Designing a WEA Course Using Collaboration

Marni Goldenberg
California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo

Panel Members:
Jim Lustig, San Diego State University
Andy Ballard, Indiana University
Cheryl Teeters, Northern Michigan University
Rich Obenschain, Gordon College
Jeff Tindall, Western Illinois University
James Retzlaff, Northern Michigan University

Abstract

This panel discussion explored the successes and struggles of running a WEA course through collaboration. The panel shared their stories and provided suggestions for ways to create a WEA experience for their clients/students by working with another affiliate. Six individuals who had collaborated in various ways sat on this panel. Collaboration included working together to run a course, using resources from another school, or even going to locations that were used by another school/affiliate.

Keywords: Collaboration, panel discussion, WEA courses

Designing a WEA Course Using Collaboration

During this presentation, the panel talked about their specific courses and how they have worked with another affiliate to offer a WEA experience. The panel provided specific ideas on collaboration and gave suggestions. The audience was able to ask questions related to the collaboration experience. The panel included: Jim Lustig, San Diego State University, Andy Ballard, Indiana University, Cheryl Teeters, Northern Michigan University, Rich Obenschain, Gordon College, Jeff Tindall, Western Illinois University, and James Retzlaff, Northern Michigan University.

The questions that were answered in the presentation included: How did you collaborate? How did this first get initiated? What worked and what did not work with the collaboration? And what suggestions do you have for future collaboration? Panel members were given the opportunity to respond to these questions. This paper will include responses from some of the panel members.

Jim Lustig, San Diego State University

How did you collaborate? Our affiliate has been collaborating for many years with other WEA Affiliates, whether it is sharing instructors and "course know-how", offering course area logistics and support, or completely outfitting courses. One of the best things to

come from this has been improvement in our courses as we have learned so much from others and feel strongly that we have reciprocated.

How did this first get initiated? I am not really sure, but it really took off once we offered a few Professional Short Courses where other WEA instructors could see and experience what we had to offer in the way of course locations, outfitting, logistics, safety management and instructors. Soon after, many affiliates approached us not only to offer WEA sanctioned courses, but purely recreational trips for their students. Word of mouth has been tremendous and it has been very personally rewarding to develop close friendships as well as spend time in the field learning from so many great WEA professionals. In addition, I think we set ourselves up well from the very start of our affiliation in the fact that we recruited students for our courses from all over the country because we were not confident, year-to-year, that we could generate enough interest amongst our own students. Again, word of mouth from students may be equal or better than that of professionals.

What worked and what did not work with the collaboration? What I have found to work best is clear lines of communication and full partnership with course planning every step of the way. Otherwise, students and instructors start the course being confused as to primary goals and division of leadership responsibilities. By far our best and ongoing collaborative efforts have been supporting Western Illinois University's ECOEE semester for 10-17 days in Baja California and a 21+ day NSP course for Gordon College (Massachusetts). Other affiliates we have served in various capacities over the years have been: Southern Illinois, Ithaca College, Oklahoma State, Indiana Univ., CSU-Chico, Cal Poly-SLO, and Lifespan Counseling. Lastly, I almost forgot to mention that our most important and valued collaboration is with Expediciones de Turism Ecologico y Aventura of Ensenada, Baja California, Mexico. Francisco Detrell is the owner of this company and a WEA Instructor. He and I have been working closely together for over ten years providing all kinds of fantastic adventures in Baja California and without his expertise, friendship and commitment our SDSU affiliate would not have enjoyed many years of great success.

What suggestions do you have for future collaboration? I would welcome the opportunity to create more collaboration between affiliates. For example, my students very much need experiences outside of Southern & Baja California -- such as whitewater paddling, vertical and horizontal caving, technical mountaineering, cold water sea kayaking, canoeing on big water with portages, and even the opportunity to camp in the "woods" where they can legally collect wood and cook all their meals over a fire (most have never done this!). And I would imagine that many other affiliates would love to bring their students to a warm weather climate for desert travel, rock climbing, surfing, canyon backpacking and sea kayaking. Did I mention that the Sierra Nevada is a wonderful place to backpack in the summer?

Andy Ballard, Indiana University

How did you collaborate? IU and NMU ran a combined WEA Steward course from Dec. 28, 2005-Jan. 8, 2006 in Agawa Canyon, Ontario, Canada. NMU had eight participants, and IU brought six participants and two instructors. Essentially, by sharing resources such as equipment, instructors, and regionally specific knowledge, the two sponsoring affiliates were able to run a very successful program.

How did this first get initiated? James Retzlaff, an NMU undergraduate student, attended an IU sponsored WEA NSP in Yellowstone during the summer of 2005. During that time, James and I had several conversations about the abundance of ice climbing areas and winter camping conditions available in and near Northern Michigan. James, an experienced ice climbing guide in the area, offered to apprentice a WEA Steward course in the area any time IU was interested. IU was indeed interested, and the rest is history. Cheryl Teeters provided a wealth of experience for the collaboration and helped keep logistics running smooth.

What worked and what did not work with the collaboration? Things that worked: sharing of resources and cross pollination of academic knowledge. Things that did not work: scouting of the area was an issue due to Instructors coming from far away and the level of academic outcome expected differed between the two affiliates.

What suggestions do you have for future collaboration? Have a great sense of humor and plan an "Instructor Only" pre-trip outing to discover any strange nuances in teaching habits.

Jeff Tindall, Western Illinois University

How did you collaborate? Collaboration for the Environmental, Conservation and Outdoor Education Expedition (ECOEE) at Western Illinois University begins with a need. As the ECOEE coordinator, I am unable to expertly lead in all modes of travel or environments in which the ECOEE students may want to become proficient. Hauling gear all around the country for the different modes of travel for a semester is prohibitive. ECOEE began to look for programs and people that could at least provide gear and some special expertise in various areas. We first looked within the Wilderness Education Association and then looked into network connections of various students and instructors.

ECOEE has had the good fortune to work with Jim Lustig and Aztec Adventures to fulfill part of the NSP requirements in Baja on two occasions. Each time has been a bit different in need and outcome. Other collaborative experiences that ECOEE has been engaged in are service projects providing support staff for Summit Adventure, service projects with Joshua Tree National Park in lieu of park fees, rafting the lower third of the Grand Canyon with United Christian Youth Camp, and a back country Wilderness First Responder with WEA Instructor Nadia Kimmel of Desert Mountain Medicine.

How did the collaboration first get initiated? Collaboration first came from a need for equipment and expertise. ECOEE and Western Illinois University have the equipment to field most program types. The instructors have expertise in a variety of skills and environments. Moving into new or more advanced areas with a group often call for greater expertise than "jacks-of-all-trades" can manage. Transporting gear from the mid-west to Baja is cost prohibitive. Maintaining gear and certifications for occasional usage is also cost and time prohibitive. Some of the activities ECOEE engages in could be done elsewhere to the same effect, but without the "Las Vegas Juice" that is needed for certain locations.

Having a network of outdoor leaders and programs to draw upon is essential for

beginning collaboration. Having WEA instructors with expertise and equipment that also have the WEA philosophy and training can create a cohesive experience for students gaining proficiency in different modes of travel and environments. A well-planned collaboration can provide lead instructors on a semester program a well-earned break and insight into what is happening with their group through an outside perspective.

What worked and did not work with the collaboration? Most of ECOEE's collaborations have worked well. Working through a university, ECOEE has learned to look at collaborations as a type of sub-contracting. Having someone familiar with the area and course to take care of logistics is a great relief. Most collaboration has been with folks that do courses in the area regularly. They understand the logistics and risk management plans. ECOEE hasn't had to re-invent the wheel by working with other programs.

Working with others gives students the opportunity to see how other programs and leadership operate. Students get to see different leadership styles in instructors. They benefit from the extra experience and expertise of the new instructors.

Group dynamics can be muddled for a while as students adapt to new styles and procedures. It is not always the most fun situation but has proven beneficial if processed well. Instructors must be adaptable and flexible and willing to "let go." Different instructional styles and procedures provide a living model of compromise and adaptability for student's to observe and learn.

What suggestions do you have for future collaboration? Communicate, communicate and communicate. Where there is a will there is a way. Be creative in exploring new ideas.

This panel provided insight and perspective on collaboration. A program can only become stronger by using resources and as the moderator of this panel, I highly encourage you to look into possible collaborations to make your program that much more successful.