

Emotive outdoor learning experiences in Higher Education: Personal reflections and evidence

Peter Leadbetter, Anna Bussu & Michael Richards

Outdoor learning experiences in Higher Education (HE) provide students with the opportunity for emotional development, cognitive development and learning. Despite this, the literature exploring the impact of emotive outdoor learning experiences on students' development and learning is scarce. The aim of this paper is to present an overview of the key factors important for the delivery of outdoor learning experiences in HE. The paper will also incorporate the authors personal experience of delivering emotive outdoor learning in HE (visiting Holocaust sites with undergraduate students). Broad recommendations for the future design and delivery of emotive outdoor learning experiences is also discussed.

Keywords: outdoor learning experience; emotive; higher education; adaptability; reflection; pedagogy; group identity; Holocaust.

OUTDOOR learning experiences can provide opportunities for affective, cognitive, and skills-based learning in Higher Education (HE) (Munge et al., 2017). If appropriately designed and integrated, outdoor learning experiences can increase student motivation toward learning tasks due to increased understanding of the purpose, value and reasons for learning activity (McConnell & van Der Hoeven Kraft, 2011). Specifically, evidence suggests that the increased understanding of the purpose, value and reasons associated with outdoor learning experience can support undergraduate university students to adapt to changing situations, develop tolerance, develop conflict resolution skills, increase cooperation, encourage group reflection, enhance team work, increase self-confidence, enhance critical thinking skills, enhance self-awareness and peer-staff relationships (Arrowsmith et al., 2011; Cooley et al., 2014; Stüdder & Haasner, 2007). However, despite the research evidence and increase in outdoor learning experiences in HE, research into appropriately designed, emotive and integrated approaches is limited and often contested (Munge et al., 2017). A synthesis of the relevant literature incorpo-

rating personal experience of designing and delivering emotive outdoor learning experiences is therefore required.

Multidisciplinary pedagogic content for outdoor learning

It is argued by Munge et al. (2017) that outdoor learning experiences should be inherently multidimensional and multidisciplinary. This multidisciplinary approach requires the student to integrate varying approaches to learning and incorporate a range of discipline specific knowledge, skills and experience to support learning (Mogk & Goodwin, 2012).

Indeed, our outdoor learning experiences (visiting Holocaust related sites with undergraduate students) provided students with the opportunity to link (in the classroom and on site) with the disciplines of psychology, sociology and history (Lindquist, 2011). From our perspective, this was facilitated by the inherently adaptable and multidisciplinary nature of the undergraduate programme, with the academic course team inclusive of psychologists, clinical health academics, and criminologists.

Consistent with this approach, we developed and delivered pedagogic multidisciplinary

nary content before, during and after the visit to Holocaust related sites. This included lectures and interactive sessions that provided an overview of the historical and political factors that contributed to the Holocaust. Indeed, consensus dictated that one discipline central to the delivery of an effective educational programme about the Holocaust is history as this could be linked to broader issues applicable today (Lindquist, 2011).

In the development of the outdoor learning experience we were also aware of evidence outlining how Holocaust learning was often supported by limited and superficial pedagogic content (typically lectures) that lacked context, was presented in no coherent order, and was delivered by non-specialists in the discipline (Lindquist, 2007). It was therefore critical that the outdoor learning experience incorporate key concepts and experiences meaningfully throughout the duration of the course by subject experts. This is consistent with emotional pedagogy (Gramsci, 1991; Zembylas, 2013), which necessitated that experiences must be facilitated to be meaningful over time. Indeed, from this perspective any outdoor learning experience should be fully integrated within a course or syllabus and revisited throughout.

A discipline which was incorporated into the pedagogic content was psychology. That is, from a psychological perspective, the Holocaust presented an opportunity to help students understand what made mass genocide possible by exploring the factors that allowed leaders to motivate followers to commit acts of brutality and inhumanity (Shapiro, 2001). Specifically, social psychology allowed lecturers the opportunity to explore (with students) the impact of conformity and bystander behaviour as significant forces influencing the Holocaust (Short, 2001). That is, social psychology offered explanations of the processes and possibilities that led to individuals assisting or conforming to the social pressure as bystanders or perpetrators in the Holocaust (Lazar et al., 2009). This helped students comprehend and understand the paradox-

ical and seemingly impossible notion that 'normal' families and individuals could commit such extreme acts of inhumanity and brutality in this context.

To normalise and foster connections between the pedagogic content and the outdoor learning experience we incorporated images and accounts that connect to the past and looked beyond the victim (in this case) (Foster et al., 2014; Lazar et al., 2009; Salmons, 2001; Simpson, 2012). This included lessons and information about resisters and rescuers. The aim was to move the student away from a complete focus on human suffering and victimisation. Indeed, Nesfield (2015) argued that many accounts of the Holocaust largely ignore human talent, resistance and humour. Emotive outdoor learning experiences should therefore include (pre, post and during the visit) artefacts, original photos, film, case studies, personal histories, and visits to sites where events took place. The inclusion of such items may assist in exploring the diversity and vibrancy of Jewish communities (and other groups), thus allowing for direct and authentic links for students (Salmons, 2001). Outdoor learning experiences should therefore include university based educational programmes that use an adaptable and diverse range of mediums (from a diverse range of perspectives) to allow for meaningful and authentic connection to the subject.

Emotional engagement and support for outdoor learning

Studies of teaching-learning process, especially emotions of lecturers and students in outdoor learning contexts have largely been ignored in the literature (Demirkaya & Atayeter, 2011). Our experience, however, supported the notion that often students learn in contexts where they are placed 'out of their comfort zone' and where they can connect emotionally to the material delivered previously in the classroom. In this context, the visit to Holocaust sites was transformative as the learning involved building on classroom sessions by fostering and incorporating

individual affective responses from students (Shapiro, 2001). Indeed, this intellectual connection to the material was found once the students were affectively engaged, as opposed to solely being engaged with theory or intellectual material delivered in the classroom. It is only when students are affectively moved or engaged that students can take responsibility for their own learning (Shapiro, 2001).

However, in some outdoor learning experiences there is a potential to cause harm if the affective element is 'overwhelming' for students (Salmons, 2001). Our experience indicates that many students were not prepared for the horrific, direct and graphic images of the Holocaust on such a large scale. Thus, for any potentially emotive experience, lecturers should also be trained to facilitate students emotional learning process (Hen & Sharabi, 2014).

The emotionally overwhelmed student also reinforces the notion that lecturers need to be adequately prepared (as much as possible) and remain adaptable and professional, by not being overcome by their own emotional responses. This is supported by Lindquist (2011), who argued that the lecturers' behaviour in confronting an emotive topic can heavily influence student reactions. A priority for us, as lecturers therefore, was to ensure an emotionally safe and secure environment for students (Nesfield, 2015). This also highlighted the importance of developing relationships with students by exploring a range of factors related to the emotive content over an extended period prior to visiting such sites.

Our experience indicated that if students immerse themselves in the 'real experience' (learning by doing) they expressed an emotional and cognitive impact of the outdoor learning experience (empathy with the victims and each other, tolerance, social consciousness, emotional management, and enhanced communication with other students and lecturers). This is supported by Cowan and Maitles (2011) and Delasalas (2014) who outlined that through outdoor learning experiences students had developed empathy, toler-

ance, self-awareness, emotional management, and communication with other students.

Reflection and the outdoor learning experience

Foster et al. (2014) and Beard and Wilson (2002) argued that time and space for reflection enhances the opportunity for permanency and relevance to other contexts when visiting potentially emotive outdoor sites. This was supported by our observations as students explicitly outlined how they needed time (during and after the visit) to reflect on their personal experience to enhance knowledge and learning (a process defined as self-narration). However, the reflective process itself did not provide a meaningful experience as authentic connection to the material and study visit was required (Taniguchi et al., 2005). Thus, university-based educational and pedagogic content is critically important to provide multidisciplinary content and context for students to assist in developing these authentic connections. Authentic connection and reflection should also be adaptable and led by the lecturer to guide students through the process of self-reflection and 'self-to-other connection' (Endacott, 2014, p.29).

It is important to note factors that could hinder student self-reflection. If the outdoor learning experience includes visits to sites associated with death, suffering and the macabre (such as Holocaust sites) then learning and development can be hindered by the asymmetrical view of such sites as a 'tourist attraction' (Stone, 2012). That is, consistent with the notion of 'dark tourism', some students perceived the deeply emotional and tragic scenes that require individual reflection, as contradictory to a scheduled and impersonal visit a tourist attraction.

Group identity and the outdoor learning experience

Outdoor learning experiences also have the potential to amplify the group dimension by allowing for shared and reflective learning. In our experience, both students and lecturers highlighted that the experi-

ence consolidated the student group as well as student-lecturer relationships. A 'group identity' was fostered and sustained via a process of shared emotional experience (beyond any other university experience). Indeed, Banks (2008) found that it was easier for participants to create and foster a 'group identity' via an emotional shared external visit, than after three years of university-based teaching. Furthermore, Bester et al. (2017) found that outdoor education aids in student retention by providing the opportunity for additional contact between students and academics supporting stronger relationships and an enhanced sense of belonging to the programme. Thus, a practical recommendation is that such learning experiences be planned for first-year undergraduate students to foster and promote community building early in the degree.

An important factor in supporting group learning (among students and lecturers) was the availability (and spontaneity) of all participants to share opinions and emotions in informal situations before and after the outdoor learning experience (Hoffman, 2009). This could include social events such as lunch and dinners on the trip (perceived as important for group consolidation and cohesion).

Recommendation for practice

The paper has briefly presented key issues and themes that influenced the development of emotive outdoor learning experiences in a university context. The recommendations below are based on personal observations and published evidence and include a need to:

- understand the need to merge and adapt pedagogy by incorporating a multi-disciplinary perspective (in the example provided social psychology, sociology, history);
- support outdoor educational experiences with relevant pedagogic content before, during and after the visit;
- consider complexity when teaching and developing the programme (including accounts and images that look to the past and look beyond the immediate environment and/or context);

- engage students and lecturers on an affective level to enhance learning;
- manage the affective element of the student experience (as much as possible) allowing students to be open to intellectual debate and engagement (Lazar et al., 2009; Lindquist, 2007; Salmons, 2001; Simpson 2012).

Finally, as the evidence is limited in examining the impact of emotive outdoor learning experiences in HE, more well-designed and peer reviewed research in this arena is required.

Conclusion

There is limited evidence on the impact of emotive outdoor learning experiences in HE on students' learning and development. Our experience indicates that visiting emotive outdoor sites (in our case Holocaust-related sites) is a positive and potentially transformative experience for undergraduate students and lecturers by fostering an emotional connection to the classroom-based content. This connection of outdoor learning experience to classroom content needs a multidisciplinary focus, by incorporating a diverse range of perspectives (such as psychological, sociological, political, and historical content) contexts and mediums to facilitate reflection and authenticity.

Authors

**Dr Peter Leadbetter, Dr Anna Bussu
& Dr Michael Richards,**
Edge Hill University

Correspondence

Dr Peter Leadbetter,
Faculty of Health and Social Care,
Edge Hill University, St Helens Road,
Ormskirk, Lancashire, L39 4QP
Tel: (01695) 650717
Email: leadbep@edgehill.ac.uk

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