

7 habits of highly effective excursions



customising group getaways
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**PRACTICAL INFORMATION FOR
THE TRAVELLING CLASSROOM**

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Mark has taught in both the private and public school systems of Australia. He is currently the Principal of the Australian College of Asian Studies. Camping and touring has formed much of Mark's educational approaches, having worked for the largest camping organisation in Australia and having been the Project Manager for AusAID's Papua New Guinea Secondary School Student's Vacation project. Married with three children, Mark is currently developing the "Travelling Classroom" as his doctoral thesis.

*This booklet is dedicated to those teachers who, despite being aware of the arduous task of risk management still undertake excursions so as not to deny their students of valuable learning experiences. The opportunity for students to learn through direct interaction with the real world results in deep and enduring understanding. **Thankyou for your dedication.***

The author acknowledges the valued and expert input of the Australian Splash Down staff in compiling this booklet

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7 Habits of Highly Effective Excursions

1. Establish Clear Aims

Prelude: This booklet provides useful and relevant information for the teacher or group leader undertaking an excursion. Whilst the “travelling classroom” provides meaningful opportunities for real life learning, it is also fraught with potential pitfalls. The increasing prevalence of litigation may cause educators to prefer the safety of the classroom, but the resulting loss to students of interactive learning in the real world is significant and of concern.

This practical, commonsense guide draws on more than twenty years of the author’s experience of attending and directing excursions, tours and camps both within Australia and overseas; as well as the similar experience of the other staff of Australian Splash Down.

The author broadly defines excursions as those educational opportunities that are presented to teachers outside the school confines. It can be as varied as a day excursion, a camp or an international tour. While varied, the core effect of maintaining order, meeting curriculum objectives and building a temporary community provides unique challenges for the educator.

Excursions, camps and tours provide valuable opportunities for students to take initiative, develop independence and connectedness to the real world. It will often take them outside their comfort zone – and the teachers.

I hope you find this booklet supportive in your role as you endeavour to make students learning experiences memorable . . . for a lifetime.

Some teachers have inherited an excursion, which has been conducted for many years, for others it is a new initiative. Either way, the travelling classroom requires educators to demonstrate a wide range of different organisational skills. Fundamental to organisational management is the setting of clear aims.

Ensure your aims are clearly understood

What are you aiming to achieve? How does your trip fit within the wider curriculum? Try to ensure these aims are written. With clearly defined aims you will be more able to communicate your purposes to those from whom you seek support for your excursion: students, parents, colleagues and administration. Further, management on tour can be considered against the backdrop of these aims.

Sell your aims to students, support staff and administration

Once you have clearly defined your aims – communicate them both orally and on paper. To successfully utilise the travelling classroom allow yourself freedom from management issues to focus on desired aims. Take others with you. Let them share in the aims and then much of the management can be delegated.

2. Reduce the ratio

How often is a high quality excursion or camp proposed to enhance the curriculum, only to be hindered by the staffing needs of the tour? Staffing restrictions may only allow a 1:20 (teacher/student ratio). So with 40 Year 9 students, having only two staff could be less than desirable in certain situations. The Education Queensland DOEM claims that the ratio of adults to students should be “appropriate to the age and developmental levels of children and the types of activities planned”. Opinions of “appropriate staffing” levels on excursions may be skewed as Administration struggles to ensure enough teachers remain back at school

Request school support staff

- Keep an “ace” up your sleeve when the chance of more teaching staff is restricted, pursue the possibility of non-teaching staff (eg teacher aides, janitors, chaplains). In fact, be daring, ask for two non-teaching staff.

Consider “appropriate” staffing needs

Develop a support team of parents and community members

- Finally, build a **support team** by developing a base of trained parents and community members who can come on excursions. Parents or guardians chosen to accompany students should be selected according to the expertise they have relevant to the activities to be undertaken. To be avoided though are volunteers who create more work for the educator. An induction process is therefore required. Don’t forget to ensure that any volunteers have completed a “working with children check”. The time spent on developing a base of suitably trained volunteers now will reap rewards for future excursions.

Use the following suggestions to try to reduce ratios from the “official” minimum requirements. This will provide you with further protection

- Be assertive in advising administration of “appropriate” staffing requirements by presenting the request clearly and confidently while acknowledging the need to maintain sufficient staffing at school.
- Avoid becoming angry and frustrated. Professional discussion maintains respect and is more likely to assist your current case as well as future opportunities

Request more staff

Support teams reduce pressure and effectiveness

With a support team, the teachers effectively have extra pairs of hands, eyes and ears. Volunteers also bring a different dimension to the temporary community. Because of their work backgrounds, students are exposed to a wide range of specialist expert knowledge and experience.

A simple induction process in the school will help in developing this process. Australian Splash Down is currently developing short internet courses for volunteers on excursions. If you would like to know more, see the response section at the back of this booklet.



3. Have a few clear rules (and establish consequences for inappropriate behaviours)

Teachers often neglect making specific excursion rules, assuming a continuation of classroom expectations. Following are three general rules for excursions (ie camps) that, when presented separately to the various other taboos, are generally remembered and accepted by students.

1. Boys and girls dormitory areas are out of bounds to the opposite variety (make sure this is clearly defined)
2. Don't leave the bounds of camp without leader/teacher permission
3. Smoking/alcohol etc is not permitted.

If it is a day excursion, the first one can be excluded. The students should be addressed either before departure or upon arriving at the site, depending on the nature of the excursion.

The "introductory talk" would elaborate on the purpose of the three rules as follows:

1. *We want to ensure a community of trust and therefore boys and girls areas will remain out of bounds to the respective opposite variety.*

Keep a few simple rules

Communicate your rules verbally and in written form

Provide students with the opportunity to discuss problems with the rules

No one approaches you? – assume we all respect the rules!

Consider rules to enhance your travelling classroom

2. *We need to know where everyone is at all times. If you need to leave the bounds of camp, just let one of the staff know (at this stage, boundaries need to be clearly defined).*
3. *We want to promote healthy lifestyles and hence our restriction on smoking and alcohol (the site would no doubt also have a similar rule).*

Rules should be presented in a language that students can relate to and find novel (eg "opposite variety"). The students should be advised that if they have a problem complying with any of these rules they are to see the teacher immediately after the group talk; otherwise it can be assumed that everyone is willing to comply with these rules.

There are other "community living" rules, which also need to be explained to students. For example, when working with primary students a signal (such as a whistle or raised hand) should be established to get the immediate attention of the group. With older students I would emphasise the need to curb physical relationships in temporary communities as they detract from community spirit. The key is to make it appear that there are very few rules and to make them simple and clear.

It is also important to think through a “Excursion Behaviour Management Plan” with Administration. What are the consequences if a student is caught outside the bounds of camp, smoking or consuming alcohol? If a student is caught shoplifting? Often teachers have excellent behaviour management plans for inside the classroom, but have not thought through plans for excursions.

Australian Splash Down is involved in the development of a range of behaviour management plans for the travelling classroom. These are available upon request. See the response section at the back of this booklet

Above all, try to remove the behaviour from the student – dislike the behaviour not the student. The support team will also need to be advised of their role in the behaviour management plan. The leader of the excursion is in the best position to deal with the discipline; the rest of the support group is then left free to handle more of a caring function. In this way an excellent balance between care and discipline is maintained and your support staff are not seen as “policemen”. It is therefore better to use proactive strategies that emanate from caring relationships to prevent or reduce behaviour problems rather than reacting to inappropriate behaviours after they have occurred.

Have consequence plans up your sleeve

Keep a few key guidelines in mind

Use your support staff as positive role models



4. Protect yourself

It only takes a few small policies to make a large difference. The last thing you need to do is to be constantly quashing “bushfires” on the excursion. Here are an example of six important aspects to remember, and remind your support team:

- No student alone,
- No student and leader alone,
- Keep a mobile on at all times,
- Make sure school administration know where you are at all times (advise of changes to plans),
- Keep school administration advised of any incidents and emergencies (try to brief the school before they get phone calls from parents, media etc),
- Write an incident report as soon as possible after any incident or emergency

Australian Splash Down produces a free monthly newsletter aimed at providing more useful information for teachers seeking to provide this safe environment. Complete the details at the back of this booklet to subscribe to this free monthly newsletter.

Remember when working with people, things will not always go to plan but prior planning will reduce risk and increase learning and enjoyment. The key is to provide a safe and effective learning framework, within which the students can enjoy learning.

Use proactive strategies to prevent most problems.

6. **Think through and communicate changes to the plan - be ready for the unexpected**

Ensure the needs of the school's hierarchy have been met

Before departure, make sure there is a clear itinerary and that all expectations of your administration have been met. A checklist can be used and may already exist in the school in the form of a "permission to change school routine" procedure. However, as mentioned previously, when working with people and resources things will go wrong. Whether it is a rainy day, a sick student or a blown tyre on a bus, there will be events that despite extensive planning, will be outside your control.

5. **Develop a positive and appreciative culture**

When things are going well, tell the group.

Be positive

Encourage students to show their appreciation for a good meal, bus driving or an excellent exhibit. If this is maintained, the whole camp culture will be positive. Encourage the students to make a meal special (decorations etc) for the support team to show their gratitude. The excitement to get involved can be surprising.

Show your appreciation

Teachers have excellent management skills rely on these

Teacher training and experience builds professional wisdom. Be prepared to be flexible in approach and with programming. Use other people, drawing on their expertise and advice. Always have a ball and a few games handy as time fillers.

Personally, try to develop a "praise rating" of 80%. That means a mind set that gives out positives (to the support team as well as students) four times as often as negatives. The result will be infectious with others also looking for the good in situations and people.

Monitor your praise rating

Communicate

Address the whole group – don't be caught answering a million questions

At all times - communicate. Even if things aren't going well, advise the student group. It can be surprising how much the students will cooperate in times of difficulty. Communication to the whole group will also prevent fielding hundreds of questions – one of the most exhausting aspects of excursions. Try to answer the questions for the group before they are asked by many separate individuals.

7. Release yourself and take the lead

Aim to release yourself so you can focus on desired outcomes. When working alone, ensure the itinerary is well planned so you have as few administrative concerns as possible.

Become a manager rather than a technician

In a team situation, try to assume a position of solely monitoring, Endeavour to manage your excursion so other teachers with you are free to teach and focus on desired outcomes. This of course depends on size of group.

Empower and support your support team

By releasing as many program and administrative duties as possible, you can focus on the goal, strengthen the program where necessary and deal with issues. Another advantage is that your support team are empowered as they have “real” roles and responsibilities in their role, and you are free to support and further train them.

“Stay on the bridge, even when someone else is steering, but try and get out of the engine room”.

Checklist

Habit	Check
1. Establish clear aims	<input type="checkbox"/> Ensure your aims are clearly written <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure your aims have been communicated to: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Students ○ Support Staff ○ Administration
2. Reduce the ratio	<input type="checkbox"/> Identify your staffing needs <input type="checkbox"/> Approach Administration for staff <input type="checkbox"/> Identify and invited support team <input type="checkbox"/> Train support team
3. Have a few clear rules	<input type="checkbox"/> Identify a few clear rules <input type="checkbox"/> Develop other rules that will help “build community” <input type="checkbox"/> Ensure prepared rules are communicated verbally and in writing to students <input type="checkbox"/> Develop a plan for misbehaviour consequences
4. Protect yourself	<input type="checkbox"/> Have a few clear guidelines for safety <input type="checkbox"/> Think – where are the risks <input type="checkbox"/> Take a mobile phone <input type="checkbox"/> What key phone numbers will I need?
5. Develop a positive and appreciative culture	<input type="checkbox"/> Maintain a high “praise rating” <input type="checkbox"/> Encourage students to show appreciation to others
6. Think through the plan	<input type="checkbox"/> Have a clear and flowing itinerary <input type="checkbox"/> Have the school’s administrative needs been met? <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare some sporting equipment <input type="checkbox"/> Anticipate questions <input type="checkbox"/> Rely on expertise of support team <input type="checkbox"/> Be prepared for change and disruption
7. Release yourself	<input type="checkbox"/> Delegate responsibilities <input type="checkbox"/> Consider how to empower and train your support team

