

RE 251 Adventure Activities, Facilitation, and Group Behavior
Questions for *Deep Waters*, chapters 4-8

In a minimum of 2 pages typed and double spaced, address the questions below. Your answers are due in either hard-copy or email no later than Tuesday Nov. 10th by 9:00am.

*It should be noted that some of your responses to these questions could be extremely personal in nature. In these cases the instructor is looking for a well thought out opinion, not just something that you think the rest of class or the instructor would agree with. It's important to acknowledge that there are many ways to look at a complicated outdoor accident such as this one. *

- “Paying attention to the boy’s perceptions of the challenges of snowshoeing might have given St. John’s masters clues that their snowshoe runs were crossing the line separating constructive challenge and physical harm to their young charges, leading to anger, resentment, and potential for irreparable harm.”

As an adventure educator or programmer, how might you know when an activity has crossed that line from constructive challenge to physical harm?

Constructive challenges are designed to be difficult but not impossible. They are designed to push people to their edges, but not over the edge. While some people may believe their edges to be much closer than they really are, generally you can tell when someone has dropped from being challenged to full on panic. People deal with hardships and adversity in different ways. Some get outwardly frustrated or angry, some break down and give up easily but only need a little encouragement to get them going again, and some are the silent sufferers. The silent sufferers are the ones that are the hardest to tell when they’ve crossed that line. These are the people who have the slightest change in their demeanor and can be difficult to pick out when distracted by the more outwardly expressive individuals. The silent sufferers won’t whine or voice their pain or fears. They only get more quiet. It is hard to see the transition from determination to desperation when the others transition to violently angry or unconsolable. This distinction among all types however must be identified and dealt with before an otherwise managed situation dissolves into one of uncontrolled panic. All types could be seen in the snowshoe races, from the team leaders who in desperation verbally and physically abused their team to the boys who could go no more and would be dragged crying to the finish line. The silent sufferers were just as at risk if not more so than their comrades. They wouldn’t stop for anything, first out of determination, then out of desperation to finish and put this whole endeavor behind him.

- Describe what is meant by the chapter 5 title “Boat as Teacher”.

Chapter five gives the reader an overview of similar programs to St. John's school as well as information on the boats they used and why they had been customized that way. It first explores Kurt Hann's Outward Bound Program and his personal efforts to combat "three evils facing modern youth - the decay of care and skill, lack of enterprise and adventure, and the loss of compassion" (p.99). The large boats they used inspired St. John's first set of water craft: massive ten-oar cutters which were nearly impossible for the young boys to maneuver. Outward Bound was similar in spirit to the adventure portion of St. John's, however in Outward Bound, the participants were put through intense instruction of the skills, whereas the St. John's boys received none. The chapter went on to tell the sad tale of a similar accident which had occurred 30 years before the Timiskaming tragedy. This had led to the outright ban of using war canoes in educational venture trips. This paralleled event was eerily similar to the fate of St. John's junior team. Had anyone even considered this story, the events might not have ended so tragically. Finally, the specifics of the vessels themselves were discussed. Customized to supposedly fit more gear, the St. John's canoes were untested, unstable and generally poor designed. In these types of programs, the gear is supposed to play a part in the challenge of the trip. To successfully paddle a large canoe, precise techniques must be mastered and teamwork must flow through the passengers to ensure a smooth ride. Control over the gear which allows us to recreate/adventure outdoors comes from learning how to work *with* the object, not force it to be useful. This mastery only comes with practice or "time in the saddle" as some would say. The St. John's boys never got the chance to even attend one class from their vessels let alone feel prepared for their final exam. The phrase, "Boat as teacher" encompasses St. John's school's unrelenting philosophy of learning through experience.

- Do you think the religious or spiritual aspect of St. John's had any influence on the large canoeing tragedy or any of the other smaller accidents/incidents within the school program?

Yes I believe that the religious aspect of St. John's had an influence on the many misfortunes and near misses that the school experienced. The masters relationship with their students had the same hierarchal feel as the system of a socially controlling church. "St. John's was established within a quasi-Christian context wherein God empowered the masters, the masters ruled the big boys and the big boys ruled the little boys, who, in turn, were encouraged to appeal to God for help to face the challenges of the day" (p.84). These abusive power relationships resulted in any signs of weakness being buried as they were easily preyed upon by the higher-ups. This fear of weakness drove the masters and in turn, students to take insane risks to their safety in order to "save face". In accordance with their hierarchal system, any time something went wrong it was blamed on the boys. If a boy's ears froze during a snowshoe race, it was his fault for not dressing properly. Never mind the complete lack of instruction from the masters on how to dress, the only concern was that if the masters admitted that they should have intervened earlier or planned better that was a sign of weakness and could not be revealed to the students. So time and time again, mistakes and incidences were covered up by blaming the stupidity or carelessness of the unprepared boys.

“God uses pain as one of his sharpest chisels to model human character.” This statement was associated with the memorial service of the Balsam Lake tragedy of 1926; however easily applies to the mentality of St. John’s school as well. In an effort to foster the boys’ relationship and devotedness to God, they repeatedly put the boys in hopeless situations. In regards to the self discovery component of the many intense outdoor activities: “But what he will more probably discover is that he doesn’t have resources within himself that he thought he had. Having made that discovery, as so often happened in the boats, he will make a pact within his soul or with God that says ‘I haven’t made it. I’ve failed. Lord have mercy. That’s all I can say. That’s my final statement.’ When you can say that, you have character” (p.128). Only once you have lost all confidence in yourself and your comrades and only have God to look to will you build “character”. This was the St. John’s way: driven to desperation, despair and hopelessness to find your way to God. Now, these cruel rites of passage and extreme situations to invoke a spiritual experience are not uncommon to humanity. People put themselves through all sorts of suffering to get a glimpse of the beyond, to connect with the energies of the world, to “meet our maker”. St. John’s was attempting to create such situations for their students to fall off the edge and have God lift them back up; they just followed the same ideology while planning these experiences. They would be kept safe “By the grace of God” any challenges or tragedies would be “God’s will” and they would thank Him for everything at the end no matter what happened on those trips from Hell, because God had given them an opportunity to go to Hell and back. This disillusionment and blind faith in God’s will ultimately resulted in a group of four unprepared masters leading 12 children to their deaths. As those responsible for the safety of their charges, one cannot just “believe” that everything will be okay.

- Specifically, what do you think caused the tragedy on Lake Timiskaming?

The tragedy on Lake Timiskaming was caused by ill-preparedness. Basing their route and watercraft solely on rumors and legends of voyageurs long ago, the leaders of this expedition were incompetent and had no business taking all of those boys on that voyage. They claimed that “learning on the job” was effective, but I believe it was simply lazy. They needed the boys to spend time selling honey for the school, doing chores to keep the residential part going, and studying for their impossibly hard classes. There was no time to teach the boys paddling or safety techniques nor was there time to develop the curriculum required to do so. “Preparedness would squash innovation” the masters touted, yet punished the boys when they failed while trying. With no route planning or even practice in brand new canoes, these masters set out with innocent children expecting them to be experienced frontiersmen. None of these kids were anywhere near masters of canoeing let alone barely sufficient. The we’ll deal with it attitude the instructors adopted when the boats proved to be unstable upon launch was reckless. Between the masters there was no established chain of command and their arrogance prevented them from realizing how dangerous it was to put a brand new boater at the stern of their weakest boat. These “masters” all had god-complexes and believed they were invincible. They continued their hypocrisy of the values St. John’s aimed to teach the boys by dividing the boys up in another hierarchal system. The strongest rowers went to the strongest sternsman. The weaklings left with the instructor who had no idea what

he was doing. The hubris and arrogance of the masters at St. John's school killed a young man and twelve innocent boys on June 11th, 1978. The accident was completely preventable. If only God had willed humility and a willingness to prepare...