

TRAVELLING IN THE WILDERNESS

Experiential learning and youth-at-risk

by Robert Sveen

EXPERIENTIAL learning is based on the premise that experience precedes learning and that the learning or meaning to be derived from the experience comes from the participant.

Experiential learning through wilderness programs is therefore a means of achieving growth through “the challenges of nature”.

Wilderness programs are now commonly used around the world to engage a whole range of people in the growth and development that come from this experience. Increasingly significant groups taking part in these programs are adolescents caught up in the criminal justice system and those young people possibly “at risk” but still outside the net.

Many wilderness programs have been established in Australia and

elsewhere which meet a majority of the empirically derived components of the adolescent criminological debate. This is in spite of the fact that crime prevention is generally not a primary objective of these programs, which instead nestle themselves with the framework of a “social justice strategy” (Vincent 1990).

The majority of wilderness programs in Australia and other areas of the world are based on the philosophies of the German educationalist Dr Kurt Hahn, an exile of Nazi Germany who settled in the United Kingdom prior to World War II. During that war there was concern about the number of young seamen who were dying with little struggle when forced to abandon ship, whereas older, more experienced sailors were able to survive.

Hahn’s response to these human casualties was to create the Outward Bound School using adventure and challenge as a medium for learning and survival. Now, half a world away, one of the many descendants employing this philosophy is Tasmania’s Project Hahn, the wilderness-based personal development program for adolescents, which has operated for over ten years and served over 800 participants.

The ensuing discussion describes empirically sound features of Project Hahn and many other wilderness-based programs in Australia and overseas, thereby offering a facilitative framework for such programs. It then argues that the components discussed, if incorporated into wider social structural changes, can contribute towards addressing the global issue of adolescent offending.

The human species initially evolved on this planet by hunting for food and cultivating the land. We have become what we are in response to the challenges of nature. It is quite logical then, if a little ironic, that when we are struggling to find a sense of purpose and when we want to help those who have lost their own constructive connection with society, that we turn back to the challenges of surviving and travelling in the wilderness. (Abbott 1991, p.13)



Working outside the justice system

Participants in wilderness programs should not have to offend to attend. Sarri (1985) recognising the net-widening and stigmatising effect of homogeneous delinquent peer programs within Australian juvenile justice systems, comments

obviously the original intention can be distorted and therefore we need to explore how these programs could operate to benefit youth in the adolescent development process, but do so without services involving the justice system in control (p.416).

The recent shift from a repressively constraining to a preventively planning model of criminal law with police, courts and correctional services, still assumes a shift toward

social control which hides a strategy for creating new forms of sanctions and ultimately has the effect on the individual of a gradual further loss of autonomy (Albrecht 1988).

Many justice-oriented programs throughout Australia and the world also tend to be compulsory, a factor which often works against achievement of the individual's potential. On the other hand, non-professional helpers freely chosen by young offenders can attain socially desirable goals particularly when the earlier random imposition of a probation officer or a social worker has proven unsuccessful (Rigby 1983).

Compulsory volunteerism

Formal control mechanisms, as well as conventional treatments within the justice system have been shown to be

clearly ineffectual in altering the behaviour of individuals (see, for instance, Coates 1985, O'Connor & Sweetapple 1988). This is linked to the issue of authority and power – subliminally coercive and overt directives are only temporarily effective, reflecting resentment against this technique (Hart 1987). With reference to young offenders Jones (1987) states

It is not possible to force someone to receive help. If adolescent motivation is absent, then intervention will fail, however much the adult world may believe it necessary (pp.275, 308).

Past probation participants of Project Hahn, who had been coerced to attend, displayed a lower level of commitment to the process of personal development and had a negative

impact on group dynamics (Sveen & Denholm, in print). Similar findings were made in the assessment of the Victorian Turana Outdoor Training Program by Brown-Greaves (1980) stating that their results may improve if the participants are asked to volunteer.

A clear distinction must therefore be recognised between compulsory (or coercive) attendance and the actual willingness to volunteer to participate. The critical issue here is whether intervention can be effective if motivation is lacking. For adolescents, motivation is so closely tied up with autonomy that the context in which intervention takes place must always be the major factor for consideration.

The empowerment and freedom of this voluntary philosophy is exemplified in the NSW Education Department South-Coast Wilderness operation with its non-interventionist perspective for behaviour-disordered youth. In this initiative the leaders are not the therapists creating the experience, but rather it is left to the environment and the participants' peers. Handley (1991) writes

The natural environment poses consequences on inappropriate behaviour which are normally buffered in modern living. The predictable limits of nature allow participants the spirit of self-reliance, of risk and adventure, the freedom to make mistakes, the sense of exhilaration when achievement overcomes fear, the excitement of learning about oneself from oneself and the overwhelming feeling of space and harmony (p.182).

Pearson (1991) believes that the most effective referrals to Tasmania's Project Hahn have been when an adult has shared a long-term, trusting relationship with the adolescent prior to their enrolment. Project Hahn is conducted by and operated out of the State Department of Tourism, Sport and Recreation. The 15- to 25-year-old female and male participants are able to enrol themselves or, alternatively,

are referred by parents, schools, correction services, Skillshare/Jobtrain and other programs socially or interpersonally geared.

In Victoria, The Outdoor Experience (TOE) conducts programs funded by the State Department of Health as a specialist program for the benefit of 15- to 22-year-old males and females from that state who are experiencing drug related difficulties. The drug-free program is tailored to the individual's level of ability instead of a preconceived notion of what constitutes success. One-third of their past participants have been through voluntary referrals from Youth Training Centres and post-program evaluations have concluded significant positive shifts in participants' overall self-concept (Abbott 1990).

Heterogeneity of youth

Two of the earliest and most empirically sound studies of wilderness programs (Ewert 1982, p.27) stated that a close association with *non-delinquent peers* in a setting of tough physical challenges was a useful technique in improving a delinquent's self-concept and social attitudes (Kelly & Baer 1969; Wetmore 1972). The positivity and encouragement we receive from our peers can influence our successes, as our achievement is largely a result of the effort we exert, rather than our inherent ability (Bandura 1986).

Historically, many correctional programs have concentrated on the adolescent offender to the exclusion of positive community influences, such as non-offending peers and other community resources. Youth from a variety of backgrounds are targeted for the heterogeneous Project Hahn model where pre-existing peer groups are discouraged. In this setting probationers from nearly every type of classification, have made up one out of every eight participants since 1983.

Another program operating in Victoria, Project Adventure Australia, is an adventure-based counselling program modelled on the American Project Adventure Inc. (Schoel, Prouty

& Radcliffe 1988). Their specialist programs for offenders are run in both community and institutional settings. The group-oriented program is designed for young adult offenders or prisoners presently under the jurisdiction of the Office of Corrections (Saunders 1990). In contrast to the non-interventionist South Coast Wilderness model, the Project Adventure model focuses primarily on the group experience. This is considered appropriate for pre-existing groups of peers (e.g. corporate groups) who are intended to return to the community together, but is perhaps less appropriate where the offender group is intended to dissolve upon its conclusion.

Maturational focus

The then senior criminologist at the Australian Institute of Criminology, Mukherjee, wrote in 1985 that there had been relatively little work on the subject of young people "growing out" of crime. He stated

across the spectrum of rehabilitative and reformative measures, there is none more effective in reducing crime than simply growing up. In fact, if maturity is something independent of age, it may have an effect in restoring offenders to good citizens which is quite disproportionate to the aging process (Mukherjee 1985, p.33).

This aligns with research by developmental theorists who view maturation as a "series of growth stages" and discuss an individual's capacity to learn and respond with socially appropriate behaviour according to their intrinsic, social and cognitive level of maturity. For instance, Piaget, in discussing adolescence states

It is during this time that his own celebration seems to him omnipotent, and it is then that he is likely to annoy his elders with all sorts of idealistic schemes designed to bring reality into line with his own thinking (in Phillips 1981, p.161).



‘ The true test of intelligence is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we don’t know what to do ’

This sees the adolescent as preeminently self-centred; focused on who they are, how they appear in the eyes of others, and what they will become. Short-term goals take precedence during this stage of development and tend to emphasise excitement, pleasure and close companionship (Erikson 1964).

Another developmental issue has to do with the setting of limits and the importance of boundaries. Kerslake (1987) writes

Poorly defined limits increase anxiety and lead to more and more acting out. Clearly defined limits, paradoxically, act as a liberating force, allowing the teenager the space and security to work on the problems which brought him or her to the setting in the first place (p.304).

Piaget (1969) is highly critical of teacher-directed instruction which places the students in a passive position. Children must interact with the physical and social environment to develop. There is no better way to

build self-esteem and confidence than by successful experience – a merely cognitive-based approach to education is as limited as the sex education book that seeks to explain an orgasm to pre-pubescent children by comparing it to a sneeze (Durkin 1991).

The Sage Hill Camp in the north-eastern American state of Vermont was founded in 1965 as a wilderness-based program for children with behavioural problems. The residential facility accepts youth from the “hardest” quarters of America and uses self-confrontational techniques, rather than intervention by the leaders, to create change in the adolescents’ lives. It is modelled similarly to the wilderness programs in Australia, with goals of cultivating emotional well-being through developing interpersonal competencies. The participant’s emotional well-being is viewed as being shaped by the ongoing personal relationships with significant others. How those others relate to us is the mirror we use to define ourselves; and those early relationships will likely become the

prototype of future interpersonal relationships (Durkin 1988a; 1991).

Wohlwill (1983) proposes that daily life interactions are characterised by person/environment feedback loops. The wilderness setting, however, does not lock the participant into a counter response, but allows the person an opportunity to reflect upon his or her behaviour (Scherl 1989). The intention is that the challenge and stress induced during participation in the various activities will bring about the interaction of positive internal dialogue (self-efficacy) with other facets of the participant’s life through applied learning (Bandura 1977).

Debriefing by mirroring the participants’ emotional and physiological states is perhaps the single most important interpersonal role of the leaders as it influences how the newly acquired information about self and others can be transferred to situations relevant to the individual. In coping with or adapting to threatening or destructive situations, we may develop adaptations that work in the situation but if they

become generalised the behaviour becomes functionally autonomous (Durkin 1988b). The debrief assists the participant by increasing their resources and manoeuvrability between coping mechanisms. Youthful offenders possess problem-solving skills but are often deficient in recognising situations in which they may be used, increasing the likelihood that they will seek inappropriate and illegal solutions (Hains & Ryan 1983; Kennedy 1984 in Cunliffe 1992). Holt (1964) writes

The true test of intelligence is not how much we know how to do, but how we behave when we don't know what to do (p.201).

The social nexus

Potas, Vining and Wilson (1990) acknowledge that addressing social problems at their roots is an economically viable proposition.

In attempting to obtain the best value in dollar terms of crime prevention strategies resources should be directed, not so much at the traditional criminal justice agencies of police, courts and corrections, but at the very heart of the social problems facing contemporary youth in Australia (p.48).

However, a shift in capital to programs possessing the characteristics quoted earlier will not significantly reduce the range of problems presented by alienated youth without structural changes at a societal level (Polk 1988).

For example, as a microcosm of the wider community, adolescents who are not committed to the school culture have been shown to have a strong predictive linkage to delinquent behaviour. Efforts in delinquency prevention must focus on changing the social climate of school settings in order to develop attachments with the



twilight world of training or preparation for work that never materialises (Pratt 1983, p.357).

Structural initiatives

One structural remedy advocated (Polk 1988; Jones 1982; Semmons 1991), is the return of a real commitment to full employment. A voluntary national community-focused scheme, where the young person could achieve personal goals in citizenship and

thereby maintain a level of social integration is presently unavailable to our alienated youth. Former Minister for Science, Barry Jones (1982), suggests "local enterprise trusts" which contract young people in domestic tree planting and beautification plus local repair and maintenance, as a means of encouraging small business initiatives and job creation. He also believes work opportunities need to be created in regions suffering heavy unemployment in service industries, rather than in manufacturing where costs are prohibitively higher.

Structurally, we need policies and programs from the bottom-up rather than the top-down, by listening and responding. Without consultation at the street level, the end product is destined to fail. The analogy presented by Davies (1992) bears as much logic:

Ambulance officers have a lot of contact with heart attack victims so we'll get them to lecture in medical school on the causes and solutions to heart disease (p.39).

Unemployed 16- to 19-year-olds in Australia are the by-product of recent structural technological changes tangibly alienated from an employment niche. The present outcome-oriented approach by federal job training programs has further structurally removed those most in need of assistance. These young people also require the greatest amount of attention to be job-ready and are least successful at gaining the politically desired outcome. While at the other end of the conveyor, an outcome of the present system of job-training has become a subtle diversion for many by turning

a humane and apparently caring face to all those trapped in the

In Australia and overseas a successful local, regional and national school initiative of which we should be proud and should support, is the Rock Eisteddfod. This annual event highlights participants' non-verbal abilities in musical theatre. Excellence

in performance does not necessarily correlate with high academic ability, and the group dynamics of these success-oriented productions have similar group development processes to wilderness programs. The French Bonnemaison model of community development also attempts to achieve this nexus at national, regional and municipal levels by encouraging participation of the entire community (see King 1988; Sutton 1990). This culturally appropriate initiative which constructively approaches youth crime prevention is currently being operated out of South Australia.

If we are serious about achieving this goal of a nexus with society, the vast network of social and economic agencies which exist to assist and benefit youth require a unification of purpose. Structural delinquency prevention at a societal level involves community reorganisation – a strengthening of the local community institutions that enhance legitimate youth identities, and reduce the opportunities that foster criminal behaviour (Empey 1974).

We are all party to creating a society that can be very hypocritical and very difficult to live in. What we are seeing among our corrections and delinquent populations are people who have difficulty living constructively in what has become a very confusing and complex world. We must jointly take responsibility for being part of the problem and not pointing the finger at "those people who have inexcusably gone off the rails"! (Abbott 1991, p.17).

The most beneficial value of wilderness programs is in their facilitative role, enabling participants to later become more open to wider opportunities in career, education and personal relationships. Logically, if utilised as a motivational catalyst for job-training the program needs to be at the forefront of the exercise. The employment orientation is then reinforced through external follow-up programs in the context of the individ-

ual's goals upon their return to the community and continuing as a part of their on-going development.

Rethink recidivism

Finally, the measurement of program success should not be narrowly defined by the retrogressive and biased features of official recidivism figures (Mukherjee 1985) which demonstrate the activities of the criminal justice system rather than the level of criminal behaviour (Seidman & Couzens 1974). Instead success should be defined through the actual behavioural change during the program and later in the community. Bettelheim (1967) said

Too often children's progress is viewed not in terms of a move toward autonomy but of the convenience of a society that cares less about autonomy than conformity. The real question is when and for what gains, we ought to strip away social adjustment for the sake of personal development (pp. 293-4).

Durkin (1988) has created an evaluation package known as the Sage Hill Behaviour Rating System, which offers practitioners a structured format for monitoring competency-based developmental growth. Its three primary goals are to cultivate participants' psychological and emotional well-being; promote their normal growth and development; and intervene in the maladaptive behaviours which interfere with their self-actualisation. The evaluation is particularly sensitive to participants' daily and long-term changes in rates of growth and development, but it is not age-specific. This system has the potential to monitor and evaluate Australian wilderness programs for adolescents. Videotaping participants in the programs as well as participant journal entries are considered valuable additions to the qualitative evidence gathered.

Kurt Lewin (1948) articulated the theory that a way of changing people was to make them participants in the change process. Forty-five years later, we are beginning to recognise that if

we wish to have a positive effect in our interactions with youth it must be from an action-based and engaging mode of cooperation. We reap what we sow.

Summary

This short review of experiential programs aims to widen the debate regarding our social and legal response to adolescent offending. The models of wilderness-based programs have been highlighted as an avenue to achieve a more holistic, heuristic and humanistic approach. It has been posited that a socially-based community response, a voluntary code of practise, a focus on maturational levels, and a recognition of experiential learning; rather than a segregated, legally-imposed and coerced homogeneity, will achieve positive behavioural changes with our youth. However, the initiative needs to be incorporated into a wider realm of social reorganisation and be seen as an early point in a lengthy spectrum, not as a quick panacea.

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