

Collier, D. The distance travelled

Whose Journeys? The Outdoors and Adventure as Social and Cultural Phenomena

**Critical explorations of relations between
individuals, 'others' and the environment**

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The Distance Travelled: Who wants to know?

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In this paper, feedback from women after a course focussing on reflective processes and personal development, and involving an outdoor education element, is considered. The scepticism of some funders about methods of measuring distance travelled is considered. The ability of people to determine their own learning outcomes is highlighted.

This paper focuses on the responses of a small group of women playworkers and community workers to an outdoor experience on a personal development course, which contained an outdoor education element.

Background

In 2000, Millennium Award Funding was secured by Kitemark, a small community work training group, to enable the development and delivery of a personal development programme for women active in their communities, as playworkers, youth workers or community workers. This short course was called 'Unleashing Your Potential'. The purpose was to give women the space and tools to reflect on their lives, including their working lives, and to accept some personal challenges, by engaging in an outdoor education experience, and exploring creativity and spirituality. It involved six day time sessions and a residential weekend in Zennor, Cornwall. Outdoor activities were limited, because of footpath closures because of foot and mouth disease, forcing us to use our creativity exploring beaches and villages, and building labyrinths.

In 2001, further funding was secured from Awards for All to enable the nucleus of the group to meet with women from other neighbourhoods, including young women. A core group had already named the course 'Don't Stop Us Now'. Its purposes were to break down barriers between neighbourhoods and age groups, again exploring personal development, as well as giving the space and tools for reflection. The course involved a number of weekday sessions, as well as a day at Avebury, and a weekend in Zennor. Although not all people were able to attend all sessions, a nucleus of participants was involved throughout and gave the feedback that forms the basis of this paper. The theme for the visit to Avebury was 'What's it all about?'. The group developed a quiz prior to their visit, which some completed as they explored the stone circle. The weekend in Zennor was organised around dream making, and included building sandcastles, looking for dolphins and seals, visiting stone circles and quoits, and having a cream tea!

The ethos of these courses

Questioning what it is to be human, and referring to his understanding that the deeper self is a complex mixture of mental, physical and emotional experiences, Mortlock commented:

I find it amusing and ironic – a neat paradox – that in these times when an attitude prevails of ‘if it can’t be measured, it has no value’, this essence of human cannot be found.
(Mortlock, 2001:21)

These courses were unusual because they offered an opportunity for these women to explore the essence of being human, in the contexts of their working and private lives. In addition, the funding was not conditional on the measurement of outputs, soft outcomes or distance travelled¹. Thus, the participants were able to focus on their self-identified goals and personal development, within the physical and emotional safety boundaries established by the facilitators and course members.

The research

The research was based on semi-structured interviews with six of the twelve participants of ‘Don’t Stop Us Now’. They were asked:

- What makes these courses different from other courses (which are focussed on achieving qualifications)?
- How important is the residential?

Responses were then sorted into categories, based on the themes developed by the interviewees. All participants agreed to their names being used in this paper.

A personal focus

Perhaps not surprisingly, interviewees agreed that the key difference between this course and other courses was the personal focus. To Sam, this was challenging and thus ‘harder work because of the challenge’. Debs found this to have a therapeutic dimension. She commented:

Not knowing how you are going to react, whether it will trigger off in your mind – such as a childhood memory that you couldn’t have bothered with until now – very therapeutic
(Debs)

She also identified a spiritual dimension, which she described as ‘scary, but enlightening’.

A reflective process

The women were introduced to a range of tools and strategies for facilitating reflection, including a private, personal journal. Time and space was established for reflection to become a key element of each session. Joan commented on the importance of the process, which included space for reflection. She said:

It's unstructured, so it's more about the process than the outcome – it's not final. I wouldn't have thought you could do it any other way. After the first course – you carry on (reflecting). The difference between what am I now – I've done a complete turn around from where I was then to where I am now. (Joan)

The flexibility, reflexivity and responsiveness of the process were also important for Debs. Alana, my building-based, 'non-outdoorist' co-worker, who became a participant during the outdoor and residential elements, had stronger views:

Outcomes and outputs stagnate creativity – the word is not stagnate – it's stultify. Being driven by outputs and outcomes means that you are goal oriented rather than process oriented and it's that, that stultifies the creativity. It's all to do with why I got out of teaching. There's no recognition that people's starting points are so diverse and that their styles of learning are different – keeping it open-ended enough so that people can explore their needs and aspirations. I am a facilitator, but I am also a learner – it's a mutual learning environment. (Alana)

Debbie supports Alana's feelings:

You learn at your own level – there's no particular level to reach so it's good for everyone. I get in a state, anxious, when there's an end product to reach. You can do things in depth, there's no pressure, which takes a lot of stress off it. (Debbie)

The implications for professional development

Although the focus was on a process that facilitated personal development, over half the participants could identify a direct value for their professional work. The course gives space for 'recharging the batteries' and for sharing practice and particularly issues with colleagues. Sam stated:

It's important for people who work in the community setting – in the community you're quite vulnerable and facing the community – there's not much time to be you. Getting qualifications isn't important. (Sam)

She also justified a focus on personal development by suggesting that it 'can stop you getting lost in other people's needs'. Debbie recognised a growth in self-

It was nice – a nice space, time out – and it was important to get away, away from the working life – you seem to be far away from work, I mean you couldn't give your thoughts to anything else (other than what was happening at the time). (Sam)

Debbie also recognised the value of sharing experiences and learning 'to muck in. It was good team work'.

The choice of location was probably of even more importance. Debs commented, 'Cornwall and Avebury - the experience is more important than a qualification.' For Debbie it meant doing 'something that you've never done before – for me to be me again, not a mum or a wife'. Sam commented, 'Cornwall is beautiful. You would be hard pushed to find a more beautiful place. I like the outdoors – the place was not unknown – it feels like home.' Debs identified the interplay between the group, the process and the location:

Cornwall was special, because of the things we did, out of the ordinary, out of the norm – being able to relax, being away from everything with a bunch of people you don't know very well, which is good. (Debs)

Discussion: The implications of the distance travelled

There is little doubt that the participants believe that they have gained from the course personally and professionally. However, Nichols (2002:34-36) has highlighted difficulties in measuring qualities such as self-esteem, and linking it to identified behaviours or given outcomes. Therefore, there is no guarantee that their evaluations and assessments of the distances they have travelled will be taken seriously. In addition, creative evaluation tools were used. As well as the interviews, artwork and poetry were also included. While these methods were accepted by Awards for All, these methods might not be recognised as valid by all funders. Dewson et al. (2000:3) suggest existing measures of distance travelled are subjective, have different baselines, and cannot be attributed entirely to the training intervention. However, similar criticisms could be made of courses that have prescribed outcomes. Learning does not take place in a vacuum. Learners have differing understandings of language and what is being asked of them. In addition, personal experience in meetings for assessors of national vocational qualifications suggest that, despite attempts at standardisation and imposing safeguards, assessors may have different understandings of the how effectively a learner has put knowledge into practice. Thus, value judgements might be involved in the assessments. Bernstein (1977:98-99) describes these evaluative systems as placing 'an emphasis upon attaining states of knowledge rather than ways of knowing', warning that in an extreme case, an underlying purpose may be social control.

While Nichols (2002:16) acknowledges that 'it (outdoor education) may be a particularly powerful medium, and a catalyst to the process', and although the interviewees acknowledged the contribution of the outdoor education experience to their learning, combining the outdoor experience with a focus on self-directed personal development may weaken the funding potential of a course. A popular image of

outdoor education is that the activity is the end in itself (Nicol, 2002:30), and personal development work may be regarded as being for self-gratification. Thus, securing funding is a complex issue, and the current focus on qualifications and employability may create future difficulties for gaining financial support for courses that focus on personal development with an outdoor education experience.

A justification for this way of working:

The self-directed learner

Despite potential funding difficulties, this way of working is firmly based on research and practical evidence. Schon (1983) has described the critical role of reflection in the learning process, particularly for professionals, and in becoming a self-directed learner (Heron, 1999:2). Reflection is a key element of Kolb's (1984) learning cycle underpinning experiential learning, which is fundamental to outdoor education. Baldwin and Williams (1988:68-69) have described strategies for working towards a self-directed group. Proudman (1995:241-243) has also described the role of facilitators in creating a safe environment, from which they can withdraw, leaving the learners to take control of making sense of their experiences and their growth, rather than responding to the targets identified for them by others. The potential dangers of standardised outcomes, which can lend themselves to the manipulation of power have been highlighted by Collins (2000:31) and Mack (1994:24). In addition, Freire (1972:45-46) has warned of the role of standardisation in a 'misguided' education system. It is to be hoped that research will be carried out into the wider benefits of outdoor education and personal development work. Barrett and Greenaway (1995) have identified the need for research into how things happen in outdoor education, rather than what happens.

Conclusions

In general, this course was a valuable learning experience for the women and had implications for professional lives as well as personal lives. Where external funding is required, it is possible that personal development and outdoor education will not be viewed favourably, perhaps being seen as frivolous. It is important that the image of outdoor education and the power of personal development for professional change are adequately promoted.

Note

1. At present, funding for courses tends to be associated with outputs or hard outcomes, which can be described as the participants gaining qualifications and increasing their employability rating, or on predicted learner hours being met. In addition, there was no compulsion to measure soft outcomes – those achievements which may indicate progress towards an outcome, such as time keeping or improved communication skills, or the distance travelled, the progress made towards employability or hard outcomes (Dewson et al. 2000:2).

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