

A Decade of Outdoors Experiential Workshops: Facilitator Reflections and Tips

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Though much literature describes the value of experiential and place-based learning experiences for participants, we have found little comparable literature regarding the facilitator experience. This paper provides current and future facilitators of workshops, especially those that take place outdoors, our reflections and ideas as facilitators, including tips for success. Our findings reinforce the conclusion that experiential learning can be as beneficial and transformative for facilitators as for participants, and that what we encounter during workshops parallels what students may go through in our classrooms as they learn. We identify five clear themes from facilitator reflections and encourage readers to consider leading an outdoor experiential learning sessions.

Keywords: reflection, facilitators; outdoor education; place-based learning; conference pedagogy; educational development

S'il existe beaucoup d'études décrivant la valeur des expériences d'apprentissage expérientiel axé sur la dimension locale, notre examen a révélé peu d'études du genre portant sur l'animateur. Notre article présente des idées, des réflexions et des conseils à l'intention des personnes qui animent ou animeront des ateliers, tout particulièrement des ateliers en plein air, en vue de la réussite de ces activités. Nos conclusions indiquent, premièrement, que l'apprentissage expérientiel peut être bénéfique et peut induire des changements chez l'animateur aussi bien que chez le participant et, deuxièmement, que notre expérience en tant qu'animateurs au cours des ateliers recoupe l'expérience d'apprentissage des étudiants en classe. Nous cernons cinq thèmes issus des réflexions des animateurs et nous encourageons les lecteurs de l'article à envisager la possibilité d'animer des sessions d'apprentissage expérientiel en plein air.

Mots clés : réflexion, animateurs; enseignement en plein air; apprentissage axé sur la dimension locale; pédagogie de conférence; perfectionnement de l'enseignement

Since 2005, the authors, and other faculty and educational developer colleagues have led a total of ten day-long experiential workshops in outdoor settings across Canada in conjunction with

the annual conference of the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (STLHE; Cassidy, Wright, Streat & Watson, 2015). Facilitated on the pre-conference day, and at locales close to the

conference venues, we have worked collaboratively to bring ideas and planning to life. One of us (Wright) has been the lead for all ten workshops.

We have previously written about the value of such outdoor and place-based learning experiences for workshop participants (Wright, Cassidy & Monette, 2013; Cassidy et al., 2015). As to the value of being outdoors, we describe Kaplan's (1977) premise about natural environments as being fascinating and keeping involuntary attention without mental fatigue. In Cassidy et al. (2015) we expand on this, referring to the findings of Nisbet and Zelenski (2011), where outdoor walks in nearby nature facilitated a sense of connection with the natural world and increased happiness. Ardoin, Schuh & Gould (2012) describe place-based learning, as, in part, how people connect with place and how those connections influence engagement with the environment.

We have previously presented the workshop reflections of these participants—faculty, staff and students of post-secondary institutions attending the annual STLHE conference (Wright et al., 2013; Cassidy et al., 2015)—as well as their metaphors for teaching (Wright, Monette & Hamilton, 2010). We have also referred to the potential benefits for the facilitators themselves. An outdoor education experience can stimulate a more holistic educational process (Wright et al., 2010). The same benefit might be derived for facilitators as well as faculty and others who teach by physically bringing students into the outdoors or by metaphorically bringing aspects of the outdoors into the classroom (Cassidy & Wright 2013, Cassidy, 2015).

In this paper, we focus on the impacts that these outdoor experiential learning events had on the five of us as leaders and facilitators. We see value in this unique perspective. While it is relatively common for those facilitating learning experiences—be they related to conference sessions such as this, outdoor adventure camps with students, or the post-secondary classroom—to study effects on the learners or participants, our approach here is to

reflect on the meaning and impact of workshops for the facilitators. We have found little work in this specific area. Glynn (2008) describes a broader concept—training and development of facilitators to work in experiential education—and makes some links between facilitating and teaching. As Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett and Norman (2010) assert, learning is a developmental process, not a product.

The Workshops

In all of its iterations, the workshop has involved paddling, usually in kayaks and/or canoes, in salt water or fresh water, walking and observing the natural environment, partaking of simple communal meals in the field, and discussing and reflecting with the participants on educational themes and related topics.

Dillon et al. (2006) note the importance of attention to preparatory work in outdoor learning. Well before the actual workshops take place, much planning is involved. One of us (Wright) explores a logical location of the paddling day near the conference venue, booking equipment and planning other logistics often up to a year in advance. As the team of facilitators is assembled, we determine which of us will take on various roles. Each year, these include writing a workshop description to match the conference theme, promoting the event to delegates, planning food – with allergies, preferences and food safety at top of mind – inviting self-described paddling ability in order to pair people up, and coordinating carpooling or other ways to reach the paddling venues. Two of us rent a boat the day before each actual workshop to test and refine our workshop schedule.

Each year, participants have been post-secondary teachers and educational developers, be they faculty, staff or students, from a variety of disciplines. Facilitators have roles in post-secondary education as teachers, researchers, administrators and educational

developers. Workshops begin in the open air, at the boat launch sites, with personal introductions of the participants and facilitators. Over the years, all have been committed to exploring notions of pedagogy and the enhancement of teaching and learning in higher education. There is clearly buy-in from the start and people are happy to be there: anticipation prevails.

As facilitators, we provide some details on how the day will unfold, safety precautions, and tips on observing the natural world. In addition, participants are often asked to reflect on a number of specific themes, linked with teaching and learning pedagogy, scholarship of teaching and learning, and how they relate to the activities of the day. During each year's debriefing session at day's end, before returning to the conference site, we have invited informal written reflections.

Methods

At the end of each workshop, participants (15-25 per workshop) and facilitators (3-5 per workshop) write brief reflections. These are done informally on index cards and without pre-determined structure or format.

We adopted writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005; Vander Kloet et al., 2017) for the reflections in this paper. The model of reflective practitioner is well-accepted for classroom practice (Schön, 1983). We are drawing on the notion of reflective practitioner at the level of educational development because reflective practice is fundamental to experiential education (Association of Experiential Education, 2016). Experiential educators purposefully engage in focused reflection to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities (p.1). Five of us who co-facilitated the workshop multiple times shared with each other longer, more descriptive written reflections

(averaging 787 words) after the tenth workshop, compared to those we wrote on index cards at the conclusion of each workshop. Reflections were analyzed by hand and grouped for patterns in meaning and overall themes (Sandelowski 2000; 2010). All five of us reviewed the reflections independently for commonalities and discussed patterns in the reflections. Though written from our individual perspectives, and sometimes related to the unique disciplines in which we are situated (Education, Kinesiology, Nursing, Zoology), five distinct themes emerged, which we describe below, illustrated using narrative excerpts.

Though it is common to plan educational events with the participants in mind, as we studied the reflections we wrote, we determined that much could be learned by examining the impacts of experiential education events as professional and educational development for the facilitators.

Model of Reflective Practice

To provide structure and to help contextualize the facilitators' reflections, we considered the reflective practice model of Mezirow (1990; 1993; 1997). This model suggests that critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which our beliefs have been built. Learning can be defined as "the process of making a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of an experience, which guides subsequent understanding, appreciation and action" (Mezirow, 1990, p.1). It further proposes three forms of reflective practice, categorized as public reflection, which we see being very parallel to our workshop experiences. These include content reflection, process reflection and premise reflection (Raelin, 2001).

Content reflection involves "a review of the way we have consciously applied ideas in strategizing and implementing each phase of solving a problem" (Raelin, 2001, p.12). We feel that content reflections

relate to the structure of the activities throughout the day, the organization, events, timing, leadership on the water, and other aspects of each workshop day. Process reflection examines procedures and assumptions as we engage in problem solving (Raelin, 2001). Kreber (2004) speaks to the value of reflecting for both facilitators and teachers, asking ourselves how effective we have been in our instructional methods. In order to do this, we can seek feedback and evidence from learners (participants), as well as from relevant literature. She describes the “nature of our learning as both instrumental and communicative, both predicting how students (learners) will respond and trying to learn through interactions with others” (Kreber, 2004, p.33). During the workshops, we reflected on the process, including adjustments in activity timing, dealing with unexpected issues in participant pairings within the canoes, making parallels between leading educational development activities and classroom management.

Premise reflection refers to challenging the validity of presuppositions in prior learning (Mezirow, 1990) and are different from procedural considerations and reflections. Premise reflections are critical reflections which “address the question of the justification for the very premises on which problems are posed or defined in the first place” (Mezirow, 1990, p. 4). Mezirow goes on to note that encountering new meaning perspectives can redirect the way we engage in the world as we challenge what we fundamentally believe. In this way, premise reflections can be transformative. Our major collective reflection regarding workshop outcomes led us to appreciate the benefits of such events for facilitators. This fundamental shift in our thinking, which challenged our presuppositions in prior learning, is that experiential learning should not just focus only on the participants. In fact, we came to realize that much was to be learned by examining the impacts of experiential education for our own professional development. After all, experiential learning is “the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p.38).

Furthermore, “transformative learning may arise through the acquisition of emancipatory knowledge, ‘the self awareness that frees us from constraints [and] is a product of critical reflection and critical self reflection’” (Cranton 2002, p.64, in Harvey, Coulson & McMaugh, 2016 p. 7). Through our reflections as facilitators, we gained a new perspective of experiential learning as being as beneficial for the facilitators as it is for the participants.

Five clear themes emerged from our reflections as facilitators: interdisciplinary approaches to learning, experiential learning, teamwork and collaboration, the interplay of space, place and identity, and the development of a sense of community. These themes reinforced that experiential learning can be as beneficial for facilitators as for participants and that what we encounter during a workshop parallels what students may go through in our classrooms as they learn. We chose excerpts from our reflections to illustrate each theme.

Interdisciplinary Approaches to Learning

Outdoor workshops provide an excellent environment to reflect on interdisciplinarity, partly because of the nature of the setting and the varied backgrounds of the participants. Furthermore, experiential learning theory research is highly interdisciplinary, addressing learning and educational issues in many fields (Kolb, 2014). All five of us included the interdisciplinary aspect of the experiences and its connection to our academic backgrounds in our reflections. Jacobs and Frickel (2009) define interdisciplinarity as communication and collaboration across academic disciplines. This certainly was the case with participant discussions during the workshops.

Reflections

1. As a physical educator I believe in learning activities that involve the whole body. I like the notion that learners should “engage intellectually, emotionally, socially, soulfully and/or physically” (Association of Experiential Education, 2016). I see the advantages of exercising in nature and in taking the time to discover the surroundings.
2. It amazes me that canoes, at least in these conditions, can accommodate such a wide variety of people and abilities. We also echo the words of a recent workshop participant in discussing interdisciplinarity: the benefits and the need for interdisciplinarity in higher education, is simple and definitely on-target: “We need interdisciplinary approaches because life is interdisciplinary”.
3. I am a science educator and educational developer with a great passion for the natural world. I have been fortunate to find ways to combine these skills and interests in a variety of ways. I feel that place and/or field-based, experiential and active engagement with the world around us is a valuable and necessary aspect of higher education today. Pressing issues such as climate change, informed use of natural resources, and related sustainability topics, not only have many academic and interdisciplinary connections, but also challenge students to come up with practical real-world solutions.

Experiential Learning

As described above, experiential learning according to Kolb (1984) is “the process whereby knowledge is created through transformation of experience” (p.38). When individuals learn a skill or come to understand an idea through hands-on efforts in an outdoor setting, they become physically and emotionally engaged and the “embodied learning is

memorable exactly because it looks and feels different from what has come to be commonplace in education, learning through lecture or other passive means” (Howden, 2012, p. 43). Our reflections below reinforce the importance of hands-on learning and how teaching is a dynamic process. They further suggest that, as educators, we need to be thinking about the importance of engaging our learners and helping them to feel safe in potentially new learning environments.

Reflections

4. When reflecting on the workshop I can’t help but think of the logistics and how essential the attention to detail is for learning experiences to be successful. I see many parallels to what occurs in my teaching. In order for the experiential learning opportunity for my students to be meaningful, I spend many hours ensuring all of the details are in place. Like our paddling pedagogy, I always have a dry run with instructors and peer mentors to ensure that there aren’t any aspects that we missed or details that need to be newly considered.
5. In a variety of university courses I designed and taught, I have incorporated ways to take students outside, and ways to bring the outside in. As an educator and educational developer, I feel great satisfaction when students or teaching colleagues show they are enjoying their learning, work and practice through connections to the natural world. Part of my teaching philosophy is to feel that I have made a difference. To see a student or teacher articulating how they will apply their learning and explorations, continuing that cycle by making change and teaching others, is about the greatest thing I could hope for.
6. Most canoes were well on their way, but we saw a pair of paddlers struggling. Pulling alongside, we tried to coach them from our canoe, but after several minutes of watching

the two paddlers continue to struggle, we switched pairs, so that a more experienced paddler was now in the stern of each canoe. This is not much different than what occurs in the classroom. Sometimes we need to coach from the side and sometimes we need to offer opportunities for greater support so that our learners can get the most out of the experience. While we want our learners to be able to take off on their own, as teachers, we need to build in safety nets to catch our students and be able to help them navigate the waters with our support until they can do so on their own.

Teamwork and Collaboration

We identified the importance of teamwork and collaboration resonating throughout the entire process of planning and engaging in the workshop experience. As facilitators, collaboration starts with the planning process. See sections on “The Workshops” above and “Tips for Facilitators” below. On the workshop days, participants usually found themselves paired with strangers to paddle canoes, navigating, collaborating, and sharing the decision-making process. Many were reminded of the importance of teamwork and reflected on the importance of collaboration. The notion of teamwork as a necessary skill in outdoor education has been shown in the literature (Roos, Lennox & Botha-Ravyse, 2016). In a 2014 and 2015 study of an outdoor adventure education event, researchers reported teamwork as one of the two most frequent skills developed by first-time participants. The importance of teamwork and collaboration clearly came through in our reflections.

Reflections

7. The conditions on our dry run were severe. It was very hot and a very strong south wind blew us down the channel. We knew this

would have been extremely challenging for novice paddlers. They would have needed a lot of help had the same conditions prevailed the next day. How would a go vs. no go be established when adverse weather conditions persist? As educators, do we have a ‘Plan B’ when circumstances dash our original plans? Would reasonable collaboration have turned to chaos if we had set beginning paddlers out in windy conditions they had no chance of mastering?

8. Paddling in a canoe with someone you don’t know takes a lot of trust and teamwork/collaboration at first, in order to be safe, and efficient. Once I started paddling, my experience kicked in and I was able to focus on my partner and the natural world around me. I was relaxed, happy, and able to live in the moment. I felt like I do in front of a large class when I am teaching material I know extremely well. I just relaxed and enjoyed the connection with place and person. Paddling was the perfect activity to set the tone for the day – it forced us to connect, collaborate, and communicate.
9. The notion of teamwork came to life in our canoe as my counterpart described her thoughts on being a team in the canoe. She mentioned how important trust was for her as my teammate [in the bow] since she could not see what I was doing and at times had to give up control. In the stern, I reflected on needing to watch my partner and to follow her lead. This is often what happens in academia, both with colleagues and students. As team members, we need to rely on each other, trust them and work towards a common goal.

The Interplay of Space, Place and Identity

The interplay of space, place and identity was also a consistent theme in our reflections. Part of our strategy of an annual foray into the natural setting has been to invite participants and leaders to think and re-think educational issues in an outdoor environment characteristic of a particular geographic region of Canada. This allows participants, who are also attendees of a conference held in the built environment, to be immersed in a region's more natural and sometimes undeveloped guise. Often a recreational excursion attracts participants to come early and/or stay after the main conference is over. This can be an otherwise missed chance to see the natural world and network informally with conference delegates (Cassidy & Popovic, 2018).

Location can be an integral part of planning, organizing and attracting participants to a conference (Cassidy, 2018). Natural settings are selected because exercising in natural environments has been shown to be associated with, “greater feelings of revitalisation and positive engagement, decreases in tension, confusion, anger and depression and increased energy” (Thompson Coon et al., 2011, p. 1761). Furthermore, it fosters collaboration in and out of the canoe, working as teams and providing an environment for relationships to develop. Quay, Dickinson & Nettleton (2002) showed that caring between school students was more likely to be experienced in an outdoor education context than inside a classroom. The relational aspect of learning is fundamental to the experience, and this notion was underlined in our reflections.

Reflections

10. I love the chaos on the dock as people pair up, select paddles and personal flotation devices, and get into the canoes. Some take off as if there was a prize for the fastest. Some are tentative and a bit nervous. The

participants, in this environment, have become explorers. I have been canoeing from a young age and here I am, decades later, so happy to share the joy of paddling in this natural space with this group – including many mid-career adults—some having never wielded a paddle in their lives!

11. Even if I didn't know them at the beginning of the workshop, I found that participants were already friendly and open. They were excited and ready for an adventure and that gave me great satisfaction in my work. Looking back on the benefits of exercising in nature and the behaviour of the participants, I can only be happy to do what I do. The positive rapport established during these workshops remains beyond the day. Something happens in nature that you won't find in the classroom.
12. The trees, rocks and water made me feel at home—an immediate and unquantifiable sense of connection to everything and everyone there. This initial experience with receptive and understanding people within a peaceful, beautiful place, helped my confidence. I may not have been able to say what I felt very eloquently to start the day off, but I felt appreciated, I felt that I helped others have a good experience ... and I felt closely connected to the place and the people.
13. I remember when I was first introduced to the identification of birds in their natural environment. All of a sudden a whole world opened up to me. I went to places I had been many times and now saw living things that were obviously there before. I so much enjoy opening worlds to others, such that they can go to a new place or somewhere they have been before, but see nature as they had not necessarily done in the past. I aim for this with my learners.

The Development of a Sense of Community

One of the strongest shared outcomes of participants and facilitators alike has been the sense of community arising from the shared experience of a single day. Allen-Craig and Carpenter (2018) wrote of their involvement in developing outdoor education programs and the sense of community they felt through their involvement (p. 66). They further described the role of outdoor education as an “all-inclusive experience for personal development, health and well-being, community development... teamwork” (Allen-Craig & Carpenter, 2018, p.67). The identification of outdoor education resulting in connections being made that led to a feeling of, “community and a sense of belonging” was also described by Cameron (2018, p. 274). A study by Austin, Martin, Mittelstaedt, Schanning and Ogle (2009) found that participants in their outdoor orientation program reported an “increase in sense of place and social benefits” as a result of the experience (p.437). In our reflections, we emphasized the communal experience as part of our values, the unique rapport developed among participants and facilitators in this special context, as well as increased knowledge of the community beyond the paddling setting as a part of our preparation and practice.

Reflections

14. I think sharing food with others can help build community. Listening to the conversations around the picnic tables was interesting; much discussion about the importance of place and space in learning. Sometimes I forget how important it is to sit and eat with friends and colleagues. The connectedness, the relational aspect of the experience was really powerful. This sense of community, of connections/relations, afforded an opportunity to get to know and

share in a different way than I think is possible inside the classroom.

15. In the high school where I taught for a few years, we had the tradition of bringing the first year students to a camp in a natural environment where we participated in outdoor activities. The goal was to establish good rapport between teachers and students and also among students who did not know each other. Coming back to school we could feel that something was different: a rapport that was deeper than at the beginning of the school year.
16. Co-leading the paddling excursion is one of my favourite events. People, many of whom have never met before, are fully engaged, enjoying nature, talking about teaching, learning and scholarship. They become fast friends and colleagues for the rest of the conference days and often beyond.
17. In conversations we had with people living and working near the paddling site, we were reminded that many local, family-owned, and long-established businesses thrive there, often attracting vacationers of all ages each year. We found that conversations can move into areas of mutual interest and experience, in one case about schools connecting to community, and how local business people become involved in educational projects. In a community thriving on the influx of visitors, family, school life and business are all wrapped up with local concerns.

Tips for Facilitators

In reflecting on our experience, we offer a few suggestions for facilitators. Although we focus on the outdoor learning events we led over many years, some of the tips may apply to other learning events:

1. Assemble an enthusiastic team of facilitators; celebrate your individuality and

work in planning your event to make the best use of each team member's skills and interests.

2. Promote your event to prospective participants, and once assembled, keep them informed of how to prepare and make the most of the event; hear their voices and create a community of learners.
3. Conduct a dress rehearsal or dry run before the actual event to determine any unexpected site-specific details and make Plans B and C. Discussions with locals help make important connections and adds richness.
4. Be prepared to be flexible and responsive to the needs of your participants on workshop day.
5. Make time throughout the event for discussion, quiet reflection, sharing and enjoyment by learners and facilitators alike.
6. Celebrate!

Conclusion

The five themes emerging from our reflections show that a wide variety of impressions were made on us as facilitators while paddling in the outdoor environment. We realized through our reflections that the experiences were as beneficial for us as facilitators as for participants. Together, the workshops we have led over ten iterations have been transformative for all of us as we realise that experiential learning should not focus only on the participants. As facilitators, what we encountered during the workshops parallels what students may go through in our classrooms as they learn. We were able to draw parallels between facilitating in an outdoor environment with teaching in our disciplines. Many similar themes were noted by Ashworth (2017), including feelings of connectedness, the value of learning outdoors, experiences and personal development. "Learning is

influenced in fundamental ways by the context in which it takes place." (Bransford, 2000, p. 25).

We agree with the views of Baldwin, Flood, Naqvi, Ratsoy & Templeman (2017) about pedagogy of place in post-secondary education: greater emphasis needs to be given to educating students about the places they come from and the places they come to learn. During our pre-conference paddling workshops, we have focused on the importance of a sense of belonging, both to a community and to place. We encourage future participants of STLHE and other conferences to propose sessions that make the most of place, especially outdoors.

Drawing on the work of Dewey (1938), some of our philosophies of education involve facilitating learning through meaningful experiences. Freeman, Nelson & Tanicuchi (2003) note that "educational experiences need to be transferable from one setting to another at some point in the future, and there must be opportunities for students to reflect on their experiences so that they can learn from them" (p.7). Even as facilitators, we must reflect on the experience to take meaning from it and to relate it to the classroom/lab environments in which we work. We can look at the value and importance of logistics. In the classroom, a successful experiential activity requires thought, planning, structure, organization, back-up plans, relevance and attention to detail. Working in a team poses additional opportunities, challenges and considerations.

There is often uncertainty and risk in teaching, as there was for us in facilitating the paddling workshops. Aadland, Lennart Vikene, Varley & Vegard Fusche (2017) describe the importance of awareness of potential hazards when learning in the outdoors. As facilitators and leaders, we see the need to create a space where there is safety in the risk. This will allow for deeper learning for all involved. Reflecting on the experience and making connections to our teaching and educational development practices allowed us to think about what we see as a purpose in higher education—to

make meaning of the experience and of teaching. Skelton (2009) writes that “teaching excellence ... focuses the mind on the underlying purposes of teaching in higher education and it also represents a potent force to drive us forward in our efforts to understand and improve what we do” (p.107). The time for reflection as facilitators helped us, as educational leaders, on our journeys to improve our teaching, and reinforced the importance of meaningful interactions with colleagues.

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Additional Resources

See links to related materials with downloadable resources you can use in your own teaching or facilitating practice:
<https://cassidyinview.wordpress.com/in-class-activities/bring-the-outside-world-into-your-class-and-vice-versa/>

Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to our many colleagues who took part in paddling workshops since 2005. Your

contributions, energy, and positive spirit helped to make us better facilitators and teachers. We also thank the anonymous reviewers, whose comments and suggestions improved this paper.

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