

Qualitative Research and Making Meaning of Adventure: A Case Study of Boys' Experiences of Outdoor Education at School

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ABSTRACT: This article details the process and analysis of a case study, conducted over a six-week period, involving an outdoor education class in an all-boys Catholic, New Zealand secondary school. The questions explored by the case study were the subjective meanings of adventure experiences in outdoor education and the benefits of qualitative research for assessing the value of outdoor education. The methodological techniques used were observation, involving some researcher participation, and in-depth interviewing. Subsequent data analysis was based upon theories of experiential education and adventure education, and concepts of leisure and human agency. The results of the study suggest that the meanings participants make of their experiences, and the value they derive from them, exceed those that may conventionally be sought and measured as an improvement in self-concept. These findings suggest that learning through adventure is potentially valuable as a holistic and life-long form of activity that enhances the capacity to enjoy and engage in living. This is an important extension beyond its often limited and compartmentalised applications, which are rationalised by specific outcome based objectives. A qualitative methodology was indispensable to an inquiry of this kind and warrants further attention in the process of understanding the meanings of adventure and learning.

Introduction

The essence of learning from adventure is the process of making meaning out of experience - of action and reflection. Dewey (1938) believed that the fundamental concerns of human beings were with values, rather than with questions of an abstract and objective reality. For Dewey truth is "that which works" or "that which explains". The goal of learning is not to know the right answer, because that might change. The goal is to "know about the world as we experience it", a process of "making determinate the indeterminate experience" of rendering the chaos of experience meaningful and useable (Walter & Marks, 1981:78-79). Freire (1970) also believed that the world is not a given static reality, and that people possess the potential to educate each other through the medium of the world. Freire's 'practice of freedom' is a process of action and reflection by which people interact critically and creatively with reality, and thereby discover how they can participate in the transformation of their world. This is a concept of education as liberation, as a nurturing of human agency within the everyday world of structures and constraints.

Methodology Trends: Meaning-Making and Measuring Rods

Increasing numbers of outdoor education programmes base the justification of their activities on their ability to increase elements of self-concept (O'Brien, 1990; Project K, c1995; Schoel et. al., 1988; Sir Edmund Hillary Outdoor Pursuits Centre, 1993/1994). Such rationalisation may be increasingly necessary, as economic utilitarianism demands well-defined and measurable outcomes to match money spent. As a result, a substantial amount of research focuses on determining the accuracy of claims that participation in adventure activities positively influences individuals' self-concept (Park, 1996). The majority of this research attempts to measure psychological outcomes using various quantitative instruments, predominantly self-report questionnaires, designed to assess the degree of change in self-concept (Ewert, 1987). While many have reported an increase in participant self-concept as a result of outdoor education courses, results have been far from conclusive. According to Park (1996:27), such studies have been dogged by problems including methodological and conceptual weaknesses, inconsistent measurement instruments, and poor theoretical frameworks. Researchers and reviewers have cautioned that benefits should not be exaggerated, as changes are difficult to substantiate. They possibly occur regardless of participation, and vary widely depending upon the nature of the programme and the participants involved (Anderson, 1988; Hill, 1978). Such cautions suggest the

need for a fresh look at the way in which we determine, and set out to substantiate, the benefits of outdoor education. A need has been recognised to develop research that explore the 'process variables' of adventure experiences instead of focusing on measuring outcomes (Ewert, 1987; Hastie, 1992; Wichmann, 1991). As explained by Klint (1990) a quantitative understanding of self-concept development fails to show what aspects of the adventure experience facilitate development, in what ways and to what degree. She concludes that, "inquiry needs to move forward toward an understanding of how the adventure experience influences human perceptions and behaviour" (*ibid*: 170).

Meaning is the "essential concern" of qualitative research, with the intention of exploring ways in which people "make sense out of their lives" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982:29). Qualitative research techniques such as participant observation, focus groups and in-depth interviews collect relatively rich information about relatively few people, and can be used to capture the personal nature and the phenomenological aspects of the adventure experience. They are particularly suited to analysis that focuses upon meanings and perceptions, because they allow concepts, terms and relevant issues to be defined by the subjects, rather than predetermined by the researcher. Participants can be encouraged to speak in their own voice, which is particularly important when the information gathered from each individual varies considerably and becomes a story in its own right. In fact qualitative research is often narrative in form, with close attention to detail as "everything has the potential of being a clue" to understanding (*ibid*:28). In this way qualitative data allows for the illumination of individual processes of meaning making of outdoor education experiences, illustrating that these are rarely as simple as increased feelings of well being or positive self-image.

Method

Action and Reflection in Qualitative Research

In this case study of an outdoor education class in an all-boys New Zealand secondary school a qualitative methodology was used to explore subjective perceptions of adventure and challenge as a learning experience - that is, the ways in which outdoor education students made meaning from their experiences. A relative scarcity of such studies in the past defined the second aim of the research: to explore the value of using qualitative, process-focused research as a means of assessing the value of outdoor education programmes.

The Research Participants

The research participants were initially ten male students, between the ages of seventeen and nineteen, who had selected outdoor education as an option in their fifth year of secondary education at an all-boys, Catholic school. Ten boys were observed for the first part of the study and, for the second part, four of the boys' out of this group of ten were selected to participate in the interviews. The school they attended has a commitment to outdoor education courses that promote leadership skills and self-esteem. Since the early 1980s the school has been maintaining and developing its own school camp facilities, and all students in Years 9 and 10 attend annual camps in which older students undertaking leadership training assist with the running of activities. Since 1995, outdoor education at senior levels has taken the form of the Outdoor Recreation National Certificate courses for students in Year 12 and Year 13. These courses are structured to the requirements of New Zealand Qualification Authority unit standards, which the school is accredited to assess. The units taught include adventure-based learning, tramping, rock-climbing, weather interpretation, kayaking, outdoor first aid and outdoor management.

While the units described above are designed primarily to focus on skills that may be used in a vocational setting, the female Head of Outdoor Education has a background in adventure-based learning techniques from Project Adventure. She is enthusiastic about applying these techniques in a broad range of teaching environments throughout the school. The degree to which adventure-based learning has been integrated within the outdoor education programme appears to be dependant upon the combination of the enthusiasm of the teacher involved and the school's commitment to the personal, social and spiritual development of the students¹. Guidelines for the

outdoor education programmes at the school include: a focus on the development of self-esteem and group skills through adventure; challenge, trust and co-operative experiences; and, where possible, the utilisation of the experiential education learning model of briefing and debriefing experiences. They also emphasise that students' experiences of outdoor education should include fun, reflection and be positive in nature.

Part One: An Observation Process

During the case study a six-week observation process raised important questions which were subsequently explored during in-depth interviews. This period of observation was invaluable for providing insight into the social dynamics of the class and my position as a researcher. Take, for example, my journal entry for Thursday afternoon, August 29, 1996:

It's a clear, windy day. At the top of a cliff in the city green belt, two boys begin to set up the anchor points for an abseil. Another boy coils a rope while his friend bounces around, one minute fantasising about snow-boarding down Everest, the next minute complaining that this abseil is too high and that there isn't enough time to do it before he has to get back to school to catch the bus. Then he realises that I'm taking notes and teases me about being a spy. One of the boys, working quietly with the ropes, asserts that the abseil can be done. But they all question why the teacher has brought the others in the class who sit now at the bottom of the cliff, with various injuries that prevent them from taking part. Eventually, one of the boys and I abseil to the bottom of the cliff before packing up to go home.

When the outdoor activities included sharing the experience of the students, for example abseiling, kayaking or adventure-based activities, I participated in these activities to the extent that I felt it would help close the distance between researcher and subject. At first I was concerned that being older, female, and a European New Zealander, I would have difficulty establishing rapport with the students. Participating in class activities, however, provided common ground that was important for the quality of the later interviews. On one occasion I traded places with a student who took the role of kayak instructor and taught me an eskimo roll. During that hour, the distance between researcher and subject seemed to dissolve, or at least to be momentarily 'turned on its head'. This experience illustrated the pivotal nature of the relationship between the researched and the researcher. Rather than maintaining the invisibility and objectivity of the researcher, the lines were blurred, and my own experience played an important role in my interpretation of events. This is indicative of how qualitative research takes into account the impact of the researcher's perspective on the data collecting process, whereby the dynamics of the interaction between the researcher and participant significantly influences the nature of the data collected.

Another important consideration is the impact of my presence as researcher upon the behaviour of the students. At first the students appeared disinterested in my being there. On the first day the teacher attributed some 'fooling around' to the fact that initially they were somewhat embarrassed by my presence. In later weeks, however, the students seemed to accept my presence more naturally and some encouraged my participation in class activities with a playful amount of teasing. Over the weeks, some students became increasingly interested in my research, and this prompted them to reflect on issues, such as class participation, and discuss these with their teacher. It took three weeks before I began to feel a degree of rapport and acceptance among the group. At the end of six weeks, however, I was still conscious of the extent to which our range of experiences differed, and of the ways in which this might alter the meanings that we made from events. Acknowledging this is vital to the authenticity of the research process, and it is this degree of insight that is invariably lacking from quantitative research. The observation and researcher participation helped to provide the backdrop for the pictures painted by the interviews and set the class context for the boy's personal reflections on their experiences of outdoor education.

Part Two: Individual Interviews

In weeks five and six of the research, I spoke to four students in face-to-face, semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Participants were chosen for interviewing, on the basis of the observation

process and in consultation with the teacher, to gain as wide as possible a representation of the varying backgrounds and attitudes within the class. This included a mixture of motivation and ability levels, and cultural backgrounds. Within the constraints of this study, it was not possible to interview and analyse the data from any more than four participants.

The in-depth interviews were semi-structured in the sense that I directed the participants to cover a number of themes, while encouraging them to talk about aspects of the course that were of most interest for them. In this way I hoped to leave them as free as possible to describe their experiences in their own words. The themes discussed included their background; the reasons they enjoyed outdoor education; their attitudes towards what they were learning; their feelings about the importance of this learning; their ideas about the nature and importance of challenge; and their plans for the future. It was inevitable that each student would have their own particular story, and the diversity of those interviewed is illustrated by the following profiles. (Please note that pseudonyms are used for the students).

Individual Case Study Profiles

Isaac

Isaac is Samoan and grew up in New Zealand where he still lives with his mother and father, two brothers and two sisters, a friend, a cousin and an auntie. Isaac's favourite sport is basketball. Much of his spare time is spent with his youth group and with the school multi-cultural group. He also works part-time in a downtown menswear store which he enjoys – *“I just like being around people I think”*. With the exception of school camps during his first years at secondary school, Isaac was not involved in outdoor recreation until he chose it as an option in Year 12.

Tala

Tala is nineteen years old. At the age of four or five months his parents sent him to Samoa to live with his grandparents. He stayed in Samoa, visiting New Zealand only for holidays, until his first year at secondary school. Tala contrasts the life-styles of the two cultures.

Tala: [Samoa is] different life eh. It's free life ... like it's pretty shocking when I came here and learned about summer uniform and formal uniform and stuff like that. But in Samoa it's just , you know, the lava lava, that's it. No sandals; bare feet.

Growing up in Samoa with his grandparents was a good experience in Tala's eyes because now he knows the difference between the two countries. He says that some of his Samoan friends envy him for this. At the moment Tala is living with his sister and her children. He is a keen rugby player, so keeping fit is important and he always goes for a run if he has a bit of spare time. Fitness is one of the advantages he finds he gains from choosing the outdoor education course. Tala also finds he has learnt more about New Zealand through these outdoor education experiences. He is a leader of the school multi-cultural group, in which he enjoys learning from other cultures and getting to know other people better.

Simon

Simon is a European New Zealander. He has just turned eighteen and has three sisters. His father is a qualified outdoor guide who runs his own business, and his mother is an outdoor education teacher at a secondary school. Growing up involved a lot of family outdoor activities, and Simon developed a love for it. His sisters, however, did not enjoy it at all. Simon is glad to be finishing secondary school at the end of this year because he feels, *“we don't get treated as adults basically”*. He likes to go surfing, mountain biking and hang out with his mates. Since the fourth form he has had various part-time jobs. Currently, he works in a petrol station.

Joe

When Joe was ten, his family moved to New Zealand so that he and his brother could receive an education more widely regarded than that which Malaysia could offer them. They had lived in a suburb close to the capital, Kuala Lumpur. For Joe, the two lifestyles were not significantly different.

Joe: The weather's different; it's hot over there. Society wise it's practically the same, just there's less white people ... Apart from that it's just the same, people go to school, people go to work.

English, which he learnt at school in Malaysia, is Joe's third language, after Punjabi, which he speaks at home, and Malaysian. For Joe, the best thing about his final year at secondary school has been the way in which all the boys of that year have come together to form good friendships. Joe likes to play drums and to go to the movies. He also often goes into the outdoors. He started going on camps about once a month when he joined the Air Training Corps in his third form. He has flying lessons at the local aero club. Joe's enjoyment of the outdoors began with his curiosity as a small boy.

Joe: My Dad used to be a mountain guide in Malaysia, but I could never go. My brother could go because he was older than me ... I always wondered what it would be like ... I could see him the day before, packing his gear and everything. I always wanted to go. When we came here he allowed me to get into the bush.

The Analysis of Data

The interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. For the purpose of data analysis, a technique based upon the constant comparative method was used (Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). Transcribed interview texts were divided into 'units' of meaning. These units, from all four interviews, were grouped thematically to become categories. The categories were given titles designed to represent their common theme. Through a process of constant comparison between the emerging themes, the categories are refined to the extent that the main themes represented within the data can be identified.

While the very individualised nature of the interview data illustrated the individualised nature of the adventure experience, and the value of qualitative methodology for exploring these stories, three major themes emerged from the data analysis process. These themes - relating to the ongoing enjoyment of overcoming challenges, building confidence and mental strength, and the freedom of choice - are described and discussed below.

Results and Discussion

The On-going Enjoyment of Overcoming Challenges

The notion of challenge, and the role that it plays in learning and life, was a central theme in the way the four boys spoke about their experiences of outdoor education.

Joe: Life's just a bunch of challenges really. I think it's very important to have challenges. Life would be dull without them. Just get nowhere ... You learn the most out of doing a challenge. You don't learn anything if you just sit in class. If you do something, you learn something.

It appears that challenge is not only a good way to learn, but also a good thing to learn. According to these students, overcoming challenges helps to make them feel competent - which is fun - and an on-going display of competency in challenging situations continues to make them feel positive about themselves, and optimistic and excited about the future.

Tala: Challenges is like ... you find hard things that you want to try easy for you ... just keep on trying and trying and trying ... I reckon it makes you try the thing that you've never tried before.

Joe: Even if you stay on the same challenge - like I did for one and a half years on kayaking - get over it, then find another one ... If you want to ever do something,

you can always say - you can do it. Whereas I find most of other students here in the school, although they're quite bright, I found that they're really reluctant to do stuff, reluctant to mix and everything. Which is pretty bad because they're really bright. They've got the whole world in front of them.

These students found something compelling about challenges once they had learnt to find enjoyment in them. For Simon it was something in the nature of an addiction.

Simon: Once you've done one of them you can't get enough, you can't stop, you just got to keep going ... It seems like there's nothing in life if you don't do something.

Leading a group of third formers on a day tramp, Isaac found enjoyment in the success of forming friendships and getting 'to know each other heaps better'. Although previously he had not particularly enjoyed tramping, after this positive experience Isaac's motivation for tramping soared.

Issac: I wanted to do it again the next day. I felt I could just keep walking and walking ... when I first went out there, I went out there thinking that I had to ... I think you just have to go out there to enjoy it and then everyone else will enjoy it too ... What you put into it you get out.

Dewey's (1938:16) description of a quality "educative" experience is one that is engaging for the student, and in addition to being immediately enjoyable, has the tendency to promote having "desirable future experiences". An experience which, "arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future" enhances Dewey's principles of the continuity and interaction of experience (*ibid.*:31). By this measure, the adventures of these students in outdoor education are 'quality' experiences. The participants comments also suggest that they have become 'experienced adventurers', astute in their perceptions of risk and competence, and actively seeking activities which match these two variables to achieve "peak adventure" (Priest, 1990).

Building Confidence and Mental Strength

Isaac thinks that in the future, outdoor education will be the most important subject he has taken. He says he has learnt:

Issac: How to cope ... with situations. How to pick yourself up when you're down. And how to get through challenges.

Simon feels that outdoor education has taught him the confidence or 'mental strength' to push personal limits of achievement. Tramping is an example:

Simon: You're so physically tired that you don't think you can go on. You end up, through mental strength, ... dragging yourself on and actually making it to the hut, whereas some people have been physically able to do it but mentally they've said 'it's too hard I can't do it'. And when you get there you think to yourself 'I wasn't as strong as you but I dragged myself here and made it', and they gave up when they could have done it.

Tala also feels that his chances of success depend upon wanting something enough, then persevering until he achieves his goal:

Tala: It's up to you how much you want it. That's what I think. And if you just keep on trying everything just keep on trying and trying and trying - you come up with something

Simon believes that the potential for outdoor education to motivate his peers extends not only to future outdoor activities, but also to living itself - to getting over the 'dead places'.

Simon: You kinda learn how to survive even if it's in the city - doing stuff that's outdoors.

For some people OE's [outdoor education classes] been the difference between life and death really ... [It has stopped them killing] themselves. Like they've gotten the strength from doing OE, for the will to survive, how to get on with doing a job no matter what it is. Just the will to want to live, whereas in other topics they've really created tension - didn't want to learn much.

Bandura's (1977) theory of self-efficacy asserts that expectations of personal effectiveness in the face of demanding tasks is based upon information derived from internal and external sources. These sources of information include past 'performance accomplishments' that correlate to verbal persuasion or encouragement and vicarious experience – which Bandura argues are the most influential. Success through persistence and increased levels of effort is thought to increase self-efficacy to a greater degree than those achieved by chance happenings (Klint, 1990). High efficacy expectations in turn are believed to enhance "intensity and persistence of effort" and to influence ways in which tasks are chosen or avoided in the future (Bandura, 1977: 212). White's (1959, in Klint, 1990) model of effectancy motivation describes the process. First, a successful accomplishment leads to feelings of satisfaction, intrinsic pleasure, enhanced competency and expectations of efficacy. Second, such feelings either maintain or increase the motivation to attempt further accomplishments, which, if successful, further enhance expectations. Once begun, the cycle gains its own momentum. The comments of the research participants support the assertion that outdoor education activities are a catalyst for this cycle - provided that there are adequate amounts of initial encouragement and support. Also, the particular challenge inherent in outdoor activities seems to contain enough apparent risk to achieve 'optimal arousal', whilst at the same time providing a reasonable chance of success.

The Freedom to Choose

A sense of freedom and the opportunity to choose to participate made outdoor education appealing to these students. Sometimes 'free' time became 'doing nothing' time, but giving students the choice to learn is a good idea in Joe's mind. He believes that it shows whether a student is serious or not, being a good indicator of what it will be like when there is nobody to 'chase after' them any more. Doing anything, Joe feels, is a matter of choice and depends upon interest, "either you're interested or you're not". From his outdoor experiences Isaac had found, "the more I give, the more I get out of it", and for Simon it was a sense that, "there's nothing in life if you don't do something".

Rapoport & Rapoport (1975) identified that developing the capacity to enjoy life is a preoccupation for young people, something which is often antagonistic to a work ethic and the imperative of undertaking profit-producing activity. This tendency is inclined to vex adults and authority figures who view it as leading inevitably to illicit pastimes and anti-social behaviour (*ibid.*:112). Denying young people any opportunity for freedom and exploration may, however, be 'throwing out the baby with the bath water'. Without it, they may never learn intrinsic motivation or may never learn how to make their lives freely inspired adventures, and thus fail to fulfil the creative potential of whatever capacity they possess. Intrinsic motivation is held to be essential to experiential education - learning depends on wanting to learn and education becomes self-education (Walter & Marks, 1981). This principle is also inherent to outdoor education - intrinsic motivation is a prerequisite without which there is no 'experience' of adventure (Priest, 1991). Tala, Isaac, Simon and Joe all have challenging ambitions in mind for the future. With the exception of Isaac, they also have well-defined ideas about how they plan to combine their livelihood and their leisure in the future to achieve their perceived maximum capacity for enjoying living.

Conclusions

This research began with the intention of exploring two central themes: the ways in which individuals make meaning out of outdoor education experiences; and the value of using qualitative research to assess the benefits of outdoor education programmes. The enhancement of self-concept is an admirable outcome of outdoor education, but technically its isolation and measurement is a dubious undertaking. Laying claim to it boxes us into the corner of having to prove it, and this, as experience shows, is fraught with problems.

Tempting as it may be to justify outdoor education in terms of measurable increases in self-concept, Fromm's (1942: 16,23) concept of positive freedom perhaps encapsulates the desired process and outcome of outdoor education more accurately.

Positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality ...
The only criterion for the realization of freedom is whether or not the individual actively participates in determining his [or her] life and that of society.

The process of building confidence is one aspect of an individual's ability to achieve a state of 'positive freedom', but learning to feel good about ourselves is only one part of the process. It is inevitable that life's adventure will take us through bad places as well as good ones. More important than feeling good is knowing how to increase our chances of feeling good - it is a process not an outcome. While there is no guarantee that the participants in this study will always feel good about themselves, the data collected here suggests they have learned how to improve their chances of feeling good, in an individually and socially positive way. This capacity is not always evident in measurable outcomes. Outdoor educators may find it difficult to feel that they are getting anywhere, as these students' teacher sometimes does. However, adventure learning comes by degrees, as the gradual accumulation of experience helps to shift perceptions and change previous behaviours and assumptions (Klint, 1990; Priest, 1990). The benefits of this may not surface until the moment is right - which is not necessarily when researchers are around with measuring rods or when the teacher is taking note.

The qualitative data collected within this case study suggests that the boys interviewed had learnt something about positive freedom from their experiences of outdoor education. In varying ways, and to varying degrees, they learned about what it means to determine their lives and the lives of others through challenge, perseverance, motivation, responsibility, co-operation and friendship. Things did not always work, not everyone achieved the goal of learning to kayak, but that was part of the process of learning from experience. Whilst this study did not involve a control group for comparison, the participants clearly perceived themselves to differ in critical ways from those who did not take outdoor education. This was particularly evident in their willingness to take on and persevere with challenging tasks, the confidence of knowing what it takes for them to achieve and thus, the ability to fulfil their potential. As Joe said, "*they've got the whole world in front of them*". This was the meaning they themselves made of their experiences.

The value and meaning of outdoor education cannot be fully measured by outcomes or credits gained, or self-concept scores increased. To stand or fall on these conditions is to limit the potential of adventure to enhance our capacity for living. The benefit of a outdoor education may only be shown when an individual is willing or able to challenge assumptions about self and society. As the teacher who continues to teach outdoor education in this school has found - past students have contacted her, years after leaving the school, to thank her and urge her to keep teaching outdoor education. And this is only to be expected. As Zeldin (1995: 15-16) has said,

Mentalities cannot be changed by decree, because they are based on memories, which are almost impossible to kill. But it is possible to expand one's horizons, and when that happens, there is less chance that one will go on playing the same old tune for ever and repeating the same mistakes.

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ⁱThese objectives are included in the school's Mission Statement which advocates 'a supportive Christian environment promoting self-esteem and consideration for others ... encouraging pupils to strive for excellence in every field of academic, cultural, social, physical and spiritual endeavour'.

Biographical Statement

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