Adventurous Learning

Uncertainty, agency, authenticity, and mastery

Simon Beames
(with special thanks to Mike Brown)
Who has had an adventure recently?
Overview

- Education indoors and outdoors has become too rigid and prescriptive: this limits student learning
- Student learning can be increased by making teaching more adventurous
- There are four features of adventurous learning: Uncertainty, agency, authenticity, and mastery
- These can be used to consider the degree to which our teaching practices can be considered ‘adventurous’ — and how this might be increased
Definitions of adventure

• ‘An unusual, exciting, or daring experience’ (The Oxford Concise Dictionary, 2008, p. 18)

• ‘outcomes cannot be predicted to any great degree’ (Higgins, 2001, p. 102)

• Involves ‘a degree of uncertainty’ (Mortlock, 1984, p. 14)

• ‘...a challenge that will demand the best of our capabilities — physically, mentally, emotionally’ (Mortlock, 1984, p. 19)
Meanings of adventure

- Individually and culturally relative
- Multiple meanings = ‘adventure’ is too vague to be of academic use
- Need to reconceptualise adventure and gain ‘theoretical purchase’ on the term
Social ‘backdrop’

- Constantly evolving technology, global migration, communications — more and more, faster and faster (Elliot & Urry, 2010)

- ‘Risk culture’ dominates (Giddens, 1991), as people are obsessed with ‘minimising bads’ (Beck, 1992)

- Daily life is increasingly complex (Morrison, 2008)

- ‘Liquid times’ (Baumant, 2007)
Academic ‘backdrop’

- Neo-liberalism and market forces have shaped educational practices
- Education has become bits of information to be taught and tested (Ross & Gibson, 2006)
- Standardised testing reigns (Hursh, 2006) and the curriculum narrows (Hess & Brigham, 2000)
- This limits teachers’ capacities to respond to students’ individual needs (Garrison, 1997)
Adventure Education

Critiques

• Has become highly rationalised, prescribed, and calculable, and predictable — *McDonaldized* (Loynes, 1998)

• Is becoming characterised by performative labour, theming, and merchandising — *Disneyized* (Beames & Brown, 2014)

• Central concept of transfer of learning is problematic (Brookes, 2002; Brown, 2008; Wolfe & Sandahl, 2005)

• Ignores place (Brookes, 2004; Baker, 2005)

• Disempowering (Beames, 2006; Brown & Fraser, 2009)

• Features misplaced ideas of using risk to manipulate emotions (Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002; Brown & Fraser, 2009)
Stock take:

- Life in liquid times is characterised by uncertainty, change, and complexity.
- Education of all kinds is going in the opposite direction: it is becoming increasingly predictable, standardised, and rationalised.
How can learning be more adventurous?

It needs to equip young people with the tools to thrive in a world that is constantly changing.
Adventurous Learning

Four features:

- Uncertainty
- Agency
- Authenticity
- Mastery
Uncertainty

• Outcomes and processes are not fully predictable: Tasks offer multiple possible courses of action — there is not one right answer

• Deep reasoning and innovation is required

• Elicits creative responses from students imagining solutions, refining ideas, putting them into practice (Robinson, 2011)

• Draws on Aristotle’s need to practice reasoning and moral decision-making (see Stonehouse, 2010), Dewey’s Indeterminate situation (1938), Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance (1957)
Agency

• Students must have the power to influence what is learned and how it is learned.

• Key is teachers providing appropriate ‘autonomy support’

• Students need to be given the ‘right’ kinds of choices: *relevant, not too many, and cognitive* (rather than organisational) (Assor et al., 2002; Stefanou et al., 2004)

• Facilitators need to allow criticism and encourage independent thinking (Assor et al., 2002)

• Draws on Self Determination Theory (Deci & Ryan, 1987)
Authenticity

- Concerns what is ‘real’ and encountered in ordinary life experiences

- Starting point is landscape’s inherent curriculum. *What can be learned here?*

- Responds to place and community (Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Smith & Sobel, 2010)

- Does not rely on contested notions of transfer of learning between greatly differing contexts

- Draws on Dewey’s *Criteria of experience* (1938a), and Dewey’s ‘process of living’ rather than ‘preparation for future living’ (1897)
Mastery

♦ Is about consummate skill and commanding knowledge

♦ Is rooted in discourses of challenge — not risk

♦ Challenging tasks demand 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

♦ Draws on Bandura’s Self efficacy (1977), Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow theory (1990), and Berman and Davis- Berman’s Autotelic experiences (2005)
Putting it all together...

HIGHER LEVELS

Uncertainty

Agency

Authenticity

Mastery
Final thoughts

♦ The four dimensions are not necessarily value-laden — educators may have good reasons for using prescribed methods and artificial settings.

♦ The dimensions of Uncertainty, Agency, Authenticity, and Mastery are together an heuristic tool to enable meaningful discussions.

♦ Adventurous learning is not about outdoor vs indoor education.

It’s about appropriate contexts and methods for deep and meaningful learning.
How adventurous is your teaching?
References

References (cont’d)