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ABSTRACT

This study explores how high school students learn from their experiences in an extracurricular adventure program and illustrates how students' narrative inquiries relate to experiential learning. Twelve canoe trips were studied by participant observation methods. Data were collected from recorded interviews with students and staff, field notes, film and video recordings. Observations suggest that students' stories serve five educational functions; that is, they serve: (1) to authenticate the experience; (2) to interpret the experience; (3) to call attention to relationships; (4) to transmit cultural lore; and (5) to influence outsiders. Further analysis of the stories indicated that story-telling is a natural process involving spontaneous meaning construction and reconstruction over time to account for new experiences. The paper includes examples of students' stories that illustrate the educational functions of story telling. This study suggests that stories serve important purposes in learning and teaching and that story telling occupies middle ground between the extremes of formally structured class discussions and leaving the experiences to speak for themselves. (LP)

# THE GOAT PORTAGE:

# STUDENTS' STORIES AND LEARNING

# FROM CANOE TRIPS

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**Abstract: An ethnographic study of students' stories on canoe trips is used to explore the problem of how students learn from their experiences. Narrative inquiry is combined with experiential education practice to show that story telling occupies middle ground between the extremes of formally structured class discussions and leaving the experiences to speak for themselves. Students are portrayed as people who naturally and unconsciously construct meaning from their experiences by telling stories about them. Stories serve important purposes in learning and teaching.**

## Introduction

One of the most difficult questions that skeptics ask outdoor teachers is, "What do students learn on wilderness trips?" The question conceals another one, namely, "How can a person possibly learn anything under the conditions of wilderness travel?"

These questions belong to the broader issue of how anyone learns anything from experience. It is easy to provide experiences for students. It is more difficult to ensure that learning follows, because only the student can do the essential internal work to convert experience into learning. Recent research suggests that telling stories about one's experiences is a centrally important process in learning from them. Clandinin and Connelly (1991, p 259) claim that making and telling stories "is a fundamental quality of education."

Experiential educators have tried to get to the heart of learning from experience. One of the best accounts describes experiential learning as a cyclical sequence of preparation, challenging action and discussion (Joplin, 1981). I will combine the ideas of story-telling and experiential education by showing how students' stories relate to the experiential learning cycle.

## Theoretical Considerations

Social science researchers in the qualitative traditions have come to see their informants and themselves as story makers. The constructivist approach is exemplified by studies of reflection in learning by professionals (Schon, 1991). Another example is the development of narrative inquiry by Clandinin and Connelly (1991).

Schon (1991) clarifies the way stories nest inside one another in narrative research. Direct stories, such as those told by canoe trip participants, are the

primary material out of which the researcher builds a more comprehensive "metastory" which transcends the detail of the direct stories. According to Schon, there is an underlying story behind the research metastory which explains why the material was manipulated in the way it was.

What is the underlying story in this case? It is the struggle to understand how students make meaning from their experiences. Outward Bound instructors, for example, have long tried to decide if it is enough to simply provide the experience, to let "the mountains speak for themselves," or whether the mountain experience is made more significant by discussion of the experience. Schoel, Prouty and Radcliffe (1988) agree with Joplin (1981) that post-experience discussion (debriefing) is essential. Studying students' stories will add to our understanding of this debate.

If Joplin's (1981) model of experiential education has a piece of the truth, namely that some kind of post-experience processing is critical for learning, and if constructivists have a piece of the truth, namely that human beings make and remake stories to account for their experiences, then it follows that students' stories about canoe trip experiences should tell something about their learning from the trips. It also follows that studying students' stories adds to the professional repertoire of methods to generate learning from experience.

## Context and Method

Mackenzie High School, Deep River, Ontario, offers an extracurricular adventure program called Trekkers. The program is open to any student, but the majority of members are in grades nine to eleven. The highlight of the program is a white-water canoe trip for which students are thoroughly prepared.

Twelve canoe trips were studied by participant observation methods. Data sources were recorded interviews with students and staff, field notes, film and video recording. These data are a fertile source for analysis. The long time interval of the investigation provides observation of student and trip variations. It also permits comparison of actual events with storied versions of the same events years later.

Interviews with individuals constituted the primary source of stories. A second source of stories came from interviews on other topics with students in small groups. Here, fragmented stories emerged indirectly as part of the conversation. A third source came from the stories told spontaneously around informal evening campfires. The story-tellers were usually senior trekkers or teachers.

## Learning and Teaching Through Stories

The observations suggest that stories serve five educational functions. The first three functions are a direct part of the learning process. They are to authenticate the experience, to interpret the experience and to call attention to relationships. Stories with these functions are first person stories, coming out of the speaker's personal experience.

The remaining two functions are to transmit cultural lore and to influence outsiders. These categories are important because students are applying their learning. Stories in these categories constitute informal teaching. These stories are less often first person stories, although they may be told as such.

Analysis of the stories shows two additional features. One is that story-telling is a natural process which does not require instructor action. The other is that stories are reconstructed over time to account for new experiences.

The stories given below have been reconstructed from interview transcripts or retold from a combination of interviews and field notes. The source of each story is given. All names are invented.

Authenticating Experience

An experience does not necessarily lead to learning until it has been validated in some way. It is as though each person needs permission to construct and incorporate the lessons of the experience. Having your story heard and accepted gives that permission and stamps the experience as authentic. It is possible that without a story, an experience has no meaning. Stories are the genuine, surviving traces of the experience which are constructed and reconstructed repeatedly over time. This is one good reason for the debriefing phase when instructors provide talking time for participants after an activity.

Interpreting Experience

To learn from an experience, a person must interpret it in some way. To relate an event as a story is to construe the event and to put it into some reasonable context that makes sense in the light of the person's other experiences. The story "gives the teller reason," as Schon (1991, p 5) puts it. But the interpretive function is limited if there are not other persons to respond. Thus it is important to share the story.

Validation and interpretation stories are illustrated by the following stories.

The Goat Portage. It seems so hard. My first time we nearly didn't make it out of the rapids to the take-out. Then we had to wade in that black stuff to get to shore. After the really steep part we walked off the trail and we hit a tree. The canoe hit a tree. Oh, Wow! Smash! And then we were trying to go sideways and I slipped over a rock. And the canoe fell down. And I was sitting there going, 'Ohhhh. I'm in pain! Help me!' My neck grew about 2 inches that time.

Yeah. I remember when my pack broke on the Goat. I had to carry it and my pad and my sleeping bag in my arms. It was hell. (Two interviews and notes.)

Relationships

A dominant element of the canoe trip emphasized by students is being separated from family and friends. Stories show paradoxical features. The students are proud of their accomplishments in caring for themselves without parental intervention. But at the same time they miss home and look forward to getting back.

You get to plan your own food. Ali: Mum and Dad don't get to say, "This is what you're getting for the next nine days." I get to plan what I want to eat, and I get to carry it to see if I can carry a week's food and be self-sufficient. Jin Yuan: Yeah. Mary and I were on a trip with our Dads. We were portaging the canoe and everything was going fine and her Dad comes and takes it away from you. And it takes away the feeling that you did it. You carried the canoe. (Interview.)

Lore Transmission

Lore transmission stories normally describe the consequences of failing to practice a skill. They are almost always "horror" stories. They are never told at moments of intentional skill instruction where the instructor's words are direct and not parabolic. For example, an instructor will say, "Remember, if you must get out of the canoe, the upstream person gets out first." But around the campfire on another day the matter of leaving a canoe in current is dressed differently.

Getting out. I'll never forget the time that two girls got hung up on a rock right near shore on those rapids we ran after lunch today. Anne was in the bow and she jumped out onto an old log. It was the funniest thing. The canoe did a one-eighty with her partner flailing away in the stern, screaming blue murder. And the log sank under Anne leaving her waist-deep with the water roaring around. Luckily, there was a bush right there and the stern person grabbed it and held on. She and Anne argued for a

> while about what to do next. Eventually Anne got back in, dripping, they peeled off pretty well and finished the run. (Retold from notes of a teacher's story.)

Influencing Outsiders

Stories are told to impress and recruit outsiders. Most beginners heard stories from the canoe trips long before deciding to sign up. Younger siblings reported hearing trekker stories "all their lives." Senior students spoke about instances of friends who declined to participate on the basis of stories they had heard. Trekkers believed that the accounts of discomfort and hard work were discouraging. Such stories tend to bring into the program those who want to test themselves against difficult conditions, and repel others less adventurous. This latter point clearly has implications as a major factor influencing students' choices of options in all aspects of education.

> It's a pain. They're a lot of work. Well, Mark told me that you have to paddle all day and at night you have to -- like, it's hard to -- it's hard to go to the bathroom. Well, it's not hard but it's a pain because all your food -- it's not hard -- no, but it's a pain to go out in the bush and find your toilet paper, waterproof it, waterproof your backpack, stuff like that. (Interview.)

Story-Telling is Natural

Normally, there was little difference in the interview responses of males and females. But, in the case of stories, the females and novice males were distinctly more responsive than were experienced males. One group of males denied that they had been told anything about trekker canoe trips before coming, and they denied telling anyone else about their experiences. Direct questions like, "What stories have you heard about the Goat Portage?" were answered with "I dunno. There aren't any stories." When interviews turned to other matters, the boys began to tell stories.

This contradiction is possibly due to both the discomfort of the early stages

of a recorded interview and a genuine belief that their accounts of canoe trip events did not belong to the class of things called "stories." This is evidence that stories are constructed and used in a spontaneous, unconscious way.

The naturalness of stories is further supported by the fact that most stories are told in the first person because they are the accounts which spring from one's own experience and do not have to be remembered from hearing alone. A deliberate construction of stories would lead each person to choose from the best of the classic transmitted stories rather than from more feeble instances from one's own experience.

In keeping with the claim of innocent unawareness in the telling of stories, both students and teachers seemed not to notice the frequency of story-telling and the educational function which stories fill. In a culture of modern media, it is tempting to think that oral tradition is lost. In the case of the Trekker canoe trips, however, it is clear that there is a rich development of the culture through spontaneous story-telling.

Natural story-telling deviates from Joplin (1981), Schoel et al. (1988) and from Clandinin and Connelly (1991), who claim that the reflective process must be deliberate. Writing stories about experiences, like the use of journals (Raffan and Barrett, 1989), is an example of deliberately reflective story construction which is different from the spoken accounts of trekkers.

## Reconstructing Stories

Clandinin and Connelly (1991) claim that stories are not constructed just once. New experiences require new stories and also that old experiences be "restoried." Some canoe trip stories were clear examples of reconstruction over time. The central facts of stories in this category were unchanged, but the detail

and purpose varied. The following story illustrates a variation.

Students complained that they had too many freeze-dried meals and too little seasoning. At that point Paul told this story.

> Kraft dinner. Yeah. It's like I heard about a group that brought nothing but Kraft dinner for their meals. That would be a lot better, you know. That stuff's pretty good. They just had the one thing to eat. Everybody liked it and knew how to cook it. It's simple and gives energy and that. (Retold from interview and notes.)

I was able to compare this version with the original incident two years earlier. A group had brought nothing but Kraft dinner for 10 evening meals. They were tired of their food. They had chosen Kraft dinner because it was the only thing that everyone liked. Now they realized that if they had chosen more variety, only one person at a time would have been unhappy. Dissatisfied with excess freeze-dried food, Paul had drawn on the bare fact of the Kraft dinner menu to construct an upbeat version.

## Conclusion

Students use stories to construct learning from experience. When the stories are told to others, the learning is disclosed and becomes vulnerable to feedback. Teachers can understand better what students have learned by hearing and interpreting their stories. Teachers can also better understand student motives in making participation decisions based on the stories told to them by their seniors. The power of oral stories is shown by Udall (1991). The power of written stories is shown by Sykes (1989) and Raffan and Barrett (1989). In practice this means that students are excellent sources of information about what is happening to them in educational settings, when interpreted in light of the teacher's own underlying story.

Canoe trip stories show that oral stories are natural, unforced constructions

of experience. As such, they occupy a middle ground between the highly organized debriefing discussions described by Schoel et al. (1998) and the laissez faire practice of letting the mountains speak for themselves. Spontaneous stories are less deliberative and less cerebral than Schon (1991) or Clandinin and Connelly (1991) describe, but they have an authenticity which gives them power.

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