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The Changing Geographies of Overseas Expeditions

BY PETE ALLISON and SIMON BEAMES

Introduction

Travel and overseas experiences, particularly those involving some form of outdoor education, is regarded by many young people, parents, university admissions officers, and employers as somehow beneficial to a young person's development. Expeditions have been used in the UK as an educational tool since 1932, when the Public Schools Exploring Society ran their first expedition to Finland (see figure 1). Recent literature specifically examining expeditions in the UK demonstrates an increasing interest in this quintessentially British phenomenon (Allison 2000, 2005; Allison and Pomeroy 2000; Simpson 2004).

Although gap years (i.e., a period of time when students take a break from formal education to travel, volunteer, or go abroad) and expeditions are slightly different (as the former often incorporates the latter, but not vice versa), no specific statistics are available on the numbers of people engaged in expeditions from the UK each year. Jones (2004), however, estimated that 250,000 to 350,000 Britons between



Pete Allison. Photo by Steve Ayres. Simon Beames. Photo by Nancy Fancott.

16 and 25 years old were taking a gap year annually. In 2008 Rowe reported that “the gap year market is valued at £2.2 billion in the UK and globally at £5 billion. It's one of the fastest growing travel sectors of the 21st century, and the prediction is for the global gap year market to grow to £11 billion by 2010” (p. 47). The Geography Outdoors Fieldwork and Expeditions Section of the Royal Geographical Society (formerly Expedition Advisory Centre) list 134 organizations currently recruiting expedition members.

Thus, it appears reasonable to conclude that the popularity of expeditions and gap years is increasing. If further evidence is needed, then the development of British Standard 8848 (specification for the provision of visits, fieldwork, expeditions and adventurous activities outside the UK) in concert with the Learning Outside the Classroom quality badge scheme (underpinned by the Expedition Providers Association) convincingly indicate the growth in numbers of people traveling overseas on expeditions and gap years. Despite this long history and growing field of practice, expeditions have received relatively little attention by educational researchers in the UK and can be considered a significant gap in the current literature.

We address six areas of practice within the expeditions sector that are contentious and worthy of examination: volunteer work, cultural sensitivity and environmental responsibility, psychological considerations, regulating practice, conducting



Figure 1—Commander Surgeon Murray Levick (center) and his team depart London Kings Cross for the 1932 expedition to Finland; this was the first expedition of the Public Schools Exploring Society (which changed its name in 1947 to the British Schools Exploring Society). Photo courtesy of BSES Archive, www.bses.org.uk.

research, and accessibility. We focus on the UK context in order to provide some depth and context to the discussion; however, other countries are currently facing similar issues that cannot all be detailed here.

Volunteer Work

Perhaps one of the most inflammatory issues in the current expedition climate surrounds expedition organizations sending young people to developing nations as unskilled laborers. For example, this could entail participants doing jobs such as teaching in primary schools, helping to take zoological surveys, or working in national parks on conservation projects, and is often under the remit of undertaking geographical research.

Many of these projects may not fall under the strict definition of an expedition, as they may not involve a journey; they may be based in the same place for several weeks at a time—despite being remote and self-sufficient. A number of organizations have elements of expeditions as part of their programs. For this reason, the issue of unskilled labor is highlighted.

Some critics note that Western young people going to developing nations and working may often be considered a form of neocolonialism (Simpson 2004). This is so, because there remains an imbalance of power in favor of the participants and the expedition provider. For example, the UK would not tolerate an 18-year-old Ghanaian boy coming to the southwest of England for six weeks and teaching in a primary school. This is in contrast to common instances where British youth without appropriate qualifications and with minimal experience find themselves in developing nations, playing prominent roles in the host village's formal education system. Although this kind of

altruism may be laudable, it may be worth considering that this practice is only made possible by the wide gulf between the resources of the visitor and the host community. These practices of going overseas to learn through volunteering are sometimes referred to as service learning.

A number of papers have described how service learning is a branch of experiential education that is gaining increasing prominence in the Western world (Jacoby 1996; Jakubowski 2003; Warren and Loeffler 2000). Jacoby defines service learning as “activities that address human and community needs with structured opportunities intentionally designed to promote student learning and development” (1996, p. 5). Typically, service-learning programs involve living and working in a host community on projects that have been deemed important by the members of that community (Jacoby 1996; Kendall 1990).

Meaningful service-learning programs demand thorough examination, so they are not merely exercises in being exposed to life in a developing nation, but rather engage participants in the daily life of those living in the host country (Levison 1990). Similarly, service-learning projects ought to ensure that those being served are in control of the services being provided, those being served become more empowered as a result of the project, and those who serve are also learners (Jacoby 1996; Kendall 1990). Dickson (1988, p. 26) recommends educational programs for young people where the experience is based on “the adventure culminating in service, and the service itself an adventure.”

In strict terms, service learning cannot occur without formal reflection (Jacoby 1996). Service without reflection would likely be regarded by many as volunteerism, as it is not connected

to any structured set of learning objectives. We suggest that learning can happen without formal reflective activities (e.g., reviewing in a circle, journal writing). After all, people have learned through experience since the beginning of time. We also recognize that service learning experiences designed to be part of a larger educational program may need to have specific intended learning outcomes in order to justify their inclusion.

Another feature of service learning is reciprocity, where all parties “are learners and help determine what is to be learned. Both the server and those served teach, and both learn” (Kendall 1990, p. 22). Furthermore, it is imperative that the members of the host community identify the service tasks and then control the service provided (Jacoby 1996).

Expedition providers who are using service as part of their program can draw from the literature as a means of guiding their own practice. Crucially, expeditions involving volunteer work as a means of learning need to be thoroughly considered and not “added on” in some tokenistic manner. Well-conceptualized and well-implemented projects have considerable potential for learning.

Cultural Sensitivity and Environmental Responsibility

Along with the issues of health and safety highlighted in the 1990s, expeditions in the new millennium have brought new areas of concern. Critics have identified several potentially problematic aspects of some current practices on youth expeditions, including cultural sensitivity, the use of drugs, and the environmental costs associated with young people traveling outside of their home country (Allison and Higgins 2002).

First, they were particularly critical of expedition groups that did not show appropriate cultural sensitivity when traveling in developing nations (Allison and Higgins 2002). Participants who do not cover themselves suitably and wear short and sleeveless tops in Muslim countries are an obvious example.

Second, the outcomes of an expedition being so great that they warrant flying a group of 50 young people across the world was highlighted as being questionable (Allison and Higgins 2002). In a time when air travel is widely accepted as a contributor to global climate change, it seems surprising that so many operators and participants are convinced that they must visit lands far away, despite sometimes knowing little of their homeland. This point is contentious and has been responded to by the Young Explorers Trust who have convincingly argued that the benefits outweigh the costs. It seems likely that this debate will only gain more energy as issues of climate change continue to receive attention.

In response to some critiques of “universal” outdoor education (i.e., ignoring “place”), there is a movement toward expeditions that take place in the neighborhoods in which young people live and go to school. Outdoor Journeys is an example of a framework designed to allow students of all ages and abilities to generate questions about human history and local ecology (Outdoor Journeys 2009). Learning about the sociocultural and geophysical aspects of landscape involves students taking responsibility for planning their route, managing their primary needs (e.g., food and fluid intake, temperature regulation), and identifying hazards that might be encountered (see figure 2). The goal is for much of the responsibility to be shifted from the teacher to participants

with the aim that students develop the tools necessary to undertake their own developmentally appropriate journeys—either as part of school or not.

We want to caution against overseas expeditions and local journeys being dichotomized and set against each other. Rather, we see them as being complementary elements of a rich education that all young people are entitled to and as mechanisms that enable people to engage in explorations of places near and far. Indeed, undertaking self-sufficient journeys early in life may encourage and support young people to seek more adventurous travel further afield as they get older and a spirit of inquiry and enthusiasm to learn about the world in which we live.

Psychological Considerations

Expeditions present a number of complex and varied challenges that inevitably evoke a range of psychological responses (see figure 3). This aspect of expeditions

has received increasing attention, and the field of wilderness therapy has sought to address the learning from, and management of, these unavoidable psychological responses. Some responses are considered more positive and associated with learning (e.g., awe and inspiration, considering past experiences, learning how to interact with others), whereas others have more negative connotations (e.g., home sickness, psychosocial challenges, eating disorders). Furthermore, the responses to such experiences occur not only during expeditions, but also afterward, when participants return to their home community. It is helpful to consider three psychological areas.

The first area is learning in a safe (physical and emotional) environment. Taking people on expeditions is often motivated, to some extent, by trying to trigger some kind of psychological or emotional response to various aspects of the experience. For some this may be about developing themselves, understanding themselves and others,



Figure 2—Cyclists prepare for the next stage of their overland journey to Lhasa, Tibet, in preparation for their month-long ride to Everest base camp and onward to Kathmandu, Nepal. Such expeditions rely heavily on local people and services and involve numerous opportunities for interactions with local people and environmental considerations. Photo by Pete Allison.



Figure 3—Pete Allison (left), Nancy Pickup (middle), and Pete Gwatkin (right) depart for two weeks in the Staunings Alps in northeast Greenland. The intensity of such wilderness experiences involves a complexity of psychological challenges. Photo by Pete Gwatkin.

and as an opportunity to reflect on their lives, behaviors, and relationships—past, present, and future. For others, the expedition may be a time when reflection brings to the fore difficult issues that may have been previously suppressed, such as confidence, dysfunctional relationships, existential challenges, and sense of life direction. Clearly, leaders need to be appropriately prepared to deal with these and related issues. To this end, planning prior to an expedition, including reviewing applications and holding interviews, gaining medical information, writing clear marketing material, and conducting thorough training weekends are crucial in minimizing psychological difficulties that may arise.

Second, postexpedition responses are often difficult to gauge, and until relatively recently, had not been studied. The phenomenon can be understood as similar to the blues when returning from vacation or to a process of mourning (e.g., for the wilderness, for friends, for simplicity of expedition life). For many young people, going on an expedition for the first time can be life changing; it is often the first visit to a far-off place, to the wilderness, and of experiencing cultures very different from their own. As such, returning to everyday life (school, home, college, employment) is often rather awkward. Indeed, it is common for people to report difficulties sleeping inside, making decisions about what to eat, amazement at the

number of people they meet, and missing the intimacy of the relationships experienced on the expedition. Allison (1999, 2000, 2005) studied expeditions and discovered this phenomenon to be common among the majority of participants. He comments: “It seems reasonable to conclude that some adjustment post-expedition might be expected for the majority of people. If there were no signs of some type of post-expedition adjustment then one could question if there had been any changes or examination of values during the expedition experience.” (Allison 2005, p. 23)

The third psychological area that expedition leaders need to deal with concerns managing threats to the learning environment. When people experience some of the challenges outlined above, such as adjustment problems (to and from the expedition), illness/accidents, crises (emotional and otherwise), it is vital that leaders have the skills to recognize them, decide on a course of action, manage and remedy them, and keep them from occurring again—unless these problems are deemed to be desirable (rarely the case) (Berman and Davis-Berman 2002; Berman, Davis-Berman, and Gillen 1998; Kaplan and Talbot 1983).

Regulating Practice in the UK and Beyond

Most of the expeditions taking place in the UK that involve participants under the age of 18 years old are regulated by the Adventure Activities Licensing Service (AALS), which was developed following a kayaking tragedy in 1993 and the subsequent Young Persons Safety Act (1995). The word *most* is used deliberately, as expeditions that are in nontechnical terrain and have rapid access to roads may not be classified as licensable by AALS (AALS, n.d.). For example, an expedition in a

flat, forested area that is not far from a road may not require the provider to be licensed by AALS. Naturally, there are elements of duty of care and basic health and safety that need to be adhered to, but there is no need for the leader to have an outdoor qualification, such as the Mountain Leader award.

If the expedition involves traveling in more remote and demanding country (usually higher hills or on the water), then by law the activity is licensable under AALS. This means that AALS ensures that the activity provider has competent staff and is using properly maintained safety equipment. It is important to note a crucial exception to AALS regulations: expeditions for those under the age of 18 in Britain are not licensable under AALS, if the expedition leader is not being paid (e.g., a teacher leading an expedition with student participants) (AALS, n.d.). Once the expedition leaves the United Kingdom, things become less clear, as there is no statutory obligation for providers to operate at a given standard or for leaders to be qualified.

However, since 1972 the Young Explorers Trust (YET), which is a UK independent educational charity, has approved expeditions through its national evaluation system. This process was designed and developed as a means of supporting expedition organizers and leaders, as well as improving the quality of provision while giving expeditions “YET approved” status. YET also offers a small grant system to support expeditions they approve and which are in need of financial support. In 2008, the YET screening process incorporated British Standard 8848 to become the YET evaluation process.

British Standards 8848, which was published in 2007 (and reviewed and updated in 2009), is the closest the sector has come to regulating the



Figure 4—Dr. Sue McInnes and Chris Hodgson communicating using signs with local Ladakhi children in Ladakh, India. Photo by Pete Allison.



Figure 5—Richard Brown and Alex Skinner prepare to place ablation stakes in the glacier for a five-week monitoring project at Tasermiut Fjord, southwest Greenland. Photo by Jeff Brown.

practice of overseas ventures. British Standards 8848 is not limited to expeditions, but rather covers any kind of visit, trip, or fieldwork outside of the UK (British Standards 8848 2007). British Standards 8848’s principal goal

is to minimize injuries and illness during these ventures. The onus to follow the practices outlined in the standard is placed squarely on the “venture provider.” The venture provider may use third-party employees

Expeditions for young people involving science research, adventurous activities, and community work have gained remarkable popularity, yet elicited only a moderate amount of research.

(such as bus drivers or mountaineering instructors) as long as 8848's specifications are being followed. At the time of this writing, expedition companies are not required to adhere to 8848, but presumably gain credibility in the eyes of the public if they do.

All of the above outlined systems (AALS, YET, and BS 8848) are concerned with a systems approach and accrediting organizations rather than certifying individuals. This approach has been developed in response to an increasing number of overseas expeditions taking place in a wide range of environments with a broad spectrum of aims. In these varying circumstances, specifying individual leader certifications may be too complex to manage. As an example, compare the leadership skills that are needed for a small school group going on a two-week expedition from the UK to the Swiss Alps, with the skills needed for a three-month expedition for individuals from across the UK who are traveling to Kenya to kayak, undertake some service learning projects, and visit some game reserves. To address such differences the evaluation system for BS 8848, which is administered through the YET, offers a flexible approach that considers the specific expedition aims, location, and context in a descriptive rather than prescriptive manner. The approach encourages organizations and individuals to focus on managing the plethora of situations they may encounter on expeditions and not create cumbersome paperwork.

Conducting Expedition Research

Research can be undertaken on expeditions in two broad categories: first, research about the environment that is being visited (e.g., geology or tourism) (see figure 4), and second, participants and leaders being studied as a means of understanding the influences and processes occurring during and after an expedition (see figure 5). We focus on the second of these two categories. Undertaking empirical research on expeditions can present challenges beyond those normally associated with ethnographic methodologies. It is relatively straightforward to collect data after the experience—through questionnaires and interviews, for example. Whether one is collecting data as an expedition leader, a participant, or as a specialist researcher, there are pros and cons to actually being on an expedition and researching the other people on the expedition. There is no right solution, but rather the most appropriate, depending on the specific aims of the research, the questions being asked, and the epistemological preferences of the researcher(s). Therefore, although possible approaches are outlined in countless texts on research methodologies, the onus is on the researcher to choose a methodology that will most effectively answer the research question.

Actually being on the expedition that one is investigating is a privilege that must not be abused. Having such intimate and constant access to (normally) willing participants is unusual

in the world of research (but common in anthropological studies). As Potter's (1998, p. 256) examination of the human dimensions of expeditions informs us: "During expeditions people live in close quarters 24 hours a day and generally lose their taken for granted privacies...options to check out from the group, sometimes even briefly, are greatly reduced and frequently impossible." This kind of access for the researcher can bring a familiarity—and consequent level of understanding—that offers ethnographic approaches (e.g., living with the expedition) much credibility.

As a researcher on the expedition, one cannot help but somehow influence people's interactions and behaviors. The degree to which one is participating in expedition life, as well as the overtness of one's data-collection methods, need to be carefully considered. For example, if one does not fully participate in expedition life (which is difficult to do in itself) but is sitting nearby, taking notes or asking people to complete questionnaires at regular intervals, then this process can impact on individuals in numerous ways. First, members may alter their behaviors if they are being watched, and second, they may answer questionnaires in order to present themselves in a certain way (e.g., with the aim of increasing their social "currency"). On the other hand, if one fully participates in expedition life (e.g., participant observation [Spradley 1980]) and is never seen to be formally interviewing anyone or taking notes, then one may gain a deeper understanding of what people think and do—which is probably what the researcher is most curious about. The concerns are that (a) the researchers are such a part of expedition life that they overly influence the group, and (b) they lose their ability to find a balanced perspective on the group and their role

within it. Again, there is no one solution, only the most appropriate for the circumstances and issues being explored by the researcher.

Another important aspect of collecting data on expeditions is the meteorological conditions. For example, pouring rain and a howling gale at the campsite may not be the most suitable conditions for conducting a recorded interview with a participant, as he or she may not be fully focused on the discussion. Certainly, it is worth considering the degree to which one's primary needs (e.g., food, shelter, warmth) are taken care of, and how this may affect the state of the interviewee. On the contrary, a researcher who is hoping to capture a deeper essence of "the moment" may choose to put microphones in front of participants' faces precisely during stressful or uncomfortable occasions. Some parts of an expedition may be so stressful that it would simply be unfeasible to pursue any kind of data collection. For some, descending a mountain ridge may be stressful, whereas for others, making a meal at camp may be challenging. Thus, the timing of such approaches to research will inevitably be better for some participants than others.

In these scenarios, it may be more useful to use field notes (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995). This might involve pulling out a small notebook once off the above-mentioned hypothetical ridge and trying to recount a particularly meaningful item that was said or observed. Informal conversations may also serve as rich data. For example, after the storm at sea has passed, there may be insightful comments offered by participants over a cup of tea in the galley.

Alternative approaches to those already outlined might involve asking those involved in expeditions to write about their experiences at a time at

which they feel ready. Certainly, the advent of digital recorders for interviews, focus groups, and field notes has greatly facilitated researchers' ability to return from an expedition with many hours of data that takes up little space and is increasingly easy to analyze with modern qualitative data software.

In this section we have noted a few of the issues associated with data collection undertaken during expeditions. First, the little work that has been conducted in this area has been primarily empirical research. There are extensive opportunities for philosophical exploration of educational expeditions. Second, little, if any, research has focused on the learning of all involved in an expedition (such as leaders, assistant leaders, members of local communities visited, organizations) but has rather focused on the learning of the young people or participants involved. Third, there is growing pressure for outcome-focused research to measure the value of expeditions empirically; methodologically this is challenging and has met with little success (Allison and Pomeroy 2000, Thomas and Pring 2004).

Accessibility

There are inequalities between different people's access to resources in society. These resources might be things such as food, education, medical help, and property. Historically, the world of educational expeditions has been dominated by affluent white people (e.g., early expeditions run by the Public Schools Exploring Society). The period from the mid-1970s to the mid-1990s saw the British overseas youth expedition transform from a product exclusively for the socioeconomically privileged to one catering to a "much larger range of children of varying social backgrounds and academic abilities" (Grey 1984, p. 17). An example of these programs is Kennedy's

(1984, 1992) overland expeditions to the Sahara Desert with inner-city youth from Liverpool. Current initiatives such as the Next Generation scheme offered by the British Schools Exploring Society are examples of promoting equality of opportunity.

In the UK today, although more opportunities exist for marginalized people to take part in expeditions, a fundamental discrepancy between the demographics of those who go on expeditions and those who do not appears to remain.

In Scotland, where students from the bottom 20% of the socioeconomic spectrum are seven times more likely to be excluded from school than those in the top 20% (Scottish Government, 2009), one can reasonably speculate that expedition opportunities for the former will come from a youth-at-risk program of some sort. Conversely, those within the top 20% wanting to go on an expedition will usually rely on their parents paying substantial amounts of money, or that money may often be raised with the help of their parents' social and business networks.

Beyond financial matters, it is quite likely that in social networks characterized by chronic low income, young people are not interested in going on an expedition, as there is little history of any family member or friend so doing. Equally, teenagers attending an independent school with a strong tradition of going on an expedition may feel stigmatized if they do not take a given expedition opportunity. It is conceivable to suggest that by choosing to participate in an expedition, they are merely "going with the flow" and following dominant social forces.

The implication for practitioners in all countries and cultures is that if the outcomes of an expedition are desirable for all young people—as a means to increase overall personal growth and

well-being—then surely these kinds of experiences ought to be available to all, irrespective of financial power, physical ability, sex, gender, religion, or ethnicity. Conclusions Expeditions in the UK have a long history that can be traced back to exploration for geographical purposes. In the last 20 years, expeditions for young people involving science research, adventurous activities, and community work have gained remarkable popularity, yet elicited only a moderate amount of research. More recently, in 2008, a “knowledge exchange” conference was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and organized at The University of Edinburgh, as a means to discuss and share information about overseas expeditions. The conference was successful in bringing together expedition providers, policy makers, and academics in order to discuss a range of current issues concerning all parties.

We acknowledge many issues within the field of educational expeditions and focused on six that have emerged through our reconnaissance of related literature: volunteer work, cultural sensitivity and environmental responsibility, psychological considerations, regulating practice, conducting research, and accessibility. We believe that many of these issues are inevitable, but by opening discussion about them we can ensure that we make conscious decisions about our practices.

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