

Pathways

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River-Running Metaphor for Thinking Through Social Justice Competency Development

By Elyse Rylander and Mary Breunig

If proper etiquette for a socially just outdoor leader is broken down into its basic components, it is very similar to informing a novice whitewater kayaker about river running. For example, a whitewater paddler should work to avoid whirlpools. An educator or program leader should avoid making assumptions about participants based on race, class, gender presentation, age or ability, for example, to avoid being swallowed up by a different but equally dangerous whirlpool. Undercuts are a dangerous river feature that have the same effect as a whirlpool in regards to potential entrapment. When a non-formal educator is leading a group, s/he must be vigilant about homophobic, transphobic, misogynistic, racist, classist and ageist jokes or comments and avoid being entrapped by group enculturation. Another common river feature that any whitewater paddler is taught to avoid are strainers. A socially just non-formal educator should avoid overly relying on one group member's experience, who may come from a marginalized population, as the sole source of social justice knowledge about that particular marginalized population, and thus work to avoid being sucked into (and under) a narrow perspective.

Simultaneous to learning about which river features to avoid, novice paddlers are also taught which river features will help them to safely navigate the waterway. Non-formal educators can be taught to navigate social justice terrain in a similar manner. Paddlers are instructed to seek out a downstream V as a safe navigational landmark; social justice proponents would identify "respect" as one key navigational landmark. Wave trains and surfing waves represent exciting facets of many rivers but can be a bit tricky to navigate as a novice. A temporary moment of trepidation can lead to a feeling of elation if deftly navigated and with the "right degree" of knowledge and expertise. Being honest about one's knowledge level on a particular social justice topic while taking risks to open



up dialogue can result in a similar feeling of elation if navigated well, even when navigating those waters may feel scary at first. Educating oneself and others on social justice topics can also be unnerving, much like paddling into a drop on the river, but those results too can be rewarding.

There are situations on the river in which a paddler must aim for the one path between two hard objects, otherwise known as a slot. A similar experience can happen in social justice advocacy when someone takes a risk to interrupt someone else's use of oppressive

Navigating the Rapids of Developing Social Justice Competency

Behaviours to avoid:

Assumptions

Limit first sight assumptions you make about participants. Consider, for example, your assumptions about:

Gender, Ability, Income Level, Sexual Orientation, Race, etc.

phobic/-ist Cultures

Deliberately manage homophobic, sexist, racist, embodiment assumptions and comments and work to create safe group culture and space.

"Outing" group members without their consent

Group members will share with you more fully if they trust and see evidence of your capacity for maintaining their confidentiality

Relying on the marginalized individual as your only source of knowledge.

While learning from your group members is encouraged, do not rely on it as your sole means of education.

Behaviours to embrace:

Respect

Convey respect in all your actions. Consider how your embodied responses as well as your words and actions convey respect and be consistent. If you regularly frown or gently "no shake" your head when certain individuals in a group make contributions (ones that you often disregard or disagree with), this will get noted by that individual and the group and is a form of silent oppression.

Honesty

It is critical to be honest and transparent about what you know. It is okay to say "I don't know," and even better to follow-up and ask, "can you help me understand this better?"

Educate yourself and others

Learn about your own privileges and how they impact your interactions. Understand how privilege is also systemic and can lead to oppression, both individual and internalized. Engage in hard conversations.

Brand yourself as an ally

Identify yourself in visible ways and words as a person who supports marginalized communities.

Interrupt negative situations

Stop or speak out against an oppressive joke or comment. Redirect individuals if they make assumptions about an individual's race, class, ability, gender, or sexual orientation. This will also aid in identifying you as an ally. Say, "ouch" as an ally or as the oppressed individual and then follow up with how you are feeling to further educate and open pathways of communication.

Communicate

Establish strong communication and feedback relationships with every member of the group. This will help you more safely navigate difficult situations. Receive feedback in a non-defensive manner.

Take Responsibility

It is okay to say, "I screwed up, I am sorry," and to then ask about how to engage differently if you have offended someone. Apologies involve saying "I'm sorry" and asking "how can I restore justice?"

Actions that Bridge the Gap:

(e.g.) gender assumption
Ask participants when they introduce themselves to also articulate their preferred gender pronoun

Develop positive group culture through the co-establishment of a Positive Learning Environment (Goolin & Leach, 2008). Gather the group together. Draw a large circle on a whiteboard identifying this as the group environment, asking people what they wish to see in the environment and write that inside the circle (i.e. laughter and positive contributions) and what people want outside the (circle) environment (i.e. put downs).

Obtain explicit consent from an individual before conveying information to the rest of the group

Educate yourself on marginalized communities and cultures different from your own so that your experience expands beyond your experiences with one or two individuals

language. The pressure from the opposing forces can sometimes seem too frightening, however the pressure of that "in-between" place may actually lead to a successful outcome. Constant communication with and awareness of all the paddlers in one's surrounding environment, with a particular view toward your group members, is foundational to a safe and successful day on the water. Exhibiting "good expedition behaviour" by looking out for others and respecting the line they choose in navigating a rapid is paramount. Likewise, respect, establishing a "safe" environment, and maintaining open lines of communication are foundational to social justice competency.

Many judgment calls are made on the river and when advocating for social justice, requiring one to remain constantly alert, perceptive, knowledgeable and flexible to the changing terrain. Remember that, while engaging in paddling a river and advocating for social justice may feel scary for novices,

those marginalized by society because they hold less privilege established by some "other" dominant, hegemonic norm, have scarier, deeper and more complicated waters to navigate. How can I/we educate for and toward a more socially just world alongside them?

Mary Breunig, PhD is an Associate Professor of Recreation and Leisure Studies at Brock University and Past-President of the Association for Experiential Education. Her scholarship focuses on social and environmental justice in outdoor experiential education. Find out more at marybreunig.com

Elyse Rylander is the co-founder and Executive Director of OUT There Adventures, a Seattle-based adventure education organization committed to fostering positive identity development, individual empowerment and improved quality of life for LGBTQ youth/young adults and their peer allies. To find out more, please go to www.outthereadventures.org

