

The Perceived Life Impact of a University Outdoor Education Course

By Jennifer Wigglesworth

Learning in the outdoors provides lasting educational experiences. Most students retain information best when *doing* an activity, and the outdoors allows for these opportunities. Outdoor education (OE) is a large, multi-disciplinary field cultivated from many roots. Since OE offers such vivid learning opportunities, it is an important area for research initiatives.

The study I am discussing in this article is part of my Master's thesis at the University of Ottawa, which I am completing under the supervision of Dr. Paul Heintzman. It is patterned upon research by Daniel (2007) on the life-significance of a university wilderness expedition. There is currently relatively little research on the life significance of OE and I am hoping to fill this gap in the literature. The research is retrospective in nature and it takes a lifespan perspective; therefore, it seeks to understand how experiences that may have occurred 20 or 30 years ago continue to influence people's feelings or behaviour.

The purpose of my present investigation is to discover what participants in a university summer outdoor education course remember about their OE experience and what they learned during and as a result of the course with respect to their *intrapersonal*, *interpersonal* and *environmental* relationships. Furthermore, I am exploring whether lessons from the OE course play a subsequent role in participants' lives and which components of the course have the most impact. Therefore, I am studying two aspects of the OE course: the life significance of the entire OE course, and the life significance of its individual components.

For my Master's thesis, I am completing two interrelated studies. The first study consists of semi-structured, in-depth interviews with University of Ottawa alumni who were enrolled in a two-week summer OE credit course held at the University of

Ottawa's camp. So far, I have completed 11 interviews and I hope to interview a few more participants. The purpose of this part of the study is to explore the significant life experiences of the OE course. The findings from this study will then help shape the final version of the web-based questionnaire for the second study.

I expect that the research results will have critical implications for field-based programming with an emphasis on the outdoors as a classroom. Therefore, the findings have the potential to inspire Canadian professional practice and demonstrate the need for outdoor education in university settings. For instance, if we can isolate and understand the processes and conditions that enhance opportunities for personal growth from outdoor experiences, then we can prescribe conditions and program activities more effectively to match the potential for growth (Daniel, 2007). Furthermore, an enhanced understanding of the transformative potential of outdoor experiences could have many implications for land management practices, including the importance of protecting and preserving wildlife areas, forests, and provincial and national parks.

In addition to practical implications, the research findings hold promise for contributing to scholarly literature. First, the study seeks to understand the long-term impact of the experience. Second, it explores an area of research that is still very much in its infancy, including the processes that link an OE course to a significant life experience. It is evident in the OE literature that there is a need for more process-oriented research. Therefore, the proposed research seeks to answer this call; this will be done by establishing links among course components and outcomes through analysis of the semi-structured interviews that will aim to understand *why* the participant found his or her OE experience to be significant

and what parts of the outdoor course led to this discovery. Third, the findings have the potential to advance significant life-effect research, as the research questions will explore the role an OE experience has on someone's life over 20 years after the experience occurred. In line with this, the research findings may contribute to Dewey's theory of personal meaning that maintains that learning must derive from making meaning of what is being taught. It is hoped that the research will document how an outdoor experience becomes increasingly memorable, and, ultimately, leads to a significant life experience. Finally, the research findings may advance the learning theory of experiential education if they are able to demonstrate the importance of learning through direct and genuine outdoor experiences.

Since many of the OE studies have been conducted with youth, the next logical step is to explore OE processes with new populations. My present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature. The current research explores how *university students* come to understand whether an outdoor experience is significant up to 20 or 30 years after participation in the OE course. Although the proposed research will be

patterned on Daniel's (2003) study, he explored the significant life effects of a wilderness expedition, not an OE course. Therefore, my research fills this gap in the literature by focusing attention on a particular OE program.

I am currently in the process of transcribing and analyzing the interview data. I plan to disseminate my research findings in later article submissions.

References

- Daniel, B. (2003). *The life significance of a spiritually oriented Outward Bound-type wilderness expedition*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). Antioch University New England, Keene, NH.
- . (2007). The life significance of a spiritually oriented, outward bound-type wilderness expedition. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 2(3), 386–389.

Jennifer Wigglesworth is currently completing her master's thesis at the University of Ottawa. Hiking, snowboarding, golfing and dragon boat are her favourite outdoor activities.

