Talking Paper: Participant Feelings During Experiential Education and Adventure Programs and the Effect on Leadership Development

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Kurt Hahn developed the first and most recognized adventure education program in 1941. During World War II German U-boats were sinking British merchant ships, and sailors waiting for rescue were fighting frigid water. Puzzlingly, the survival rate among young, presumably more fit sailors was much lower than among older seamen.

Sir Lawrence Holt, owner of the Blue Funnel Line called upon his friend and well-known progressive educator Kurt Hahn to discover the reason for the discrepancy and rectify it. Through his analysis Hahn determined the problem was lack of confidence not a shortage of skill or equipment. In Aberdovvy, Wales, he established a program of progressively rugged challenges to help the young recruits develop the internal fortitude and confidence necessary to survive harsh physical challenges. Hahn explained that through achievement, young sailors learned the possessed “far more than they knew” and began to rely on themselves (Outward Bound, 2002).

The program was an immediate success. Holt named the program “Outward Bound” after the nautical term that refers to when a ship leaves homeport bound for the open ocean. The standards and practices of Outward Bound are the model for most other experiential, adventure education programs.

“Outward Bound-type” programs have been used for decades to instill the same sense of confidence and competence in teens and young adults. Wilderness education experiences have been, and are being, used to help individuals with mental illnesses from schizophrenia to depression. Recently such programs have also been embraced by the business community as a method to build team unity and employee self-concept. Similar programs have also been viewed as a method to identify and develop leadership skills in participants. Many people have
participated in “ropes courses” to build confidence and team unity with organizations for which they have been associated. With the expansion of these programs into venues well beyond the training and development of young men for nautical and military service one must question the effectiveness of wilderness education activities and what participants gain from these experiences. Studies of experiential education have examined the physical component (Gerdes, 2001), educational influences (Bogner, 1998; Stevens & Richards, 1992), perceptions of nature (Haluza-Delay, 2001), environmental influences (Palmberg & Karu, 2000), moral development (Newton, Sandberg & Watson, 2001) and self-concept (Benson, 2002; Garst, Scheider, & Baker, 2001; McDonald & Howe, 1989; O’Dea & Abraham, 1999; Harris, 2000). Several studies focused on the specific question: Is there is a long-term impact on the self-perception and/or self-confidence of individuals completing experiential-based wilderness education experiences? These studies are of interest not so much in the specific question examined but rather their varied methodologies.

Three studies with such focus were Harris’ (2000), Garst, et al.(2001) and Benson’s (2002) studies of the effect of an outdoor adventure program’s impact on participant’s self-perception and self-concept. Harris and Benson used a quantitative method to examine only self-concept scores of program participants compared to a control group. Garst et al. used a mixed methodology to also examine the program’s influence on participant’s behavior and socialization. The research methods used in the Garst et al. study could be used in settings with adults or adolescents from any demographic by adapting self-perception scales or other assessment surveys. Harris’ and Benson’s methods may prove difficult to duplicate in adult settings such as business training programs due the difficulty in establishing a control group.
In Garst et al. (2001) the authors described many constructs that have been used to define self, including self-esteem, self-concept, and self-perception. In their study, Garst et al. used Harter’s (1988) definition of self-concept as being associated with nine different domains. The domains as defined by Harter include scholastic competence, athletic competence, physical appearance, social acceptance, behavioral conduct, job competence, close friendship, romantic appeal and global self-worth. The Harter construct seems to be one of the most widely recognized measures of adolescent self-concept. The authors’ predominately qualitative method was driven by the belief that quantitative methods often inadvertently miss the influence of outdoor adventure programs. This is due to the fact that participants of outdoor education programs often represent a demographically diverse group of individuals so researchers are challenged to identify appropriate matching control groups.

The Garst et al. (2001) study had 58 urban adolescents identified as “at-risk” participate in 3-day outdoor adventure trips. The group had a diverse ethnic composition: Hispanic (18), White (18), African-American (13), Native American (5) and biracial (5). Hater’s (1988) Self-Perception Profiles for Adolescents (SPP) was used as the quantitative instrument for it’s high reliability. The qualitative data was gathered through participant observation, leader journaling, and immediate and four-month post-trip interviews. Observations were conducted by the principal investigator, who attended all three trips and served as a volunteer leader to develop a rapport with the trip participants, and other trip leaders. The observation data provided an additional data source for triangulation with survey and interview results.

Across all three trips, a total of sixteen group leaders were asked to complete a journal for each full day of the trip (two journals per trip). Journals provided additional documentation of group interaction and the impact of trip activities on individuals and the group. A sample journal
question included, “What did you notice about the group today in terms of their behaviors, actions, or communications?” In addition trip leaders were asked to rate each participant’s self-perception based on their observations using a rating sheet provided on the back of their journal each day. At the conclusion of each trip, the leaders submitted their journals to the principal investigator, who recorded the self-perception ratings and calculated an average self-perception score for each participant. Interview participants were selected by the principal investigator based on these scores. Three participants with the lowest averaged scores (low self-perception) and three participants with the highest average scores (high self-perception) were asked to participate in two post trip interviews. This form of selection represented extreme case sampling, which is suggested when attempting to identify participants who exemplify particular characteristics. The interviews explored the outdoor adventure trip influence on self-perception and behavioral changes that subjects attributed to outdoor adventure trip participation.

Several trustworthiness procedures were used in the study to establish reliability and validity among the qualitative data. Credibility, which is the qualitative equivalent of internal validity, was established using prolonged engagement (12 months), persistent observation (before, during and after trips), and member checking (leaders review of transcribed text, observation memos and interview responses for accuracy). Dependability and confirmability were achieved through the use of an inquiry audit. The audit was performed by readers to examine and confirm the qualitative data analysis process, and the codes and categories that were produced.

In a mixed methodology study with a more quantitative slant to the examination of leadership skill development Hobbs and Spencer (2002) attempted to quantify the impact of a Wilderness Education Association Wilderness Stewardship course on students’ leadership
development. The twelve students in the study completed the Leadership Skills Inventory (LSI) before and after a two-week course. The course included ten days of field experiences in camping, hiking, and canoeing. Each student assumed the leadership role in the group for one day. This included planning and communicating the day’s activities, teaching lessons and helping in the group debriefing at the end of the day. As a qualitative component participants were required to keep journals and mention decisions made throughout the day, and complete peer and self-assessments. In their study four of the nine categories of the LSI showed significant changes when comparing pre and post-test scores. The areas showing significant change were fundamentals of leadership, speech communication skills, character-building skills and group dynamic skills. A possible criticism of the Hobbs and Spencer study is if immediate post-test data can be used to state that true skill development was achieved. Perhaps a longer time lapse from course completion to post-training data collection could show if a true quantifiable training effect occurred. This could cause other complications such as post-training experiences that could skew program training effect and post-training data collection.

While there are many theories as to the benefit of wilderness education programs there are many areas of study in which substantial empirical research is severely lacking. The field of experiential education can benefit greatly from sound analysis of the common practices and respective impact on participants skill development. Can examination of specific components of experiential wilderness activities help determine which activities best develop leadership skills? Can this examination of task performance and activities act as a predictor of future leadership success? If so, this will enable program designers to concentrate and tailor activities for optimum participant benefit.
Perhaps a more in-depth analysis of participants’ feelings and emotions can be the next area of concentration for future researchers. The formal study of cooperate leadership training programs has not kept pace with the rapid proliferation of these experiential adventure-based education activities. As previously referenced, the majority of the studies that examined wilderness education programs whether they were qualitative or quantitative in methodology, placed an emphasis on participants post-activity attitudes and behaviors. I find it more intriguing to study the feelings of participants during the wilderness experience. While a quantitative approach using some sort of scaled measure of participant’s individual perceptions could be included, I would be more interested in a qualitative examination of the participants feelings and attitudes by using journals, interviews and a technique that would require addition research and guidance. The additional technique I feel could be fascinating would be the use of video journaling by participants during the activities. This could reveal more in depth and detailed results than a standard audio recording or questionnaire. My desire to analyze the personal feelings and emotions of participants during the activities would seem to require a research method that is predominately qualitative in nature. I have yet to determine if the design would a case study or more phenomenological in nature. I am leaning towards a more blended method from both traditions with the inclusion of some quantitative data to establish trends in participant behavior.
References


