The Long Double Haul: Teaching Fly Fishing to a Year 10 Advisory as a Means to Aesthetic Engagement

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Abstract

To adequately address the stressors and sensitivities of the boys in my Year 10 Advisory, I devised a curriculum of fly-fishing skills and outdoor education to enhance aesthetic engagement. Pagis and Effler (2021) posit that "aesthetic engagement" correlates to a dual process of cognitive reasoning; drawing a distinction between Type 1 (implicit, dispositional, fast, non-declarative, automatic) and Type 2 (explicit, deliberative, slow, declarative, slow attention).They also offer a third category of reasoning, wherein inhibiting both types of thinking allows "actors" to enter an alternative cognitive space. I conducted qualitative research over three months and my findings indicate that fly fishing as an activity had the capacity to relieve stress and enhance aesthetic engagement in Year 10 boys: they were able to see the world around them with more clarity, the experience boosted their self-confidence, they grew closer as a group, and they were able to experience new places and new environments.

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My students were stressed. They were stressed beyond their capacities. As their advisor, they would tell me about the constant barrage of work without any possibility of reprieve. The sports that they played and the activities that were engaged in, all seemed to be adding to their stress levels as opposed to allowing them a chance to recharge and re-engage. Stressors and daily tasks had in essence "forced [them] to censor thoughts and feelings, life for these young men had become more performance than authentic experience" (Reichert, 2019, p. 51). When I read Reichert's statement it struck a chord. I knew it applied to what I was hearing daily in my advisory group. The phrase "authentic experience" spoke to me. I extrapolated this to think about my own life: How do I, as a man, seek authentic experiences? I go fly fishing.

I began to expand a very simple idea, but one that could address the problem outlined by Brown (2021), who notes, "We raise boys to 'halve' themselves, to deny and disavow the necessary skills of feeling, expressing, and connecting with other people" (p. 9). While the concepts of "feeling, expressing, and connecting" also address Reichert's (2019) notion of "authentic experience," I knew that fly fishing has always been something more for me. For me, fly fishing has been the way I seek peace, comfort, and solace in a chaotic world, and I wanted to share these benefits with my boys.

I find fly fishing addresses the problems outlined by Reichert (2019) and Brown (2021), and I wanted to explore whether the experience could have the same effect on my students. Too often the boys describe "unwinding" or "tuning the world out," instead of using their developing cognition for engagement. I wanted to carve out specific time for "fascination" or "open exploration" (Pagis & Summers-Effler, 2021, p. 9). I hoped that mindful tasks, self-exploration,

and aesthetic engagement would help the boys see a healthier way to cope with stress than simply retreating into the world of social media and/or video games. Consequently, I devised my research question: How can fly fishing in a Year 10 Advisory foster boys' aesthetic engagement?

Action research was an ideal way for me to address my research question and begin to formulate a solution as it provides an opportunity to "connect theory with practice" (Mertler, 2020, p. 26). I am an advisor and the moderator of the school's Anglers Club, so I felt it was an appropriate "action" as it is "specific to a particular setting … and context" (Mertler, 2020, p.15). I also sought to frame my project as a chance for the boys to engage with the natural world where, "[Students can] experience and interpret the phenomena of place in contrast to where they have come from but also by actively opening themselves to the possibility of place" (Wattchow & Brown, 2011, p. 66).

Literature Review

The benefits of a mindful task for stress relief and overall spatial presence have been explored by Harding (2022), Creesy (2022), and Cornforth (2021). These benefits also extend to a fuller portrait of the masculine self through realizations of empathetic relationships (Reichert, 2019). Benefits of physical activity and socialization were also outlined in detail through studies at the National Outdoor Leadership School (Paisley et al., 2017). Thus, by teaching boys the benefits of mindful exercise in the form of fly fishing, I hoped to facilitate for them the awakening of a multi-faceted approach to their lives as young men that is less about "performance" and more about "authentic experience" (Reichert, 2019, p. 51) and feeling "wonder, calm, less anxiety, and less self-destructive" (Pagis & Summers-Effler, 2021, p. 7).

Aesthetic engagement fosters feelings of connection that can center on the present, but also on the wider world, which makes it a particularly useful practice among students who may

not feel fully connected in their present spaces (Pagis &Summers-Effler, 2021). Also, Becker et al. (2017) suggest that those students who might treat the fly-fishing curriculum as just an outdoor education lesson would be more likely to create positive experiences by simply being in nature, no matter what task they are charged with performing.

Mindful thinking and mindful exercises have been a recent addition to educational spaces for benefits relating to attention, focus, and emotional regulation (Davis, 2015). The benefits of mindful thinking and mindful exercise are particularly applicable in all-male education surrounding healthy masculinity (Wilson et al., 2021). Contemplating mindful tasks allows students to access areas of self that are often "easily missed, overlooked, or for personal reasons, intentionally ignored or repressed" (Cornforth, 2021, p. 3). Much of this research, however, has been focused on general outdoor education (Sassaman, 2022) and the study of place (Wattchow & Brown, 2011) without specific, task-oriented activities.

According to Wilson and Dixon (2010), there is "potential for mindfulness interventions as actual behavior change procedures" (p. 137), which was intriguing to me regarding the type of mindfulness intervention that I might implement.

The spiritual, ethical, and psychological benefits of fly fishing have roots in mindful thinking practices (Coggins, 2021). Fly fishing, as discussed, falls into what Pagis and Summers-Effler (2021) define as "aesthetic engagement … [in which] participants purposefully follow the pull of curiosity despite the risk of uncertainty" (p. 6). Their resulting study on "aesthetic engagement" compared fly fishing to vipassana meditation and observed that "Fly anglers need to move their attention beyond the limits of their bodies in order to inhabit the mind of the fish and develop a feel for the current and ecology of the river" (p. 10). They successfully

"[illustrated] how these activities create an opening for altering enduring storylines and thus hold potential for creating paths to changes in perception, experience, and action" (p. 17).

Pagis and Summers-Effler's (2021) study lays the groundwork for fly fishing to "invite people to scale down from the 'big picture' to the particulars of perception. Such sensitivity implies withholding our tendency to judge in favor of openness to learning" (p. 18). This "openness to learning" is a key component in adolescent engagement. My personal experiences with fly fishing as a means to mindfulness/aesthetic engagement inspired me to craft a curriculum to teach my advisees the benefits of seeking this mindful practice for overall health and a positive sense of self.

For many years, students, particularly male students, have endured various treks into nature with the goal being to provide cathartic experiences (Berman, 2005). These experiences often do not achieve the desired results because the foundational piece about *why* is missing, largely because young males do not inherently possess the emotional verbiage to identify *why* they might need to be more in tune with their feelings in the first place (Real, 1998; Reichert, 2019). Consider then, how fly fishing could be the catalyst for positive thoughts, feelings, and masculinity. Fly fishing brings a young man to a natural setting where stillness and presence are paramount to success. It requires a knowledge of place and the desire to learn. Fly fishing offers the opportunity for success and validation through hard work and above all, fly fishing offers experiential learning (Chapman et al., 1992).

Liefländer et al. (2013) argue for the importance of connection concerning environmental and outdoor education concepts. Connection can be extrapolated to include competencies in environmental empathy, which includes general empathy towards humanity. When you care about something, you naturally want to see it thrive. Hence, fly fishing is potentially another tool

for teaching environmental consciousness as "action-oriented environmental education" (Thor et al., 2020). This could certainly be an added benefit to overall aesthetic engagement.

Research Context

Delbarton School is an all-boys, Benedictine, Catholic college preparatory school located in Morristown, New Jersey, a suburb of New York City, USA. Led by the monks of St. Mary's Abbey and their lay colleagues, Delbarton provides a transformative liberal arts education in the Benedictine tradition. We work with 650 young men in Years 7–12. Delbarton's mission is to welcome diverse young men and challenge them to pursue excellence, build character, and develop leadership through service, by educating the whole person: mind, body, and spirit.

The participants in this action research project were 12 boys aged 15 to 16 years old from my Year 10 Advisory. I had worked with these students for one year before the research as their Year 9 advisor and so knew them well. I obtained permission from both the boys and their parents/guardians to collect data, photographs, and videos about their experiences related to fly fishing. The Advisory met every day for thirty minutes with one class period per week devoted to our fly-fishing curriculum over a six-week cycle. There was also an outing to the South Branch of the Raritan River to put theory into practice.

The Action

I devised a curriculum that would cover all of the various aspects of fly fishing and introduced that curriculum to the boys during our first week in school. During Week One, the boys reflected on the following quotation:

> Losing [a fish] is hard. Sure, you were going to release it anyway, but that's not the point. The plan was to be magnanimous in victory. You ask yourself, was it my fault? A typically analytical question. You can avoid it with the poetry of the 'it's just nice to be

> fishing' variety, or you can soften it with many levels of technical evasion, but there's finally only one answer: of course it was your fault, who else's fault would it be? (Gierach, 1986, pp. 2-3)

The boys' reflections needed to touch on some points: What types of feelings does Gierach bring up here? Have you ever had similar feelings? Are these feelings in keeping with your perception of "masculine" feelings? The boys recorded their feelings in journals with each prompt added. I used similar quote reflections with each week's lessons. After, our first and second casting practices on the school grounds, I presented the boys with the quote: "Fishing requires skill and experience, but it also requires an act of faith ... That means living with the knowledge that success, as it's traditionally defined, requires something out of your control" (Coggins, 2021, p. 11), and followed up with questions that included: Do you feel ready to fish? What are you expecting you might gather from our time together on the water? The boys provided striking and interesting answers.

Two main sessions involved casting. The fly cast can be one of the more daunting aspects of the sport, so I made sure to devote as much time as possible to the casting demonstrations. I also ensured that each boy got a chance to spend as much time as they wanted with fly rods. I had help in this from Peter Kutzer, Orvis Endorsed Operations Manager, who was able to assist me in procuring Orvis products for these demonstrations.

The final phase of the action included a trip to the Ken Lockwood Gorge in Califon, New Jersey. The Gorge has a storied stretch of the Raritan River. We were accompanied on our adventure by professional fly tyer and fishing guide Tim Flagler and his son Drew. They helped me guide the boys through the intricacies of the river and the necessity of casting as for novice

anglers, this can be very challenging. This stretch of river is full of many challenging points, but the boys were unphased. It was an extraordinary experience.

Data Collection

I collected a varied set of qualitative data throughout the action by way of student reflections (before, during, and after the action), individual interviews (during and after the action), video reflections, and field notes that I took during our instruction sessions and during our time on the river.

Data Analysis

The data were coded along subject lines. Each boy kept a journal, and I organized their responses to prompts based on dates and events within the action. I analyzed the qualitative data from my quote reflections, interviews, and notes using inductive analysis. I noticed that many of the responses to the initial prompts and interview questions seemed to have two similarities: stress and confidence. My advisees were stressed to the point of exhaustion, but they also felt a disturbing lack of confidence in their own abilities. I shifted the analysis, therefore, towards trying to see whether the practice of the sport could have an overall positive effect on their self-confidence. I found that in reflections and interviews most felt more confident in their overall abilities as young men after our weeks spent thinking about fly fishing.

I had made sure to use a variety of data collection tools in the research process, but my most valued and informative tools were individual interviews with the boys and their final reflections. I noted thematic generation based on levels of interest in pursuing fly fishing further. Some boys were highly interested. Some were moderately interested. Some were less interested. The boys were open and honest and most reflected on their original thoughts from the outset of

the curriculum. There was growth and change for all involved in this process, and for some it was significant.

Discussion of Findings

My personal experience with fly fishing led me to this project. I have found joy, solace, peace, and stress relief when I go fishing, and I wanted to share that experience with young men to see if this type of reflective thinking and repetitive action could help them in some way feel better about themselves and their place in the world. My analysis of the data from the boys revealed that fly fishing was indeed a means to aesthetic engagement as defined by Pagis and Summers-Effler (2021). Four themes encapsulated the aspects of the boys' aesthetic engagement.

Clarity in Details: Fly Fishing Allowed the Boys to See the World Around Them

The boys' reflections generally leaned towards new and open perspectives on the world around them. Pagis and Summers-Effler (2010) argue, "By resisting recognition and anticipations, aesthetic engagements leave actors open, vulnerable, and willing to engage, consider, and investigate the world more broadly" (p. 22). Boy D commented, "that when I was out on the water, I was much more relaxed and my mind was very clear." This clarity was displayed in general notions of the day as well. The boys were engaged with me and the guides as we explained the history of the place and all of the fauna present that morning. Boy J remarked, "the serenity in the air and the calmness surrounding the sport made me feel very comfortable." Boy A further commented that "I feel like I learned a lot today." Boy N reflected:

> Prior to the actual fly-fishing trip, I [had] a preconception that my inability to complete the activity of catching a fish would neutralize any ability to enjoy the experience of fly-fishing, yet this notion completely changed following the trip. The trip provided me with

the ability to obtain peacefulness and stability that allowed me to sacrifice my personal worries in the world.

Boy C said that "It felt great to cast a fly rod. I was surprisingly good at it. It gave me a second to calm down and realize that using every muscle to power the line will not make it go farther, but technique and flow will let the rod go much farther. I felt calm and patient in the moment, willing to start over and refresh." The clarity achieved in the realization that detail-driven action can achieve some sort of stress relief was in contrast to many of their prior notions of the sport. Boy H argued, "Most sports that I play are about the grit of getting something done, however, fly fishing allows one to experience the patience and persistence needed to succeed."

Confidence is Key: Fly Fishing Enhanced the Boys' Self-Confidence

One of the keys to aesthetic engagement that I extrapolated from this research was self-confidence. It seems that if you are lacking in confidence, achieving true aesthetic success is elusive. When asked about self-confidence in general, seven of 12 boys stated that they "regularly felt self-doubt." After the fly-fishing curriculum, nine of 12 boys stated that they "felt more confident in their ability to pursue fly fishing on their own." Boy K, the most successful angler on the trip, the student who caught the only fish, reflected, "I would definitely like to go fly fishing again, but I probably would not really be able to go alone, because I wouldn't really know what to do if my fly rod got stuck in a tree, I wouldn't know where to go, I don't know how to add a fly back on, etc." His success hinged upon the ability to feel confident in the moment, which was really surprising to me because, as stated, he caught the only fish and yet he would still not want to "go alone." Boy A stated, "Even though the reason is odd, the action research helped me realize that I have to be confident in my abilities and not be so worried." By

learning the sport, the boys realized that task-oriented success can lead to confidence in one's abilities to tackle other complicated experiences.

Camaraderie: Fly fishing is More Enjoyable as a Group

As Pagis and Summers-Effler (2021) argue, fly fishing creates a "sense-based embodied sensitivity to details" (p. 21). Boy J wrote, "Although the disappointment of not catching a fish was there, seeing my friend catch one was awesome and seeing his smile when he caught it made it worth it." Boy J's feeling of elation at another student catching a fish reflects this notion that success in fly fishing is not contingent on one thing. Boy J continued his reflection by writing, "I enjoyed spending time with my classmates and being able to bond with them over a single goal, trying to catch a fish." His sentiments were shared by his classmates. Boy D stated, "I think that fishing was a great experience and was a very peaceful and calm exercise."

Nature and Place Matter: Fly Fishing Allowed the Boys to Experience Environments That They Normally Would Not

Fly fishing brought the boys to a place that they had never been before. The Ken Lockwood Gorge is a state-managed wildlife area that is home to some of the best trout water in New Jersey. When the boys arrived, Boy S commented, "I had no idea this was here. I don't even feel like we're in New Jersey anymore." Wattchow and Brown (2011) define "the concept of place" as "suggestive of both the imaginative and physical reality of a location and its people, and how the two interact and change each other" (p. xxi). This concept relates directly to aesthetic engagement because of the interaction and change that occurs between actors and place. The boys clearly experienced this type of interaction. Boy R spoke to "really feeling something in the outside world. Though I probably won't do it again, I appreciate the reasons why people might." Boy H commented, "One thing that is missing is time to be able to go outside and just do

something, because most of my days, especially during the school year, have to be spent inside or away from nature." Boy R further stated, "the trip provided me with the ability to obtain peacefulness and stability that allowed me to sacrifice my personal worries in the world." Only one actual fish was caught, yet most boys felt that the day was completely successful. Overall, all the boys were engaged in the action, rather than in the result.

Conclusion

Fly fishing allowed the boys to feel a sense of accomplishment, self-confidence, and clarity. My advisees continued to be stressed by their workload and the rigor of the expectations presented to them by their families and the school and they felt they did not have a chance to explore the world without the need for concrete success. Fly fishing afforded them this opportunity. Many boys stated their desire to continue fishing. Some have even joined the school Anglers Club and have joined us on voluntary outings. Some found the process rewarding, but they were not interested in fishing as a sport for the future, while some others were indifferent to the process as a whole.

I set out to see if the need to release stress and change mindsets could be accomplished through fly fishing, and it proved successful. Moving forward, I plan to engage more of my colleagues about the benefits of aesthetic engagement through small workshops on fly fishing.

Reflection

Life is often described as a "long haul." In fly fishing, there is a necessity to learn a procedure called the double haul. When you double haul, you are essentially turbo-charging your fly line for maximum distance by tugging on the line during the backcast then repeating the tug during the forward cast allowing the physics of the cast to shoot the line further. This move is extremely difficult to master. It's like patting your head and rubbing your stomach at the same

time. For me, life is one long double haul and fly fishing has been the means for me to engage aesthetically with the world. It took me a long time to realize this, but I imagine that if I was presented with the opportunity when younger, I would have jumped at the chance to learn this technique for thinking.

I think that it's incredibly important to teach boys the importance of engaging with the world on a level without the necessity for concrete success; where the success might just be the few hours that you get to spend without stressors. By learning knots, casts, and fish types, the boys learnt self-confidence. This is an essential skill for positive masculinity. I am incredibly grateful to the International Boys School Coalition, Delbarton School, Fr. Michael Tidd, OSB, Mr. Joshua Hartle, Mr. Rob Flynn, The Flagler family, Mr. Peter Kutzer, and my action research cohort for their support and encouragement during this process. I owe a special thanks to Mrs. Polly Higgins, who has been an essential mentor and friend during this entire undertaking. It has been both enlightening and exciting, and I am hoping to further explore this topic in the future.

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