

Gone missing

Are we missing the opportunity for long-term development?



AUTHOR
Simon Waller

Simon Waller spends his year working between a top flight boarding school and freelance provision of Outdoor Education around the UK. Simon is most often found exploring the sea, playing in or on any waves he can find, watching the animals and marvelling in the beauty of the endless sky.

As the world is getting busier, we are becoming more time constrained and the temptation is to take an off-the-shelf experience rather than take the time to understand our clients' wants and needs. In some cases, this decision to jump to the end result means that we miss the opportunity to develop good judgement. In the following article I explore the reasons for this and the potential missed opportunities for learning and developing experience.

In this article, a recreational client refers to a member of the general public with no aspirations to become an instructor, coach or guide. They have come to you with a set goal in mind. The professional client is a member of the public with an aspiration to become a competent Outdoor coach, instructor or guide.

Over the last decade working in the Outdoor sector as an expedition leader, coach and centre manager, I have noticed a seeming drive to fast track experience, in order to get to the higher levels of an activity: to the cost of the traditional apprenticeship (learning the trade).

From a recreational perspective it is possible to pay your way to experience by buying experience from others, and with, for example, the recent changes to Bronze DofE, the pathway to experience has been simplified. Originally there was a need to complete a trip similar to the assessment, before the assessment experience. Now students, as a minimum, do some training and a single assessed expedition. This may make the award more accessible, which is a positive, but I wonder what the cost is to skills? Similarly in the professional world, fast-track instructor schemes promise to take a novice practitioner to a qualified instructor within a matter of weeks.

This article doesn't intend to set a level, or speed, for progression, but is more an observation that rapid development may lead to a diminished depth of understanding of the risks and problems associated with the Outdoor activity, when compared to those who have developed their skills over a longer time period.

"A skilled instructor has the judgement to make this balancing act work, but newer leaders can get into difficulties if they choose an exciting and challenging option without having considered the possible consequences."

Barton and Brain (2).

As identified by Barton and Brain there is a need to develop experience and

good judgement. Historically, a walker might start scrambling, move on to climbing, climb harder, climb in the alps and then finally move on to the greater ranges. This traditional development path allows "frontier adventure" as described by Mortlock (3); frontier adventure is where an individual experiences adventure very close to their limits. These limits constantly stretch during the journey to reshape the comfort zones of those taking part. This also allows for learning opportunities, when things go wrong, to be more manageable within the level of skill possessed by the individual participating. By buying in experience to allow us to operate beyond this level, we are possibly encouraging a short cut around the experience pathway, for individuals without the knowledge of how to adapt techniques to changing environments and contexts.

Good judgement is hard won from experiences gathered in the learning process. The longer and more varied the learning process, arguably the stronger the judgement skill set is, in both the recreational and professional user.

This judgement can also come from the experience gathered from others, whether through anecdotal stories, attending a course or reading a book.

"Use judgement rather than the opinions represented in this book."

McGrath and Ellison (4)

For me, reading a book can transfer the knowledge behind a skill, even show you how to use a skill, but it cannot make up for a diversity of experience deploying a skill and choosing when not to use that skill. For example, I have read endless articles and books, attended courses, sought coaching, watched videos about the kayak roll... but can I reliably roll my boat? Not as well as I would like. The problem is that I dislike being in the water, so the practical reinforcement and learning phase is missing, essentially the experience of rolling and all the variables are lost on me. Ultimately, my lack of practical experience is the limiting factor and so judgement of what is the right skill to deploy is missing.

As an experienced instructor, I have come to accept that teaching the technical skills can be easier than developing the knowledge of when to deploy them. In ten minutes it's possible to teach a technique that can then have a lifetime of variations in application and consequences in poor deployment. For example learning how to perform a draw stroke is simple, but learning when to use it, how much power to use, how to link into the next stroke, or what else could

“It is important to remember there is no substitute for experience.”

Chris Brain (1).

you use, creates a lifetime of choices and potential outcomes. It can be difficult to develop this interest within a recreational client group who often want to learn the next thing, rather than develop that particular new skill. I have found that to sell the idea of the apprenticeship, it is important to show clients the possibility of independent trips and experiences through developing their knowledge base.

The British Canoeing coaching policy encourages coaches to work towards obsolescence (5); focusing on teaching learners independence with the intention that as the learner develops their own skill sets and judgement, the coach will no longer be required. However, I have found to my cost that encouraging a client to follow a progression to achieve competent independence does not always resonate with the client and can put them off the long-term apprenticeship required.

I once set a long development plan for a recreationally motivated client, which used British Canoeing star awards as development markers. I failed to notice that the tests were not exciting the client. By losing my client-centred approach, I lost the client who instead went to a competitor selling the client's dream trip off-the-shelf, rather than developing their skills to a level where they could explore it themselves. This set me thinking about whether my recreational clients cared about the style of the trip or if simply being on the trip made the difference? If I had the opportunity to re-live this experience again, I would take more time to develop a long-term program that excited my client; I would be more specific and a lot less generic with my programming.

As professionals, I think we are only as good as our experiences and we should

GET PLANNING

See pages 22 to 23 for the different ways to connect Outdoor Learning with schools.

be constantly searching out new and novel ways to challenge our perceptions of the limitations of skills. By actively searching these situations out, we are better informed to be able to keep our clients safe and advise the best options available to them, rather than only present a single answer to solve a problem. We should be working to develop independent clients who are able to safely and effectively manage their

future development and know their level of ability. This will avoid them overreaching their capabilities, whilst also knowing how to develop their stretch and comfort zones, to expand their personal capacity. Knowing their stage of development will help to avoid as many of the pitfalls of inexperience as possible and allow them to seek their own personal next step.

It isn't only good news for our clients; long-term development can have a

positive impact on us as providers as well. A focus on long-term development creates clients who are developing their skills and keeping their interest growing; this means a returning client who will be ready for you to take them across the next step. This can push the coach to develop their own practice to keep the client interested and challenged. No more routine coaching sessions, as every session is designed by the client to develop along the route that they have chosen for themselves. It's exciting to work in this way and can really feel the most rewarding when the student passes some key moments, for example the first time the client plans and prepares their own trip successfully.

In conclusion, we have looked at the reasons for taking a long view to skills development and experience creation. We have taken a look at the need for having a range of experiences and how this can be transferred into a better experience. We have also looked at a variety of clients and their long-term development aspirations. The key thing I have tried to establish is how we are missing a trick at the moment by focusing on short term quick fixes and experiences rather than developing the unconsciously competent client.

It's going to be interesting to see how this develops in the future. Will the market for long-term clients dry up as the potential client is lured to a guided "no decision-making required" experience? Will there be a movement to client-centred long-term development approaches? I know which way I will be working ■

Asking the right questions?

Here are the questions I ask myself when working to develop a client-focused apprenticeship approach:

- Q What was it in my development that allowed me to catch the bug and get to where I am today? How can that be applied enthuse my client?
- Q What is the long-term goal of the client? Are they a one-hit experience client? Are they interested in long-term development and a lifelong interest in the sport?
- Q Does the client want to be independent in the activity, or are they content with a guided/supported activity? For example, some clients love walking, but want to be led each time they go on the hills, so they can focus simply on the enjoyment rather than the decision-making and safety aspects.
- Q Am I the right person to get them there? Do I have the skill set to help them achieve their goals? Do our personalities match productively? Do I have the time and motivation to take them all the way to their finish line? If I honestly can't answer the questions in a positive way, I would rather pass on the client to another provider than develop a quick buzz for the client that leaves them further from their goals.

If responses to these questions suggest there is a possibility I am the right person to work with the client on a long-term basis, I then take time with the client to really understand what they want to achieve and how we can work together to generate the greatest variety of experiences. This experience generation phase is the key to developing lifelong learners and starting their pool of knowledge in the most productive fashion.

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