Chapter 1

Introduction

We are passionate about the role that well-conceived and facilitated educational experiences can play in enriching students' learning. Together we have over forty-five years of involvement in education, in a variety of roles, such as high school teacher, youth worker, outdoor instructor, university professor and researcher.

The rationale for this book is rooted in our concerns about the state of education in today's world and the path it is taking. We believe that the potential benefits of mainstream education and outdoor adventure education have been increasingly restricted and marginalized to a point where neither offers a strong platform for meaningful student learning. In this book we have articulated some of our concerns and made some suggestions for an alternative form of practice that we hope will both enrich students' learning experiences and stimulate educators who are seeking to broaden their repertoire of practice.

The state of any educational policy and practice is located within the greater social, cultural, political and economic times in which it exists. This may seem like an obvious statement, but it is an important one to begin with, as the content of this book would not have had so much relevance twenty or fifty or a hundred years ago. This book addresses a system of education that has been substantially shaped by a rapidly changing world that is a feature of the 21st century.

Consider how different life is now when compared to how it was for your parents or grandparents. Back then, there was no internet and there were no cell phones. Breathable fabrics and the use of plastic in the

construction of kayaks were in their infancy. These new and improved material objects brought about by technological advances are easy to spot. The non-material aspects of 21st-century life are much harder to define, however. Many of these non-material aspects have affected social structures (e.g., notions of the family unit), career opportunities and lifestyle choices. Much of this has to do with (un)predictability and uncertainty regarding the future. These days, people are less likely to know what lies ahead of them, in terms of the jobs they will have, where they will live and how secure they might feel. Our lives are increasingly filled with uncertainty and speed. Giddens (1999) referred to this as the *Runaway World*.

Now consider two of the big criticisms that we hear about education in so-called 'developed' nations. You'll have heard that there is too much standardized testing and that classroom sizes are too big. These criticisms, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, are usually a consequence of educational budgets being under-supported by central or local/state governments, so that decisions about learning and teaching are often made on an economic basis, rather than on educational ones. In order to teach more people with fewer resources, an industrialized model of education, based on the rationalization of goods and services, is implemented.

Perhaps the most classic example of economic rationalization is what Ritzer (1993) labelled *McDonaldization*. With McDonaldization, organizations control, calculate and constrain their operations to such a degree that they become highly efficient. The positive side of this is that an organization's production can be highly predictable. This kind of prescribed operational process might be fantastic for an American traveller in Shanghai who wants to have a Big Mac; however, it is this standardization and prescription that is a major problem for contemporary education. One reason why this is a problem has to do with recognizing that people are not "all the same". When we treat everyone the same, we are making a judgment on what is best for people that is usually based on our understandings of what is good and right. What is valued in some societies as knowledge is ignored in others, and universalized 'knowledge' that is divorced from learners' historical and social contexts may be of little relevance or interest to them. The 'one size fits all' approach to education has failed a range of groups (e.g., indigenous peoples, immigrants and students from low socio-economic backgrounds).

We discussed earlier how education is a reflection of its time, and hopefully this idea is clearer now. The major challenges of our era, such as climate change, wars based on religious beliefs and public health (e.g.,

obesity, global pandemics), demand creative solutions that will not come from students who have learned to become excellent test-takers. Society needs young people who have been educated to address real-world issues on a planet that is moving swiftly.

It is through education itself that we have the means to change educational processes. Ken Robinson (2011) argues that we need to run our education systems in "radically different ways" (p. 5) if people are to survive and flourish. We are optimistic enough to believe that together we can provide some resistance to what might be termed 'the ills of education', but we are not so naive to think that this kind of change will happen overnight; it may take several years, if not a generation. Education is a highly politicized and complex enterprise with formalized learning outcomes, and educators have an ethical obligation to consider how the knowledge, skills and attitudes they teach are put to use.

This book has been written for a wide range of educators: early years teachers, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, college and university professors, youth workers, wilderness expedition leaders, adventure activity instructors, corporate trainers and coaches. If you teach anything, this book has something to say to you. This may seem like a bold and even arrogant statement. Some may think that one book cannot possibly cater to such a wide audience. We believe that education of all kinds—indoor and outdoor, nearby and far away, with little people and big people—has gone down the same path to a point where there is less and less uncertainty (in terms of its outcomes and processes through which they are achieved), minimal participant power (what we call agency), fewer opportunities to learn in real-world, authentic settings, and too little emphasis is placed on mastering skills and knowledge that can be put to good use.

The book contains nine chapters that build on the foundations provided in this introductory chapter. In Chapters 2, 3 and 4 we outline some of the challenges and issues facing contemporary education, while in Chapters 5 to 8 we explain the four key dimensions of adventurous learning. We close the book with a chapter that discusses how the four dimensions can be considered together when designing and delivering engaging and meaningful learning for your students.

The forthcoming chapter delves into the meanings of adventure. As we will see, the definition of adventure is incredibly broad and one that many people will be able to make connections to in their home life, work, school and play. What do you think is an adventure? Consider the adventures that you have experienced in the last three months. Did these adventures

happen by accident? Did you pay for these adventures? Did they involve 'typical' adventurous activities (e.g., paragliding, rock climbing) or did they involve something unexpected happening (e.g., getting a flat tyre while driving)?

In today's world, the word adventure means many things to many people; it is subjective and culturally relative. What constitutes an adventure for one of us may be utter boredom for someone else, and while our white, privileged male selves may seek adventure to construct and maintain a certain identity in society, people living in different circumstances (e.g., unemployment or social deprivation) may have no desire to augment the considerable levels of uncertainty and risk they involuntarily face on a daily basis.

Themes of adventure pervade western society and are evident in the choices people make about everything from clothes, to holidays, to leisure activities, from the dominant modes of charity fundraising, to children's birthday party activities, and even the post-apocalyptic video games that are so popular. What do these kinds of adventure have to do with education? Not very much, we would answer! We do argue, however, that meaningful education in the 21st century demands characteristics of adventure. There is an urgent need to reclaim the essence of 'adventure' and more deliberately incorporate key elements of it into our educational practices.

Chapter 3 is entitled the *Socio-cultural Backdrop*, and explores how our taken-for-granted, day-to-day actions are in fact highly influenced by the fast-paced, sophisticated and powerful economic forces that pervade society. One of the tensions present in contemporary society, which is in an increasing state of flux and uncertainty, is that many people crave predictability (perhaps as a consequence of this fluidity). Consequences of late modernity's rationalized features of social life manifest themselves through increasing regulation, standardization and prescription in both mainstream education and non-school-based outdoor education.

We will see how the collective theses within Beck's (1992) *Risk Society*, Giddens' (1991) *Modernity and Self-Identity*, and Bauman's (2007) *Liquid Times* give us a theoretical platform upon which we can examine what we mean by adventure. Notions of adventure, risk, challenge and uncertainty can only be considered within a micro (educational) context once they have been understood on a global, socio-cultural level. This discussion becomes more complex when we take the changing young person into account as well. The educational adventures that a 'digital native' child, who is largely disconnected from the natural world, might want to

undertake, will contrast greatly with those of someone born even thirty years ago. Universalized and context-free adventure activities delivered to school students in many western countries fail to connect with the lived-experiences of youth in a globalized age.

For some people, the antidote to the pitfalls of conventional schooling could be found in organizations like Outward Bound, the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and Project Adventure. Over the last fifty years, however, outdoor adventure education, with its promise of personal and social development, has fallen into the same trap of rationalization, prescription and regulation as has mainstream schooling—the very style of education to which it was claiming to be an alternative. The 'naturalness' of highly orchestrated and contrived adventure pursuits being delivered by experts in 'place-ambivalent' settings, has been questioned by a number of writers. Formerly uncontested notions of the importance of perceived risk and the transfer of learning from one social situation to another are no longer philosophically supportable and are poorly evidenced. Adrenaline-filled fun activities invariably require so much knowledge and judgment for safe participation, that inexperienced young people are only able to exercise minimal agency and authentic decision-making.

The focus on delivering a bewildering array of activities alongside inescapable forces of commercialization (with their need for efficiency and predictability) has, paradoxically, eviscerated the potential for adventurous learning within contemporary adventure programmes. Chapter 4 provides a multi-faceted, coherent argument that outlines how outdoor adventure education, in its dominant guise around the world, fails to meet its full potential. Such a critique is a necessary platform upon which we can begin to redefine this critical relationship between adventure and learning.

At this point in the book, the scene has been set and we move to explaining how the four dimensions of adventure *(authenticity, agency, uncertainty and mastery)* can inform the development of an adventurous learning environment.

Chapter 5 on Authenticity explains how it is vitally important for students to see the value in the tasks in which they are engaged. This is not always the case, as educational activities are frequently viewed by students as a sequence of tasks to complete in order to succeed in some kind of assessment, which then permits progression to some kind of next stage, but which has few (if any) concrete, useful links to their daily lives. Our view of authenticity in education is rooted in what might be called 'real-world' learning contexts. Of course, classrooms are in the real world,

but (at best) they are often one step removed from the democratic issues, cultural practices and curriculum-imbued surroundings that exist outside school buildings.

Our notion of authenticity is linked to Dewey's call for education not to be viewed as preparation for the future, but rather, be full of meaning in the present. Authentic experiences are those that have deep relevance with the current lives of our students, rather than the acquisition of abstract knowledge (or Freire's notion of 'banking') that may be useful in the future. Unlike decontextualized ropes courses and algebra exercises, authentic learning opportunities *here and now* help students to understand and learn from the world as experienced in the present. Many authentic learning contexts exist in the school grounds and local neighbourhood, while others involve working with community organizations in service, conservation, citizenship or enterprise projects.

For students to engage deeply in learning they need to be provided with opportunities for ownership and responsibility. Another word for having this kind of power—one adored by sociologists—is *agency*. Agency is the focus of Chapter 6. Young people have a hunger and curiosity to learn about the world they inhabit, and we advocate for students to be equipped with the skills, knowledge and power to be able to make informed decisions regarding the circumstances they encounter throughout their educational career.

This is not to vanquish the role of educators, as they are central to the quality of their students' education. Indeed, although we are perhaps stating the obvious, unlike learning—which people have been doing since the beginning of time in the absence of formal schooling—education involves an educator (Itin, 1999; Roberts, 2012). Educators' reason for being is to facilitate learning that will help students and society benefit in equal measure. In adventurous learning environments, their role (in our view) is to consider the value of sequenced learning experiences that afford students opportunities to evaluate various courses of action, construct and execute plans, and be prepared to deal with consequences. Agency is a crucial dimension in our conceptualization of adventure and is interwoven with our development of the concept of mastery through challenge.

The third dimension in adventurous learning is Uncertainty. This chapter outlines the vital necessity of pedagogical approaches that feature uncertainty of outcomes and of process. Our approach to adventurous learning contrasts with commercialized, packaged and highly regulated 'adventures' that feature replicable and predictable outcomes, and which are so typical of many tightly scripted contemporary adventure education

programmes. School-based educators inhabit a world of set lesson plans with pre-determined outcomes and pressure to cram-in packaged content within a fixed time frame. A distinguishing feature of our conception of uncertainty is the emphasis placed on process and the need to create space for learners to exercise curiosity and creativity, rather than restricting these attributes through rigid adherence to defined lesson plans or achieving predetermined outcomes.

We are calling for a reappraisal of educational activities of all kinds, so that students can experiment, learn from trial and error, and make mistakes without the threat of physical or psychological harm. This is not wrapping our students in cotton wool; it is about providing space for experimentation within carefully considered boundaries. Indeed, powerful learning experiences can come about when neither the teacher nor the students know the solution to a given problem and must work together to find it. The rationalization of mainstream educational outcomes, coupled with the standardization and commercialization of adventure activities (that require replicability and certainty), undermine student agency and severely limit what can be learned and how it can be learned. Following Dewey's notion of the *indeterminate situation*, uncertainty is a cornerstone of adventurous learning.

Chapter 8 discusses the crucial ingredients of Mastery through challenge. We know that not enough challenge leads to boredom and too much often results in feelings of helplessness or inadequacy. We are concerned that adventure-based educators have been culpable of confusing discussions of educational challenge by using the terms 'risk' and 'challenge' almost interchangeably. This has led to the development of 'novel' activities that, while fun, take the form of entertainment rather than education, thus diminishing opportunities for learning.

Appropriate challenges requiring the acquisition and application of skills are vital to enduring learning and can contribute significantly to building one's positive sense of self, thus underscoring the role of agency in attaining goals. In our view, the mastery of skills has an important role to play in developing learners' capacity to act and to be responsible for their choices. Appropriate learner-driven challenges, with their ensuing struggles, frustrations and successes, can lead to high levels of satisfaction.

We are conscious of young people's needs for authentic challenges that have meaning in their everyday lives; 'real-world' challenges lie in opposition to contrived tasks, such as rappelling off a tower or crossing a 'toxic swamp' using three planks of wood, which some people may find challenging, but from which limited useful and applicable learning may result.

We do our students few favours when we mistake high thrills entertainment for learning; entertainment may lead to short-term pleasure, but meaningful, enduring learning requires sustained effort. Too often, short-term novel activities do not demand that participants take control of the direction of their learning through developing and applying skills that build on prior knowledge. While suitable challenges may involve elements of risk, we strongly argue that artificially constructed physical risk-taking has no place in our conception of adventurous learning. The discussion needs to be centred on suitable, authentic learner-based challenges that lead to learning, rather than on fabricated and highly regulated activities that bear little resemblance to the challenges faced in real life.

The final chapter is where we explain how the features of adventurous learning—authenticity, agency, uncertainty and mastery—come together to guide practice and programme development. We present a schematic representation of adventurous learning that can be used to evaluate current educational practice and to inform future programme design, lesson planning and approaches to teaching. We are understandably cautious about the provision of 'the model' of adventurous learning, but we are also aware that as practising educators it is helpful to be able to have a conceptual model upon which to frame one's day-to-day thinking about how best to prepare today's learners for a changing world.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this book is to examine ways in which aspects of adventure can enhance indoor and outdoor teaching practices and positively influence learners. For us, this examination is not possible without having a deep understanding of both the various meanings of the word 'adventure' and the context of education in the early 21st century. Our belief is that too many educational enterprises dressed as adventure education are not very adventurous at all and, because of this, the amount of learning that they are capable of eliciting is greatly limited. The book's discussion moves us towards an enriched pedagogical approach that will provide early years teachers, primary school teachers, secondary school teachers, pre-service teachers, college and university professors, youth workers, wilderness expedition leaders, adventure activity instructors, corporate trainers and coaches with the tools to critically reflect, evaluate and develop their practice.

We encourage you to engage with the material presented with a questioning frame of mind, to engage in dialogue with your peers, and to

experiment with the ideas put forward. Like you, we grapple with the day-to-day practicalities of teaching and the associated administrivia that seems to be the 'lot' of educators in modern educational institutions. The ideas that follow are drawn from our own trial and error, frustrations and successes, and desire to better equip those with whom we interact to be better prepared for a world that will not decrease in complexity and uncertainty.

You'll notice that we use the term 'adventurous learning' throughout the book, as opposed to adventure education. The word 'adventurous' is particularly appealing to us, as it comes with less 'baggage' than the ubiquitous term 'adventure', which is discussed in Chapter 2. The *Oxford Concise Dictionary* (2008) defines adventurous as "Open to or involving new or daring methods or experiences" (p. 19). It follows, then, that the kind of learning that we espouse be hallmarked in this same way.

We shared an earlier draft of the book with colleagues who acted as critical friends and kindly suggested improvements and modifications. Some reviewers found it helpful to skip ahead to the final chapter and see how the four dimensions of adventurous learning could be illustrated with diagrams. Others wanted to get to the 'solutions' part of the book first (from Chapter 5 onwards) and come back later to the 'issues' section (Chapters 2–4). Both of these ways of approaching the book are perfectly acceptable; indeed, in a book on adventurous learning, we wouldn't want to be too prescriptive to our readers. You have our permission to move between chapters in whatever order you like.

With this introduction, we warmly welcome you to the uncertainty and challenge of adventurous learning. We hope you will gain the knowledge and desire to develop authentic learning experiences for your students and implement this approach in your own contexts.