

Outdoor management development: a journey *in ludus*

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'You can learn more about a person in an hour of play than in a lifetime of conversation' - Plato.

Introduction

This paper reports the outcome of a three-stage research study that sought to understand the learning experience of participants in an outdoor management development (OMD) program. OMD is broadly defined as a form of experiential learning that utilises a variety of outdoor adventure experiences, problem-solving exercises and initiative tasks to meet a range of training and development goals including team building, problem solving, decision making and personal development (Wagner, Baldwin and Roland, 1991). OMD is the umbrella term used in this project to capture a range of experiential learning experiences variously called corporate outdoor training, experience based training and development, or corporate adventure learning.

The paper outlines the research process undertaken; examines some of the central ideas from the extant literature; and concludes by providing an argument that seeks to 'reframe' the outdoor learning experience from its dominant paradigm of serious business to one of serious fun!

What do we know about the OMD learning experience?

The OMD literature falls broadly within four main groups: anecdotal reports; psychologically focussed research; management effectiveness research; and program design research. Each of these is discussed briefly below.

The anecdotal material primarily consists of first hand accounts of former program participants who have typically published their findings within professionally oriented or 'popular' management literature. Reports by Schrank (1977), Galagan (1987), Long (1987), Arkin (1991), Boylen (1992) and Crump (1996) exemplify research from this group. For example, Crump (1996, p.173), after returning from his OMD experience, noted: 'I learned to be more accepting and open about my feelings, to be a better listener and less judgemental. This has helped enormously as a trainer and as a human being. I am much happier with myself and spend less time worrying'.

The use of standardised inventories, and experimental and quasi-experimental designs, to assess participants on a range of psychological constructs such as self-efficacy, self concept and life-effectiveness, is somewhat of a research 'tradition' in outdoor/adventure education. OMD researchers such as Roland (1981), Galpin (1989) and Barrett (1990) exemplify this tradition. For example, Galpin (1989), in his study of a three-day executive development program conducted by the Colorado Outward Bound School, found significant increases in self-concept and 'hardiness'.

Goldman and Priest (1991), Smith and Priest (1992), Wagner and Roland (1992a) and Ibbetson and Newell (1996) are among the researchers who have conducted projects aimed at assessing the efficacy of OMD programs to contribute to specific workplace outcomes. The management effectiveness research has included studies on team development, risk-taking propensity, work-group functioning and team effectiveness.

The program planning area of research (Wagner, Roland and Faye 1994, and Priest 1995) seeks to examine the relative impact of a range of program design variables such as: the gender composition of groups; the differential impacts of program 'type' ('low' impact versus 'high' impact); and the role of the facilitator. For example, Wagner and Roland (1992b), in their study of facilitator effectiveness, found that 'the facilitator does have an influence in improving organisationally desired behaviours; and that facilitators trained in the 'soft' skills of human behaviours and group processes will achieve better results than those facilitators trained only in the 'hard's kill areas' (p.11).

While the research evidence presented above points to different forms of learning taking place in the outdoors, the factors or processes underpinning that learning remains largely unknown. The metaphor of the "black box" (Ewert 1983, Mannell and Kleiber 1997) is apposite - participants enter a program, engage in a range of activities (the black box) and emerge 'changed'. Existing research tends to report on the outcomes, the change, but has typically only speculated on the reasons for such outcomes rather than subjecting the change process itself to rigorous examination.

This research project sought to undertake such an examination within the context of OMD - a process of 'lifting the lid' and 'unpacking' the black box.

The metaphorical 'black box' is comprised of the lived experiences and attributed meanings of participants within a learning context. Accordingly, any approach that attempts to understand both the nature of an experience and what is experienced (what happens and what is the experience of what happens), must focus the research within the experiential domain of the participants. For these reasons it was decided to approach the study from the perspective of qualitative research and in particular, phenomenology.

Approaching the research problem

The methodology for this project was, in Weinstein and Weinstein's words (in Denzin and Lincoln 1994), an 'emergent construction' involving three separate, yet interrelated studies. As the study unfolded, different techniques were assessed and included according to their ability to contribute to the rigour of the overall project.

Study 1 provided an initial point of entry into the research problem and helped shape the direction of the later studies. The study involved in-depth interviews with representatives of 12 organisations who were providers of OMD programs. Its purpose was to try and understand, from the organisations' perspective, what they viewed as the theoretical underpinnings of their respective practices. The interviews were held in both Australia and the United Kingdom.

Studies 2 and 3 were conducted with groups of graduate students who attended the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) Management Development Outdoors program. This three-day program is held at remote bushland site (accessible only by water) and is a mixture of initiative tasks, challenge activities (ropes course, abseiling and rock climbing) and a half-day problem-based management scenario. Management Development Outdoors is conducted twice yearly with 15-20 final year MBA students. The gender mix is approximately 50:50 with an average age of 30-35 years. To enter the MBA, students must have a prior degree and at least five years management experience.

Study 2 was exploratory and again utilised in-depth interviews with five OMD program participants. A detailed analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken. Study 2 provided valuable insights into the experience of program participants and substantial methodological guidance for the final study.

Study 3 involved 20 participants with whom an ongoing research relationship was developed. This study used a range of research methods including photography, video recording, a focus group as well as in-depth interviews. The approach also moved from the broadly ethnographic frameworks of Study 1 and Study 2 toward phenomenology.

Approaching the problem phenomenologically

The approach suggested by Van Manen (1990) was used to provide the overall framework for the phenomenological investigation. The purpose of phenomenological inquiry is clearly articulated when he argues that the 'aim of phenomenology is to transform lived experience into a textual expression of its essence - in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and a reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience' Van Manen (1990, p.36).

In accord with the suggestions of Van Manen (1990), Moustakas (1994) and Crotty (1996) the first 'level' of analysis undertaken was thematic. According to Van Manen (1990, p.79) 'phenomenological themes may be understood as the structures of experience. So when we analyse a phenomenon, we are trying to determine what the themes are, the experiential structures that make up that experience' (emphasis in text). The development of themes both reduces and shapes the data. Inevitably data are 'lost' in this reduction process. However, the purpose is to pare away the repetitive and the redundant, not to strip away the essential meaning. The data are shaped as they are reduced.

Van Manen (1990, p.79) argues: Making something of a text or of a lived experience by interpreting its meaning is more accurately a process of insightful invention, discovery or disclosure - grasping and formulating a thematic understanding is not a rule-bound process but a free act of "seeing" meaning.

Accordingly, this analysis has not taken theme development as a mechanical process of frequency counts or content analysis based on the recurring use of terms.

However, it was recognised that the process has to be managed in a 'methodical' way to ensure consistency of interpretation and transparency in the determination of relevant themes.

To guide this process, the three approaches recommended by Van Manen (1990) were used: the holistic or sententious approach; the selective or highlighting approach; and the detailed or line-by-line approach. In addition to these approaches, consideration was also given to previous thematic analyses conducted as part of Study 2.

Many of the same themes recurred, while others were resorted into more coherent packages of ideas. The major themes that emerged from the examination of the textual data were: *Immersion*; *Relationship Building*; *Affective Perceptions*; and *Learning Outcomes*. *Immersion* was defined as a type of 'gearing into' the experience. *Relationship Building* concerned the development of relationships with other participants. *Affective Perceptions* were concerned with the feelings expressed by participants about their involvement. Finally, *Learning Outcomes* concerned identified insights into the individual participants personal or management behaviour.

Engaging with the essence of experience

The themes and their commensurate categories (thematic sub-sets) primarily reflect the experiential structures of the OMD experience. The next stage of the analysis then moved toward a phenomenological explication of the data; an engagement with the essences of the experience, that is to 'the element or elements in the phenomenon as phenomenon that make it precisely what it is' (Crotty 1996, p.159).

To move from 'theme' toward essence involves further disaggregation of data. Essences are not program elements or particular sets of actions arising from the individuals engagement with these elements. Rather, an essence is a 'construct' that arises from the individual interaction with these elements, that is, how the phenomenon is experienced.

Thus, developing essences is a reconstructive or constructive act (Denzin 1989). According to Denzin (1989, p.59) the 'goal of construction is to re-create lived experience in terms of its constituent, analytic elements'. In the analysis, the term particular essence is used to distinguish between those underpinning features of the experience and the general essence that is a cumulative construct of the particular

(Spiegelberg 1982). Four particular essences of the OMD experience were identified -*Transcendence*; *Dissonance*; *Communitas*; and *Viscerality*.

Transcendence incorporates and extends the theme of immersion. Immersion involves a type of dualistic structure - a tension between letting go of one life-world and being apprehended by another. Letting go requires putting to one side the elements of 'everydayness' that give both meaning and personal identity - work, leisure, interpersonal and family relationships. These realities are temporarily suspended and subsumed by the experience. In other words there is a sense of transcendence.

The experience of *dissonance*, a feeling of disharmony, discord or incongruity was most often expressed by participants in the form of being outside their 'comfort zone'.

As used in the popular vernacular, the term comfort zone implies feelings associated with a perceived level of psychological well being. In OMD, this sense of well being is constantly under challenge but more overtly so in the perceived high-risk activities.

Communitas (after Turner 1982) reflects the important relationship between the individual and the group and the extent to which a sense of belonging, a type of ephemeral kinship and interdependence, features in their experience.

Viscerality is used to encapsulate the range of experiences in OMD characterised by emotional engagement. As such, it goes beyond the description of the response to an event as 'emotional' and focuses on the experience of an emotion - that which is experienced in a holistic sense. Visceral experiences appear to be the metaphoric glue

that binds much of the program together. It seems that a type of emotional engagement with others and the various program elements pervades the OMD experience. As one participant commented, 'OMD is not about the head, but about the heart'.

Taken together, the four particular essences of the experience point to an overriding series of paradigmatic shifts in the way participant's experience learning at OMD.

It is not simply a change in locality. Rather, it is more a change in consciousness, a psychological shift from the familiar, the everyday experiences from which we draw meaning, to those which challenge (and perhaps threaten) our understanding of ourselves and the world (s) in which we function. What emerges within the analysis is the interrelatedness of the essences. There is no sense of causality. Rather, they can be conceived as four *planes of experience* that lay upon one another neither hierarchically ordered nor independently sovereign.

Each of the essences contributes and maintains that sense of shift; that change in consciousness. Transcendence and removal from the everyday lifeworld appears fundamental. The shift to transcendence initially manifests itself in the physical relocation to the program venue.

However, that sense of shift has to be maintained, a process that takes place through interactions with other participants, the facilitators, the program elements and the activities of daily living.

The emotions being experienced run through each of these interactions as does the constant tension between seriousness and non-seriousness; between real and unreal; between work and play; between formal and informal learning; and between dissonance and consonance. These dualisms are negotiated in the company of others who help to support and question the interpretations of experience.

Learning is not isolated and attached to a particular experience but is ongoing and transactional.

From the perspective of the respondents, it is hard to imagine the experience of OMD without each of the particular essences as discussed. Getting away from their routines, working and building relationships with 'strangers', playing with ideas and personas, and being emotionally apprehended by experience appear essential to the OMD experience. However, this is not to suggest that each is of equal 'value' or that participants experience the phenomena in precisely the same way. What is suggested is that OMD, as experienced within the program, would not be the same experience without these dimensions.

The ludic turn

When examining the ideas of transcendence, dissonance, *communitas* and viscerality phenomenologically, there emerged a sense of incompleteness in the analysis, a feeling that these separate but related ideas did not fully explicate the phenomena. Therefore the question arose: is there embedded within the 'plane' a phenomenon that links and flows through the experience? In responding to this rhetorical question, a process of thinking through the phenomenological character of the work to date and a re-examination of the assumptions and examples of the data was undertaken. In addition, the themes from the previous two studies were reviewed in search of a common integrative framework. Further, the data were examined as a whole, to see the 'plane' as an entity within itself and not as a collective. In part this is the act of 'imaginative variation' (Husserl 1969) where there is an attempt to move beyond the overtly empirical to intuitively grasp the essence; and then turn that intuition back to the data itself to authenticate the essence so apprehended. Moustakas (1994, pp.97,98) argues that in this process 'the thrust is away from facts and measurable entities towards meanings and essences'.

Emerging from this dialectical process was a sense of the overwhelmingly *ludic* (or playful) nature of the OMD experience. To explore this idea, some of the seminal works in the literature of play and playfulness were examined.

The phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schutz (1973, 1975, 1976) viewed the world of *imaginings and phantasms* as a world of freedom. According to Schutz (1975, p.257) the world of fantasy makes us 'free from the pragmatic motive that governs our natural attitude toward the world of daily life, free also from the bondage of "interobjective" space and intersubjective standard time'.

Johan Huizinga, in his work *Homo Ludens* (literally, man the player), argues that play was, and is, central to the formation of culture. According to Huizinga (1950), play has six defining characteristics: its voluntary nature that clearly delineates it from other forms of social activity; its unreal quality; the playing out of action within given limits of time and space; the notion of a play 'spaces'; the formation of a play 'community'; and finally, the characteristic of secrecy where games and relationships have their own rules and customs valorised through the

playful experience.

Gregory Bateson's (1973) ideas on play arose primarily from his work in the area of communication and his hypotheses concerning the various levels of abstraction in which communication operates. For example the phrase 'this is serious' could communicate at one level the genuine 'seriousness' of a situation. Yet at another level (of abstraction), this is serious, could imply quite the opposite - this is not to be taken seriously. For Bateson, both content and context were important.

Victor Turner (1982) discusses the notion of play as liminal (or transitional) behaviour. According to Turner, liminality gives people the opportunity to engage in ludic behaviour which may challenge the familiar, and 'defamiliarise' them. The liminal setting provides an opportunity to create new models, new paradigms, and new ways of looking at the familiar which, when required, feed back to the normative world.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's (1975) work had, according to him, the simple goal of understanding enjoyment. In discussing his concept of 'flow' Csikszentmihaly argues that flow 'episodes' (or enjoyable experiences) are most often experienced *in ludus*.

Taken together, the analysis of the play literature provides substantial insight into the OMD experience. The ludic implies a letting go of everyday reality, a psychological shift in consciousness from the confinement of the everyday to a sense of boundlessness, fluidity and freedom. Further, the ludic is discordant; it challenges existing understandings and re-shapes new ones bounded by temporal reality. The ludic also demands new roles and new sensibilities, which are at the same time 'serious' and 'non-serious' but at all times visceral in its experiencing. In short, the ludic is the essence of OMD.

Ideas for practice - reframing the learning experience

The idea of reframing is grounded in the ludic essence.

The ludic provides the opportunity for individuals to temporarily suspend belief; to move from the reality of the everyday; and to move into a conscious realm of experience played out within given limits of time and space. This 'new' world of experience allows individuals to invert social attitudes, and to create new models and new paradigms in the spirit of *communitas* - apart, together.

To be sure, elements of the ludic are in the frame of all OMD programs. However, what is argued here is that the ludic should be at the core of the OMD experience. The trend toward framing experiences within the work context undermines the freedom of the ludic frame. Participants are maintained in the liminal, caught between the potential of the liminoid and the constraints of the everyday. This is not to suggest that the world of work should not enter the ludic inspired frame. Rather, the suggestion is, that ideas from the world of work should be contextualised and arise from the ludic.

To paraphrase Nadler and Luckner (1992), to enter the ludic frame is to engage the facilitator and participants in a form of 'edge work'. The comfort zone is built around familiar activities, safe environments, workplace relativities and predictable outcomes. The ludic moves the program beyond the protective frame, beyond the edge into the unknown: transcending the everyday; creating dissonant experiences; engaging the visceral; and building an understanding of self within the context of *communitas*. To engage with the ludic is to embark on a unique learning journey.

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