

THE IMPORTANCE OF WILDERNESS BASED DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

In trying to provide an insight into my understanding of the benefits of wilderness based personal development programmes for young people, I am reminded of my own early days as an outdoor activity instructor back in the early 1970's when I discovered that the early development of experiential education in reality encompassed a range of characteristics that went back to innovative experiential educators like Kurt Hahn who proposed "learning through doing" as a way of building "maturity and character"

Over sixty years ago, Hahn expressed his concerns that individuals and in particular, adolescents – in contemporary western societies – lacked significant, responsible roles, and that instead of receiving incrementally increasing levels of responsibility, many received responsibility that was little more than that given to young children.

Hahn went on to set up Outward Bound programmes based on his belief that wilderness experiences and rescue training embodied the values of tenacity, responsibility, judgement, self-discipline, and compassion.

Whilst his programmes were initially designed for the general population of adolescents, the Outward Bound model has since been applied to a wide and diverse clinical population around the globe and has grown and developed into a multitude of programmes catering for a wide cross section of the community. Clearly, such resources and facilities are no longer exclusive to 'normal' adjusted young people from a middle class background.

For example, in Canada and the United States, it is an important component part of adolescent and adult mental health recovery work, and in particular, for those individuals who have turned to a wide variety of self-destructive and self-abusive behaviours such as drug and alcohol misuse.

In Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, it is being utilised as the foundation for marginalised youth entering into the employment field, and in New Zealand and Australia, it is widely accepted as a vital part of the overall strategy in motivating positive behavioural change with young people who find themselves marginalised and disenfranchised from family and society due to their inappropriate and anti-social behaviour patterns.

Here in the United Kingdom over the past few decades, it has been utilised as a 'tool' to effect personal change, growth and development through raising self esteem, self worth, social development skills among many other areas assisting individuals to attain their own level of personal developmental goals.

In today's modern world where change is evident within every aspect of our lives, this is never more felt than by those individuals who find themselves marginalised within their family and/or society, who in addition to struggling in order to keep up with a demanding and changing world, struggle daily with trying to better understand themselves within the context of their lives and the social situation they find themselves in.

Whether they are aware of it or not, they are in reality engaged continually in exploring what it means to be human.

This is in essence, a spiritual journey through which they struggle to come to terms with mysteries and uncertainties of human existence whilst trying to establish meaningful standards and values by which to live by.

In addition, they seek to identify worthwhile goals to aspire to on a variety of levels, yet, at the same time, struggle to develop the understanding of a multitude of diverse life skills through which these

may be achieved in spite of, not because of, their presenting behaviour patterns, their social status situations or their academic or intellectual capacity.

In our rapidly changing world, new and appropriate approaches to self-learning are called for constantly.

The importance of not supporting and assisting young people from all walks of life to prepare for a successful 'journey' into full social inclusion, is obvious - the cost of failure in this task will undoubtedly be a financially burden for society and local communities, but more importantly, continue to expand the numbers of individuals who find themselves excluded from the very society they should be an integral part of.

The challenge for all those working with - and for - this section of society, must be to empower them as individuals to be able to cope effectively with the many choices, problems and opportunities which face them, and yet at the same time, help them to develop a real sense of community, citizenship and belonging.

There can be no doubt, that the 'human' need for excitement and challenge can, if unfulfilled, express itself through anti-social behaviour, delinquency and criminality, alcohol and drug dependency, vandalism challenging behaviour or violence.

Experiential education, irrespective of the name we give it, embodies the potential to go some way in satisfying this 'human' need in a positive and appropriate manner. When such programmes take place in wilderness settings, there is an added dimension to the potential outcome for individual participants – appreciation for nature and the natural environment; the value of ecological conservation and sustainability of working to decrease the carbon footprint we all leave in our wake as we pursue our own goals in life, and introduces young people to a place where external distractions such as noise, pollution, peer pressure, family conflict, inter-personal relationship issues etc seem to pale into insignificance when confronted with the wonders of tranquillity, raw and uncontaminated nature along with an opportunity to experience internal and external 'space' within which to make a connection to their inner self, the quintessential component for all development and change.

It is clear to me that the world of the 21st century and beyond will be unlike any we have known. Therefore, if we are serious in our intentions to prepare and support young people in order for them to grow positively and confidently within the world they are inextricably a part of, then we have no choice but to tackle the issue head on.

The least we can therefore do is to help develop their capacity to learn as much as is humanly possible so that they can be appropriately equipped for whatever challenges they meet along their difficult life's 'journey'.

To aid us in this endeavour, we have the ability and capabilities to tackle this issue on seven fronts:

1] Both compulsory and post compulsory education should in itself, provide all members of society with the skills and 'tools' they will need for their life's journey irrespective of their social status, academic ability, or functioning levels of intellect.

In essence, experiential education (under any guise or terminology) should be viewed as an essential part of the wider holistic educational curriculum, both within and without a formalised educational setting.

Such an approach would go some way in helping to identify and develop personal qualities essential to the education of the 'whole' person and also provide an important spiritual dimension.

There can also be no doubt, that participation in a wide variety of experiential educational activities, can strengthen self-confidence, improve relationships and encourage good judgement. As a result, individuals will be better able to develop the values, skills and understandings that will help them move towards social inclusion and hopefully, responsible citizenship.

2] In the social context, many young people may become disaffected and disenfranchised from formal learning as well as feeling that they are not an active or valued contributing member of society, let alone within the local community they live in.

Social as well as educational exclusion is in itself, a major barrier to learning and therefore to change taking place. In this context therefore, some individuals may fail to reach their full potential as an individual, or, as a valued member of their wider community that is so vital to instilling a sense of respect, for both the self and for others.

This in turn may lead the individual into a lifestyle based on self-fulfilling prophesy. For example, basing their inter-personal relationships on the 'false' belief, that they don't deserve help, that they are in fact bad, mad or useless and therefore a waste of space, or that they are not loveable or likeable as a person and as no one shows respect to them, then they don't need to show or give respect to others. In this context, they may believe that there is no reason to behave otherwise or to change their disposition or demeanour.

In this scenario, the individual may well become trapped in a downward spiral leading them into possible depression, self-destructive behaviour, anti-social behaviour patterns, or even into a negative mental health well being crises.

We should therefore recognise the contribution experiential experiences within the outdoor adventure activity medium can make in motivating such individuals to develop their social skills which in turn would allow them to reconnect back to the value of life long 'learning' and more importantly, to positive self-discovery.

Furthermore, experiential experience elicits and encourages a responsible attitude towards excitement and risk which may replace other forms of excitement seeking and the need for a constant adrenalin rush, or of 'living life on the edge'.

3] In the business world, employers readily identify those personal qualities required in a work force so essential whether we like it or not, to safeguard survival in a financially driven market economy.

The ability to work as part of a team, to take orders and respond accordingly and to eventually lead others in pursuit of economic growth, requires among other attributes:-good communication and listening skills, effective interpersonal skills, an ability to recognise the need for change, to overcome challenges, and, to utilise initiative, drive and motivation not only in themselves but in others.

Experiential educational activities can be a most effective way of developing these qualities within individuals.

4] Utilising the wilderness natural environment within which to carry out personal development programmes whether for pure adventure, for learning, for therapeutic purpose, for individual or group development, or, just to allow others to experience or re-discover a 'lost childhood', is just one approach to providing a unique opportunity in supporting individuals as they explore their natural surroundings. Such an approach would allow for individuals to safely explore themselves as a valued functioning individual.

Within such programmes, individuals can learn to appreciate natural resources, understand the importance of conservation, and, to be aware of the finely balanced relationship between humanity and the sensitive eco-system that exists on our planet.

5] In sport and recreational terms, both group and individual activities can become a route through which all individuals may be introduced to a wide range of physical and aesthetically rewarding sports, hobbies and leisure activities.

Many adventure activities are built around non competitiveness, although within all adventure activities, for those seeking competition, a niche can always be found.

Outdoor activities may be pursued at any level of difficulty, allowing for progression from beginner to high levels of excellence. In essence, activities cater for every age range, for every behavioural manifestation, and for every level of intellect and physical ability and capability.

Such activities are also ideal for life-long participation at a variety of levels and may of course, open 'doors' into other mediums and areas for individuals to grow and develop.

They encourage active healthy lifestyles, benefiting each individual as well as society, and can be an effective tool for building self-esteem and instilling feelings of self-worth and value to the self and to others.

6] Personal Growth & Development is essential if young people are to develop into productive members of the society they live in irrespective of their academic or intellectual achievements.

Adventure therapy, therapeutic adventure, experiential education, adventure activities, outdoor education, field studies, wilderness therapy or whatever name you wish to call what you do, can be a cost effective 'tool' in aiding personal growth & development across a wide and diverse area.

Without doubt, the most debilitating characteristic of human development is clearly seen with individuals who suffer from continued low self esteem, feelings of low self worth, a lack of self confidence, an inability to make and sustain meaningful relationships. In essence, the lack of believing in themselves may well prevent the individual from operating at a level that affords them an opportunity to live their lives on a 'level' playing field and in particular, that of academic achievement and by inference, prospects for continuing meaningful employment.

Research clearly shows us that those individuals who participate in some form of experiential educational activity, have more opportunities to develop a wide variety of essential life skills, for example, leadership, communication and listening, making and sustaining inter-personal relationships, all allowing for them to be better equipped to overcome challenges that they will face during their continuing developmental lives.

7] Spiritual development is an essential component part of who we are as a person. It is my experience that as many young people align individual spirituality with religion, they miss out on the opportunity to discover their own internal spirituality within the context of who they are and why they exist. Consequently, many harbour an identity crises in that they see no value in themselves individually as a human being but view themselves as just another small insignificant cog in a big wheel which they have no control over.

Maslow once said that all human beings make an unconscious journey through five stages throughout our lives and that whilst we look for fundamental things such as physical needs, safety needs, love and friendship needs, many of us aim for the penultimate level – self esteem and feelings of self-worth. However, whether we acknowledge it or not, we consciously or subconsciously seek the ultimate level – self-fulfillment and self-actualization.

If we explore what is really meant by the terminology self-fulfillment and self-actualization, we note that it is in essence the centre of our own 'spiritual' being, the one place where we once existed without life's 'baggage' and contamination.

Wilderness environments allows young people unique opportunities to operate, test out, discover and take on board elements that they feel they need in order to view themselves as a unique human being who whilst may be a small cog in a large wheel, they are non the less essential and an important component part if that wheel is to continue to rotate.

Clearly, any experiential educational programme, irrespective of where it takes place or in what format, can be a valuable resource within which we can help all young people raise their self-esteem, feelings of self-worth as well as helping them develop positively irrespective of their presenting behavioural traits.

We as outdoor practitioners should not forget the three most common themes that permeates the Complex world of personal growth & development which faces us all but more importantly young people:-

Change must emanate from some form of learning;

Learning can only take place when there is motivation to do so;

Motivational change is not a natural human trait.

Perhaps it is time for us to remind ourselves of Hahn's ideals and philosophies and whilst back then, they related to a young 'middle class' population, today it must surely relate to all those young people who find themselves either excluded from, or situated on, the fringes of today's ever changing and demanding society, or feel they are a square peg which has to fit into a round hole in order to survive and compete in the 'human jungle' that is our existence.

Clearly, such individuals and groups, require external support in order to be able to find the motivational levels to effect any necessary change if they are to find their own way in this complex, uncertain and rapidly changing world finding their rightful place on that 'even playing field of life'.

We should be mindful of the resultant consequences if we squander this golden opportunity.

Some things are desirable,

Many things are probable

But all things are possible

Whilst my main aim is to train, advise, help and support other practitioners towards being at a point when they themselves can plan and instigate appropriate outdoor programmes for young people, I will occasionally agree to accompany a group into the outdoors and oversee therapeutic activities, ceremonies and rituals if this is part of the overall programme. My fees are always negotiable.

A list of the therapeutic activities that I deliver can be found below although no one programme has all the listed activities, ceremonies and rituals present but of course, I am open to discussion as to what should and should not be included in any outdoor programme.

List of Activities, Ceremonies and Rituals that I currently deliver:

Wilderness Therapeutic Work

Paying due regard to using Vision Quests as a Rite of Passage for modern day youth and to support individuals with low level mental health issues.

- Using Journey sticks as a means to sustain experience.
- Building a Therapeutic Ceremonial Doorway in Nature.
- Using Trees to connect with the inner self.
- Using string (with/without trees) to define connectedness with others and the self.
- Using the Solo experience as a Rite of Passage [using your own frame of reference]
- The power of the written word approach within the solo experience.
- Using the Natural Environment to represent your understanding of your own life story.
- Viewing your life, past, present and future through Nature's window.
- Re-inventing the new you - (photos and old clothes ceremony)
- Re-connecting to a magical and special awareness - (toy or toy representation)
- Use of Journey memory sticks.
- Toon Cards and Pocket Spirits.
- Tacky Talk sessions – [The ancient Inuit Way].
- Walking your internal labyrinth on Nature's external path.
- Stone Sculpture.

Of course, these activities, ceremonies and rituals can be delivered in any combination and for any specific purpose.