

ADVENTURES IN NON-PROFIT: Developing an Outdoor Pursuits Program for Adults with Developmental Disabilities

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Background

Between the winter of 2004 and the spring of 2005, I had the chance to develop an outdoor pursuits program for adults with developmental disabilities in Calgary, Alberta. I will not name the organization and clients' names have been changed to ensure confidentiality.

A friend was working with a non-profit educational organization and she informed me that they were searching for someone to develop a year-round outdoor pursuits program. It seemed to be a good opportunity to contribute to an innovative program, and apply my outdoor leadership skills in a new and challenging environment. I applied for and accepted the position and my experiences with the organization proved to be personally transformational. I learned a lot about therapeutic recreation and the challenges and joys of non-profit program development. In this article I will reflect on my experiences over a year and a half with the program.

Program Description

Our clientele were primarily adults with Down's syndrome, autism, and acquired brain injuries. It was a day program, providing services five days a week, year-round. Many clients had been attending the program for several years—there were no time restrictions on participation. The overarching aim of the program was to provide the clients with practical and social skills that would enable them to lead lives in 'mainstream society' with varying degrees of independence. Experiential vocational training, life management, and health and wellness classes were regular program elements.

The idea for the outdoor pursuits program originated from previous program facilitators who had periodically taken clients on outdoor excursions in the surrounding area. These excursions had been well received by the clients and their families and as a result the administration saw an opportunity to include outdoor pursuits as a regular component of their health and wellness programming. I became involved with the program at this point. It was an interesting opportunity for a young person with a background in kinesiology and outdoor education and a passion for working with people.

The Journey Begins: Challenges and Successes

The first few months of the job involved working in partnership with another facilitator and a program manager, developing a vision and a plan for the outdoor pursuits program. Our activities with the clients during that time were limited to within the city limits. Many afternoons were spent hiking along a surprisingly diverse urban trail system, playing soccer, and doing yoga.

A major part of those first few months involved assessing the risk management of taking clients outside of the city limits into local wilderness areas. The climate was tense surrounding outdoor education in Western Canada at that time due to two recent tragedies involving high school groups (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation, 2000; Dohrmann, 2003). A significant logistical challenge proved to be the waiver process. Getting waiver forms home with the clients, signed, and returned often involved repeated phone calls to guardians. However, these calls also provided the opportunity to discuss the new outdoor pursuits program and often resulted in increased guardian support.

Other aspects of risk management that we examined were staff certification requirements, potential excursion locations, and client to staff ratios. At times it was challenging working within a team that was relatively unfamiliar with the field of outdoor education. For example, it was initially a challenge to gain agreement on the importance of outdoor pursuits staff being certified in Wilderness First Aid (at least 40 hours). Initially, it was proposed by the management that if one staff member had Wilderness First Aid training, then others needed only to have Standard First Aid certification. However, this line of logic neglects the possibility of the higher trained staff member injuring his or herself in a wilderness situation, requiring appropriate assistance from other staff members. Eventually, it was recognized that all outdoor pursuits staff should be trained in Wilderness First Aid and financial support was provided. Overcoming this type of difference in perspective was challenging, but also rewarding.

As our planning progressed, we decided that we would schedule one full day of outdoor pursuits activities each week in conjunction with other half-day excursions. We planned to spend most of our full days hiking in wilderness areas within an hour drive of the city and also include monthly excursions to local climbing gyms, a canoe club, a sailing club, and a local Provincial Park with an established orienteering course.

These extra excursions were limited by our funding. We were running our program on a seemingly incredulous budget of \$100 per month (excluding vehicle expenses) from the organization and \$100 per year from each client. One dynamic that I experienced as a result of this was regular revamping of our programs and services. For example, depending on funding parameters, programs like art and outdoor pursuits might stand alone as individual entities at some points, while at other times be amalgamated into other program areas such as healthy living. This fluidity made the task of developing the outdoor pursuits program extra challenging.

As spring approached, we headed out on our first day-hikes. The excursions were generally successful, but it quickly became evident that we would need to be hyper-aware of our client to staff ratio as well as which clients were present. Our typical group size was 6-10 clients with two staff. This was generally manageable except in circumstances where clients with especially high needs were present. For example, in the early months we had a client with autism. Rob would consistently endanger himself on day hikes by darting unexpectedly off of a trail into the surrounding bush, onto thin ice, towards cliff edges, into traffic, or into creeks and rivers. When you have a client such as Rob, who requires constant support, it

takes one staff member away from the rest of the group, leaving the other with up to nine clients. This type of issue constantly came up during my time with the organization. It was a never-ending and dynamic challenge for all staff and managers to balance the individual needs of each client with the safety of the group.

In the end we delivered a solid summer and fall program. We had a lot of fun hiking, sailing, climbing, canoeing, and orienteering throughout Southern Alberta. We even had the chance to hike through Alberta's dinosaur Badlands while visiting the Royal Tyrell Museum. The summer season culminated with a three-day event held at a local camp where we invited both our participants as well as adults with developmental disabilities from other organizations.

The Journey Continues: Learning along the Way

One of the things that stands out for me when I think of my time with this organization is the strong bonds and sense of community that grew within our outdoor pursuits group. Andrews (1999) describes this in the context of wilderness expeditions as a 'sense of community'. While our group never spent longer than three days continuously together, the daily and weekly consistency of our program created very strong personal and group bonds. I observed the outdoor pursuits program become a touchstone in our organization. Some clients expressed clearly that their involvement with the program had increased their motivation to come each day. The staff team also noticed clients, who had previously struggled socially, especially forming new friendships with other clients, begin to create new social bonds. These new social skills seemed to transfer into other areas of the program.

The long-term, continuous nature of the program also allowed for significant improvements for our clients physically and emotionally. A couple of examples come to mind in this regard. In her initial time with the outdoor pursuits program one client, Judy, struggled to walk on a flat, paved surface without falling. However, after several months in the outdoor pursuits program, Judy was successfully completing five-kilometre day-hikes on uneven mountain paths without a single fall! Another client, Nyla, struggled early on with her physical fitness. Her self-esteem was low and her parents were concerned about her health. She enjoyed participating in the outdoor pursuits program, but found the activities exhausting. With her parents' permission, I developed a simple daily exercise routine for her to do during her non-outdoor pursuits days. She was impressively dedicated to the regime and experienced improved health and fitness over a few months, expressing improved self-esteem and capacity to participate in our activities. Nyla also struggled with daily life management skills such as getting ready on time to catch the bus in the morning, causing her to be out of sorts for the rest of the day. In partnership with her parents, we developed a plan for her to follow to address this specific issue. It proved successful and she arrived better prepared each day to participate in the program.

The outdoor pursuits program provided clients with the opportunity to develop leadership skills through a rotating 'leader of the day' system. This was the first opportunity for many clients to lead a group in activities such as decision-making and route-finding. Many clients also expressed appreciation for simply getting out of the city and experiencing more natural environments. For some, these were their first experiences outside of an urban area. Regular environmental and sensory awareness activities were organized, from resources such as the Rediscovery manual which were entertaining and well received by the clients.

“You Must be Special to Work with Those People”

Sapon-Shevin (2001) discusses the common experience of special-education instructors hearing a comment like, “it takes a special person to work with those kids”. She points out that comments such as this often imply that it is patience and kind-heartedness, but not technical skills that are required to work with students with special needs. I encountered this phenomenon during my time with the organization. When I told others what I did for a living, they often said things like, “You must be very patient - it takes a special person...” Well, maybe it does, but Sapon-Shevin is right in recognizing that it is not only patience that is required to be an effective special education facilitator, but also technical skills and knowledge. I would add to her point of view however and recognize that successful educators often possess a combination of technical knowledge and soft, people skills. For example, to be an effective outdoor educator one must possess the technical skills and experience to safely lead a group of *any* students through their given terrain along with special intrinsic qualities or characteristics that help them in interactions with their specific students.

Sapon-Shevin (2001) also discusses the concept of ‘matter of fact accommodation’. Matter of fact accommodation involves an educator gracefully accommodating students with special needs in the context of any educational environment. She uses the example of discreetly providing a special snack to a student who has dietary restriction and using it (with their permission) as a learning opportunity for the rest of the class. I experienced this during my time with this organization. With a diverse group of clients with various disabilities, we were constantly responding to individual needs. Generally, clients were aware of each other’s special needs and accommodated each other which helped to create a safe and open environment. I’ve experienced this phenomenon again with different populations of students in my current role as an instructor with Outward Bound Canada. I’ve also been impressed by my fellow instructors’ seemingly inherent understanding and implementation of this concept.

The Journey Ends: Reflections and Implications

Summer turned into fall, and fall into winter. Before we knew it we were approaching the end of our first year. We had developed a plan for the winter season that involved a lot of snowshoeing and indoor climbing. We had also developed a long-term plan for expanding the program. In the process, I had become familiar and made connections with more established organizations which deliver therapeutic outdoor programs such as Power to Be in Victoria, BC (Power to Be, 2007). It was inspiring to learn about the success of other programs. However, being only twenty-four years old at the time, I had realized that I still had an itch for personal adventure and further education; a long-term commitment to this organization was not for me. A suitable replacement was found and we spent a short time transitioning him into the program I took time off to travel and began the outdoor, ecological, and experiential education (OE3) program at Lakehead University that fall.

My experiences with this organization were formative. I learned a lot about the logistical and financial challenges of operating non-profit educational organizations, risk-management, and the trials and joys of leading special needs students in outdoor experiences. To this day, these experiences continue to inform my instructional practice.

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