

Two Critical Writing Incidents (One Positive and One Negative): Scuba Diving on Guam

by
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A Positive Experience

Guam is a tropical paradise only 32 miles long. I taught English courses there for three years with the University of Maryland programs on military installations overseas. After the end of my first year, I began to get what the locals call, “Island Fever.” I decided to do something about it. “Probably some of the best places on Guam are underwater,” I concluded after hearing friends boast of their underseas adventures. Therefore, I decided to take up scuba diving.

I signed up for a two-week certification course with a recommended dive master. Charlie exuded confidence when our band of “wanne-be” divers, eight in all, huddled around him for the first lesson. “Let me show you the equipment,” he said, displaying an orderly arrangement of “stuff.” Soon we were slipping on diving belts, tinkering with air tanks, trying on flippers, and admiring regulators. “To begin diving,” he explained, “you really need to keep in mind only a few key principles. Listen carefully: Here they are:”

To my amazement—and later delight—at the end of an hour, he announced that we were all to undertake our first dive. I could hardly believe that I was soon fully outfitted and slipping quietly into Guam’s tropical waters. Suddenly I was surrounded by incredibly beautiful fish and stunning coral reefs. As I breathed in and out, as we had been instructed, I was comforted by the sight of the surface only a few feet above me. Charlie led us gracefully through an ever increasing variety of wonders. We gestured to one another, pointing out curious clown fish and colorful rock formations. When we finally surfaced, I knew that was “hooked.”

A Learning Principle: “Students will be motivated to learn when they experience success.”

A Negative Experience

Guam is a tropical paradise only 32 miles long. I taught English courses there for three years with the University of Maryland programs on military installations overseas. After the end of my first year, I began to get what the locals call, "Island Fever." I decided to do something about it. "Probably some of the best places on Guam are underwater," I concluded after hearing friends boast of their underseas adventures. Therefore, I decided to take up scuba diving.

Because my husband is not a "water person," I decided to team with another Maryland instructor, a psychologist named Dave. We signed up for a two-week certification course with a recommended dive master and began our lessons. Dave was a great companion. We thoroughly enjoyed learning all about decompression charts, the dangers of stone fish, and the exotic equipment. Dave always had a cheerful word when I would feel discouraged. For example, one day when we were entering the water over a long stretch of slippery rocks, Dave smiled encouragingly as I stumbled and lurched because of the heavy tanks and the awkward flippers. "Did you know that in a recent poll psychologists were asked to describe in one phrase what keeps people mentally healthy? That phrase has relevance for us. It is 'Risk-taking.'" With that encouragement, I struggled onward and into the water. Everything went "swimmingly" in the course until we got to the unit on "buddy breathing."

As we sat in a gently swaying boat, our dive master explained: "'Buddy breathing'" is a certification requirement even though the new octopus regulators now allow two divers to use the same air supply. You'll never have to do 'buddy breathing,' but you have to experience it before I can issue your card. So, you and your dive buddy need to drop down to "x" number of feet with only one tank of air and one regulator. You need to pass the regulator back and forth while you surface slowly, remembering that if you come up too quickly you will suffer from the 'bends.'"

Dave shrugged at me when the dive master said, "Okay, let's do it one pair at a time." When our names were called, Dave and I obediently stepped over the side of the boat and plummeted down to the specified descent. I realized almost immediately that something was wrong. So did Dave. Unknown to us, the regular was upside down and neither of us could draw air. We were drowning. I watched Dave, almost in slow motion, as he slowly ascended, his face distended and his eyes popping, as I knew I must look. Repeatedly, I wrenched the regulator from my mouth, handing it to him, and he did the same as we continued to rise slowly, our lungs bursting. We had no air. At last we broke the surface, thankful to be alive.

We felt betrayed. Why, oh why, hadn't our dive master let us practice this procedure in shallow water?

A Learning Principle: "Neophyte learners need to rehearse complex material under low-risk conditions."