

at school with orca

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Last year while tripping in northern Ontario, one of the group mentioned that he had his Level III Flatwater and Level II Moving-water (rapid running) Certificates from an Ontario Recreational Canoeing Association sanctioned course. Level II means you are highly skilled in the subject. Level II means you are also qualified to teach the subject. However, when there were rapids to navigate this person was the weakest in the group and always got into trouble even after scouting with guidance from the trip leader and watching other canoes navigate the rapids easily and safely.

This person's performance had me wondering about O.R.C.A.'s standards so this spring I decided to apply for an O.R.C.A. Moving-water Level III course. There are a number of pre-requisites (like having your Level I and II Certificates) before you are eligible for a Level III course, or you can be accepted by the course director based on his evaluation of your previous experience. My application was accepted and I found out later that many of my fellow students had been in the same situation.

It was a five day course on the long Victoria Day week-end and the following weekend and was held at Madavaska Kanu Camp, a location where kayaking and now open canoeing is taught throughout the summer. There were three instructors and fourteen students giving a very low teacher/student ratio. (O.R.C.A. recommends a teacher/student ratio of not more than one to six.) Instruction began promptly each morning at 9:00 a.m. and continued, with only an hour break for lunch, until 5:30 p.m. After supper there was some free time until 8:00 when there were classroom sessions on how to teach, how to organize a lesson, how to prepare a programme, all on an extremely professional level. The value of films as a teaching aid was also discussed.

Day one was spent on flat water and day two on moving water. The three instructors took us right through what is taught on the Level I and Level II Moving-water courses, basic strokes and manoeuvres, rescue and safety measures, communications, etc. During our on-the-water skills practice sessions, students were under constant observation and instructors were quick to point out any weaknesses, and equally quick to praise (standard practice of a good teacher).

Evening, day two, after our lecture period, all students were given assignments to prepare a written lesson programme for three subjects. Some students struggled with this (including myself) until near midnight. The smart ones, like the teachers who were taking the course, had their lesson programmes done in no time and were able to relax and have a sing-song around the log fire.

Day three started with the handing in of assignments. The rest of the day was devoted to each student acting out the roll of a teacher and giving a lesson on his three subjects to his fellow students. The course instructors simply observed and evaluated the teaching qualities of the student, making helpful suggestions after each presentation. Day three closed with each student getting a personal evaluation of his progress from his instructor. All students made Level I.

Day four commenced with a review of the three previous days and each student being handed three more teaching assignments. The rest of the morning was devoted to skills practice and manoeuvres on the river and running a prescribed course through the rapids as bowperson, sternperson and solo.

There was to be video coverage of these runs, to be shown after supper. Unfortunately a mal-function of the equipment prevented this. The afternoon session was more practice teaching and some free time to study or improve ones practical skills.

Day five, examination day, started with a written theory test. This was short and easy. Following the test, each student gave three more demonstration lessons and was duly assessed. After lunch practical skills were tested, each student having to run the prescribed course, bow, stern and solo using the manoeuvres suggested by the instructors.

The course involved getting into and out of a series of eddies on both sides of the river and behind one island. The current here was strong but relatively smooth with a few small shelves to avoid. It was not difficult. The next section of river was a "dog leg" bend with about fourty metres of standing waves, the waves being about one metre high with two to three metres between crests and stretching right across the river. The prescribed manoeuvre involved a back ferry from left to right just before you reached the waves, looking for a narrow channel through the waves and then, because you were on a bend, keep moving right to avoid the larger waves on the outside of the bend. Once clear of the waves a backferry into an eddy on the left, then a front ferry over to the right bank and then an eddy turn to finish the test. Regulation safety measures and signals were used throughout the entire exercise as a number of students didn't make it through those waves. There was, in my opinion, an easier way through those waves, but we were being tested for our paddling skills, not our river reading abilities.

There was one chance only on these tests and if you goofed, no second runs were allowed. The fact that a crew made both tandem runs successfully did not guarantee a pass. Members of some crews made Level III while their partners only got Level I. The three examiners had you under observation during the entire test and obviously were able to assess who was leading who.

How did I do personally? I failed, miserably. First I elected not to go for the Level III Teacher's Certificate because I knew my teaching abilities were no where near the high standards required and then, after dumping twice in those waves during practice sessions, I began to doubt my own paddling skills and opted out of the skills test. However, my time was not wasted. Far from it, as I now have a much greater understanding of what is required to teach a subject. I also know which of my paddling skills need to be improved.

About that person I mentioned in my opening paragraph: he was either bragging or had taken a Level II course where the instructor/examiner was not living up to O.R.C.A.'s high standards. Another explanation could be location. Perhaps the rapids where he had taken his course were not true grade III rating. Familiarity with location is another factor. For instance, if the course I attended had been conducted at Palmer Rapids, I would have done much better as I know Palmer Rapids well from many pleasant week-ends spent there.

The only weak spot in the course I took was "river reading", which I feel is very important. If you cannot find the easiest and safest way through a rapid, then you have problems before you even start your run. The difficulty with teaching river reading is that you would have to scout many rapids and this would require a lot of time.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that the level of instruction on this course, which was under the direct control of O.R.C.A. was of an extremely high calibre. The standards for student achievement were equally high. O.R.C.A. is certainly not handing out certifications, willy, nilly to anyone.