Reviewing with Teenagers

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This article was first published in support of my workshop on Reviewing with Teenagers at the 10th Lindley Festival of Outdoor Learning (2016). It highlights some of the challenges and solutions I have found when wanting teenagers to reflect on their experiences of activity-based learning, or on their daily ups and downs of life as a teenager. Working with teenagers is full of surprises – what looked like good practice two minutes ago, may not be good practice now!

Contents

Teenagers love reviewing!

They told us so. These were not hand-picked, impeccably-behaved, ultra-obliging teenagers. They were a broad social mix of teenagers who had been sponsored by parents or social workers to take part in 7-10 day activity-based residential programmes. The activities included outdoor adventures, creative arts, communication games and ... reviewing. Yes – reviewing can be an "activity"! Our course evaluations consistently showed that reviewing sessions were highly rated by teenagers.

Perhaps it is fanciful to interpret these high ratings as "love", but we did witness many reviewing sessions in which the positive impact was highly emotional – such as when young people were making *Gifts* for each other that reflected their personal qualities, or when a group were celebrating their success and achievement through *Action Replay*. [See *References and Links* at the end for links to reviewing methods mentioned in this article.]

The examples of practice in this article mostly come from the last century, so I first need to check a few things with you about teenagers ...

Teenagers #whataretheylike

- Are they still a bit temperamental, unpredictable, contradictory?

- Do they still wait to find what gets peer approval before making their "own" choices?

- Do they still change their minds at very short notice and do the opposite of what they said they'd do?

- Do they still exercise power by being negative or silent or saying the minimum?

- Do they still behave like children and expect to be treated like adults?

- Or do they mostly behave like adults but take time out to be children whenever they like?

- Is "respect" still one of the most important things for teenagers?

- Do teenagers still expect to be treated as individuals with a unique identity who are different from the rest – while not wanting to be so different that they risk being excluded by their peers?

- Do teenagers react in negative ways if you try working with them in ways that remind them of (negative) school experiences?

- Are teenagers still trying to work out who they are and what they want?

The above list of questions could be seen as a tirade of frustrations from a grumpy adult. (Actually I find it quite reassuring to realise that I still have some of these teenage qualities myself.) I see the list of questions above as having a practical purpose: it points out some of the opportunities and pitfalls when facilitating a review with teenagers. If a review process shows respect, flexibility and customisation (attributes not often found in school classrooms) then you are off to a good start.

Contracts: short, tailored and principled

A common pitfall arises when trying to work with agreements or "contracts". Contracts are often part of an adult attempt to make things more predictable. There is a good case for preparing teenagers for the adult world by training them to make and keep to contracts, but while teenagers are still teenagers, contracts will be vulnerable to the vagaries of the unpredictable worlds of these in-between-agers. Agreements between teenagers can last as long as the gap between one text message and the next. Against this backdrop, a contract for a 1 day, 5 day or 30+ day programme seems very ambitious. So with teenagers it seems especially important to respect everyone's right to change their mind – especially if they discover they have agreed to something that they didn't know enough about

at the time: "You didn't tell me my brand new white shoes would get muddy!"

I am generally doubtful about the value for teenagers of adult world constructs such as "The Full Value Contract". There is nothing wrong with teenagers knowing how best to create value for themselves and others. But it is difficult to make a meaningful "contract" when the journey ahead is full of unknowns. However, I think there are some fruitful ways of using contracts (or agreements) for setting up a climate for learning:

1. Make a series of **short-term** agreements – say for one activity at a time, rather than for a whole programme. You can then review that agreement during or after the activity while the agreement-making process is still relatively fresh in teenagers' minds.

2. Rather than having the same agreement for everyone, encourage individual variations in the agreement. Combined with 1 above this becomes an **individually-tailored** short-term agreement.

3. Rather than creating an agreement around "do's and don'ts", try to use the language of **intentions and principles**. For example: "I will try harder to show others the kind of respect that I expect from them, and especially towards [person A] and [person B]". This is simply the affirmation of a universal moral principle. It is more fruitful to review this kind of statement (and its interpretation) than it is to review something like a "no bullying" rule.

Combining 1+2+3 this becomes: "**an individually-tailored short-term statement of principle**" – and ideally a principle that is highly valued among these teenagers and especially by the teenager for whom it is tailored. An additional benefit that arises from a principle-centred approach is that principles are more universal than contracts, and "universals" (by definition) are much easier to transfer to other situations. Using a series of short-term agreements also compares favourably with trying to make a "one-size-fits-all" long-term agreement. Longer term agreements generally stay in the background (or are quietly forgotten) until they are breached. Whereas short-term agreements are more likely to be kept – and so give regular opportunities for building on positives. [I return to this theme later in the section on "*Capturing the good stuff*"]

Almost a contract: "What matters to me"

"*What Matters to Me*" is a teenage-friendly variation of an exercise also known as "Essence of Being" or "Some Body". Essentially it is a contract-making exercise that stops short of making a contract. Each person places words or pictures inside a giant body shape. Each item they place in the body represents the kind of experiences they would like to happen during the upcoming programme. And each item they place outside the body shape represents the kinds of experiences they don't want to happen. Once this is done, your question to the group is:

"*What can you do (as an individual or as a group) to increase the chances that you will experience what you want to experience and that you will not experience what you don't want to experience?*"

Usually this exercise results in a series of recorded statements that becomes a group contract. This teenage variation is to ask:

"*Think about what matters most to you personally and record up to 5 of these things that you really want to pay attention to during this programme. 'What Matters to Me' is a private note to yourself, but I will be asking you now and again to reflect on what you have recorded.*"

Some teenagers might prefer to make their private notes public – to the group or to a learning buddy. But the key change in the teenage version is that any "contracting" is primarily with oneself rather than with the group or with the facilitator. With a public contract there is a risk that the facilitator will be tempted to use the contract as a means of control and enforcement. Whereas a contract with self is more consistent with self-responsibility, self-development and with responsibility for one's own learning. Of course, there might be some unsociable behaviour that warrants exclusion from the group (or there might even be illegal behaviour that warrants reporting to the police). But I would argue that:

1. The "self-responsibility" approach results in greater ownership, more valuable learning and in more sociable behaviour.

2. A typical contract can bring out the worst in anti-authoritarian teenagers because it gives them something to rebel against, or someone else to blame when things go wrong.

3. Anti-social behaviour that warrants exclusion or reporting to the police is exactly that. You don't need a contract in place before you can challenge anti-social behaviour.

At any age, people will be less defensive and more open to learning when being asked "Why did you change your mind?" or "What became more important at that moment?" rather than being asked why they broke a contract. You can also ask "What were the consequences for you and others when you changed your mind?" Paying attention to impacts on self and others and to the moral principles in play does not depend on the prior existence of a contract – even if it is helpful to have already had some kind of acknowledgement or discussion about the value of the principle.

What teenagers need

If you want to know what teenagers need, ask them and they will probably tell you. The chances are that many of the items in their list will correspond with the kinds of human needs identified by development theorists. Here is a sample of such needs, drawn from five such theories about child development and adult development [see *References* section for sources]:

Belonging & Acceptance

Care & Friendship

Praise & Recognition

Responsibility

Self-Respect

Creativity

Achievement

New Experiences

Connection

Significance

Certainty

Uncertainty

Growth

Contribution

Fun

Freedom

Power

and many more ...

By reviewing activities we show that we *care* about what young people experience, that we *value* what they have to say, and that we are *interested* in the *progress* of each individual's learning and development.

When young people feel *cared for*, *valued*, and *respected* as individuals they will be better learners!

No such list is ever complete, including the list above. Trying to meet (to some degree) around 5 developmental needs in a reviewing process will help to achieve a rich and rewarding reviewing experience. Yes *the review is an experience too* and the experience of a review can be even more powerful than the experience of the activity being reviewed.

For example: using a *Simultaneous Survey* for appreciative feedback, you can ask each young person to collect positive feedback on behalf of one other young person in the same group. During this process several developmental needs will be met (to some degree) such as:

- experiencing the **responsibility** of collecting feedback for another

- experiencing a sense of **achievement** and **contribution** when passing on positive feedback

- experiencing **praise**, **recognition** and **connection** while receiving positive feedback (via the person acting on your behalf)

- the receiving of such positive feedback from peers may well be a **new experience**

Other reviewing methods have different "needs-meeting" profiles:

- creating an imaginary *Missing Person* to recruit to your group is open enough to create experiences of **freedom**, **fun** and **creativity** (and the whole exercise is focused on meeting the perceived needs of the group)

- performing an *Action Replay* of a key event is usually **fun**, while providing much **responsibility** and **power** for anyone who takes over the controls (to explore what happened by interviewing people when the replay is paused).

What matters here is the radical shift of perspective – which maybe you have already made in your practice. The shift is in seeing the whole programme as an experience – and not just the activities. This shift is also towards seeing reviewing as an opportunity for significant personal development rather than simply seeing a review as an opportunity for "learning". The most powerful kind of reviewing will enhance both learning and development. And the frame of "development needs" can help you to design and facilitate reviews in ways that enhance development while also improving the climate for learning.

Talking about learning may not do much for development unless the conversation is being conducted in a way that is also rich in developmental experiences.

Capture the good stuff with a review

Without a determined effort to make reviews positive or balanced, they tend to slip into a discussion about problems and things going wrong. This is a tendency with groups of all ages who want to improve. It seems more natural to want to learn from mistakes than to try to build on what went well – with the result that achievements (and people) get overlooked and underacknowledged.

In teenage groups this tendency can be even stronger especially when teenagers are in the habit of putting each other down rather than praising the efforts and achievements of others. Teenagers as individuals might well be in the habit of doing themselves down if in their peer group it is more socially acceptable to be modest and saying anything remotely boastful can lose you friends. A negative peer culture of put-downs is not one that supports learning and development.

If you do nothing to reverse this tendency for reviews to become an experience of negativity, then do not be surprised if reviewing sessions get a bad name and motivation for reviewing goes into decline. You can prevent this from happening by adopting a generally appreciative approach to reviewing that focuses on the positive stuff: on effort, on trying again, on supporting others, on challenging others (rather than blindly following others), on making it fun for others, on coming up with new ideas, on keeping going through difficult times, on spotting what was needed, on being assertive, on compromising (and on not compromising!), on being caring, on being critical (with good intentions) ...

If you see reviewing as an opportunity for meeting developmental needs (to some degree), then reviewing will become valued, popular and much loved by teenagers as they come to feel increasingly safe and significant in a reviewing culture that is respectful and developmental.

When groupwork doesn't work

Sometimes it happens that teenagers who are most at risk and most in trouble are brought together in the same group for groupwork. It should be no surprise that such groups can be extremely difficult to thrive in or work with. This is because the proposed solution (groupwork) might be the very situation that the group members find most difficult to cope with - and even more so when the group is a collection of people who struggle in group settings. One solution is to build the group by doing a series of paired exercises in which each person eventually has a paired experience with each other individual in the group. Some pairs might be extremely incompatible. If this is the case, the activity they do together should be attractive, not too difficult, play to their strengths or interests and be closely supervised. Pairs that are more compatible will not need such close supervision. The "activities" that pairs do together are many and varied such as cooking, a trust activity, a game for two, a service for the rest of the group or a review for two – maybe as learning buddies.

The ideal result is that the one-to-one connections grow throughout the group and this makes it a little easier to work with the group when they are next together as a whole group. If this is still quite a challenge, you can build things up from pairs to the whole group in stages. After working in pairs you can move up to working in 3s or 4s. For example, a review process such as *Missing Person* or *Moving Stones* can involve subgroups working together before presenting what they have made or created to the rest of the group.

There are quite a lot of reviewing methods that start in ones or twos and gradually build up towards a whole group method (for example: *Horseshoe* and *Simultaneous Survey*). These are particularly useful methods when working with difficult groups. These same methods can also move from a whole group process back to a small group or paired process. So using flexible methods that move between different group sizes can help you find alternative ways of working with teenagers who struggle (or who feel intimidated or simply "not at home") in large group settings. By using flexible methods that allow you to change group size, you can gradually work towards a situation where working (and learning) in the whole group becomes increasingly possible.

Teenage peer pressure

Peer pressure (negative or positive) is a force that causes people to change their mind or do something against their will. However "positive" or well intentioned this pressure might be, it is preferable that the individual is still free to choose and make their own decisions. This is a tricky area for many teenagers: it is the balancing act between fitting in and being different. Teenagers often make their choices based on their assumptions about how their peers will react.

What I find interesting about this "teenage balancing act" is that this kind of dilemma recurs throughout life. The main difference is that the language of the balancing act changes. Trying to predict how others will react to what you say or do is not just a teenage preoccupation – it is the core of training courses for developing emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills, teamwork, leadership and even customer service. The key difference is whether you feel trapped or even paralysed by what others might think, or whether you can navigate your way through these relationships and grow in

confidence and ability as you do so.

When I was providing activity-based self-development programmes for teenagers, the customary practice was for the facilitator to write a character description of each teenager at the end of the course. We felt that this was inconsistent with self-development – even if receiving a full character description from a sympathetic adult was a novel experience, and even if the report became a prized bedroom decoration or a valuable addition to a CV.

In place of this traditional character description we turned it into a writing exercise for young people themselves. We asked them to write descriptions for each other as well as self-descriptions. Our role was to include a variety of peer feedback sessions throughout the course, so that by the time they came to write their descriptions they were not stuck for ideas. They would work together in small groups so that young people with poor writing skills could still make a valuable contribution to the process. The facilitator's role was to manage the whole process, ensure a high level of quality for all and endorse the descriptions with a signature and maybe also with a sentence or two.

Our key measure of the success of these courses was the quality of the descriptions that young people were able to produce for each other and for themselves. The benefits of this process were:

1. Each young person is able to listen to the **responsible, insightful and caring voice of the group** (and not just to the voices of careless put-downs and shallow praise).

2. The **language of the teenage peer group** is more easily understood by a teenager than is the more unfamiliar vocabulary that a facilitator might use in their character descriptions.

3. **Writing about oneself can be a significant step on the road of self-development**. Instead of having others write your personal story, you take responsibility for writing it yourself. Your peers have helped you reach this point by giving you feedback that helps you see other sides of yourself that you may not have yet seen or acknowledged.

If you (as a facilitator) feel that any individual has ended up with a poor quality report, you can give the group extra time to come up with something more insightful or (as a last resort) you can revert to the old style of report and write it yourself. I am pleased to say that there was no occasion where we felt it necessary to take this backwards step. We felt that these reports in the words of teenagers were an effective means of making peer pressure a sensitive and developmental force.

Only non-negotiables aren't negotiable

In *The Complete Facilitator*, John Heron writes about "non-negotiables": these are your unbending principles and values on which you are not prepared to compromise. If you are clear to yourself about what is non-negotiable, then you can give yourself the freedom to negotiate everything else – should you wish to or should you think this will be of benefit to the teenagers that you are working with.

This view (or realisation) might tempt you into more power-sharing. From a teenage perspective what you see as power-sharing might be seen as you giving them more respect – because instead of deciding everything for them, you are negotiating with them, and encouraging them to take part in decisions about the programme. It is always tempting to hang on to any power that you have, but if

you see your purpose as being to "empower", then it makes sense to involve teenagers as much as possible in decision-making.

John Heron points out 18 ways of doing this in a 6 x 3 matrix. The 3 basic positions are "hierarchical" (the facilitator decides); "co-operative" (we decide together) and "autonomous" (participants decide). The 6 areas in which decisions can be made relate to: planning, meaning, confronting, feeling, structuring and valuing. As a facilitator you are free to move around and take any position that does not take you into one of your "non-negotiable" areas. Strategically moving around between these positions creates opportunities for participants to be empowered and responsible.

Starting with a blank programme is a perfectly legitimate (and successful) style of youth work, but it does not suit every situation. Providers of activity-based programmes have certain resources, sets of skills and qualifications that tend to shape the programme that is offered. And in some situations young people have signed up because they have a special interest in the activities being offered.

We generally believed that programme design was not about the sequencing of activities, but was more about the sequencing of themes. *Early* in a programme the typical themes might be: getting to know people, building trust, communications ... In the *middle* of a programme might be: teamwork, problem-solving, journeying, challenge ... Towards the *end* might be: feedback, independence, leadership, transfer, souvenirs, making connections ... This paragraph will have had few or no surprises for many readers. The surprise might be that our programmes did not show any activities.

The activities were not shown on our programmes because we did not know what they were going to be. The teenagers would be expected to choose activities that would be a good fit for the theme or objective of a particular session. They would have to persuade us that the activities they suggested were a good fit, and depending on the situation, we would often be very hard to persuade.

The benefits of this approach to programme negotiation were:

1. The teenagers soon realised that they were responsible for turning these skeleton programmes into real programmes with activities to do. They were no longer in school where everything was decided for them. But nor was it a free-for-all because there were conditions attached.

2. The teenagers were regularly practising negotiation and power-sharing and working together as a group while doing so.

3. The teenagers had a vested interest from the start in trying their hardest to explain to us how the activities they wanted to do would give them particular kinds of experiences or develop particular kinds of skills.

4. This also meant that before, during and after the activity the teenagers were fully aware of the main theme for the activity and would often want to show that their judgement in advocating a particular activity to match a particular theme or objective was perfectly sound.

5. These negotiations would often lead to adapting activities in ways that would strengthen the connections to the theme or objective.

6. There was a strong sense of working together to co-create the programme – not as equals but

with different starting points and different negotiating positions.

Another approach to programme negotiation is to use *Activity Map* near the beginning of the programme. In this case you will have planned the programme (or most of it) in advance – including the activities. By using the *Activity Map* exercise, you quickly discover whether any participants have experienced any of the upcoming activities before, and if so, whether these were good or bad or mixed experiences. Those who have not experienced a particular activity before are asked to show how much they are looking forward to doing it (from enthusiastic to not wanting to do it at all). On discovering this information you may want to adapt the programme or the activities in some way in order to make the programme a more valuable experience for each and every participant. Of course, if there is a challenge or adventure theme underlying the programme, finding out that some participants have fears related to an activity might become a reason for doing it rather than a reason for not doing it. However you respond as a facilitator, you will have gained valuable information that will help you to make suitable adjustments (if needed). You will also have been using an interactive process for discussing the whole programme with the participants – and they will also be better prepared for what is to come.

Who am I?

Teenagers may be searching for a satisfying answer to this question. It is unlikely to be answered within a single programme, even though the feedback processes described in the "peer pressure" section above can serve to help a young person think more deeply about this question, and may well cause them to learn more about how they come across to others.

The basic form of this question may need adjusting a little to make it more dynamic eg "Who am I becoming?" This is because the teenage years are usually years of rapid development – and this is what often confuses older people who are more settled and only vaguely remember the turbulence of their own teenage years.

Another useful adjustment to this basic question is to realise that in different contexts a teenager can be a different person – so "Who I am at home" might be very different to "Who I am when out with friends", or to "Who I am at school" and "Who I am when on a personal development programme with an entirely new group of friends". (As a school student I can remember being an entirely different teenager from one classroom to another.)

Activity-based personal and social development programmes create fresh opportunities with new activities in a highly supportive group environment that develops potential. It is highly likely that such a programme will bring out the very best "versions" of a young person and will create some great memories.

But if these strong positive memories are seen by the teenager as a passing phase "that only happens when I am taking part in that kind of programme", then that new potential identity may not transfer to other parts of their lives. The potential benefit can easily be wasted if there is not some deliberate

strategy to carry over positive identities from one context to another.

If the programme was a school trip, and the teenager's normal peer group are amazed at the positive changes they saw in someone, then there is a greater chance that the positive story will be remembered and retold whenever the individual finds themselves back with the same peer group. Similarly if a school teacher witnesses a so-called "trouble-maker" being a strong and positive leader during an activity-based programme, that school teacher may well have second thoughts about the values and capabilities of that young person. Positive stories are more likely to spread when there are talkative witnesses who see these personal breakthroughs.

This process can be aided by the use of souvenirs that become talking points in other contexts. Character descriptions (in the reports mentioned above) can work in this way – if they are shared – but eye-catching souvenirs are more likely to be displayed and talked about. The ideal souvenir for helping to transfer a positive identity from one context to another is a conversation starter that is seen by many people. This makes it easier for the young person to engage in significant conversations with significant others.

My favourite example of this strategy in practice is where a group of teenage boys (who had been taking part in a youth social work programme) were asked to create clay models of themselves. They took these models home and this led to new kinds of conversations with their parents and their wider family.

Parent: "Who's that?"

Son: "That's me!"

Parent: "It doesn't look much like you."

Son: "Well it's meant to be a mixture of me now and me how I'd like to be."

Parent: "Which bit's which?"

And for many boys this was the first time for a long time that their parents had paid so much attention to their sons and how they saw themselves now and in the future. And near the end of this developmental programme the boys were mostly telling quite strong and optimistic stories.

When the parents turned up at parents evening they reported how valuable those conversations had been. Until that point any enquiries from parents about how things were going at the youth club were met with teenage grunts.

Hopefully this article about reviewing with teenagers will help you get well beyond those grunting responses and into much more rewarding territory. Enjoy riding the teenage roller-coaster again – rather than trying to straighten out the tracks. That's so adult!

Workshop Description

Here is the description of the 3 hour workshop on which this article is based.

Young children guess what "teacher" wants and try to oblige. Whereas teenagers might just be tempted to do the opposite (or nothing at all). Peer influence is often stronger than "teacher" (or "youth worker") influence – so it can make sense to try to work through peers. Engaging person x by engaging person y is almost a Catch 22 (if both are disengaged at the outset). So is the idea that by "reviewing reviewing" you can get teenagers more engaged in reviewing. Teenage years are full of contradictions. So let's enjoy some contradictions and explore some ways in which teenagers (even the most contradictory ones) will come to really appreciate and value their reviewing sessions. This workshop draws on what I learned from working with youth social work groups outdoors in England and from my work with Save the Children in Scotland when advising youth social work projects.

References and Links

Reviewing Methods mentioned above (in alphabetical order):

Action Replay: http://reviewing.co.uk/stories/replay.htm
Activity Map: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/ropes.htm#ACTIVITY_MAP
Horseshoe: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/ropes.htm#HORSESHOE
Missing Person: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/ropes.htm#MISSING_PERSON
Moving Stones: http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/6_2.htm#2
Simultaneous Survey: http://reviewing.co.uk/archives/art/9_2.htm

Reviewing for Development: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/reviewing-for-development.htm

which includes this reference to these **Development Needs Theories**:

The list above draws together the work of Maslow (1954), Lindgren (1956) and Kellmer-Pringle (1965). Similar needs have been identified by Carl Rogers (1969) as being critical needs to satisfy in order to create the "freedom to learn". Anthony Robbins' Human Needs Psychology (HNP) identifies 6 Human Needs - 1:Love & Connection 2:Significance 3:Certainty 4:Uncertainty/Variety 5:Growth 6:Contribution. Fulfilment depends on meeting the needs for Growth and Contribution. William Glasser's 5 Needs are Fun, Freedom, Power, Belonging and Survival. He refers to them as 5 legs of a stool, not as a hierarchy.

Reviewing for Different Ages: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/reviewing-for-different-ages.htm

Reviewing for Wellbeing: http://reviewing.co.uk/articles/reviewing-for-wellbeing.htm

Lindley: http://lindleyeducationaltrust.org Lindley host the Annual Festival of Outdoor Learning

Author's website: http://reviewing.co.uk The Guide to Active Reviewing

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