THE COMFORT ZONE
Reflection on a taken-for-granted model
Mike Brown

Lesley Lorenzen: Local kayakers, Pukerua Bay, Wellington

Reference to the comfort zone model is widespread within outdoor adventure education. It is based on the belief that when placed in a stressful situation people will respond by overcoming their hesitancy and grow. This model is often presented to students prior to activities with a perceived sense of risk and challenge which arouses strong emotional and physical responses to novel tasks (e.g., a ropes course).

Students are encouraged to 'stretch themselves', to move outside their comfort zone and expand their preconceived limits and by inference learn. This article briefly explores the theories that underpin the comfort zone model and suggests that it is time to rethink how it is used.

The CZ is often presented in the following manner.

When being introduced to this model students are often asked; "what does it feel like when you are inside your comfort zone?", "what does it feel like when you are outside it?" and "what might prevent you from moving outside your comfort zone?". Student answers often include physiological responses (increased heart rate, sweating etc) as well as psychological reactions (feeling of panic, fear, excitement etc).

It is interesting to hear students' talk following the introduction of this model. It often appears that being 'outside of one's comfort zone' becomes the measure of success in other aspects of the programme.

What is a comfort zone?

The use of the term is so common that we take it for granted that it is based on a well established model. But what is a comfort zone?; how do you know if it's growing?; is there one 'universal' comfort zone that defines my behaviour across all activities or are comfort zones task specific?

What does the research on the comfort zone model have to contribute? In two words: very little. There is not a 'comfort zone theory' per se. It would appear that the comfort zone model finds its roots in the psychological fields of cognitive development (Piaget, 1977) and cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957).

A brief introduction to Piaget's theory of cognitive development

Piaget is possibly best known for identifying differing stages in a child's cognitive development. The concepts which form the basis of his theory draw heavily on the terminology of biology.

The need for equilibrium

According to Piaget the driving force that impels people to either assimilate new experiences into existing beliefs/behaviours or to modify existing ways of thinking or acting to include new experiences (Piaget referred to this as 'accommodation') is the desire to maintain equilibrium or balance. Piaget's theory has not been without its critics and it's defenders (Lourenco & Machado, 1996). For example, the assertion that one always seeks equilibrium is an assumption or hypothesis which is difficult to substantiate. The notion of equilibrium is a contested and controversial issue. It has been suggested that people are able to accept contradictions and to tolerate conflicting ideas without requiring resolution (Lourenco & Machado, 1996).

We should be mindful not to interpret Piaget's theory as if it were a stimulus-response relationship; creating disequilibrium through stress = learning. What is assimilated or accommodated depends on a person's needs/desires. If the experiences that are provided are too novel and too far from a person's normal activities it is possible that rather than being accommodated they will be dismissed as irrelevant or impossible. Confusion arises when one associates providing a stimulus and observing a response which is then equated with learning. For example, we know that providing students with a challenge on the ropes course will elicit a range of relatively predictable behaviours (fear, anxiety, perseverance, a 'buzz' etc.). Brookes (2003) refers to this as 'conformist effects'. He cautions against confusing conformity effects, which are temporary, with educational change. Placing a student in a challenging position may elicit certain behaviours but it does not necessarily mean they are learning.

Insights from Festinger's theory of Cognitive Dissonance

Cognitive dissonance is concerned with how a person deals with inconsistencies between their beliefs and actions. Cognitive dissonance theory is premised on the belief that people will interpret an event or experience to maintain consistency between their beliefs and actions. It also explains how altering behaviour can lead to a change in attitude. When faced with a situation where there is a conflict between their beliefs and actions people may reduce their dissonance by changing their beliefs until 'mental harmony' is achieved. A number of researchers have also suggested, that in addition to issues of logic, emotional factors often also play a role. According to Aronson (1968) dissonance can occur when a person's belief that he/she is a good person is placed in doubt by behaviour that undermines this belief.
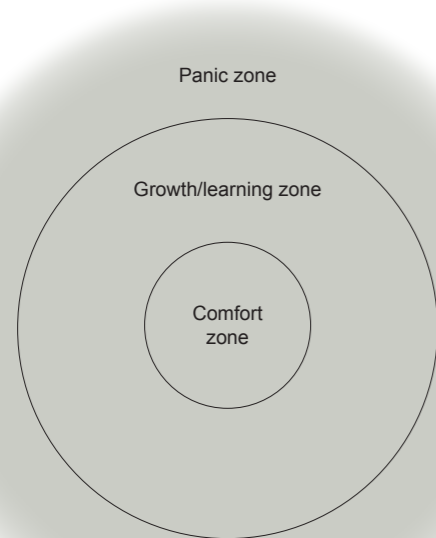
Revisions of Festinger's original theory emphasise self-concept and cultural norms as the driving force for resolving inconsistencies rather than the need to maintain logical consistency. Whilst Festinger's original theory has undergone a number of revisions it does provide a framework for thinking about the possible motivations for change when people are faced with inconsistencies between thoughts and actions. It is clear that there are various 'triggers' for creating dissonant conditions and these triggers are different and are certainly not uniform and predictable.

Cognitive dissonance/ disequilibrium and learning

Cognitive dissonance or disequilibrium has been applied in classrooms in attempts to enhance learning. Strategies to foster changes are based on creating an element of dissonance within the learner between their initial understanding and the principle to be taught. However, dissonance between discrepant events may lead to a change in understanding, or it may not! There has been considerable research which supports both the negative and positive effects of the use of dissonance as a teaching strategy. For example, for low achieving students the use of dissonance as a teaching strategy can actually hinder their progress in class (Zohar & Aharon-Kravetsky, 2005).

It would appear that not only do students of various abilities respond differently to the use of dissonance but also that the degree of dissonance has differing effects, some discrepant events can be powerful in stimulating change while others have no effect at all. It was found that rather than giving up their previous conceptions to accommodate new information students were likely to either reject the new information outright or classify it as only appropriate to 'school' settings which is not valid in the 'real world' (Rea-Ramirez & Clement, 1998).

It may be that dissonance is to some extent unavoidable and beneficial for some students on some occasions. However the question is whether the active promotion of dissonance is necessary to promote learning. A dissonant situation may be treated by learners as too great a 'leap' in understanding,

in which case they might reject it outright, or consign it to the 'not valid in the real world' file. Do students view 'success' in the ropes course as being related to success in other aspects of life? The fact that you may have provided one potentially dissonant belief, "I can achieve success on the ropes course" does not mean that this single event will replace other multiple beliefs regarding the individual's ability in other settings. Years of socialisation are unlikely to be replaced by a single event, particularly when it is experienced in a novel or highly contrived environment.

Just as in classrooms there is no reason to suspect that 'the outdoors' and 'real life' are not seen as separate contexts where different ideas/standards apply. Students' ability to 'compartmentalise' is illustrated by Wattchow and Johnson's (2004) findings in relation to students' perspectives of environmental issues following an outdoor education experience. The research revealed how students considered the bush and the city as unrelated and they had no desire or interest in becoming involved in environmental projects upon returning to their homes in an urban setting. They had differentiated knowledge into 'outdoor' and 'real world' compartments which were seen as unconnected.

The contradictory and inconclusive findings certainly do not give a clear and unambiguous mandate for creating situations which engender dissonance or disequilibrium as an effective learning strategy for all students. Even if discrepant events occur people will invariably have a number of ways of rejecting or reconciling these dissonant thoughts/actions.

Concluding thoughts

Adventure educators have taken the concepts of dissonance/disequilibrium and applied them in a rather direct manner; stressful situation = learning. However as Boud and Walker (1993) remind us "learning from experience is far more indirect than we often pretend it to be" (p. 85). Leberman and Martin (2003) have pointed out that the activities in which students had been pushed outside of their comfort zones were not necessarily where peak learning occurred. Use of this model has the potential for less than desirable consequences in terms of student engagement, psychological well-being and emotional safety. As educators we hear the success stories but what of the silences and unspoken thoughts that are subsumed in the rush for closure of an activity?

I am not advocating abandoning challenging and adventurous activities. Opportunities for 'authentic risk taking', where fabricated stress is minimised, where there is dialogue about risk and genuine personal choice fosters "an environment which encourages appropriate risk taking" (Estrellas, 1996 p. 34) and the potential for positive learning outcomes. What I am cautioning against is the use of this model as a justification for engineering situations to place students outside their 'comfort zone' (e.g., inventing new activities that are higher, steeper or longer).

Davis-Berman and Berman (2002) have argued that the greatest amount of change comes when participants feel safe, secure and accepted. They have argued that, "more

productive avenues to growth and change exist, based on participants' safety and security…. rather than an emphasis on increasing risk and moving out of comfort zones" (p. 310).

Effective learning depends on solid foundations and strong relationships of trust and support between educators and learners (Vella, 2002). The concepts of reciprocal learning and autonomy/self-determination create new metaphors for teaching and learning and reframe the relationship between educators and learners (Bishop & Glynn, 1999). Learning can be viewed as a gradual and cumulative process rather than a sudden shift in understanding. Let us provide students with favourable conditions for authentic and meaningful experiences where they are challenged in an appropriate manner according to sound educational principles. It is time to reposition the comfort zone model as a metaphor; a metaphor to describe how we might think about learning and growth rather than a rationale for implementing dubious teaching and learning practices.

Further Reading

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Mike Brown is a senior lecturer in the Department of Sport & Leisure Studies at The University of Waikato. He has worked in the outdoors in Australia, The United Kingdom and New Zealand. This article is an abridged version of a refereed paper published in the Australian Journal of Outdoor Education (2008). A full copy of the paper can be found at: http://edlinked.soe.waikato.ac.nz/staff/index.php?user=michaelb&page_id=9143

COVER PHOTOGRAPH
Swedish tourist John Juter celebrates New Year's Day at Maruia Falls in the Buller region as part of the annual Victoria University Canoe Club trip to Murchison.
Photography by Gerard O'Flynn, goflynn@coras.co.nz

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