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Be Prepared!—and Other Valuable Lessons I Learned About Teaching From Being a Boy Scout

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Be Prepared!— and Other Valuable Lessons I Learned About Teaching From Being a Boy Scout

Last week in his guest column, David Schary wrote about what he had learned about teaching from gardening. He concluded his column by asking what we had learned about teaching from our other pursuits. Coincidentally, I had been planning to write a column on what I had learned about teaching from being a Boy Scout. My experience as a Boy Scout in the 1960s was overwhelmingly positive, although it was also somewhat negative, and both aspects have had an effect on my teaching. Here is what comes to mind:

1. Be prepared. One of the first things I learned way back then, and it certainly has stuck with me. In Boy Scouts, "be prepared" meant packing wisely for a camping trip, including the essentials of food, shelter, and clothing, but also necessary tools, a first aid kit (came in handy more than once), a flashlight, and so on. As a teacher, being prepared is essential. We have to prepare for the content of each class, of course, but we also have to be prepared for the unforeseen: a student's question from left field; technology failing, always when we are counting on it; ice storms that disrupt the syllabus; and a thousand other problems that arise in the course of a semester. I did not know it back then, but scouting was preparing me for my career by teaching me the value of preparedness.

2. Leadership. As I progressed through the ranks of the Boy Scouts, from Tenderfoot to Second Class to First Class and beyond, I was amazed to find myself emerging as a leader. Gaining the trust of the adult leaders and my peers, being chosen as a patrol leader, was a crucial step in my emotional and intellectual development. When I declared as an English education major in college, I had the usual doubts about my ability to be a teacher, to be a leader in the classroom. The first moment I stood up and took on that role, I drew on my confidence as a leader that came from Boy Scouts, even if I did not consciously realize it at the time.

3. Teamwork. One of the first lessons of scouting is that you are not just an individual, but a member of several larger groups: your patrol, your troop, the Boy Scouts overall. I remember competitions between patrols, like fire building. We had to work together as a team to gather tinder and wood, then to build the fire and start it. (The first team to build a fire that could boil water won; my dim memory says my patrol did.) Such teamwork drills made me realize the part I could play, the part others could play, and how we could all work together to succeed. I draw on those teamwork lessons as I organize group activities in class, as well as when I serve on or lead committees in my department and in the university.

4. Learning by doing. Central to the Boy Scout experience is education,
"I read The Boy Scout Handbook avidly, but I did not really learn until I actually tied a square knot, two half hitches, and a bowline; or until I did a mock rescue using the four-hand hold; or until I learned survival skills by swamping my canoe, then draining it and turning it upright, alone, for the Canoeing merit badge. Our leaders taught us, telling us how to do things, but we were not passive recipients of their knowledge; we learned by doing. Learning by doing is central to all of my classrooms."

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but education by doing. As an avid reader (and nerd), I read The Boy Scout Handbook avidly (I still remember the cover by Norman Rockwell from back then, with a Boy Scout on the front, holding The Boy Scout Handbook, which had on its cover that same boy, holding that same book, and on and on, to infinity), but I did not really learn until I actually tied a square knot, two half hitches, and a bowline; or until I did a mock rescue using the four-hand hold; or until I learned survival skills by swamping my canoe, then draining it and turning it upright, alone, for the Canoeing merit badge. Our leaders taught us, telling us how to do things, but we were not passive recipients of their knowledge; we learned by doing. Learning by doing is central to all of my classrooms.

5. Mentorship. I had mentors in the troop leaders, who were patient but also demanding with a rambunctious group of young pre-teens. I remember our Scoutmaster, who was a master teacher of everything from knots to astronomy to fishing to outdoor cooking. I recall the mentorship of older peers who showed a Tenderfoot the ropes (sometimes literally), and I realize that I became a mentor to younger scouts as I progressed. I am a teacher because of teacher/mentors over the years, and now I am a mentor to students and to other teachers. Little did I know that those seeds were planted back then in those days of Troop 231.

I mentioned the negative factors in the beginning. That factors in too, because we learn from everything, even from what we see as bad experiences.

I was in two Boy Scout troops. The first was organized by the church we belonged to, St. Andrews Methodist. That first troop is where I had most of my positive experiences. The leaders, especially the Scoutmaster, were excellent leaders and teachers, even if they did not enforce strictest disciplines at all times. Admittedly, we were a pretty rag-tag bunch; we called ourselves "F Troop," after a TV show of the time.

That changed when our troop merged with the troop at a neighboring church, St. Giles Presbyterian. I am not sure why this happened, but it meant that we had new Scoutmasters, that we were merged into existing patrols with existing leaders. I had earned the rank of Star, then Life, one below Eagle, but I lost my leadership position to a younger guy. The troop leaders had been in the military, and we spent about 75% of our time doing close order drill, which was not very appealing to a 15-year-old guy used to having fun while learning. Their rules eventually got too restrictive, and their militaristic stance was rubbing me the wrong way in 1969, the height of the Vietnam War, and the beginnings of my questioning of authority.

I vividly recall the night we were marching, over and over, when I turned to my brother Jimmy and asked, "Are you having fun?" He wasn't either, so we just turned out of the ranks and started walking home. "Birds! Where the hell are you going?" the Scoutmaster bellowed. We were going home, quitting. I think I was one or two merit badges away from the top, but there was no looking back. That taught me a lesson, too—about bad teaching, harmful teaching. And the ability to resist it. I do not regret that decision, but I highly value the positive lessons I learned—even if I did not fully understand them at that time, so long ago.
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Thought For the Week

“We think boys are rude, unsensitive animals but it is not so in all cases. Each boy has one or two sensitive spots, and if you can find out where they are located you have only to touch them and you can scorch him as with fire.”

–Mark Twain