



An Analysis of Facilitation in Sail Training: Observing Facilitator Behaviour as a Contributing Factor in the Development of Young People

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Context

Learning can be considered as a means of generating and assimilating knowledge, skills and competencies which provide the foundation for satisfying increasingly complex needs and enable us to modify our behaviour and therefore survive and prosper within a competitive, rapidly changing and advancing world (Laal & Salamati, 2012). Learning is widely considered to result from experience, yet as Dewey (1997, p. 25) famously stated not “all experiences are genuinely or equally educative”; research shows that for experiences to be educative they must be personalised, cumulative, reflective, and relevant. Formal pedagogies which guide much education provision in the UK are vehemently criticised for not being implemented in a way which instills enduring and individually relevant learning. Non-formal and practice-based pedagogies are valued for associations with learner-centred and “lifelong and lifewide learning” (Festev & Humberstone, 2006, p. 8) which responds to evolving theory and carefully considers and appraises process.

Much current research, which replaces a historic faith in the usefulness of non-formal personal and social development programmes for young people in the outdoors, has been criticised for focusing heavily on outcomes and often disregarding the many processes which contribute to ‘proven’ positive results. Consequentially, we have little more than a broad and unsubstantiated understanding of how such programmes ‘work’ which is problematic as it prevents practice from being augmented. This research responded to calls for process-oriented and empirical studies of outdoor programmes and set out to identify and share the actions and behaviours of facilitators which may be pivotal in the creation of educative experiences. Such an approach may give rise to more effective “evidence-based practice” (Allison, 2014, p. 143) which may help to “establish the credibility of our field” (Priest & Gass, 2005, p. 308), may enable providers to better understand and attribute meaning to their work, but most importantly may help to ensure that provision is educative.

Methods

This qualitative study took place specifically in the context of sail training, a recognised platform for personal and social development which is currently associated with a narrow research base of variable quality. Research occurred on three vessels operated by different organisations which all have the development of young people as their primary aim and have a reputation for excellent practice. Influenced by aspects of ethnography, enculturation was a dominant feature whereby the researcher lived on board and participated in activities to observe, learn about, and interpret features of facilitation. Observations and resulting interpretations were guided by sensitising concepts informed by a thorough review of literature concerning experiential and personalised learning pedagogies prior to entering the field as well as previous experiences of facilitation and sail training, thoughts and personal values.

Findings and Discussion

Facilitators observed during this study were seen to adopt a wide range of complex strategies which can be linked with personalised and experiential pedagogies. Many adopted an innovative and flexible Rebecca Hind (May 2016). bexly123@hotmail.com. Supervisor: Dr Pete Allison

approach to programme design and delivery and reacted to information gained from an assessment of need and progress as opposed to rigidly conforming to a plan or a list of predetermined outcomes. They promoted self-regulation, agency and self-realisation by permitting learner 'voice' and 'choice', thought to be two of the most powerful 'gateways' to personalised learning, by allowing young people to devise, own and achieve personal goals, and by encouraging young people to experiment with, and apply newly, or previously acquired knowledge and thus learn autonomously and independently. In one case, facilitators created opportunities for young people to learn experientially and without guidance or direct supervision. Questioning was used extensively by facilitators to support and guide young people to develop higher-order thinking skills, to think critically and analytically, to form judgements and opinions, and to generate knowledge more independently. Facilitators were also seen to encourage young people to be reflexive, to know, understand and assess themselves, to review and transfer learning, and provided feedback which on occasion was constructive. They created social opportunities, grouped young people by ability and need, promoted peer coaching and collaboration, catered for a variety of learning preferences and multiple intelligences and ensured that provision was novel, enjoyable, multi-disciplinary, relevant, challenging, and prioritised 'learning to learn' and the growth of personal and social skills over fixed and specific content relating to sailing. Further they were exemplars of, and encouraged desirable character traits, and permitted young people to be motivated by, and engaged with the learning process.

Whilst there were variations, facilitators largely designed and delivered 'high-quality' programmes which are thought to have permitted *deep experience*, *deep learning*, were underpinned by *deep support* and thus were educative to some degree.

Several improvements are recommended. Firstly facilitators should look inwards, for reflexive thought is the first stage of improving practice, and specifically should consider the way in which they may or may not utilise 'best practice' strategies. It is also recommended that facilitators should work to provide an experience in which young people may become more independent and responsible, and are able to self-regulate their learning more. Further organisations should educate facilitators about the processes and value of personalised and experiential pedagogies with the aim of ensuring that all facilitators have a repertoire of approaches that can be applied to varying contexts and are confident in using them thus ensuring the likelihood that provision is informed and purposeful. Fundamentally, whilst many programmes are associated with 'proven' outcomes, providers should not rest on their laurels and should focus on *improving* rather than *proving* practice, a sentiment that is at the heart of this research.

Future studies should be empirical and process-oriented and should aim to comment on the outdoor context and generate succinct and substantiated "context-mechanism-outcome pattern configurations" (Pawson & Tilley, 1997, p. 77) thus linking particular aspects of facilitation with specific personal and social development outcomes. The field would also benefit from larger-scale studies and research which investigated facilitators' espoused theories, judgments and decision making.

References

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