



Focusing on Strengths for Challenging Youth

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A five-step model is described, that has been used with learners who have typically failed mainstream schooling. The model involves: fun support, challenge support, personal development, higher learning and empowerment. This model can be applied to a wide range of educational settings, and has been shown to enhance learner motivation and self-management.

Adventure Conservation is a 20 week course. It features a process of experiential learning that enables these young people to achieve results through action centred learning. I developed the programme this way because mostly all of my students have failed mainstream schooling, but have discovered all have the capacity to enjoy learning and development. To achieve this it often puts the student outside a position of comfort and into states of dissonance where they unlearn, relearn, and then learn.

I use the outdoors and adventure as a medium for learning but I have a belief that the concept can be transferred to a host of other learning contexts. I have the belief that all forms of learning, behaviour change, personal development and growth occur through actual experiences. Therefore an important teaching tool I use is the learning by doing. This is defined by active rather than passive processes. It features a reflection of the activity as an important part of the learning and then asks, "where to now." The programme features a 5 step model of very different stages of development that can be put into practice in a variety of educational situations.

Outcomes:

- Young people are more motivated, able to self manage, have an increased self – identity and can make positive changes.
- Young people are more skilled equipped and personally supported to make transitions.
- Young people have increased relationship, communication and teamwork skills.
- Young people value making a contribution to the community and environment.

1. Starting something new(Fun Support)

Acknowledgment, acceptance association, commencement.

Activities and experiences include an important element of fun with a supportive processing or debriefing style with the aim of creating an environment of belonging so they feel part of a group. This includes facilitation of Ice-breakers that involve a lot of direction and appropriateness' in a non-threatening way that will encourage all to participate and contribute to the reflection process in an uncomplicated and trouble free manner. A lot of direction from the teacher in a fun and supportive way is necessary. Encouragement of members to have a longer-term common objective is necessary to persuade group to focus on the future of the other stages of the programme.

2. The honeymoon is over (Challenge support)

Opposition, struggle, rebellion, disagreements, conflict resolution.

With this phase an activity like raft building can bring conflict to the forefront. A teacher can miss the subtleties of learned intimidation or unhealthy interpersonal behaviours. I video and re run the video then debrief and all reflect and contribute as we look at attitudes and behaviours of all group dynamics. This stage relates to ironing out dysfunction in the group as members start to identify their faults and improve on them within an individual and group context. Strategies I use is putting people together (of different learning styles)or problem solving activities that will cause conflict with each other to bring difference to the forefront . Throughout the activity the teacher stands back and observes carefully the disparity but becomes completely involved within the reflection process of the experience and debrief. Consequently there is a need to manage debriefs in a balanced and democratic way making sure all members are heard as all suggestions are learning opportunities.

3. Trusting others and self (Personal Development)

Agreement, consistency pulling together, participation, familiarity, trust in others.

To build on this stage, students participate in activities such as small group work that are selected to encourage social construction. For example, to plan the menu for a camping trip and then create the food on the camping trip.

This stage highlights more independence, self awareness and trust within the individual as they are receiving on-going support from their peers. The teacher then fosters an independence that is developing by acknowledging strengths and showing positive responses to independence by giving tasks of responsibility that relate to real situations. Debrief around this activity would be firstly recalling how it went then secondly how the group went as far as personality dynamics and what strengths and weaknesses individuals possessed and how this enhanced the success or unsuccessful tasks and further questions of what strategies were used to overcome them.

4. Fine tuning (Higher learning)

Satisfaction, capability, obligation, social construction of knowledge and ideas.

This stage is characterised by members being independent, confident, resilient and more self-aware. Activities include individually presenting content to the group and independently managing group experiences. The teacher withdraws and takes the role of self-advocacy, shadowing activities and

development of independence as an observer but always prepared to support if experience go wide of the mark and debriefs would also feature high level learning of the experience.

5. Were there, where to now (empowerment)

Transformation, fulfilment, direction, mastery, independence.

Group members are empowered and independent. This stage the student asks the question, “where do I go now,” and the teachers task is to encourage reflective activities that engage the student to search for a new course in the life journey. Examples of tools to achieve this are reflective journals, self-biographies, career search programmes and reflective solo activities.

Quality relationships

I think you need total belief in the people that you teach and focus entirely what they are good at not what they aren't. Laughing with people within the group is an important aspect of relationship building and even with the seriousness of a debrief, at times it is important to say something funny to relax the tension and as a result can enable some to contribute in a more honest and meaningful way. Being able to identify the small things that are going with individual members and casually talking to them can be powerful, teachable moments. I endeavour to role model and include myself in all activities to work alongside and not lead from the front. At the same time I attempt to be open and honest with all and share my own difficulties with learning. Interestingly this admission doesn't weaken my credibility but has a reciprocal effect as students become open and honest with me.



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