Fostering Student Leadership, Competence and Independence: NOLS Student Supervision Practices

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Purpose Of This Paper

This paper defines NOLS' expectations for supervising students while we concurrently develop their independence. This paper, written with input from instructors, uses their quotes (*in italics*) to provide guidance and further explain NOLS' techniques and strategies for conducting independent student group travel. Specifically addressed are camp to camp hiking days (daily independent student group travel) and multi-day student expeditions (SE's). It also acknowledges that students are often independent of direct instructor supervision while in camp.

The Role of Independent Student Time

"Our teaching is intended not only to prepare students to meet wilderness challenges on their own, but to lead others as well."[1] Throughout our history, the education, training and experience provided through a NOLS course has developed competent graduates capable of leading and conducting their own outdoor trips and expeditions. A foundation of the NOLS educational philosophy is to use the learning power of experience with consequences.

It is no less true today than when NOLS was founded in 1965 that people, especially young people, need, want and respond well to this educational approach. NOLS' use of independent student group travel has a profound effect in the development of desired leadership attributes in our students. Our alumni tell us this. Our observations tell us this. Research into the educational outcomes from a NOLS course consistently correlate both daily and multi-day independent travel by student groups with higher student outcomes. Personal empowerment that comes from independent decision-making is the most significant course-level factor affecting all student outcomes.[2]

A core value of NOLS is to teach leadership. "We encourage the evolution of judgment, personal responsibility, and awareness of group needs…through practical experience and timely feedback."[3] Independent student group travel (ISGT) provides opportunities for students to display competencies necessary for wilderness travel, to better understand their abilities and limitations, to gain valuable experience upon which to further develop their self-awareness and judgment, and accomplish a realistic and achievable goal.

The Practice of Independent Student Time

We use a progression of classes, activities and experiences to build knowledge, skill and competence. We carefully evaluate and assess student performance, and gradually loosen supervisory reins to facilitate independent student experiences. The progression begins with students independently performing cooking and camp chores. A common next step is hiking without instructors during the day. The progression may culminate in a multi-day student expedition during which the students use their skills and knowledge to travel through the wilderness without instructors.

Many of our course types include the possibility of independent student group travel. Most commonly these are either hiking for a day without instructors, or the multi-day student expedition. However, there are NOLS courses where activities are too technical or the environment too harsh to allow students independence from direct instructor supervision. Defining technical terrain is subjective. The International Scale of River Difficulty and the Sierra Club classification of terrain and rock climbs are two common systems that can provide guideposts, but any definition is subject to many variables. Conservative evidence and observation based judgment that the student is capable of managing the challenges is the best approach to evaluating terrain or routes for student travel.

Participating in independent student group travel is an earned privilege, rather than an automatic experience. Students who don't demonstrate adequate skills, effective group interactions or decision-making, can hike with the instructors, while other students travel unaccompanied by instructors. Though not common, there are courses where instructors do not allow students to go on student expeditions, or they shorten the experience. The route can be altered to fit the abilities of the students and some student expeditions may need a daily check-in with the instructors.

Familiarity with the terrain for both the students and instructors is a key element to successful independent student group travel. Specific knowledge of the intended route(s) may not be necessary, but students need to have had sufficient experience in the terrain type to be competent. ISGT groups don't do technical activities (e.g. rock climbing), but rather they travel over familiar terrain types. They don't wade a river without a river crossing class and supervised practice; they don't cross a high mountain pass without first having done so with their instructors.

NOLS instructors deciding when and how to allow young people to venture into the world on their own face a challenge similar to parents. We balance the likelihood and cost of a beginner's error against the benefit of the activity. The degree of instructor presence depends on student ability and the risks and educational goals of an activity. We may let students cook with stoves after only one demonstration while we coach them through numerous river crossings before they attempt one on their own. We may let students lead themselves on a well-marked trail, and intervene the first time they cross an exposed high mountain pass or snow slope. Through the years our teaching and coaching methods have balanced the advantages and disadvantages of allowing our students to develop responsibility and leadership through independent experiences.

Yet student independence does not come without risk. Katy Brain died in a river crossing in the summer of 1996 while she was hiking with a student group. Thomas Nazzaro disappeared, presumably into a moulin, during a student expedition on the Matanuska Glacier in 1999. We operate in a climate, in both our profession and society, of growing intolerance to the adverse consequences of risk. Sociologists tell us that this present generation of parents is especially protective of and adverse to negative consequences, or even some discomfort, for their children.

Preparation for student independent travel involves four key strategies; clarity of expectations and curriculum progression, observation of performance and the decision on student readiness for independence.

Clear Expectations and Curriculum Progression

There are a number of tools we use to convey what we expect from students preparing for and participating in independent student travel.

Travel plans and route briefing

A route briefing and a written travel plan are powerful tools to brief and teach students and to evaluate their navigation skills and hazard awareness. They help the student anticipate distances, hazards, navigation and decision points and allow instructors to arrange meeting areas and clarify expectations on timetables and contingencies. Students need to be given clear instructions on what to do if hazards are encountered, if situations arise that are beyond their ability, our expectations about being overdue, emergency procedures, weather considerations and unexpected obstacles. Consider having everyone do an individual travel plan at some point in the course. This sidesteps the possibility that only a few interested students are doing all the daily travel plans.

Camp boundaries

Brief students on camp boundaries and behavior to set expectations and terrain boundaries within which instructors do not have to be immediately on hand to supervise. While not as formal as a perimeter of a glacier camp marked with wands, this briefing can include how far students can roam unaccompanied for fishing or solitude.

Point out natural boundaries beyond which you expect people to have told the instructors their plan, and that they bring a day pack, a map, a compass and a companion. Having students describe camp boundaries is a good way to develop this habit and awareness so they can use it during the student expedition.

First aid skills

Students traveling independently need first aid skills. If instructors are nearby these may be simple skills such as stabilizing a patient and managing the ABC's. As their independence grows so does their need for more skills. We have a specific scenario-based first aid curriculum appropriate to the length of ISGT. This curriculum is a pre-requisite for participation in ISGT activities.

Emergency and lost person procedures

We address emergency procedures at a basic level when we tell a student what to do if they are disoriented around camp, or a group what we expect if they become lost or delayed. We tailor our overdue group instruction for the situation. We may use simple directives such as "stop walking and make yourself visible." As skill and experience increase we may add expectations on accessing support if the group is separated from staff.

> *"We ran a few first aid scenarios and emphatically covered emergency procedures. One scenario, late in the course, went from the initial patient assessment all the way to having a runner party show up at our tent, documents in hand, with a plan and a good contingency. The students did a fantastic and thorough job at this, taking it very seriously, and assuring us that panic wouldn't arise if they found themselves in a tough spot."*

While on ISGT each student group knows the itinerary and travel plans of the other student groups and the instructor group. Students are provided specific emer-

gency procedures to follow if there is an incident that includes providing first aid and/or attending to the well-being of the patient and rest of the group, then sending a messenger team to locate and notify the instructors who can then assist or use their portable telephone or radio to request addition assistance. In rare cases, it may be more expedient for the student messengers to directly contact NOLS emergency coordinators.

ISGT groups are formed to balance strengths and weaknesses of the team members. Each group travels with a full compliment of shelter, food, stove/cook gear and clothing. Also, each group may follow the same route but depart at different times, or they may choose separate routes.

The instructors plan their itinerary so that they are within a "reasonable distance" to any group at any time. This reasonable distance depends on specific local conditions. During multi-day student expeditions the upper limit is for the instructors to camp no further than 24 hours travel from any student group. Commonly this time frame is much less. Instructors consider terrain features and student strengths and abilities when determining their camp locations. For example, instructors may shadow one group of students along the same route and be one or two hours away at any given time, while a stronger, more competent group may follow a route farther away.

Curriculum progression
The curriculum progression of classes, activities and experiences is designed to build from basic outdoor living skills through travel and technical skills, from being a novice to being capable of more advanced skills, from leading yourself to leading others. The intent of this curriculum is, on courses where it is an option, to prepare the students for independent student travel.

Careful Observation and Creative Supervision
When students travel independently, and in particular during multi-day student expeditions, the instructor team may use combinations of supervision techniques.

> *"Students traveled with and without instructors throughout the course. By intermingling these types of travel days, students could work on new skills for a few days and then hike with instructors and be quickly reevaluated on their new skills."*

Ghost instructors
Silent instructors accompany student groups, observing their actions but intervening only if safety is compromised.

> *"Progressively, the instructors stepped back as we hiked with the students, saying less and giving more of the reins to the students, only stepping in if it became a safety issue. We could assess their map, travel, hazard evaluation and communication skills."*

This can become an awkward situation where student leadership is undermined or unclear. As much as we try to remove ourselves from daily hiking decisions, students can adeptly read when our body language says, "Hey, why are we going uphill when camp is down in that valley?" Clear intervention parameters need to be established to allow the students to experience their leadership but permit the instructor to take over if safety is in question.

Shadowing
A variation of this is shadowing groups, hiking in visual contact and intervening if an unexpected obstacle presents itself.

Meeting at hazards
You might leave camp before the students to assess terrain before they arrive. By meeting at the river crossing, pass or boulder field we can allow students to travel independently on familiar terrain, and coach them at the new or challenging terrain. This can happen by meeting groups at prearranged sites, such as the base of the big pass, or giving the students permission to wait for the instructors if they are uncomfortable with a river crossing, snow or boulder field.

Instructors have different levels of comfort with independent student activities and different supervisory schemes. Some wait for students at challenging rivers, passes and other terrain obstacles. Others hike with students through these areas as silent observers, turning the students loose after the hazard.

Debriefing
We rely on daily debriefing of the student hiking groups to teach communication, conflict resolution skills and to assess the students' progress.

> *"We debriefed daily, addressing both teamwork and hazards with the most emphasis, and got a clear idea of how well and how safely they all worked together on the trail. It really built my confidence when one group debriefed themselves and did a good job."*

Determining When Students Are Ready For Independence
Observations and demonstrated competence are the foundations of a decision that students are ready to be independent. Our desire that they be ready is not the same as them actually being ready. Desire can be a subjective hazard in our decision process. We need to be able to articulate, with supporting examples, why we think they have earned independence. The length of most NOLS courses allows us to

systematically apply a careful and specific teaching progression and provide the necessary time for observation to facilitate decisions on when to turn students loose.

NOLS field staff evaluate leadership, expedition behavior, teamwork, communication, decision-making process, core skills (travel, navigation, camping), weather and hazard experience in deciding when students are ready to be independent.

"I look for my students to be organized, on time, and motivated. Do they leave clean camps and kitchens? If students are assuming responsibility on the smaller scale I can consider them for larger responsibilities."

"When they show consistency in making safe decisions, understand risk factors, are solid campers and are developing an environmental ethic, then they're ready."

"We spent enough time with the students on the trail, assessing their map and travel skills, and their communication skills, to know that the chances for success are high and failure was unexpected."

Leadership skills
The NOLS Leadership Skills are a benchmark to measure student readiness. Competence in core outdoor living and technical skills, awareness of abilities and limitations, judgment with mature decision-making skills, tolerance for adversity and uncertainty, and expedition behavior can all be observed in students.

Decision-making skills
We observe students interacting with others and reacting to the different challenges of a course. This gives us a lot of information, especially on month long and semester courses, on their decision-making. We identify the leaders whose decisions we trust, and the "young immortals" who need closer supervision. Students making their own decisions need to be willing to speak up when they have an opinion regarding safety and to have a clear understanding of goals and priorities for their student expedition.

"When they have experience—with instructors present—in a number of different hazard evaluation situations, and if they handle these decisions well, then they can be ready to be on their own."

Expedition behavior
Tension within a group or poor expedition behavior is a risk factor for dissention and poor communication when times get tough.

"Expedition Behavior, the ability to function in a group and as a team, is one of the more important prerequisites for participating in an independent student expedition."

Outdoor living and travel skills
There is plenty of opportunity to observe competence in students in the core outdoor living and travel skills. It becomes clear when students can be expected to take care of themselves and others without an instructor's presence.

A student's ability to travel through rivers, over high passes and boulder fields, develops throughout a course as they practice skills and become increasingly involved in the decision-making process. We evaluate and give them feedback on the limits of their skills, abilities and experience. We can see if the student is aware of their surroundings and group, acting conservatively and consistently.

"We held a skills clinic where every student had to start a stove, show us their location on a map, use a compass, tie a few knots and pack their day pack."

"Consistency with fundamentals will demonstrate both conscientiousness and the setting of safe habits. Things like careful coiling, the dressing of every knot, the meticulous double checking of partners before starting a top-rope climb, accurate climbing communication—all reveal a commitment to fundamentals and safety which can be relied upon."

Weather experience
On courses with potential for harsh weather we may decide to stay closer to a group, especially if the expedition to this point has only experienced benign weather.

Hazard management experience
We can develop a good sense of our students' experience with and ability to manage hazards such as weather, rock fall, moving water, animals and insects. We can anticipate their performance when we're not around, and adjust our level of supervision accordingly.

"I do a hazard tour, walking around the area, identifying hazards and discussing risk management."

"After a formal class on hazard evaluation and risk management, I consistently weave a theme of speaking about the hazards and risk management strategies we're using."

Conclusion: Leadership and Independence
A goal of our curriculum is to develop students as leaders who make decisions and lead without the direct guidance of their instructors. The curriculum themes of wilderness skills, expedition behavior, leadership, Leave No Trace and risk management all flow toward this goal. Our graduated levels of supervision parallel our leadership curriculum.

"I like to use these four to five phases of supervision in leadership development; Role Modeling, Consultant, Guardian Angels, Autonomy, and if appropriate, Small Group Expedition."

The expedition nature and length of most NOLS courses allows instructors to systematically apply a careful and specific teaching progression. It gives us the time for observation and evaluation to support our decisions.

I thank the instructors for their input into this document. This document has been revised six times in 12 years, a reflection of a process of questioning and evolution of our practices will enable us to continue to develop our techniques for fostering independent student leaders.

Notes

[1]NOLS Wilderness Educator Notebook, 1999.

[2]Sibthorp, Jim, PhD, et al. Exploring Participant Development Through Adventure-Based Programming: A Model from the National Outdoor Leadership School. *Leisure Sciences,* 28: 1-17, 2006.

[3]NOLS Vision pamphlet, 1995.