

Summer Term Sabbatical Report - Brendan Silcock (PE Dept).

Currently I am the Duke of Edinburgh (DofE) Award Co-ordinator and have been in this role since May 2012. During this time the number of boys taking part in the DofE has increased tremendously and I am introducing a Gold level course this year. In order to cope with this influx of students the school needs to develop its area of expertise rapidly so the boys can be provided with a meaningful, challenging yet safe experience.

During the summer term I was given time away from school to investigate Outdoor Education in New Zealand. The reason for going to New Zealand was that Outdoor Education a long established subject in primary and secondary school and is a key part of the curriculum. The outdoors is very accessible and there are plenty of very well qualified and experienced instructors to pass on their wealth of knowledge.

I worked with one intermediate and four secondary schools and spent a week at the Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre (EHOPC). I completed an Outdoor First aid and Patient Management course and worked with the local Department of Conservation when they were delivering their educational programme to secondary schools students. From these experiences I have developed and broadened my knowledge base and gained more experience which will assist me in making better decisions.

My experiences will directly impact the DofE programme at CLS in the following areas.

1) Safety

Safety is the most critical element to any expedition. The week spent at the EHOPC was incredibly beneficial because they are the Gold Standard for safety in NZ. Each morning they would have a briefing and look at the weather for the next two days. The weather for the next 24 hours was then looked at in relation to the activities that were on that day. This made everyone aware of how the environment may be changed due to the weather and how this may affect their groups. I am going to implement the safety and communication procedures that they employed.

Before going on a hiking trip along the Kepler track with the Mount Aspiring College, the group of teachers and leaders sat down and discussed the up-coming trip. The hike involves a day walking up to an alpine pass, a day walking along a series of ridges and a day walking down. They spoke specifically about a large weather system that was coming through and was due to hit during the trip. Issues for them were flash flooding, severe weather in alpine terrain and being able to effectively monitor a large group of Year 9 students in difficult conditions. They stressed the importance of not having to make big decisions in the field, foreseeing the potential dangers and being proactive in planning to ensure that all have a positive experience and return home. The teachers decided that they would decrease the length of their trip and stay a night in the hut and return via the same track the next day. By doing this the group avoided the worst of the weather system and only had to deal with rain on low ground.

While the school was on this trip, a hiker at the opposite end of the lake was swept away and drowned while crossing a swollen stream.

2) Improved methods for preparing the students for their expeditions

While working with Waimea College in Richmond, I spent time using their ideas about urban map reading and problem solving. Although they had hills just a 15 minute walk from the school they used urban orienteering to hone their students' skills. The activity struck a balance between practical experience and working in a safe environment. This will be implemented into the CLS training programme; we have an abundance of landmarks and narrow streets, which will help the students with grid referencing, pacing and timing their walking over a distance.

Practical experience is an essential part of learning skills for the outdoors. This year all three levels of the DofE programme will have two training days where they will be out in the field honing their skills. During the training there will be guided walks with members of staff. There will be more focus on navigational techniques, such as the four D's (direction, distance, duration, destination) to ensure they stay on track plus practical first aid and camp craft. From now on, the DofE training will be a much more practical experience.

The use of an activity debrief is to ensure that students are able to maximise their learning from the experience they have just had. It allows the group to:

- i) understand why people in the certain roles act the way they do in certain situations,
- ii) appreciate the different roles within the group and
- iii) help them empathise with group members in future situations.

3) Managing more challenging expeditions

During DofE expeditions the groups are under remote supervision, which allows for the students to feel independence but also allows the staff to know they are safe. Each school I worked with had a different technique for monitoring their students. I am going to introduce the following protocols:

- The group will carry a personal locator beacon. This will allow the group to communicate with the teacher and can differentiate between a major incident e.g., sun stroke or hypothermia and a minor incident e.g., a bad blister. The beacon uses satellites so the students will never have 'no reception'.
- The boys can check in with staff at a set time of the day, two hours before sunset, if they are not in camp. If they are lost, the members of staff have two hours of daylight to find them.

During the summer term I completed the Outdoor Emergency Management course which was an extension of the Outdoor First Aid course. This focussed on managing patients in the outdoors when help is several hours away. The skills and knowledge that I learned were used during a recent DofE trip to Bavaria when a boy with an undiagnosed nut allergy ate peanut butter. These monitoring techniques will be passed on to the other members of staff.

4) Improving my personal experience on the mountains

By gaining more experience through days walking, I was exposed to new challenges and new experiences. Through these I have improved my judgement and feel more confident that the correct decision will be made in the future.

When away with Waimea Intermediate I hiked to the top of Mount Isobel in Hamner, a 1300m peak, to investigate the route. The first 1000m of ascent was comfortable and undertaken in excellent weather. Once at 1100m the cloud descended, visibility dropped and it began to snow. I had planned to summit the three peaks along this range but decided that with the ever increasing wind, the deteriorating visibility and the snow, beating a hasty retreat was a much wiser option.

The next day the group was due to do the same climb and although the weather had improved we needed to think about the age of the students, their equipment and their experience. It was decided to do another walk to a water fall instead because it was safer and the students would have a more enjoyable walk.

5) Conclusions

The two most important things that came up constantly when out on the trips in New Zealand were putting the students' needs first and discussing the student's experience. The students' ability, previous experiences, knowledge and resources to deal with challenges must be at the fore front of any planning. If this is not done, the students will not buy into activity and it becomes pointless or it will not be safe. At the end of every activity the group would have a debrief to see how different people had experienced the same activity. This was a very powerful tool to help the group to gel together and to gain an insight into others' strengths and weaknesses. It promoted empathy and gave every person a chance to feel like they had achieved something during the activity.

I am very grateful to the governors for enabling me to take full advantage of the opportunities available to me during my sabbatical in New Zealand. I am looking forward to developing the DofE provision at City in the light of these experiences.

Brendan J Silcock.

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