

Great adventures?

Simon Beames, lecturer in outdoor learning at Edinburgh University, presents a framework for adventurous learning that can be used to analyse your own teaching practices.



What was the last adventure that you had? Did you pay for it? Or was it something that happened to you unexpectedly? When I ask people this question, they often cite examples more akin to being stuck in traffic with a sick child, than those of going to Alton Towers for a day. Others say, “well, it depends what you mean by an adventure”. And that’s a good question!

The trusty Oxford Concise dictionary tells us that an adventure is an ‘unusual, exciting, or daring experience’. Scholars tell us its ‘outcomes cannot

be predicted to any great degree’ (Higgins, 2001) and that it involves ‘a degree of uncertainty’ (Mortlock, 1984). Perhaps, most importantly, an adventure is ‘a challenge that will demand the best of our capabilities – physically, mentally, emotionally’.

As we dig deeper in to the meanings of adventure, we see how it is individually and culturally relative. People have their own subject views on what constitutes an adventure and what doesn’t. Similarly, many people across the world may have adventure



as an unwanted feature of their everyday lives.

These multiple meanings may not matter much for our daily conversations, but they have become too vague for educational discussions. We need to re-conceptualise the word ‘adventure’ in order to gain (what academics might call) theoretical purchase on it.

Before delving into this reconceptualisation, we need to consider the socio-cultural ‘back-drop’ against which adventures take place. First, we live in a time of constantly evolving technology, increasing complexity, global migration, and hyper-fast communications — we want more and more, faster and faster.

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Second, sociologists explain that our society is dominated by a ‘risk culture’ (Giddens, 1991), where people are obsessed with ‘minimising bads’ (Beck, 1992). Contemporary life has been called ‘Liquid times’ by Bauman, to reflect the fluid nature of our careers, relationships, and everyday practices.

But what does all of this have to do with education?

Well, this social world has yielded the neo-liberal, market forces which have in turn shaped educational practices. Teaching and learning has morphed into bits of information being taught and tested (Roos & Gibson, 2006), standardised testing reigns supreme (Hursh, 2006) and the curriculum narrows (Hess & Bringham, 2000). Taken together, these features limit teachers’ capacities to respond to students’ individual needs.

Even outdoor adventure education, which blossomed under the premise of running counter to the above rigidities, has fallen prey to these powerful societal forces. We see this in residential



outdoor centres that have become ‘McDonaldized’, through commercial imperatives yielding programmes that are highly prescribed, calculable and predictable (Loynes, 1998). In other words, they’re not very adventurous!

All of what I’ve written so far points to a paradox: life in liquid times is characterised by uncertainty, change, and complexity, yet educational practices are moving in the opposite direction and becoming increasingly predictable, standardised, and rationalised.

My question is: how can learning be more adventurous?

At its most fundamental level, education needs to equip young people with the tools to thrive in a world that is constantly changing. Achieving this requires ‘a pedagogy of adventure’ that features uncertainty, agency, authenticity and mastery.

Educators of all kinds can consider incorporating these four themes more deliberately into their teaching.

About Simon Beames

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For nearly 25 years, Simon has taught outdoors in North America, Asia, and Europe. He is former co-editor of the *Journal of Experiential Education* and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society.

Using uncertainty as a tool means having learning pathways and outcomes that are not fully predictable. Tasks need to offer multiple possible courses of action, where there is not one right answer. Such tasks serve to elicit creative responses from students, where they imagine solutions, refine ideas, and put them into practice (Robinson, 2011). Crucially, most uncertain situations can only be successfully negotiated through deep reasoning (Dewey, 1938) and innovation. ➤

Students must have enough agency to influence what is learned and how it is learned. The key is teachers providing appropriate 'autonomy support' (Deci & Ryan, 1987) – just enough for students to have some independence, but not so much that they are powerless. Much of this involves being given the 'right' kinds of choices: relevant, not too many, and cognitive (i.e., about learning content, rather than minor logistics - Assor, Kaplan & Roth, 2002).

Authenticity concerns what is 'real' and encountered in ordinary life experiences. An obvious starting point is the landscape's inherent curriculum. One vital educational question that can be asked anywhere is 'what can be learned here?' (Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

Responding to 'place' means that we don't need to rely on contested notions of transfer of learning between greatly differing contexts. Drawing on Dewey (1897), education needs to be regarded as a 'process of living' rather than 'preparation for future living'.

The final feature of adventurous learning is mastery, which is about consummate skill and commanding knowledge. This concept is rooted in discourses of challenge, rather than risk, and draws on theories of 'self-efficacy' (Bandura, 1977) and 'flow' (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

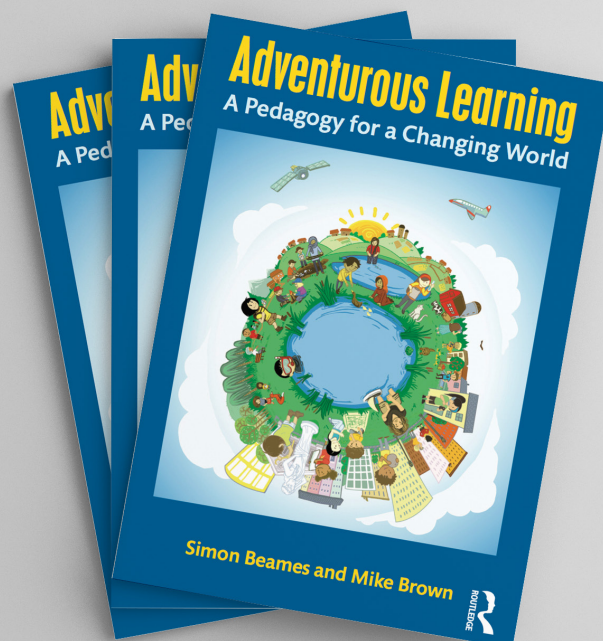
Challenging tasks demand the acquisition of skills and knowledge to make decisions, take responsibility, and take action. Overcoming challenges requires tenacity, personal investment, and an ability to overcome setbacks.

These four concepts are not necessarily value-laden. Indeed, educators may have good reasons for using prescribed methods and artificial settings. When viewed collectively, the uncertainty, agency, authenticity, and mastery framework can be used as a tool to help you analyse your own teaching practices and enable meaningful discussions between educators, parents, and pupils.

Simon's book, *Adventurous Learning: A Pedagogy for a Changing World*, co-authored with Mike Brown, will be available to buy at the end of 2015 and is published by Routledge. ○

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Adventurous Learning.