

Integrated Programs and Pro-Environmental Behaviour

by Tiffany Smith

Six years ago, I took part in what was the greatest experience of my high school career. I spent the second semester of my grade 11 year at Outward Bound Canada College (OBCC). There were 12 students, two teachers and lots of incredible experiences. Since then I have completed high school, volunteered with several community outreach programs, and been employed in various positions in the outdoor and environment field. I will soon complete my undergraduate degree in Environment and Resource Studies. I have been able to reflect on how my OBCC experience is connected to who I am and what I have done. Its profound impact on me fuelled this study, which investigates the current lifestyle of OBCC graduates, and the impact they believe this integrated semester had on their pro-environmental behaviour.

It is almost impossible to read the newspaper, talk with friends or take a walk down the street without observing how our actions affect human and environmental health (Roszak, 2002). Yet change is slow because our actions and behaviour are rooted in our core values (Hay, 2005).

Experience and education are key to shifting core values (McMillan, 2003). Outdoor experiential education recognizes the importance and challenges of experiences in the outdoors, and uses them as a tool for developing an individual's knowledge, skills and values (Dewey, 1938; Wurdinger, 1996; McRae, 1990).

Studies on the theoretical and practical relationship between nature experience and pro-environmental behaviour began to appear in the 1990s (Bogeholz, 2006). Research suggested that "nature experience as an education method played a role in developing environmental value and attitudes, and was

influential in pro-environmental behaviour" (Bogeholz, 2006, p. 68). Few of these studies however, assessed the long-term influences of outdoor education experiences on participants' pro-environmental behaviour.

The OBCC offers a variety of programs where students can earn credits towards their high school diploma. In 2002, OBCC began providing students with an integrated semester program that included extended expeditions, dog sledding, winter camping, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, kayaking and canoeing across Canada while completing a five-subject course load. Learning used an integrated curriculum approach in which subjects are overlapped to show their true interconnections; students and teachers rave about the benefits of this approach (Shoemaker, 1989).

Methods

This study used literature reviews, surveys, and interviews to triangulate data, thus providing a greater understanding of results and making conclusions more credible (McMillan, 2003).

An electronic survey was used to acquire information on the lifestyles of the 100 graduates of OBCC. It consisted of six open-ended background and reflection questions, and 30 multiple-choice questions exploring the lifestyles of participants that were largely based on the Earth Day Footprint Quiz developed by the Global Footprint Network (2002).

Survey participants interested in taking part in a follow-up interview could leave their contact information, but the surveys were otherwise anonymous. Interview questions were constructed to gather more insight into the lifestyle of the graduates and their view of

the impact of their OBCC experience on their current lifestyle. Responses from students currently in the program were expected to provide an understanding of individuals' pro-environmental behaviours prior to their integrated OEE semester. Feedback from winter 2002 to 2007 graduates was expected to represent changes in lifestyle after program participation.

Results

There was a 10% response rate to the survey, which is low but typical of mail-out surveys (Palys, 2003). The lower return rate however does make it hard to know whether the sample population is representative of the lifestyles of all OBCC graduates (Palys, 2003). Of the ten survey respondents, nine were graduates, and one is currently a student. Of the nine graduates, there was one from the fall 2006 semester; one who participated in two semesters (fall 2005 and winter 2006); one from the fall 2005 semester; one from the fall 2004 semester; two from the 2003 fall semester; and three from the winter 2002 semester. The respondents were fairly representative of graduates based on the years they participated in OBCC. The information gathered provides insight into the correlation between OEE and pro-environmental behaviour in participants' current lifestyle.

When asked their reason for wanting to participate in OBCC, the boldest statement was,

Bored with the mundane and repetitive flaws and follies of high school, I just wanted something different, to get away from it all – my summers in [Algonquin Park] were what got me through [all] the long years [prior]. Bring what keeps you alive, closer, as close as possible. All I remember is summer came quick that year, and for the first time I did not want it and was not ready for it.

This quote offers insight into this graduate's reason for participation, as well as the program's resulting value. Other responses to this question identified the intrigue of combining a pre-existing passion for the

outdoors and education, and the desire for new experiences, a challenge, learning in a different style, completing high school, and escape as reasons for interest in OBCC.

About the course graduates most appreciated the combination of the expeditions, the education style, the people, living residentially, and the awareness of oneself and the surrounding world. This was expressed by two graduates as follows:

The combination of hands-on schooling and theoretical learning, with tripping and camping thrown in there to bring the leadership and physical education into focus. Learning how to view the world in a different way, i.e., Ishmael, changed my life.

It wasn't the program, it was the lifestyle.

A common complaint was how small the community begins to feel as students are living, learning and tripping with the same individuals for five months. Two graduates expressed frustration in peers' reluctance to fully engage, and one indicated the extended periods away from home to be a drawback, while another found this to be an enticing aspect.

For some the program offered fine-tuning of outdoor and group living skills while for others there was a great deal of new skills developed. Whether participants had previously considered careers or further education beyond high school, OBCC opened their eyes to new possibilities. Responses indicated changed world views, a greater appreciation, understanding and compassion for what is around them, and deeper self-awareness.

Survey respondents were asked to list their education and work experiences since completing their semester. The nine graduates had completed their high school diploma, and are pursuing or have aspirations to pursue further post-secondary education focusing on the natural environment, the arts, tourism or teaching. Most are very

involved in their community, volunteering with youth outreach programs, development projects, and a search-and-rescue program to name a few. Many have held leadership positions at outdoor education centres and camps, while some have worked at adventure gear stores, are travelling with a cruise ship, or are monitoring groundwater flow in the Canadian Rockies. All of their jobs relate to the natural world and/or new experiences and places.

The final open-ended question asked respondents to reflect on whether these outcomes could be linked to their participation in OBCC. Responses were overwhelmingly “yes.” As one respondent summed it up,

Everything I do in retrospect has been influenced by [the OBCC] program. It is a program designed to change who you are. It is a life-altering experience.

Pro-Environmental Behaviours

The responses to the multiple choice questions are summarized as follows:

Locomotion: Most graduates get around by either walking or riding their bicycle. Most use public transit, travelling between 1 and 100 km a week. Most do not use car, but several travel by car between 1 and 25 km per week and two between 50 and 300 km a week. They most often or always travel with two or more people in the vehicle. Three spend 20 hours or more flying each year, three do not fly, and the remainder spend between three and ten hours in the air annually.

Housing: Nine out of ten live in a free-standing dwelling with an average four-person occupancy level.

Water: Eight do their dishes by hand, two by dishwasher. On average they shower between three and four times per week for ten minutes; most do not take baths.

Food: There was one vegan in the sample population, four lacto-ovo vegetarians, and

four animal-product consumers. Most of their diets consist of less than 50% processed, packaged or imported foods, and 50% or less locally grown or raised products. Half or more of peoples’ diet are organic. Food is usually purchased at the local farmers’ market, supermarket, and on occasion health food store. When asked to explain the reason for this, the common themes are expense, convenience, and environmental and social reasons. All but one indicated that they always bring their own shopping bag.

Goods: Seventy percent care about where the goods they purchase are manufactured, while 30% do not give it any thought. Although seven respondents care about where their goods are from, it has little influence on their buying habits. Most indicated that they purchase new clothes or a 50/50 mix of second-hand and new clothes, while one person indicated s/he mostly purchases used clothes, and another makes her/his own clothes or purchases second-hand items.

Waste: All but one respondent believes that they produce significantly less garbage than their neighbours. Ninety percent have access to multiple waste sorting processes (plastics and paper) and half to organic composting in addition. Most very often or always sort their waste into garbage and recyclables, and organics for those who live where there is a green bin program or use a personal compost.

Study participants were given the opportunity to elaborate on their multiple-choice answers at the end of the survey. Several noted the limitations of their current living or financial situation as impeding them from living as environmentally as they would like:

Living on my own I'd make a lot of different choices that would be better for the environment, but at university those choices don't even seem to exist. My roommate would kill me if I tried to set up vermicomposting in our room, and the amount of things that get recycled here is minimal.

I am looking forward to living on my own where I will be able to have more control over how eco-friendly I can be.

We try to be eco-friendly. It is just very hard on our [student] budget.

Discussion

Responses did not indicate that behaviours were profoundly pro-environmental, although there was a movement towards pro-environmental actions the longer the individuals had been out of the program. Many suggested behaviours would change when they got older as they would have more funds and be able to make their own decisions rather than having to conform to the lifestyles of those around them. Monitoring each individual from the beginning of their semester would make the reasons behind this progression clearer.

The integrated semester was engaging, and learning expanded beyond course material. Some students thrived for the first time and felt a sense of accomplishment. The responses to the open-ended questions highlight the transformative capacity of integrated outdoor experiential education (OEE) programs such as OBCC.

There are few opportunities in the school curriculum for students to participate in outdoor experiential education. For many, it may only be a couple of days in grade six at an outdoor education centre. There need to be more OEE programs offered throughout students' educational careers.

For many OBCC graduates this was not their first exposure to the magnificence of nature. It was the students' passion for it and curiosity about it that moved them to participate in such a program. OBCC was a catalyst for more. More studies investigating the contribution of OEE programs to pro-environmental behaviour are needed.

OEE allows for transformative learning and the development of ecological values that influence making more sustainable lifestyle decisions. Youth with pro-environmental values will eventually become decision makers and parents, passing their values on to the next generation. Semester-long integrated

programs should be available to deepen pro-environmental behaviour.

References

- Bogeholz, S. (2006). Nature experience and its importance for environmental knowledge, values and action: Recent German empirical contributions. *Environmental Education Research*, 12(1), 65–84.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. Indianapolis, IN: Kappa Delta Pi.
- Global Footprint Network. (2002). *Earth Day Footprint Quiz*. Retrieved April 16, 2007 from www.earthday.net/footprint/
- Hay, R. (2005). Becoming ecosynchronous, part 1: The root causes of our unsustainable way of life. *Sustainable Development* 13, 311–325.
- McMillan, E. (2003). A method for evaluating the impact of an introductory environmental studies class on the values of students. *Applied Environmental Education and Communication* 2, 91–98.
- McRae, K. (1990). Introduction to the purposes and practices of outdoor education. In McRae, K. (Ed.), *Outdoor and environmental education: Diverse purposes and practices* (pp. 1–27). Melbourne, Australia: Macmillan.
- Palys, T. (2003). *Research decisions: Quantitative and qualitative perspectives* (3rd ed). Scarborough, ON: Nelson.
- Roszak, T. (2002) Ecopsychology since 1992. *Wild Earth* 12(2), 38–43.
- Shoemaker, B. (1989). Integrative education: A curriculum for the twenty-first century. *Oregon School Study Council* 33(2).
- Wurdinger, S. (1996). The theory and pedagogy of experiential education: A critical look at teaching practices. *Journal of Experiential Education* 19(2), 60–61.

Having recently graduated, Tiffany Smith is looking forward to furthering her interests in outdoor experiential education through local and international experiences after she completes her second summer guiding whitewater canoe and sea kayaking trips for Black Feather: The Wilderness Adventure Company.