Dancing on moving ground

Why is an understanding of emotional competence important for outdoor learning?

Sue Orton

I can remember feeling really nervous yet excited when I realised that I needed to leave a young person alone helming a 72 foot ketch! I was a mate on the Ocean Youth Club and a young person (Kasia) had thought she would never be skilled enough to steer the boat alone. During my afternoon watch Kasia had volunteered to be at the helm, first with me and then helming by herself. I sat with her, close enough to take the wheel, but slowly realised that I needed to leave Kasia alone so that she could see, experience and know that I trusted her and she could trust herself; I chose my moment to go and get tea. A gust came through and she looked at me, nervous and a little frightened, I had to recognise and balance my fear and hers. I needed to be self aware so that my ego and self esteem needs did not get in the way. It would have been so easy to step in, to take over. But I knew the positive feeling Kasia would experience if I let her succeed without me; I got it right. The smile and confidence Kasia took from rising to that challenge permeated the rest of her trip.

I am sure you recognize moments like these for yourself, when we have the self awareness to tune into and acknowledge our own feelings, put our own ego's down and hear and give space to the feelings and emotions of our students, asking if we need to. Only then can we know the emotional temperature sufficiently to guide our decisions; for me this demonstrates emotional competence and it is at the heart of learning.

In this article I will introduce you to emotional competence and to why I believe it is so important for learning and especially learning outdoors.

Let's start by suggesting that emotions play a key role in learning. Without going into the depths of learning styles and preference I suggest that when you think back to bits of learning that stick, experiences that you can still remember well, there will be an emotional charge associated with them; maybe positive or negative. The reason for this is that feelings and emotions are *always* involved in learning. Get a problem right and it feels good inside. If praise and reward are added, this feeling is reinforced and we remember. The same is true for getting things wrong and the resultant humiliation and sadness we feel lasts too. Unfortunately the education system traditionally homes in on the things we get wrong rather than focusing on the positive, thus leaving most adults with a residue of feelings of failure and distress rather than positive affirmation and delight. I hope this is changing in schools now, but I am not

optimistic because in universities where I have been working as a learning and teaching advisor for the last eight years, pointing out failure is still a priority.

'18 out of 20 - let's look at those two sums you got wrong?'

Let's look at the emotional residue in outdoor and physical education too. Were you chosen for the team or left until last? Could you vault over a box and climb a rope? How was your tennis or orienteering? Boys and girls have different experiences of physical learning and involvement in sport and the emotional memories will cloud or illuminate their future involvement in outdoor education and learning.

So learning is an emotional process. The next question is what happens to these emotions that we all have associated with our history of learning and why is it important we access and use them?

Traditionally we don't get much practice in valuing, trusting or giving space for emotions especially the negative ones. It is often only when crisis hits or we are perceived as having a 'mental health problem' that resources of counselling and psychotherapy allow us to get to know our emotions again. This is such an unhelpful model.

Men and women too have different experiences and cultural expectations around emotion, neither of them very helpful. Let's throw in some generalisations and see if they ring any bells for us - anger and aggression are ok for men but not so acceptable for women; tender care and affection are women's territory; strong, forceful and assertive behaviour is manly, being anxious, hesitant or afraid is girly. Both genders then are potentially dumped with unhelpful practice (or lack of practise) and expectations about emotions. If you add the emotions associated with learning and the outdoors into the mix, I think the picture is similar and equally disempowering. It's not all doom and gloom. I know that colleagues are tearing up these stereotypes and challenging these assumptions and there is an intention and will to bring emotional competence into outdoor education and learning. The challenge is that it's practice not theory that matters.

Where do we start? The only place we can start is with ourselves, by developing a relationship with our own emotions, with care and sensitivity. We need to acknowledge where we learnt our relationship with feeling and emotions; families, schools and peer groups all hold clues and old patterns. It is important not to force the pace of developing self awareness (that defeats the purpose altogether!) but do it we must, inch by inch and with every support for each other.

To summarise: emotions are at the heart of learning and every one of us brings a rucksack full of emotion (both positive and negative) attached to learning. We need to bring emotions out of the closet and let them be an integral, recognised part of learning and to begin to do that we start with developing personal awareness.

Sue Orton is a facilitator specialising in action learning; action research, emotional competence; process facilitation. She offers coaching & mentoring; teacher, coach and facilitator development, education and training.
ortonsue@mac.com - www.comfortableshoes.ltd.uk