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Adventure Expeditions as Innovative Educational Practice



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Synonyms

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In many educational settings, there is a trend toward enhancing student learning by adopting new and innovative educational practices. Commonly, these innovative practices encourage more active, engaged learning and compel students to participate in a variety of “hands-on” experiences such as Kuh’s (2008) “high-impact educational practices.” This move to innovate is partly motivated by the shortcomings of the mass delivery of education that evolved as a result of industrialization when parents began working in the wage economy and schooling was formalized and organized into what today is often known as primary, secondary, and tertiary (post-secondary) education. This shift changed what and how children learn. Rather than learning being a natural outcome of the process of living in family or community groups, learning, too, was industrialized: buildings were built, students were grouped

into classes, content was chosen and delivered by teachers, and students’ disciplinary knowledge was tested. Ironically, perhaps, the current quest to innovative teaching may be a return to teaching practices of the long past. The goal of this entry is to use Beames and Brown’s (2016) adventurous learning model to demonstrate that adventure expeditions share many characteristics with Kuh’s (2008) high-impact educational practices and to make the case that both adventure expeditions and high-impact educational practices are simply good teaching.

A History of Adventure Expeditions

As schools and colleges reinvent their curricula in order to enhance learning, attract students, and add meaning and relevance to their programs, they often highlight experiential learning in many forms including study abroad and a variety of outdoor and field experiences. These experiences are frequently framed as adventures. In some regions of the world (e.g., North America, Europe, Australia, and New Zealand), combining adventure and learning is often seen as beginning with the Scouting Movement (1907) and the creation of Outward Bound (1941). Both these organizations used outdoor adventure expeditions such as hiking, climbing, and sailing in order to engage students in mentally and physically challenging experiences where students were required to work together in order to travel from point A to

point B, to meet their daily needs for food and shelter, and to function as a group. As a result of these adventurous expeditions, it was believed that students developed character that would prepare them to live well and make meaningful contributions to society. Nonetheless, taking students outside and engaging them in the natural world where they combined sensing and thinking in hands-on experience has historical roots significantly pre-dating Scouting and Outward Bound. For example, Comenius (1592–1670) believed in sensory learning and the need for experiencing the actual object of study. Similarly, Rousseau (1712–1778) advocated for learning through direct experience where physical activity and sensory learning were central. As well, Pestalozzi (1746–1827) believed in combining academic and practical skills to enhance learning and promoted the use of local schoolyards and landscapes in order to provide hands-on experience for students (Raiola and O’Keefe 1999). Looking back, it could be that these early educators were intuitively developing and promoting an organic form of good teaching practice.

Research over the past 20 years has identified many positive learning outcomes resulting from adventure expeditions. These outcomes include personal, social, and technical skill development, enhanced understanding of human-nature relationships, and cultural and global diversity. Common critical elements of adventure expeditions that facilitate these outcomes have been identified as the activities of the expedition (e.g., hiking, climbing, sailing), new environments (e.g., nature-based and new cultural settings), intentional processing and reflection (e.g., journal writing, group discussions), the group experience (e.g., living, working, and traveling in small groups), and mental and physical challenges (e.g., personal and social experience, wild-land travel) (Asfeldt and Hvenegaard 2014). The adventurous learning model aims to facilitate such outcomes, and the critical elements share characteristics of high-impact educational practices.

The Adventurous Learning Model

Beames and Brown (2016) developed the adventurous learning model to guide teachers of all kinds working in diverse education settings. The model espouses four pillars which support infusing adventure into classes and courses “for students to be more deeply engaged in learning that has a high degree of meaning and relevance in their lives” (p. xviii). These four pillars are: authenticity, agency and responsibility, uncertainty, and mastery through challenge.

Authenticity connects “learners to the physical and social worlds that they inhabit” and “connect [s] learning to the everyday lives of participants” (p. 50). This is contrary to many students’ experiences of learning where there is little connection to the world around them (e.g., local environments and issues) and their common experience of life (e.g., being a teenager, living in a technology driven world).

Embracing student *agency and responsibility* allows students to have more choice regarding how and what they learn, requires a high level of engagement, and shifts ownership and responsibility for learning from solely the teacher toward a more shared teacher-student model. This contrasts learning experiences which are dominated by specific goals and outcomes (e.g., what they will learn), defined structure (e.g., how they will learn), and little opportunity for true ownership and responsibility (e.g., little choice or individuality).

Uncertainty requires that the outcome of the learning experiences be undetermined or unknown. Specifically, Beames and Brown (2016, p. 74) argue that “where there is uncertainty, one is required to find new solutions and experiment with new ideas or actions; one has space to be creative rather than repeating previous actions.” This differs from many post-industrial educational experiences where students are encultured to seek the answer or outcome the teacher is looking for (e.g., structured experiments where the outcome is known).

Finally, *mastery through challenge* allows students to develop a high level of competence through immersive experiences (e.g., long-term projects, extended field trips). As well, mastery through challenge suggests that the learning experience is within the students' abilities and does not deliberately elicit panic, anxiety, or fear as many adventure activities sometimes do by pushing students into activities that are far beyond their physical, mental, and emotional ability (e.g., climbing difficult pitches before mastering fundamental climbing skills).

Beames and Brown's (2016) model of adventurous learning is aimed at addressing issues arising from the formalization and mass delivery of education: lack of meaning and relevance, limited student choice and creativity, predetermined outcomes, and superficial learning where mastery is unlikely. It is easy to see these shortcomings in many educational settings where teachers and administrators are working with constraints such as large class sizes, limited budgets, and many logistical and legal hurdles. In addition, Beames and Brown are critical of many outdoor and adventure programs that have succumbed to many of these shortcomings of traditional public schools because they too have adopted a mass delivery system (often with good intentions) that is budget- and efficiency-driven: more students equals more profit and/or funding.

Adventure expeditions where a small group of students (12–20) are accompanied by a passionate and skilled teacher or two, if done well, can enhance authenticity, agency and responsibility, and uncertainty and facilitate mastery through challenge which can lead to many positive learning outcomes. However, at first glance, adventure expeditions are often perceived as expensive and are therefore deemed not cost-effective (yet, when compared to the full cost of sport and science programs and facilities, for example, this is a more difficult argument to make). Conversely, when viewed through a pedagogical lens, adventure expeditions can be very effective. Nevertheless, as with any pedagogical approach, adventure expeditions can lead to mis-educative experiences and result in long-term mental and

emotional suffering, even death, if poorly designed and facilitated (see Raffan 2002).

Adventure Expeditions for College and University Learning

The Association of American Colleges and Universities describes essential liberal learning outcomes as including “broad knowledge, intellectual and practical skills, personal and social responsibility, and integrative learning” (Kuh 2008, p. v). Kuh recommends the inclusion of at least two of the following high-impact practices in order to achieve the goals of liberal learning: first-year seminars and experiences, common intellectual experiences, learning communities, writing intensive courses, collaborative assignments and projects, undergraduate research, diversity/global learning, ePortfolios, service learning and community-based learning, internships, and capstone courses and projects. A number of these practices are conducive for promoting authenticity, agency and responsibility, uncertainty, and mastery through challenge; adventure expeditions employ practices similar to a number of these high-impact practices.

Strangely, the literatures of adventure expeditions and high-impact practices rarely intersect. This may suggest that there is an intuitive sense among good teachers that (a) these high-impact practices are natural pedagogic practices and/or (b) that adventure expeditions organically facilitate the use of teaching practices similar to these high-impact practices. Regardless of (a) or (b), it could also be that educators who use adventure expeditions do so because of their intuitive sense that expeditions will lead to engaged and meaningful learning and not because they intentionally or systematically set out to use a specific high-impact practice.

Nevertheless, there is a powerful synergy between adventure expeditions and high-impact practices. Specifically, *first-year seminars and experiences* at US colleges and universities have incorporated adventure expeditions for many years (e.g., outdoor orientation programs). *Learning communities* have been created as a part

of immersion semesters where a cohort of students combine a variety of courses from a number of disciplines that are taught as a part of a semester long adventure expedition. Expeditions have also included *writing intensive* experiences where students produce a significant writing project, sometimes personal narratives that are rooted in their expedition experience. This writing is frequently scaffolded and includes peer assessment. Adventure expeditions often include *collaborative assignments and projects* such as working as a group to choose an expedition route, planning logistics, preparing and packing food, making decisions before and during the expedition, creating an expedition mission statement, and sharing expedition leadership. *Diversity and global learning* outcomes have also been accomplished using adventure expeditions by including participants from diverse cultures, racial groups, and ethnic backgrounds. Given their intense and intimate nature, expeditions intrinsically promote high levels of engagement between these diverse groups. *Service learning and community-based learning* can also be combined with adventure expeditions. For example, adventure experiences can be planned and led by a group of outdoor/adventure education students who then lead a community group on an expedition. In this way, students can apply their learning in the real-world setting of adventure expeditions. Projects centered around environmental and/or social justice issues are also frequently linked with adventure expeditions. *Internships* can also include a variety of aspects of adventure expeditions such as leading expeditions for school and community organizations while being supervised and coached by adventure professionals. Finally, adventure expeditions can be built into *capstone courses and projects*. For example, a capstone course or project might include designing, planning, and leading an adventure expedition for the students in the capstone course or other community group. In such cases, the expedition becomes the performance or deliverable of a culminating experience where senior students are required to integrate and apply what they have learned during the course of their high-school or post-secondary education.

When examining Kuh's (2008) high-impact educational practices, it is possible to imagine how these practices facilitate authenticity, agency and responsibility, uncertainty, and mastery through challenge. Beames and Brown's (2016) adventurous learning model and Kuh's (2008) high-impact practices are synergistic, and both encourage the return to good teaching that has been difficult to achieve as a result of the constraints of mass education. Therefore, while not listed by Kuh as a high-impact practice, there is a strong case for considering adventure expeditions as such and including adventure expeditions as an innovative practice in many educational settings. Nevertheless, realizing these synergies can involve challenges, such as limited teacher knowledge and experience, logistical and legal hurdles, and time and financial constraints.

Adventure Expeditions and Challenges for Teaching

Teachers must have adequate training and experience in order to lead adventure expeditions. This is especially true for longer, more remote expeditions such as backcountry canoeing or backpacking expeditions. This training and experience includes certifications such as first aid, river rescue, and wild-land navigation. As well, this certification must be coupled with personal and professional experience in order to develop the necessary judgment required for safe travel.

There are a host of logistical and legal hurdles that must also be addressed. These can include complex transportation arrangements (with drivers often requiring an advanced driver's license) and planning food to meet special dietary restrictions. Legal issues include ensuring that teachers remain current on standard practices and have policies and procedures in place that protect themselves and their host organization in the event of an incident or accident that might result in legal action.

Including an adventure expedition as a component of a student's education requires a significant time commitment on the part of the teacher and the student. Naturally, an expedition requires time

away. This means time away from family, friends, and other work obligations for the teacher and time away from other classes and activities for students. Often, this time away is difficult to account for in a teacher's workload and can also result in a delicate balancing act for students.

Finally, many K–12 schools, colleges, and universities do not have organizational systems and structures in place to support and facilitate adventure expeditions. As a result, providing expedition experiences is often a trail-breaking act that requires a great deal of commitment and initiative from the teacher and support from their organization. Combining these and other challenges make adventure expeditions the exception rather than the norm in many educational settings. However, when these challenges are addressed, outdoor adventure expeditions can lead to meaningful learning experiences for students (Asfeldt and Hvenegaard 2014).

Teachers who have incorporated outdoor adventure expeditions into their teaching commonly point to these expeditions as a highlight of their teaching experience and perceive that students experience remarkable learning and development. Some of this learning and development is because of intentional program design, but much is also due to serendipitous experiences that naturally occur as a part of adventure expeditions.

For example, in Canada, students and teachers sometimes have magical encounters with wildlife that result in unexpected numinous experiences, happenstance interactions with indigenous people that have provided new insight and understanding about Canada's colonial past, and commonly work through personal and social struggles that enhance self-awareness and resilience. These serendipitous moments point to an additional challenge of adventure expeditions: they are unpredictable. Teachers who embark with students on adventure expeditions need to accept that they give up some control of what students will learn and how they will learn. There may or may not be magical encounters with wildlife,

happenstance encounters with indigenous people, or personal and social development. There are many aspects of the expedition that are beyond a teacher's control and ability to anticipate. Therefore, teachers and students need to be flexible and adaptable in a much wider variety of factors than in the typical classroom setting. Education is always a messy affair; this messiness is amplified during an adventure expedition, yet the rewards can be great (Asfeldt and Hvenegaard 2014).

As educators face the challenge of educating students in and for the twenty-first century where climate change, political polarization, unrest, and a growing gap between the rich and the poor, all coupled with a myriad of other inequities continue, we may be well advised to look to educational pioneers such as Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, Powell and Seton of Scouting, Hahn of Outward Bound, as well as many others, to reacquaint ourselves with the essence of good teaching.

There are important lessons to be learned that can inform our teaching practice by looking to the future and to the past. By looking ahead, we can begin to anticipate the needs of future students and the world they will live in. As well, we can begin to imagine the barriers and opportunities that we will need to navigate in the process of providing them with a meaningful and effective education. At the same time, by looking to the past, we can remind ourselves of some universal principles of good teaching that have been in use for hundreds of years. It is easy to be distracted by the drive to adopt new and innovative teaching methods and technologies, yet sometimes we risk "innovating" ourselves away from rather than toward the fundamentals of good teaching. In such cases, it can be helpful to return to teaching practices of the past in order to reorient and re-ground ourselves. The use of adventure expeditions guided by the principles of adventurous learning and high-impact educational practice can be this reorientation and re-grounding.

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