



by James Walsh

Session Planning and the Art of Good Squash



I am hoping the catchy title has drawn your attention to what I hope will be an interesting light-hearted article for readers regarding the broad topic of session planning.

The analogy I am going to use compares an outdoor learning session with a fruit squash drink. Why fruit squash I hear you ask! The idea for the title comes from a young person I regularly work with who critiques my efforts at making squash. Sometimes what I've created isn't quite up to scratch and he will always let me know when I've put too much juice/water in. Everyone knows what squash tastes like and everyone also knows when squash just isn't quite right. If you follow my analogy, how many times have you been on outdoor sessions that sometimes just aren't quite right for whatever reason? Equally how many times have you been on a session where everything is going just right and you have thought that you

literally have the best job in the world?! I would imagine most readers would be able to recall a few good examples of sessions that would fit into both categories.

There are of course a multitude of factors behind what makes a good effective session and some of these are of course beyond our control. It is worth reminding ourselves at this point that you can only control the controllable. A surprise wet miserable day that has a negative impact on what you planned is always going to be a wet miserable day regardless of any forward planning or Plan B.

With all this in mind, I would suggest that a fairly significant reason behind what makes an average session a great one is good planning and preparation.

| FACTOR | WEAK SQUASH | GOOD SQUASH | STRONG SQUASH |
|--------------------------------|--|---|---|
| Session Objectives/Aims | Group task is achieved easily leading to boredom and lots of spare time. | The right balance between being achievable yet challenging. The sweet spot! | Aims are unachievable and unrealistic leading to poor group morale and frustration with the session. |
| Group Size | Too few staff for a session/too many participants. Potential for safety issues and lowered level of engagement. | Participants are all fully engaged without anyone being left out due to restraints relating to equipment/space or staffing. | Too few participants and or too many staff. These sessions border on the slightly awkward as the mismatch creates a peculiar setting and atmosphere for a session that cannot be overcome. |
| Environment | Taking a group bug hunting in an area where within an hour the class had found a handful of creatures between them. | The green space with a great mixture of different habitats that allow for a variety of different insects. The site with a meadow, small copse, rocks etc. | The setting that is so intense/scary to participants it becomes a major barrier to learning. Children from an inner-city estate too scared to enter a tall meadow so bug hunting goes out the window. |
| Equipment | Not enough equipment for the needs of the group or the equipment is in some way inadequate. | Equipment suitable and adds to the participants learning experiences | Equipment confusing, too complicated or learners not comfortable in its use. |
| Staffing | Staff not having the appropriate experience/skills to lead a particular session. Staff asking 'I hope they don't expect me to know the birds!' before leading a session on birdwatching. | Experienced and knowledgeable staff with appropriate group skills engaging the group. Novel absorbing activities used to aid teaching such as using kitchen utensils to explore bird adaptations. | Issues relating to experienced and enthusiastic ornithologists delivering a session without putting the needs of the learners first. Using complex terminology and expecting participants to know more than they do. |
| Learners Expectations | The session that in some way fails to deliver. A session that advertises various activities that are not necessarily delivered on the day. This might be for good reasons but this is not communicated to the client on booking. This often happens as the result of poor communication or providers overselling themselves. | The session that really lives up to expectations and 'delivers the goods'. This is achieved through good prior communication with the client and being honest as a provider as to what is and is not realistic. | Good sessions that just don't match up with the client's expectations. The school that booked a scientific ecological session when really want they wanted/ needed was an end of term 'fun' experience. Participants were bored, felt cheated with a sense of an anti-climax. |
| Organisational/ Project | The aims for sessions are second string to actual organisational aims. These could be commercial, self-interest or promotional. Learners and the learning experience are not the priority. | The organisation is well balanced, managed sustainably and has a genuine clear educational purpose. Provides effective sessions for learners with their best interests at heart. | The organisation/project is ill thought out with unrealistic aims and is over resourced for the required outcomes. Could be the result of a contract where funding is guaranteed and as a result the learning experience is overlooked or not taken seriously. |

If we genuinely make the experience and outcomes of the learner the most important aspect of a session we may arrive at some surprising unexpected conclusions in relation to how we plan to deliver a session. People are great at paying lip service to the needs of learners but really following through on this in practical terms can often prove challenging and sometimes counter-intuitive.

Below is a matrix including some interesting scenarios and real-life examples to explore these issues across a broad spectrum of factors. 'Weak squash' sessions are those where the factors are in some way insufficient, whereas 'strong squash' factors are ones that are detrimentally overbearing.

Some conclusions/questions to ponder deduced from the above:

- Additional staff/volunteers are fantastic, but like all staff if not managed or co-ordinated correctly they have the potential to be detrimental to a session
- Outdoor learning environments can be both underwhelming and overwhelming
- Group size is important and shouldn't be brushed off as an afterthought
- Is the equipment used on any given session fit for use and appropriate?
- Session location and appropriateness for any given activity is overlooked at your peril!
- Has there been good communication with the client prior to a session with clear expectations set?
- How important as priority do organisations make providing high quality learning experiences to their participants?

I feel that bearing some of these factors in mind when planning a session you should be aiming to create the best tasting squash possible given with what you have you available to you. Making good 'squash' is an art form that takes a lot of tweaking and is something we all get wrong from time to time.

How will you know when you have planned and delivered a good session that hits the right balance? It will seem right and just like good squash will hit the spot! ■



About the author

James Walsh RPIOL, works within the outdoor learning team at the Parks Trust, a landscape charity based in Milton Keynes. After gaining an Outdoor Studies Degree (2:1) at Manchester Met, he has worked in a variety of outdoor learning and youth work settings. James particularly enjoys discussions surrounding the practical application of outdoor theories and models in a real-world context.

Photos: Tom Davis. Squash photo from the author.