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Lessons From an Outdoor Classroom

Deborah Mixson-Brookshire shares an experience that opened her mind to the transformative nature of her ropes course work with students and reminded her why she does it.

By Deborah Mixson-Brookshire

COLLEGE INSTRUCTORS ARE MORE THAN TEACHERS; we are also observers, and the observations we make can teach us much about our students—both who they are and what motivates them. As a college instructor and a certified ropes course facilitator, I have had the opportunity to observe my classes and those of my colleagues at the ropes course on our campus. In all, I have observed more than 300 students approach the various elements of the ropes course with a wide range of strategies. In the process of facilitating all those students, I became so familiar with the many elements of the course that these elements, as well as the way in which students met the challenge of conquering them, became rather mundane—until the remarkable choices made by two students helped me to see the elements from a new perspective and left me awed by the generosity of the human spirit.

When I first introduce students to the ropes course, I typically explain to them the relative importance of teamwork, leadership, communication, and goal setting, both in terms of completing the various elements they will face on the course and in terms of their academic success. At no time do I mention the place the human spirit has in our world. However, during a recent experience on the ropes course, while I

was serving as a facilitator for a first-year seminar class, two students opened my eyes to the importance of the human spirit when they faced the Nitro Crossing element. The Nitro Crossing requires students to cross a lava river that separates the island on which they are stranded from a boat sent to rescue them. Not only must all the members of the group move safely from the island to the boat, but the group must also transport a precious and valuable liquid (a bottle cap full of water) that will cure all the world's diseases. The only tools at their disposal are a rope and several bandannas; their only way across the lava river is by swinging on a rope.

The students in this particular class took time to strategize. Several students expressed concern about the size of the “small boat” (a hula hoop) and wondered how everyone would fit in it. Other students wondered if they could actually swing themselves across this lava river from the island to the boat. Only one student, Jason, was “very concerned” about ensuring that the liquid that could cure all the world's diseases made it across the river safely. Jason fashioned a pouch out of a bandanna, placed the container for the liquid inside the pouch, and then padded the container with leaves to ensure it did not spill. Jason made all these preparations unbeknownst to his classmates, who were heatedly debating how to get all the group members

safely on the boat. While he was focusing on what he thought was the important task, Jason was not ignoring his group members, but thinking about how to accomplish one of the challenges. Before he swung across the river, Jason said to his classmates, "I will sacrifice my life, but make sure this liquid is safe because it will help millions. Remember, I am doing this for our team and the entire world." Later, in a written reflection paper, Jason stated, "It felt awesome to save the world. I love the challenges we faced today, and I felt inspired." Jason had not been very vocal throughout the exercise, nor did he explicitly attempt to take control of the group and coordinate the activity; however, he became a leader by his actions—his willingness to sacrifice for the greater good and do what needed to be done. Though this was only an exercise, Jason opened my eyes to the strength and ingenuity of the human spirit in the face of adversity and, in doing so, provided me with an unexpected lesson in the capabilities of my students. Students responded to Jason's actions by stating their appreciation and supporting him in his effort. Jason took control of the situation because he saw that no one else was stepping up to address the specific task at hand. The students were glad to have the task accomplished and appreciated Jason's ability to take the lead.

The comments of other students, as presented in their reflection papers, demonstrated that the activity had made a significant impact on the rest of the group as well:

I was afraid of crossing the river, but I made it.

I am glad Jason was willing to take the risk.

I am not much of a risk taker and I do not like swinging on a rope. I am glad I had this experience.

I can relate this to my life and graduate in four years.

Deborah Mixson-Brookshire has been an educator for over 11 years and teaches First-Year Seminar Courses, Learning Support Algebra, and Management. She is a Certified Rope Instructor for Kennesaw State University's Challenge Corner, and has over 100 hours with students on the rope course utilizing experiential education. With over 11 years of teaching experience, she consistently strives to create innovative approaches to teaching within and outside the classroom.

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It truly was great, and it helped us to grow closer relationally, thus enhancing the leading experience to transpire.

When involving my students in the ropes course, my objectives are typically to build or strengthen their capabilities in the areas of teamwork, leadership, communication, and goal setting. However, the comments in their reflection papers revealed that the Nitro Crossing activity also fed their human spirit, giving them confidence and the satisfaction of having faced and successfully overcome a challenge.

Another experience with a different group offered me a second opportunity to witness the human spirit in action. As these students were in the process of swinging their group members over the lava river, one student fell into the river. The fall resulted in a penalty being assessed against the group. One of the group members who was still on the island would have to be blindfolded for his/her attempt at swinging from the island to the boat. None of the students were willing to be blindfolded; they were all too fearful to attempt the crossing without being able to see. James, a student who had already successfully made it to the boat, realized his fellow students' fears and returned to the island to complete the blindfolded swing from the island to the boat for his group. James crossed successfully despite the blindfold, and all the remaining group members made it to the boat safely as well. The compassion and understanding James demonstrated for his group members was evident when he recognized their hesitation and voluntarily decided to take the risk of swinging blindfolded for the sake of his group. The students in his group were grateful that he stepped up to complete the penalty. Many of them thanked him once all were safely across the river, and one student, overcome by emotion at his generosity, even shed some tears. The students were more eloquent in discussing James's generosity when they wrote their reflective papers:

It was difficult today but we had James to help the team.

It was great, especially improving teamwork.

James was not afraid of being blindfolded, and I am glad to have him on my team.

I am glad I faced the challenge and succeeded.

James cared about his team and wanted us to succeed.

James took the leadership role and helped the team across the river.

Both Jason and James chose to take action on their own initiative; neither was asked by his group to perform the difficult task each group faced. However, these two young men understood that in order for the group to succeed, someone would have to step forward and face the challenge—and each of them willingly did so.

These two students caused me to take a step back and reflect on my approach to facilitating the ropes course. I realized that I had become comfortable in my method of instruction and, in doing so, I had forgotten that the ropes course elements and many of the lessons I was trying to impart are novel to many of the students, leading them in directions I could not anticipate. I learned that despite all my experience as a facilitator, my students still have the ability to surprise me with their maturity, compassion, and generosity. Finally, I realized that I had not factored the human spirit into my lessons—but maybe I need to. By taking a step back and observing my students, I became not only an instructor and an observer, but also a learner, learning more about how I might modify my approach to teaching by considering the human spirit in the lessons I hope to impart through the ropes course. And that is a lesson that will benefit both me and my students.

Reflecting back on these outdoor classroom activities, I realized that the students and I both learned many lessons. Learning the value of synergy, the students realized the output of a group of individuals is sometimes greater than the output of each individual

separately. Even though some of the students took a stance as an individual, they were still engaged with the group for support, understanding, and advice. I saw the students engage in a true team effort with empathy for their fellow teammates. As the facilitator, I learned to be more receptive of the student's ability to succeed in a given task. I believe I had gotten numb from instructing for so many hours that I was taking for granted the student's process of overcoming fears, facing challenges, and working with their peers. It opened my eyes and made a huge impact on me to the point that I now tell myself to expect the unexpected from the students. I have learned that perceptions of a challenge are vastly different from student to student, and I cannot forecast what they will or will not do to succeed at the challenge set forth. It is good for us to learn from our students, because sometimes we become so invested in the process and forget the reason why we are there. Realizing and appreciating that some students focus on the "big picture" while others see the details, I have learned to appreciate and use this experience as a teachable moment that we view things differently, make alternative assessments about what needs to be done, and utilize our diverse strengths to face challenges. Through their own reflections, the students begin to realize the impact a team has on a problem or issue that can be applied in professional situations. The learning process within these teachable moments is mutually beneficial for all involved.

As humans, it is hard to be "in the moment" when we always have so much to juggle. Take a moment and remember why we have chosen the careers we have and be present *in the moment*.

