few introductory trust activities leading to this point, but it was clear that few minds had been altered. Lifetimes of thought patterns, the social constructs of previous generations, preassigned roles dictating leadership and the order of the sexes were all being challenged.

The people in the Russian example were not ready for such a challenge to the norms of their social order. The activity chosen is one of proven usefulness in many contexts, but this time it was not the best choice. Or, it came at the wrong moment in a sequence of experiences. The program goal was not served. The citing of examples of this sort could go on, but the point seems clear—choice of the activities that comprise the adventure experience must be appropriate culturally. Much study of the cultural assumptions and conventions is a necessity when moving a program into a new cultural context.

Other differences between nations and cultures of interest to adventure educators include:

1. Conceptions of teamwork, individual initiative, and leadership vary. In some cultures the individual is subjugated to the group, while in others individual initiative is highly prized. In Australian aboriginal communities, for instance, there is great emphasis on community and interdependence and there is sensitivity to the effects of one's actions on others (Campbell et al, 1995, p. 143). Teamwork is more highly prized in some places than others. Americans are taught from their early schooling to act individually and be competitive; working together is more the norm in Malaysia (Cheong, 1996, p. 50).
2. Responses to the stresses of adventure activities may reflect cultural values:

Participants in experiential programs express their discomfort in “strange” ways. Some participants might laugh out of context at the “misfortune” of other team members in order to hide their own feelings of embarrassment and nervousness. Most Asians are not fond of touching each other, and would find any training activity involving close body contact to be very difficult. In addition, few Asian participants are able to “open up” and share their feelings in a deep personal way. (Campbell et al, 1995, p. 144)

3. A common discussion heard among instructors around the world focuses on the wish for administration, risk management and social constraints to go away so that they can “just teach.” Each country, though, has its own unique set of organizational and social challenges and solutions that support or hinder the delivery of adventure education.
4. Risk management is more of a concern in some places than others. Adventure educators in the United States must deal with the most severe threat of litigation, thus they must focus most carefully on risk management. Risk management is less of a concern in Russia, Germany, and Australia.

Conclusion

Years ago I sat on the banks of the Selway River in Idaho with a small group of visiting Japanese students. They stared up at the stars in complete awe. Every one of them had a deep appreciation of nature, yet none had before

experienced the celestial light of a clear night sky. They stayed up most of the night just looking skyward—one of those unplanned moments in a learning experience that are so common around the world. Adventure education will continue to spread around the earth, in part because it helps people find moments in their lives like this. The Maori of New Zealand will continue to develop their formalized adventure education based on their multigenerational knowledge. The social workers of Belgium will use their knowledge to sculpt a unique version of adventure education, as will the Outward Bound instructor leading a course through the Florida Everglades. Native wisdom across the world will offer new sights to adventure programmers. The challenge for all of us will be to listen, to understand and appreciate the diversity that exists behind different languages and borders.

Luca Santini's words (1996, p. 36) apply to most of the adventure programs around the world:

Adventure is still a new and pioneering field in Italy. I do think that regardless of cultural attitudes or initial resistance to adventure, the fundamental mechanisms—getting people involved, creating a supportive environment and cohesive group—work for everyone and in every culture.

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