Ellie’s Boots

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The narrative description of a recreation experience holds the analytic power to relate not only what happened at a particular time and place, but also to explore what it was like to actually be there for events as they unfold. In presenting qualitative field notes, the researcher’s core goal is to ‘describe a social world and its people’ through the depiction of observed experiences in vivid detail using description, presentation of dialog, and characterization (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995) In the present case, an Outward Bound instructor observes a student first struggle and then to grow with her experience in the wilderness. Free of both quantification and theoretical grounding, this is part of what happened to Ellie.

Keywords: Field notes, Outward Bound, Wilderness

The first thing I remember noticing about Ellie was her boots. They were more suitable for the boardwalk than for the Boundary Waters Canoe Area. They were “Sketchers,” a stylish pseudoboot which turned out to be poor fitting, too thin, and unsupportive for the demands we would place on them. We would be portaging heavy canoes and even heavier packs across muddy, stone-strewn paths as we traveled from lake to lake. After the boots, we then noticed her tight fitting stretch pants and halter-top that were all the rage that summer. Ellie was from Minnetonka, Minnesota, and so I was surprised that she arrived for the beginning of her two-week Outward Bound course so ill appareled. It seemed that anyone from Minnesota would know about the mosquitoes. Mosquitoes thrive in the north country. They hunt in thirsty swarms and they are drawn to heat – body heat or the heat of the fire, or the cook stove, or your food, any heat at all. With her tight cotton clothes, Ellie was completely vulnerable to the mosquitoes. Between the blisters her boots would bring and the bites those tight clothes would offer, it was apparent that Ellie was in for a challenging experience.

Instructors on Outward Bound courses gossip about their students - a lot. My wife Rachel, a veteran instructor, refers to observing students in action as “watching the student channel.” There is always something on the student channel ranging from the tragic to the hilarious to the personal triumph – all of which gets talked over like the very best of the soap operas back in the world. There are other channels to watch in the wilderness, but after a while the ‘portage and paddle channel’ and the ‘weather channel’ become less entertaining and never approach the drama and allure of the student channel. We nursed our opinions of the students and looked for clues as to their validity, hoping we were right about some things and wrong about others.

The verdict on Ellie was that she was a ship with sails, but no rudder, a reed perhaps, or a mirror. She reflected that with which she was presented and headed in whichever direction the wind blew. We watched her gravitate from one source of personality to another. She would go out of her way to please anyone - which showed the compassion Ellie had for others, but she showed no inner source of direction. Despite
this, she was a nice girl and her saving grace was her honest, caring nature. You notice these things about people in the wilderness – in town it may go unnoticed, where contact with others is sporadic and not constructed around an intense expedition. A week or so into the trip we discovered that Ellie actually had a mirror and lip-gloss – clearly contraband on this trip, and a possible explanation for her tardiness in getting out of the tent in the morning. Yet Ellie was the one who broke the group’s trend of blaming everything on Richard – a semi-deserving scapegoat. She helped bring him into the group.

The first portage was about 25 rods. A rod is 16.5 feet and the aluminum canoes weighed 83 lbs, bone dry, which they seldom were. Ellie cried then as she did on many portages thereafter. The boots gave her zero support, nor were they meant to be wet constantly. The first person to cross a portage does not suffer as much from the mosquitoes as the last person and, as the last person on every portage, Ellie wore many great red welts from the insects. She refused to wear bug dope because she was from Minnesota and thus was “used to the mosquitoes.” We would have days when we would cross 1,000 rods as well as paddle many miles. She carried her load slowly and she struggled a lot, but she finished each portage.

In the middle of the course we shared Gifts & Appreciations. A gift is constructive feedback to another person about some aspect that could be improved, and an appreciation is something that is held in positive regard by the giver. We do this activity in the round and so everyone has the chance to give a gift and an appreciation for everyone in the group – instructors included. G&A is both a teaching tool and a release valve for the group. My gift for Ellie was a rudder through life, while my appreciation was for her big heart and refusal to give up. At this point in the course, Ellie was trying very hard to do well and she said that she had used her solo experience to think about whom she really was and what she wanted to accomplish. Her challenge was self-reliance, one of the four pillars of Outward Bound.

During Final Expedition – where the students are in charge of 95 percent of the day’s progress – the instructors follow the students and wait for them to finish a portage before they begin it. So we were in a position to watch Ellie do something different during this brigade’s final expedition experience. She and her canoe partner were the last to get their boat out of the water, and their boat, on the shoulders of her partner, was the last to disappear up the trail. A student pack and a food pack were all that remained laying on the ground. Ellie was left with a choice: carry one and return for the second, or figure out a way to carry both. Both packs were heavy, but we had modeled double packing from the beginning as a way to save time and energy. Throughout Ellie had struggled with the weight of a single pack or canoe, and part of her morning ritual included taping increasingly larger layers of protective moleskin over her blisters before she put on those boots. So it was something of a shock to see one day that Ellie was trying to swing the second pack on top of the first – which was already on her back – with a swinging one, two, three! But she didn’t have the strength to pull it off and the second pack dropped to the ground. (The momentary spike of interest in the student channel dissipated.) So like other days, I thought she would probably trundle up the trail and come back later for the second pack, which meant more waiting on slow students.

Then the equivalent of the Super bowl came on the student channel. Ellie dropped the heavy student pack from her back and put the food pack on top of a broken tree
branch. (All eyes were now glued to the show.) She lugged the student pack onto her shoulders, and backed under the tree branch and reached back…. The pack slipped off and hit the ground with a thud. (Groans from the audience.) Ellie again dropped the student pack and repeated her scheme, but this time it worked. Rachel and I were standing in our boat some 300 yards away cheering in the middle of nowhere. High fives all around. She probably heard us, but we didn’t care, or rather we wanted her to know how proud we were. Like the mama loons we had watched teaching their young to dive, we couldn’t help but call out.

Each brigade is named for some voyageur or historical figure in Boundary Waters history. Francis Ann Hopkins, our brigade’s namesake, was a shareholder in the Hudson Bay Company and wife of Sir John Hopkins. She was responsible for creating numerous paintings depicting voyageur life while accompanying her husband from Montreal into the Northwest. We talked about this during the graduation ceremony, complete with a candle. In an often-tearful circle, each student tells the group why they personally feel they graduated from the course as they take a small pin – a symbol for their effort - from a bowl in the center. I thought Ellie was like Hopkins as she took her pin - a visitor, but one who was touched deeply by the experience. Ellie spoke of how she never gave up during the trip, and that she had tried to be there for everyone. She thought she had done well. After the pin ceremony, Rachel and I announced that we had something else to award, but these were awards that not everyone would get. We gave an Outward Bound patch to our strongest students, Jake and Micha, for their leadership on trail. Then we gave one to Ellie for coming the farthest distance on this expedition, over the roughest road, and in the worst boots. I hope she still wears those boots, and I hope she has the patch sewn to her book bag – or to her backpack. I hope she never completely forgets what she went through, or how proud we all were – herself included - of her effort there in the wilderness.

The narrative of Ellie’s experience reveals not only the struggles of an Outward Bound student but also those of the instructors as they attempt to somehow guide the experience to a successful outcome for the student. The environment also finds its voice in the complexity of this social experience - a crucial element to consider given the nature of adventure education. Reflection upon this experience and others like it yields a certain insight into the relationships that form within a group, as well as the individual growth that can occur in a wilderness context. In education, the question inevitably arises: “Did they learn anything?” The answer depends upon the perspective from which the question is asked. By looking within the experience through the lens of narrative, we can perceive the richness of the journey and perhaps gain understanding of what it was like to be there – in Ellie’s boots.

Reference


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