

Enough about the outcomes ... what about the process: Personal development and experiential learning

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ABSTRACT

Most research in experiential learning has focused on outcomes. This has happened for good reason – not least to secure funding but also to understand the benefits that result from such experiences. However, this has resulted in limited work considering the process by which such outcomes are achieved. Some work has relied heavily on psychological constructs (e.g. Walsh and Golins, 1976) which have resulted in various rhetorical narratives (e.g. challenge by choice, project adventure inc., 2002). In the last decade (roughly speaking) there has been an increasing amount of work on process (eg McKenzie, 2000) and sociological conceptions of experiential learning (e.g. Brown & Fraser, 2009; Zink, 2010). While the former is needed to inform pedagogy the latter can provide some theoretical insights.

In this paper we outline some of the above issues and suggest the imbalance between research on outcomes over process needs to be addressed. We also argue that the claims of long term impact suggest that it will be valuable to undertake longitudinal and retrospective studies. We then focus on some of our own work which is concerned with both outcomes and processes. The example concentrates on Sail Training and presents a recently developed model to gain a conceptual understanding with a pedagogical focus.

KEY WORDS

personal development, outdoor

INTRODUCTION

The majority of research on experiential learning (used here as a general term to incorporate adventure sports, adventure education, outdoor education and related terms) has focused on outcomes. This has happened for good reasons, in part as a way of justifying expenditure but also because it has been important to gain understanding of the benefits of taking part in such activities. While the purpose of this paper is not to summarise this work it is worth noting that this past research can be understood as falling into categories of psychology, sociology and philosophy. Some work has also been undertaken in the natural sciences which, for the purposes of this paper, refers to biomechanics, physiology, health benefits and such like. What is clear at this stage is that there is a complex matrix of research in experiential learning which is further complicated by appearing

in different books and journals and spanning across a multitude of disciplines and subject areas. While it is tempting to wish for clearer and more straightforward ways of categorising research in experiential learning we believe it is more useful to acknowledge and embrace this complexity. In this respect we are suggesting acceptance of ‘what is’ rather than ‘what ought to be’. We are simply suggesting use of the is/ought distinction to deal with this complexity and recognition that change is unlikely given the growing proliferation of publication outlets and the wide variety of contexts in which experiential approaches to learning are utilised.

When attempting to take a meta view of research in experiential learning it becomes evident quickly that there is a plethora of research which focuses on the outcomes of participation in experiential learning. As noted above this seems reasonable given that

such research is often needed to secure funding. In this paper we suggest that this trend now needs to be balanced by encouraging research which is focused on the processes associated with experiential learning. This point was made by Allison and Pomeroy (2000) and more recently by Baldwin, Persing and Magnuson (2004, p. 168),

There are philosophical ideas, programming principles, and a “folk pedagogy” of practitioners beliefs about how “adventure” works, but few explicit theoretical models, testable hypotheses, and little empirical evidence of specific adventure mechanisms that affect processes of individual change.

We argue here that a focus on process is essential if we are to develop meaningful conceptual understandings of experiential learning across a range of different disciplines. Though this short discussion will leave inevitable gaps and places where readers may want more, our hope is that in time others will begin to look at the details and that, most importantly, researchers will begin to consider these arguments as they plan and undertake various research projects.

DECLARATION OF INTERESTS AND FRUSTRATIONS

We believe it is important to give some context to this paper and also to declare our own interests and frustrations. This paper is based upon a presentation at the International Mountain and Outdoor Sports Conference (IMOSC) at Charles University in Prague in November 2012. This conference brings together a collection of people from across Europe who are committed to thinking and practicing in the area of experiential learning with a specific focus on values. At the conference one of us was asked to speak about ‘Adventure Activities and Challenge Sports in Personal Development’.

Our own interests in experiential learning are in the area of education outdoors and particularly in the value of wilderness experiences for personal development. This is a result of our own experiences and subsequent studies on the influence of such experiences on values development and exploration. Parallel to these experiences and interests we have an ongoing interest and commitment to philosophy as a way of knowing and are sceptical of the evidence based practice movement (see Harper, 2010) which relies almost exclusively on empirical evidence.

One of us has been somewhat disillusioned by experiences of working in outdoor education due to the often unexamined assumptions and beliefs and by moves since the turn of the century (approximately) to an emphasis on environmental education

and sustainability which often seems to overshadow personal development and values education in a wider context. This has led to frustrations as practices are often incongruent with espoused experiential principles and begin to take a more values training than values education approach – although such a critique is, admittedly, fiercely contested. However, this is not the focus of this paper but something for subsequent writing.

In this paper we use two examples to illustrate challenges for research in the area of experiential learning but before doing so it is useful to consider a phrase that is commonly associated with experiential learning.

LIFE CHANGING EXPERIENCES

Browsing through literature on experiential learning, looking at organisations’ web sites and speaking to people who have been involved in experiential learning the phrase ‘life changing’ is often used. Our understanding of this term is that it indicates that people are trying to articulate something for which they do not have sufficient vocabulary to adequately express themselves. We believe this to be understandable given that such experiences often take people to places – literally and metaphorically speaking – from which they step outside their everyday life and look in on themselves and their lives as an observer.

‘Life changing experiences’ is a term that can be found in many places, but a recent example is present in the Outward Bound Social Impact report (2012, p. 3) which states, The purpose is not to paint a glossy picture of one life-changing experience after another, but to give an open and honest account of how young people benefit from our courses and of the challenges we continue to face in measuring that consistently.

Similarly,

I’ve often heard people talk about life changing experiences and have dismissed this as hyperbole, I can honestly say however, that Outward Bound is a life changing experience and one I think everyone should have at least once in their lives. (Jarvie, 2008) Use of this term is certainly not restricted to experiential learning. The front cover of an Education Scotland document published in the autumn of 2012 titled Career Long Professional Learning included the phrase “Transforming lives through learning”.

These examples are not cited to criticise the use of the term but more to highlight the prevalence of its use and to make a further observation. The majority

of research in experiential learning takes a black box approach (Howe, 2004, p. 47), considering input and output but not process. Furthermore, the majority of research considers the 'output' or outcomes of such experiences in the short term. Research that considers outcomes for anything more than 24 months post experience is very difficult to find. This seems somewhat ironic given that such experiences are repeatedly reported and claimed to be 'life changing'. If indeed such experiences are life changing then one might expect to see much more long term research, such as looking at the lives of people who took part in specific experiential learning events 50 years ago for example. There is a small amount of research which takes this kind of approach (e.g. Davis-Berman & Berman, 2012) but it is remarkably rare.

It may be useful to point out at this stage that the idea of life changing experiences may be somewhat problematic in a number of ways. For example, for organisations to advertise that they offer 'life changing experiences' raises expectations to a level which then places pressure on staff to 'provide' life changing experiences. In turn, this assumes that there is a common understanding of what the term means and what it might be like to have a life changing experience! It also assumes that life changing experiences are positive, desirable or good. One might also question whether an organisation or other person (such as a wilderness leader) is in an appropriate position to offer or facilitate a life changing experience. Another analysis might suggest that the kind of people who are attracted to partake in experiential learning experiences might do so at a stage when they are looking for a life changing experience, at a stage in their life when they are looking for change of some kind. If this is the case then it is perhaps not surprising that they find such experiences in experiential learning participation. This argument suggests that life changing experiences may be a self-fulfilling prophecy in many contexts. Needless to say there are a whole host of further issues that could be considered – most of which raise interesting ethical considerations – but for the purposes of this paper the above is sufficient to make the point that claims of life changing experiences through experiential learning might wisely be treated with some caution.

In order to progress further and offer some more specific examples we are going to focus on some research that we have undertaken over recent years. This is certainly not intended to be self-indulgent or to suggest that this work is somehow exemplary but rather to illustrate our own approaches and the difficulty of moving away from outcomes focused

research. We are in the process of developing longer term research which aims to address the second critique outlined above.

RESEARCH ON SAILING

Between 2005 and 2007 one of us worked with colleagues on a relatively large research project on 'the characteristics and value of sail training'. The work involved tall ships (of varying sizes) across the world to explore the research questions presented in table 1.

Table 1. Research Questions from The Characteristics and Value of Sail Training (Allison, McCulloch, McLaughlin, Edwards & Tett, 2007, p. 11).

1. What benefits and effects do participants anticipate from their experience and what influences those expectations?
2. To what extent do participants experience these benefits and effects as being achieved?
3. To what extent do participants experience unanticipated benefits and effects?
4. What, if any, specific identifiable changes in participants' views of themselves are evident between the beginning of a voyage and two to three months after the voyage?
5. What are the key differences between sail training programmes? Do differences such as type of vessel used, voyage characteristics, ideology and programme characteristics lead to differing purposes and outcomes? If so what are the significant differences?

To answer these questions 17 different vessels from 13 different countries were involved in the study, 34 voyage reports, 155 observations, 306 interviews early in the voyage and after three months 173 of these people were interviewed again. Further details of the study can be found in the report but at the time this was the largest study of sail training ever undertaken. The two year project concluded that sail training does pretty much what sail training operators claim. Participants reported overwhelmingly positive experiences, developed confidence, teamwork and technical skills and there was very little difference between different vessels, sex, age and countries of origin.

Having undertaken this research which was, not surprisingly, well received by the sail training community, Allison was left with a sense of missing some

depth. While the findings were useful for pragmatic reasons (and have since assisted various sail training operators in securing grant funding for their ongoing work) the work will not make much, if any, difference to young people joining a voyage. There was nothing in the research that helped to inform someone working on board on how to do a better job – how to ensure that youth development outcomes were achieved, enhanced or how to understand their work in a meaningful way. These were not the aims of the research but upon reflection led to a search beyond the study for something else, something more. A brief summary of Aristotle's concept of phronesis is useful at this stage.

ARISTOTLE AND PHRONESIS

Among the many concerns and interests of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle was a concern with developing a theory of moral life. Indeed, developing a theory of moral life is one way of summarising Aristotle's work throughout his own life. He was concerned with enhancing human well being or human flourishing (e.g. Aristotle, trans. 1999, I 4§2). To do so he believed that moral wisdom is required and to develop his arguments he needed to consider different ways of knowing (epistemology). Specifically, he maintained that certain dispositions of character seemed to consistently promote a flourishing life, and these dispositions were called virtues. If one wanted to live well, it was then sensible to live a life of virtue. Judgments were informed not by what one ought to do, but by what kind of person, namely virtuous, one wanted to be. Aristotle considered there to be three forms of knowledge (Techne, Episteme and phronesis) all of which contributed to human flourishing which, for the purposes of this paper, need very brief summary (Allison, Carr & Meldrum, 2012; Thorburn & Allison, 2010).

Techne refers to what might often be referred to now as technical skills (skills and techniques or instrumental knowledge). In the case of outdoor experiential learning this might refer to things like erecting tents, hoisting sails, lighting stoves and cooking, tying knots and such like. These are sometimes referred to as "hard skills" but we prefer the term technical skills.

Episteme is concerned with theoretical knowledge often associated with academic institutions (Saugstad, 2013). Examples of episteme are the content specific learning of subjects like glaciology, Geology, botany, meteorology and physics. This can also include learning about individual and small group dynamics, and techniques for facilitating individual

and small group reflection.

Phronesis is normally translated as practical wisdom or good judgement. This comes from having the ability to do the right thing at the right time in the right amount. For Aristotle this 'mean' varies between both individuals and contexts and is something that ought to develop through one's life – it is a never ending project. Terms such as integrity, sympathy, compassion, empathy and tolerance are often associated with phronesis which is a 'way of being' rather than a technical skill or theoretical knowledge. Someone with phronesis knows how to exercise judgement, which is context sensitive. Aristotle considers phronesis to be the intellectual virtue which allows all other virtues of character to be exercised.

Most people involved in experiential learning can see how these three categories emerge in different contexts and often suggest that they cannot be separated out in practice. While this seems to be reasonable to a point, we believe that these three forms of knowledge are useful as ways of considering and understanding different approaches to experiential learning, especially outdoors. (It is useful here to note of the importance of well being in current contexts. In Scotland and beyond the focus on well being politically with associated 'trickle down' to research, curriculum and policy at all levels is significant. It is not particularly controversial to say that health and well being is 'in vogue'. The conception of well being and human flourishing that Aristotle offers is interesting in this current landscape as it is broad and expansive rather than instrumental (e.g. physical health to reduce medical costs) or binary (e.g. physical vs mental health).

PURPOSES PRACTICES AND OUTCOMES

In 2009 we undertook some work for Sail Training International to develop a practical toolkit to assist sail training practitioners to improve their practice and impact (Von Wald & Allison 2010, 2011). In order to undertake this work we developed a model of youth development through sail training (Figure 1). This model is based on literature in the areas of youth development, adventure education and experiential learning.

The purposes of Sail Training are summarised drawing upon the three Aristotelian categories outlined above (techne – skill acquisition; episteme – curriculum based education and Phronesis – personal and social development). Two things are important to note at this stage. First, most sail training operators aim at some combination of these three purposes. The categories may be useful for clarifying approaches to setting programme purposes and

then subsequently aligning systems and practices to achieve those purposes. Second, curriculum based education can encompass two different meanings – a

curriculum that is part of broader experiences (such as schools) or a curriculum which is developed on board and is independent of other institutions.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT THROUGH SAIL TRAINING



Figure 1. The Sail Training International Model
In developing this model we identified these five different outcomes of youth development. These outcomes are summarised (Von Wald and Allison, 2011, p. 6) as

- *Learning and Achievement*: including progressive mastery of new skills and/or discipline-based content, confidence
- *Positive Behaviours*: concerned with virtue and character, practical wisdom (judgment), respect for self and others, teamwork, leadership
- *Connections and Relationships*: between people – peers and adults; between the sailing experience and other experiences – past, present and future
- *Productivity*: participating, taking action to contribute to individual and group goals
- *Self-sufficiency*: to be self-reliant and appropriately confident, self-aware

These outcomes were derived from the main themes in relevant literature that suggest the impact and outcomes of youth development in order that we could concentrate on identifying the processes that contribute to achieving the outcomes. This was useful for developing the practices that were the focus of the sail training programme evaluation self-assessment toolkit. The toolkit that we developed breaks down each of the key practice areas into further detail in the form of questions which are aimed to promote reflection and discussion.

As discussed here, the focus in the literature seems to stem from an interest in providing evidence that youth development produces positive benefits (outcomes). By setting these evident outcomes as the aim of youth development through sail training, we could then focus on the practices that are linked with the outcomes so that operators could gain an understanding about elements of accepted practice to increase the likelihood that participants in their programmes would experience the desired outcomes. With the outcomes in mind, we can focus on the process and thus help youth development operators achieve better results from their engagement with young people.

REFLECTION AND PERSPECTIVE – LIFE CHANGING?

In this paper we have suggested that a shift in focus of research in adventure education from outcomes to process will be beneficial in improving practice and therefore enhancing the experiences and outcomes of those engaged in adventure education. In doing so we have taken a broad and general perspective which attempts to identify the key arguments and issues at stake. There are elements of the arguments that need to be explored further and we welcome work which does this.

It is important to point out that we are not suggesting that outcomes research is bad and process research is good - such a binary conception is inevitably problematic. We are suggesting that research that considers process is important in developing the cu-

rent literature to take a more holistic perspective. The second observation we have made is concerned with the short term nature of research on outcomes and the value of experiential learning. We are struck by the short term nature of the outcomes research that has been undertaken which is ironic given the

'life changing' claims so often associated with, and espoused for, experiential learning. While such experiences may be 'life changing' there may be aspects of this somewhat rhetorical polemic (some of which are noted above) which require careful consideration and articulation.

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