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Andy Williams

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Taking a step back: learning without the facilitator on solo activities

Andy Williams*
University of Wales Trinity Saint David, UK

The purpose of this study is to report on the nature of student learning resulting from an open facilitation approach to solo activities. Three key moments of facilitator intervention were identified at which the facilitator was encouraged to take a step back from directing the experience. They are the pre-activity brief, the mid-activity visit and the post-activity review. Findings suggest that participants' learning focused on their raised self-awareness and social relationships. Raised spiritual awareness was also identified and this was closely linked to a connection with the landscape and eco-system. Evidence was also identified for emergent learning to have occurred that is not normally identified in the solo discourse. The findings suggest that participants on solo activities do not require a facilitator to tell them what they should be learning and that they will identify for themselves outcomes that are personally meaningful and important.

Keywords: *Solo; Self-learning; Open facilitation; Emergent learning; Spiritual awareness*

Introduction

Research into the impact of solo camping suggests it has the potential to be an incredibly positive and powerful learning experience that can help transform a person's view of themselves, their relationships with others, and their connection to the natural world. Bobilya, McAvoy, and Kalisch (2005) comment on the positive physical, mental and spiritual impact of the solo upon participants. Drawing upon longitudinal data over a 25-year period, Daniel (2005) highlights the connection between the natural environment and the soloist's spiritual development. More broadly, Potter and O'Connell (2005) highlight self-learning and personal understanding as key outcomes of the solo experience along with the development of problem-solving and reflection skills. Common to all these studies is a belief in the value of the solo as a highly

*Centre for Outdoor Education Research, School of Sport, Health and Outdoor Education, University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Carmarthen, SA31 3EP, UK. Email: a.williams@tsd.ac.uk

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facilitator-led experience. One in which the facilitator plays a key role in the learning experience of the soloist in the way they brief participants *before* the solo, what they discuss *during* the solo and how they review participants' experiences *after* the solo. In contrast, the aim of this study was to investigate the nature of student learning when key facilitator inputs were withdrawn and students were required to set their own goals and decide their own learning outcomes.

In their seminal collection of papers *Exploring the Power of Solo, Silence and Solitude*, Knapp and Smith (2005) define their broad understanding of the solo:

> We consider the solo experience to include multi-day wilderness quests involving consideration and fasting (like those many Plains Indians completed as part of their coming of age rituals), or an experience as short and simple as a 20 minute retreat to a quiet spot to meditate, reflect, or journal to relieve stress, enhance awareness of self and nature, or reflect on life experiences (Knapp & Smith, 2005, p. vi).

There are undoubted strengths to such a broad understanding of the solo, in particular their recognition that time is not a defining characteristic. Potter and O'Connell (2005, p. 140) cite a range of temporal formats used by Canadian colleagues to include the impromptu teachable moment, hour-long experiences and others that last from a few hours to a few days. From Australia, Martin (2002, p. 242) elaborates on the concept of 'solo mind-space, the capacity to find time with minimal distractions from external sources', as a state of mind experienced by individuals even when they are taking part in an extended group journey. A second strength of Knapp and Smith's definition draws attention to the connection between periods of reflection and an enhanced awareness of nature. Wilson's (1984) concept of Biophilia suggests that the desire for contact with nature is partly innate. Pretty et al. (2005) have sought to explore this idea further and have identified three levels of interaction with nature, which they identify as distant, passive and active. The recognition that exposure to nature makes a positive contribution to individual well-being supports further enquiry into the potential of solo activities in a range of social, academic and work-related situations.

A third, and more contentious, point highlighted in Knapp and Smith's definition draws attention to the inclusion of fasting as a required characteristic of longer solo activities. Daniel (2005, p. 95) highlights the importance of fasting to Christian-based expeditions, suggesting, 'participants related spiritual growth to the solo more than to any other component of the trip'. In sharp contrast, Maxted (2005, p. 134) advocates the need for participants, in particular adolescents and young women, 'to be fed, warm, dry and emotionally stable' if they are to overcome anxieties and fears linked to being alone, bored and uncertain about what to do with their solo time. This is supported by my own observations over the last five years in which students have commented on the need to be physically comfortable as a basis for meeting the largely new and uncertain demands experienced on a solo camp. Knapp and Smith, not unsurprisingly, find strong support for fasting in the approach of organisations whose religious orientation permeates their educational programmes (Bobilya

et al., 2005; Daniel, 2005). Anderson-Henley (2005, cited in Daniel, 2005) identifies the tendency of Christian-orientated programmes to draw parallels between the solo experience, the wilderness journey and the spiritual journey. Haluza-Delay (2000, p. 143) argues for experiential educators to acknowledge the shared experiential basis of spirituality and religion 'that can be a source of motivation for environmentally aware lifestyles'. In contrast, Zetie (2009) draws attention to the problematic nature of outdoor spiritual experiences being considered in religious terms. He proposes a non-religious but spiritual approach to outdoor education that allows participants to ask their own questions about life but stops short of prescribing a preferred religious doctrine within which answers are framed. Ellis-Smith's (2005, p. 76) non-religious definition of spirituality as 'an awareness of the interconnectedness of everything in the visible and invisible worlds' most accurately informs my own understanding of the relationship between nature and spiritual awareness.

Most importantly for this paper, Knapp and Smith's definition of the solo draws attention to the important role of the facilitator who structures the experience for the participant. Eschewing the potential of non-facilitator-led experiences, Smith (2005, p. 5) argues that, 'the solo experience can be more meaningful for participants if they understand and accept the format and goals of the experience'. From a similar position, Knapp comments:

> the more skills and information a facilitator has about the goals of the solo, site location, and the person taking it, the better the leader will be able to guide the learner in making sense of the experience and in achieving deeper understandings (Knapp, 2005, p. 21).

Knapp and Smith's position reflects the dominant North American discourse around facilitating solo experiences as a 'structured framework' in which the goals and learning outcomes are heavily influenced by the facilitator who organises the experience. Smith (2005, p. 5) suggests that: 'programme leaders should provide an underlying rationale (philosophy) for the experience, guide them (the soloists) in setting personal goals, and teach them appropriate activities for their time in solo'. From a similar pedagogical standpoint, Knapp (2005, p. 21) identifies six specific concerns that need to be addressed by conscientious facilitators. These are identified as:

> (a) committing to the central role of briefing and debriefing in experience-based learning; (b) deliberately planning for opportunities to brief and debrief; (c) realising that a high level of facilitation skill is needed; (d) establishing clear intentions and objectives for the activity . . .; (e) identifying types of knowledge that the solo experience imparts; and (f) establishing a relationship with the vision quester *(soloist)* based upon trust, acceptance, risk taking, and mutual respect (Knapp, 2005, p. 21).

Such an approach focuses on the role and influence of the facilitator to direct the student through the different phases of the solo experience. Whilst I agree entirely with the need for a facilitator to use a range of different approaches to address learner needs, I am less convinced that the didactic, facilitator-led approach advocated by Knapp is the most appropriate for the solo experience. I would suggest that solo pedagogy demands a more participant-led and less directed facilitator approach. One

in which the soloist has a real opportunity to take decisions for themselves and to take ownership of the learning that results from their experiences. A recent study by Campbell (2010) provides support for a more participant-led approach to the solo experience in which students were able to negotiate where they went, what they did, how long the solo lasted and the level of support they required. In sharp contrast to Knapp's approach, Campbell sought to empower soloists to make their own choices and take personal responsibility for their learning rather than for this to be determined by the facilitator. This was achieved through negotiation with each student about their, and not her, notion of solitude. Consideration was given to whether they wished to be visited during the solo, where they wished to go, what they wished to do and self-reflection on their response to their solo experience. The very positive feedback from the majority of soloists suggests they appreciated and benefited from such an empowering approach in which they were able to 'really make the experience their own' (Campbell, 2010, p. 47).

Further consideration of the different approaches advocated by Knapp and Campbell raises two important issues for this study. Firstly, what impact does the particular facilitation approach have upon the learning experience of the soloist? Drawing upon research with a group of students entering higher education in the USA, Bobilya et al. (2005) suggest three stages at which the facilitator's approach has an impact upon the soloist's experience: the pre-solo briefing, a visit during the solo and the solo debriefing. Interestingly participants comment on the impact of the facilitator-led debrief as a cause for concern, 'because they wondered what they "should have experienced" and if they would have the "right" answers' (Bobilya et al., 2005, p. 112). Bobilya et al. (2005, p. 112) identify the need for facilitators to be given training on how to 'frame, conduct and debrief the solo experience' in order to avoid undermining participants' learning. However, I would suggest what is important in the training of facilitators is the more fundamental issue of whose learning experience it is and whether the facilitator should seek to influence both the objectives and outcomes of the solo in the first place. Higgins (1997) sheds light on the importance of participants having 'ownership' of their own learning and the impact role of the facilitator on their learning. However, Williams (2003, p. 73) goes further in proposing a continuum of teaching/facilitation approaches that range from letting the experience speak for itself to sharing the experience and directing the experience. What is important here is that different facilitator approaches have the potential to impact upon participant learning in different ways. Rea (2006) differentiates between opposing facilitation models. The 'experientialist model' emphasises the centrality of experience to learning and allows participants the space and freedom of choice to reflect upon experiences if, how and when they want. Alternatively, the 'interventionist model' prioritises the processing of the experience in line with the accepted wisdom of experiential learning theory and the need to embed, more often than not, facilitator-led reviewing within the learning cycle. Challenging the often uncritical belief in the importance of the facilitator to experiential learning theory, Rea suggests that participants can and do reflect spontaneously on their experiences without active input from a facilitator and that, 'active encouragement of reflective thought cannot

be considered a necessary precursor to reflection' (Rea, 2006, p. 131). The research of Rea (2006) and Campbell (2010) supports the potential for participants to reflect on their experiences without the direction of a facilitator and for participants to be more involved in their own learning. Greenaway (2008, p. 350) is emphatic in stating, 'the fact that reviewing of experiences can bring out valuable learning is not an argument for reviewing *all* experiences'. I would suggest that solo camping is one of those experiences in which the facilitator should be encouraged to take a step back from the learning process by creating the time, space and opportunity for participants to learn for themselves, rather than for their learning to be framed and directed by the facilitator.

A second concern highlighted by the different approaches advocated by Knapp and Campbell relates to the nature of the learning outcomes that result from the solo experience. Knapp (2005, p. 25) draws a direct correlation between the facilitator establishing clear goals and objectives for the solo and the importance of undertaking deliberately planned briefings and debriefings. By way of contrast, Campbell (2010, p. 47) acknowledges the deeper learning potential of a more participant-focused approach in which 'positive outcomes were personal and varied and not necessarily linked to the module outcomes'. Greenaway (2008, p. 359) describes the structured approach as a highly organised industrial process in which: 'the educator is now busy *programming* the experience, *delivering* the experience, *frontloading* the experience, *framing* the experience, *funnelling* the experience and *processing* the experience'. In other words, and quite ironically, he identifies within the predominantly (but not exclusively) North American approach a move to take 'experiential learning theory back into the didactic paradigm' from which progressive educators such as John Dewey, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Carl Rogers, Paulo Freire and Howard Gardner have striven to break free (Greenaway, 2008, p. 359). In contrast to the limitations of such a rigorously structured approach to outdoor learning, Greenaway's (1995, p. 172) earlier research into outdoor development training found that facilitators and students do not always agree on the nature of their learning or what is important to take forward. He concluded that it is possible to identify two distinct models of learning that were in operation on such courses:

> One for structured learning experiences in which the trainer is involved and another (or several others) for more powerful (student centred) and *less* controlled learning experiences in which they are not involved (Greenaway, 1995, p. 172; original emphasis).

In research with young people, Williams (2006, p. 35) echoes the findings of Greenaway in advocating: 'a more open-ended, less prescriptive and more learner-centered process of outdoor education that also recognises the potential for different and unplanned learning to occur'. However, he goes further in locating the decision to acknowledge emergent and serendipitous learning within the broader context of the facilitator and student as 'co-learners' in which both parties have the potential to learn from each other. Whilst this paper is not in any way trying to argue for outdoor educators to stop the practice of reviewing outdoor experiences *per se*, I am suggesting that

the solo provides a real and significant opportunity for the participant to take more responsibility for their own learning than they do in many other situations. Central to this belief is the often unnecessary or excessive influence of the facilitator on participants' learning. This demonstrates itself, in particular, in the briefing phase prior to the solo, during the solo when participants are visited and at the end of the solo through a formalised review process.

Given the powerful and, for some, life-changing impact of the solo identified in the discourse, this research study investigates the nature of students' learning with minimal facilitator input to the pre-solo brief, mid-solo visit and post-solo review. The research focus draws upon students' own words and thoughts as evidence of meaningful learning related to self, spiritual, environmental and social awareness (the most commonly cited learning outcomes of the solo) without them being identified as expected learning outcomes. Additionally, I was interested to evidence any emergent learning that took place as a consequence of this approach.

Organisation: limitations and opportunities

In order to create a more participant-focused experience for the soloists I adopted a halfway position between the highly structured and facilitator-controlled approach advocated by, amongst others, Knapp and Smith (2005), and an opposing student-focused approach adopted by Campbell (2010). Boundaries and limitations were imposed upon students in relation to their location, the static rather than journeying format for the solo and a compulsory visit by a member of the staff team on the second morning. The staff visit acted as a safety check to ensure the students had reached their allocated campsite as well as it being a chance to check on the general demeanour and disposition of each soloist. Staff were requested to stay with each soloist for the minimum amount of time they felt was necessary and to avoid commenting upon what the soloist should be doing or thinking. No other face-to-face contact was arranged, although students were further observed from afar, with their knowledge and approval, in order to monitor their progress. Students were aware of the whereabouts of fellow soloists and the staff location (a centrally located mountain bothy) and directed to make their way to the nearest support should they at any time feel overwhelmed. All agreed that an individual's emotional and psychological safety was more important than the disruption that would be created by intruding on another's solo experience.

In line with Maxted's (2005) view that soloists need to be adequately fed (as well as warm, dry and emotionally stable) for them to be able to reflect on their lives during the solo, students were informed they needed to eat, rather than fast. Finally, the use of personal telephones, watches, cameras and music players was excluded. The removal of these items was a direct attempt to enhance the sense of solitude students would experience, as well as a symbolic gesture to distance them from many of the personal technologies and cultural products deemed by many in western, materialistic societies to be essential to modern-day living (Sharp, 2004). Campbell (2010) is critical of such non-negotiable boundaries, suggesting they are set to manage safety at the

expense of student learning. She herself recognises the tension that exists in balancing her responsibilities as an outdoor educator with the need to manage risks according to a set of established rules (Campbell, 2010). In responding to such critique my aim in this study was to remove what I considered to be the most influential aspects of the facilitator's role (the pre-solo brief, mid-solo discussion and the post-solo review) that are used to define, direct and confirm the learning outcomes of the experience, if I was to better realise participants' ownership of their own learning.

Other aspects of the solo were more open and negotiable. Prior to the start of the solo I sought to empower the participants by encouraging them to identify their own goals. A conscious decision was taken not to 'frontload' the experience with a set of prescribed learning outcomes or activities to be undertaken, or specific types of knowledge to be identified. Neither were students briefed on what they should do or think.

At the start of the solo, students were given the opportunity to walk into their campsite on their own or with a fellow student who would then continue to another location. Individual territories in which students could explore ranged from approximately one square kilometre for those closest to the bothy to 10 square kilometres for the more distant locations. Due to the hilly terrain none of the camp locations were visible to each other. Students were informed that they could end the solo whenever they wished without fear of embarrassment. All students had the appropriate skills, knowledge and personal items to camp for three days. The weather was good for all groups.

Students were given a diary and pencil as a way of recording their experiences if they wished to do so, although it was not compulsory. The primary use of the diary was to act as a personal record to take away after they finished the solo. This also served as a rich data source from which insight was gained into individual solo experiences. Only students who wanted to be part of the research study were asked to submit their diaries for future analysis.

Similar to the findings of Maxted (2005), students spent their solo experience developing personal strategies for passing the time. For most students these included many or all of the following: sleeping, relaxing, resting; being bored; wondering what they should be experiencing; being anxious about how they were going to cope; and wondering whether they could stay for another hour, day or night. In addition, much of their time was spent reflecting upon the opportunity that being alone for an extended period without routine demands and distractions allowed them in terms of a new perspective on different aspects of their lives.

At the end of the solo, students were welcomed back to the group and given the opportunity to catch up and share experiences with their peers whilst staff attended to a communal campfire and cooking arrangements. No direct review of their experiences was undertaken by myself or other staff members. This was felt to be a consistent and logical part of the research approach that sought to minimise the influence of the facilitator upon the students' learning and to recognise that in this experience, if not elsewhere, they had greater ownership of their learning and should evaluate the learning experience for themselves or with each other. They did not need me or anyone else to legitimate their learning.

Essentially the organisation of the solo experience was such that students should have:

- opportunity to be alone with, and in, nature;
- time and space away from normal distractions of student life; and
- opportunity to fill the time they had available in whatever ways they wished to do (within the limitations set out above).

The soloists

A total of 45 students took part in the research study over a period of three years. Two of the year groups undertook a three-day/two-night solo whilst the other group undertook a two-day/one-night experience. Twenty-one of the students were female and 24 were male. All the students were studying in the second year of an undergraduate degree in outdoor education. The solo experience was offered to the students as an optional part of their personal and professional development. All the students who undertook the solo were offered the chance to be part of the research study, although it was not a necessary pre-condition for them to undertake the solo. Two students stated they had never previously camped alone.

Method

This solo is an interpretive study (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007) through which I sought to gain insight into the nature of student learning when key facilitator inputs (setting of learning goals and reviewing outcomes) are withdrawn.

Data were gathered from participants who wished to take part in the research by analysis of their diaries immediately after the solo was completed. Further data gathering continued via email, with students being contacted on two occasions (after two weeks and six months), asking them to reflect on their experience and to consider whether it had impacted in any way upon their lives when they were back in their normal university environment.

Thematic analysis of each of the three sets of data was ongoing throughout the nine months immediately following the solo experience. Comparative analysis of the three data-sets was undertaken in order to identify the most important themes emerging from the students' accounts of their experiences.

Findings

Me time

Self-awareness has been identified in the literature as a key learning outcome justifying the inclusion of solo activities in formal educational and personal development programmes. In most of these studies, realising self-awareness as a positive learning outcome is dependent on the guidance and direction of a facilitator. At the outset of

the solo, self-awareness is identified as a key goal of the pre-experience brief. During the solo, facilitators visit the soloists and spend time discussing their thoughts and experiences with a view to aligning them with the briefing goals. Finally, the end-of-solo review allows the facilitator once again to focus the participants' thoughts and experiences upon self-awareness outcomes. The emphasis on the facilitator's role and guidance is essential for the solo to be a success (Bobilya et al., 2005; Knapp & Smith, 2005). However, in a broader commentary on the importance of first-hand learning, Higgins (1997) has acknowledged the range of different roles that the facilitator can take and how different roles will privilege or exclude different learning outcomes.

Within this study there was significant evidence in the students' diaries and post-solo communication of self-awareness learning by participants in the form of 'me-time' reflections. Analysis suggests 'me-time' takes two complementary forms related to 'freedom from responsibilities' and 'the future'. For many students, 'me time—freedom from responsibilities' was closely linked to their family responsibilities and a recognition of the solo as a special and unique opportunity for them to be free of the demands and deadlines of normal life. One soloist commented on it as: 'Five weeks more and I'll be back home. Back to routine, chores, responsibilities. Going to so miss this freedom and independence' (FM9, international student). Such an opportunity she recognised was one that needed to be savoured. It was the type of experience not to be missed and one she hoped to repeat at some point in the future. Others, who did not feel the burden of family responsibility, identified with the sheer pleasure of the solo as valuable time when they could legitimately forget about their studies:

> Since I got here I have been trying not to worry about deadlines but the only thing that keeps popping into my mind is if I was not here I could be back at uni trying to get on with some of the work. But when I got up this morning and looked out of my tent down the valley I decided that it is lovely here and maybe it wouldn't be the end of the world if the work waited (FB7).

The idea of the solo as an experience linked to 'freedom' was also identified by Campbell (2010), although her study contextualised it as 'freedom to make choices' related to the solo experience rather than freedom from responsibilities. What seems to link these ideas is a shared understanding of the solo as an experience in which the normal demands and responsibilities of life and study could be replaced, albeit for a short period of time, with a more empowering situation in which they are able to reflect on their life circumstances and who they want to be. Common to both studies is the approach of the facilitator to step back from determining the goals and outcomes of the solo. In so doing the participants are encouraged to step forward to become the key actors in their own learning.

For other students, enhanced self-awareness took the form of 'me time—the future' in which they identified, perhaps for the first time, a need to be more active in directing their life in the direction they wanted it to go:

> If I want success I'll have to go and get it on my own. I'm going to stop waiting for things to come to me and start working for what I want. I need to chase the life I want (FG8).

One participant's diary emphasises a new self-awareness beginning to emerge around their view of their own level of maturity: 'I feel I need to grow up a little . . . be more realistic about things' (FD9). For another the focus was on wasted time: 'I think the experience is highlighting how much time I waste and what I miss out . . . although this is not an epiphany on my account more a re-assessment of my lifestyle' (FA7). Such interpretations resonate strongly with the dominant discourse around the solo as a profound and potentially defining moment in participants' lives that can help them to shape their future direction and become the people they want to be (Bobilya et al., 2005). Most importantly, these 'me time—the future' reflections were also evident in the post-experience data collection. Email comments from participants received two weeks after the solo elaborate on self-awareness learning having transferred to other aspects of their lives: 'Since the expedition the things that I wrote down definitely cemented themselves into my thinking and I now act differently' (MU9). Another student makes a clear link between the solo and a more positive attitude to their studies:

> Since returning from the solo I have noticed a definite change in my attitude towards my work. I feel that I am far more focused and motivated. I have found that instead of 'running away' or ignoring things that I find difficult, I have faced them head on (FG9).

It is no small achievement for an educational experience to be able to evidence its ability to transfer to other aspects of a person's life. Indeed, pioneer educational theorists from Dewey to Rogers would suggest that the learning process cannot move forward without it. Reading students' comments after the solo clearly suggests they felt it had personal significance that stretched (at least two weeks) beyond the three days of the solo itself. Rea (2006) found tentative evidence to support positive self-perception changes in young people occurring a few days after their outdoor experience. Notably, he reports that the reflective thinking leading to these ideas was occurring spontaneously and without the structured intervention of a facilitator. In other words, learning happens, at least for some people, without the need for a facilitator to encourage or direct it.

Further evidence in support of the potential of a less-facilitated approach is identified in the comments of students some six months after the solo: 'The solo was a great chance for me to think about the future. Whilst lying in the sun I found myself thinking about the person I am now and the person I want to be in the future' (FG9). Another student was able to reflect on the solo experience and make connections with other changes in their life:

> I think the solo experience was part of a larger pattern of change in my perception; moving from fast to slow, far to close, multiple to single focus, shallow to deep. I've started changing the direction of my life to settle down in one place, but this is a long journey in itself (MI8).

In related studies with a range of different groups and activities, a number of researchers have begun to explore the long-term impact of outdoor education. Alison (2000) has reported significant changes in young people's self-awareness 18 months

after an expedition to Greenland. Williams (2003) has traced the impact of an outdoor education experience upon members of a postgraduate programme six years after the event. Gasser and Russell (2008) have reported the impact of an Outward Bound Singapore course to still be significant after 11 years and, finally, Takano (2010) reports on a 20-year study into the positive impact of an overseas youth expedition on Japanese participants. Rea (2006) quite rightly raises a note of caution about the conclusions of studies that seek to research post-experience reflections. Such studies by their very nature require that some form of contact is maintained with members of the group in order for the long-term data to be gathered. In so doing the method of data gathering itself may act as the catalyst for participants thinking more deeply than would normally occur about the impact of the experience. Acknowledging Rea's note of caution, it is clear in this study that participants *themselves* identified in the solo experience an opportunity for learning about self to occur as well as a longer-term transfer of that learning to other aspects of their lives.

Social relationships

Enhanced awareness of social relationships is a second key learning outcome associated with solo experiences (Daniel, 2005; Knapp & Smith, 2005; Maxted, 2005). For some students this was evident in their recognition of the importance they placed upon the friendship and support of others: 'I miss my mate . . . she called me (pre solo) re my engagement and talked a while. She's so happy and I'm so proud of her. She's a fab mate and I love her to bits' (FD9). Another student's diary records how, 'the time by myself has made me realise that I like to be involved in social situations and I've learnt that this is an important part of my life' (FG7). For other students, post-experience reflections two weeks and six months after the solo reinforce their raised awareness of the importance of family and home. One student expressed her wish to be a better friend to her mother in the future in recognition of the support she had received in the past:

> My mother has been living alone for 7 years since I got married and moved out. I always thought I knew how difficult it is for her to stay alone though within a city environment. Post the solo, for some reason, I just feel a deeper sense of empathy towards her and a sense of guilt at the same time, that all these years I should have visited her more often than I did. I know that on my return I am going to make more efforts in meeting her as often as I possibly can (FM9).

For a different student the importance of the home as a focus of social relationships became more evident: 'I have started to value the time spent with other people more and I've enjoyed spending time in my normal environment (home)' (MU8). Most profoundly, one student comments: 'I used to be a very anti social individual, I preferred being alone, on this solo I realized that had changed, I was missing human company and I was glad to come out of the solo and talk' (MI8). Alison (2000) described 'self-other' learning as one of four key relationship themes to emerge from his Greenland study. Rea (2006) has similarly identified participants reflecting upon

interpersonal and social gains resulting from their mountaineering experiences in Iceland. Most interestingly this happened naturally in the absence of a facilitator-led review. In other words, their reflections were socially constructed with their peers rather than taking place with a facilitator. The need for an end-of-experience, facilitator-led review is generally uncritically accepted as a key feature of the learning process. However, evidence from this study supports Rea's findings in suggesting that participants reflect on their experiences alone (during the solo) as well as by themselves and with each other (after the solo). This raises important questions about the role of the facilitator (Greenaway, 1995; Higgins, 1997) and the need for a facilitator-led review. I am not suggesting we do away with reviewing outdoor learning experiences but I am suggesting that we need to acknowledge that learning can, and does, take place without the facilitator.

In addition, whilst it is to be expected that most people would spend some time thinking about social relationships during an extended solo, what is interesting about these reflections is both the range of different messages that were being expressed as well as the positive tone of these messages. In this respect it could be argued that everyone should have the chance to spend some time alone if it promotes a greater awareness and empathy for their friends, family and social relationships.

Spiritual awareness

Becoming more spiritually aware is a third key learning outcome of the solo literature. Bobilya et al. (2005) have noted the close association of religious and spiritual affiliation in many North American-based educational programmes. Anderson-Henley (2005, cited in Daniel, 2005) has drawn parallels between the solo experience, the wilderness journey and the spiritual journey and the goals of Christian-orientated programmes. Daniel (2005) reports on a Christian-based programme in which the solo was identified as having more significance to their spiritual development than daily devotions and Bible studies. Rea (2003), on the other hand, emphasises the humanistic rather than the religious aspects of spirituality and suggests these are more likely to occur for non-believers in the natural environment than in a religious building. In an attempt to better analyse students' comments, Ellis-Smith's (2005) definition of spirituality as 'an awareness of the interconnectedness of everything in the visible and invisible worlds' (p. 76) was adopted. This definition most accurately reflects my own understanding of a non-religious yet spiritual approach to outdoor education.

The perception of the solo as a spiritual expression of an individual's religious values (Daniel, 2005) was clearly evident in the diaries of a limited number of individuals in this study:

> So it's a big risk for God to put his trust and love in people who, even though love him, still do things for themselves often knowing that it'll hurt Him. But that is why I must always strive to please God, because He inspires me to do so and He deserves it (MB9).

Interestingly, another student's diary linked their religious beliefs with their future life: 'God's given me far more potential than I'm ever aware of yet . . . I don't want to

be a half finished painting when I die. I want to be ready to be shown to God' (MC9). For another student it was the connection between the location and solitude that was important:

> I walked to the highest point in the area yesterday . . . I found this journey extremely good as a meditative experience. I am free to pray and sing aloud without anyone hearing or judging. I can read my Bible on the shingle beach or in the sun or in the privacy of my tent (MG8).

Knapp and Smith (2005) are two of a number of commentators who have argued for a stronger connection between the solo and spiritual awareness that is grounded in a particular religious doctrine. Others do not. I am not for one moment disputing that spirituality is inextricably linked with religious belief for some outdoor practitioners. Rather this research sought to explore a broader understanding of spirituality that is not specifically tied to, but at the same time recognises, religious belief. Rea's (2003) notion of a 'neighbourhood of outdoor-spiritual proximity' (p. 13) goes some way to providing a more humanistic link between the outdoors and spirituality. However, Rea's inclusion of 'self-knowledge' and 'relationships' as aspects of spiritual development, rather than the more traditional 'personal and social learning' strand of outdoor education, may not be easily accepted by others, and I would suggest may well be ahead of its time.

Looking for a deeper understanding of spirituality more closely associated with Ellis-Smith's idea of the 'interconnectedness of everything' suggests that some students had begun to make powerful personal connections between the solo, the landscape and their inner selves. One participant eloquently described his awareness of a deep and personal connection he felt with nature as dawn broke over the mountains:

> It was 4ish and my sleep was over . . . that morning sitting perched on a steep rock, the lake beneath me, the mountains all around me, the sun hidden from me, the clouds parting ahead, the sky mirroring something inside me, I cried. Joy and sadness were chasing each other around my face, hiding behind teary eyes and around the curves of a smile. I do not know who won but I cried and laughed and cried again, until . . . I was alone again and did not wish to cry and had no reason for laughter and the mountains were just mountains and the sun had come down, out from its hiding and filled my reality with light, not necessarily a good light that everything is clear and all the shadows disappear, together with all the life and mystery that shadows are, for you see there's nothing holy about day and night, light and dark. It's just a fact of life and as the shadows left the land, they left me too and there was no more play of laugh and cry, it was all clear (MI8).

The same student expands on feeling closer and more connected to the natural world around them:

> What was new to me with this experience was a new environmental awareness. I was walking around 'my' lake trying to get to know it better, knowing its shape, its colour, its grasses and plants on its banks . . . This new attention to my surrounding culminated when I was sitting on my sleeping mat, legs high up on a mound of peat, closing my eyes, soaking up the sun, when suddenly the overall background noise started breaking up into a natural orchestra. I could hear the wind blowing through the high grass and making waves in the little lake, to my far right and back was a big bumblebee making circles in the air, from

> its flapping wings I could discern this black and white bird (I do not know its name but I could see its picture in my head) flying above the lake, the sheep were grazing on both slopes to my east and west, lambs and ewes were exchanging calls . . . This experience was very new to me and I loved it. It made me feel even more a part of the landscape, it made me realise that this kind of intimate knowledge (which was only just beginning) is truly necessary in order to be part of a place and know it (MI8).

It is a rare privilege to be able to share such eloquence of thought and word that gives insight into another's thinking and there can be no misunderstanding of the importance of the experience being remembered. Daniel (2005) suggests that natural environments evoke strong spiritual connections and that the least modified environments evoke the strongest spiritual connections. He identifies mountain environments, sunlight, flora, fauna and geomorphic features that all contribute to a site being perceived as inspirational. Indeed, the deliberate choice of a remote, unpopulated, lake-strewn, mountainous location for this study may well have been conducive to students' spiritual awareness.

What is particularly important about these thoughts is that they emerge without the prompting or direction of a facilitator. These reflections are not dependent upon a facilitator-led briefing session outlining spiritual awareness as an important goal of the solo. Nor are they dependent upon the input and guidance of a facilitator during the solo. Neither are they dependent upon a facilitator-led end-of-solo review session. On the contrary, they are the thoughts and experiences of a student that emerged as a consequence of them being given the space, time and opportunity to make personal meaning out of their own experiences. As such they are presented unequivocally as testament to the potential of the solo to elicit meaningful and deep spiritual awareness without the direct influence of a facilitator.

It would be wrong, however, for me to claim such powerful learning experiences for everyone. Indeed, no other student over the three years of data collection seemed to make such a deep spiritual connection to the landscape. However, Ellis-Smith may argue that a raised awareness of our connection to the flora and fauna that comprise local eco-systems and landscape is at the same time a subliminal representation of an enhanced spiritual awareness. Such thinking would fit easily into an older tradition of interacting with the environment as espoused by Wordsworth, Thoreau, Muir and Whitman that seems to have fallen out of favour in recent times. More commonly we now talk of environmental awareness, but as Cooper (2007, 2010a, 2010b) has noted, environmental awareness implies an acknowledgement of the inter-connectedness of big–small issues. In the United States, van Matre (1990) has been highly critical of outdoor education for jumping on the bandwagon of environmental education but failing to address its basic ecological understandings and lifestyle implications. More recently, in the United Kingdom, Nicol (2003) has advocated the need for outdoor education to adopt an ecological ontology. Building from this growing recognition of the connection between environmental awareness and individual responsibility hints at a re-conceptualisation of environmental learning as spiritual learning.

Data from this study suggest there were many examples of soloists becoming more aware of the environment in which they were living. Many students' diaries record

acute sensory observations of local fauna and flora: 'As I was walking by myself I noticed things that I might not if I was with another person. Such as a small lizard and some tiny flowers' (MJ8). Other students became more aware of the interplay between the elements and local wildlife: 'Very strange when the birds stop tweeting and there's no wind. Very still and very quiet' (MD9). Still other participants recognised the impact of technology to create a growing distance between themselves and nature; for example, one student acknowledged an addiction to their camera as a means of recording experiences:

> Funny enough when I reached there with the knowledge that I did not have a camera I paid more attention to details in topography, botanical features etc which I otherwise would have missed . . . frankly I have more vivid mental images of the sights and sounds there without the crutch of the camera! (FM9).

Making the leap between spiritual awareness and environmental learning may be too much for some and they could quite legitimately claim that observing nature more intimately is normal good practice for an outdoor education facilitator. I am not disputing that and I would actively promote an ecologically grounded approach to outdoor education pedagogy. What I am suggesting is that such a facilitator-led approach is not the only way to achieve meaningful enviro-spiritual learning. Indeed I would go so far as to suggest that it is precisely because such experiences happened without a facilitator that they made such a powerful impression upon the individual.

Taking more control

The possibility of new or different learning emerging as a direct consequence of the approach adopted in this study was particularly exciting. Highly facilitated programmes do not give much, if any room, for emergent learning to take place. Brown (2002) has called for greater awareness of the underlying power relations of traditional 'student-centred' programmes in which the facilitator acts as a 'gatekeeper' who legitimates acceptable knowledge. From a similar perspective, Krouwel (2004) acknowledges the value of serendipitous learning as being at one and the same time indeterminate, real and powerful depending on the participant's personal circumstances. Williams (2006) goes further in reporting on the potential for co-learning between students and facilitator that characterises open-ended, less prescriptive and more learner-centred approaches to outdoor education. Collectively these voices sound a clarion call for experiential approaches to be truer to the learner's experience as the basis of valid knowledge in whatever form it takes (Brown, 2002).

One example of new learning that emerged from this study is not widely acknowledged in the literature. This theme was noted in the data gathered from all three groups during and after the solo and it was interpreted as 'taking more control'. This idea seemed to reflect participants' desire to be more pro-active and selective in their personal decision-making about what they did and when they did it rather than being passive and reactive to other demands. This emergent theme was most evident in the confusion and disorientation felt by many students who struggled to know what they

should be doing at particular times of the day: 'Still really want to know the time' (FH8) and 'I'm still desperate for my watch' (FU7). For other students this frustration went beyond not knowing the time to the much deeper issue of understanding why they were feeling that way: 'Just want to know what time it is so I know what I should be doing. Do I really mean that? Need to think this through' (MA8). Not knowing what to do with themselves is highlighted by Maxted (2005) as a common and frustrating feeling experienced by many soloists. However, these students appear to be asking questions of themselves at a much deeper level concerned with why their daily lives are so determined by time and how they needed to take more control of their daily routine. Campbell (2010) identified students' worries over how they would occupy themselves constructively for so many hours as an important pre-solo concern. However, she also notes that some of these students surprised themselves in the way they coped with the challenge. No comment is made about whether students had watches with them although her negotiated approach to the solo suggests that students could take a watch or phone if they wanted.

Another student links her frustrations over knowing the time with a deeper insight into western society's adherence to time-related behaviour:

> I have also realised how much I dislike like being run by a clock. Thinking at night 'I have to be up in 7 hours, when I should be asleep', being more aware of that kind of thing is annoying. I hate that if you are shattered and want to lay in bed and then you realise that it's 12 noon or early afternoon, it's a bad thing. Rather than thinking, I needed that sleep and being glad, it's taken to a bad place. That annoys me . . . time a factor of negativity (FD9).

It is important to recognise in these statements both the content of what is being said and the facilitation approach that allowed it to be said and heard. Other than in the studies of Campbell (2010) and Maxted (2005), no mention is made of the importance or possibility of students learning something new or independent of the outcomes identified by the facilitator. Such an approach seems to be contrary to experiential learning theory and raises important questions about the approach of the facilitator and the value of the participant's learning. Quite clearly the findings of this study suggest that emergent learning does take place. In the present study this focused on students' desire to 'take more control' of their lives. In the discourse around solo activities, surely it is important for the facilitator to acknowledge and actively facilitate learning that is emergent as the embodiment of experiential learning in practice.

Conclusion

This research sought to consider the nature of solo learning experiences without the direct intervention of a facilitator before, during or after the solo activity. Three key moments of facilitator intervention were identified where the facilitator was encouraged to take a step back from directing the learning experience. These were the pre-solo briefing in which goals are established, the mid-solo safety visit in which

participants are encouraged to re-focus on the goals and the end-of-solo review in which learning outcomes are discussed and legitimated. The four most commonly cited goals of solo activities acted as the benchmark against which student learning could be categorised. These are positive change in relation to self-awareness, spiritual awareness, environmental awareness and social relationships. Additionally, the mode of facilitation adopted in this study allowed the space, time and opportunity for other types of learning to emerge. Identifying any such learning was an additional focus of this study.

Findings suggest that soloists can and do attach important meanings to their experiences without the need for a facilitator to guide or structure the learning process on their behalf. Meaningful learning was evident in relation to the key goals of self-awareness and social relationships. In relation to raised self-awareness, the findings suggest students placed a value on the opportunity to have 'me time'. This was interpreted as time for themselves without the distractions, demands and disturbances of normal living and took two complementary forms. The first, 'me time—freedom from responsibility', suggests the solo is given meaning because it allows participants to be free of their broader responsibilities to family and friends, at least for a short period of time. The second, 'me time—the future', suggests the solo is a unique and special moment in participants' lives in which they were able to reflect on who they are and who they want to be. Participants also reported an enhanced awareness of the importance of social relationships. Focusing primarily upon relationships with family, friends and home, they expressed their desire to make others more aware of how valuable their friendship and support was to them.

Enhanced spiritual awareness is a third key goal of solo activities. In this study the findings associated with participants having enhanced their spiritual awareness are more problematic. I have no doubt that students did make connections between their solo experiences and a greater spiritual awareness. Interpretation of students' comments reflects an underlying confusion over the nature of spirituality within outdoor education. The findings suggest that spirituality can be experienced in different ways and the traditional understanding of spirituality linked to religion may not apply to all, or even the majority of, outdoor practitioners. An alternative, environmentally connected spirituality is tentatively identified as a more humanistic, inclusive and relevant understanding of spiritual awareness outdoors. This reflects an understanding of spirituality grounded in students' observations and awareness of their connection to landscape and eco-systems.

A fourth and emergent finding was also identified. This was interpreted as 'taking more control' of one's personal life and decision-making. This finding is not commonly associated with the outcomes of solo activities and its emergence is intimately connected to the mode of facilitation adopted for this study. Without adopting the more open approach to facilitation taken in this study it is questionable whether such a finding would have been identified or acknowledged.

These findings raise questions about the mode of facilitation around solo activities. In particular they question the need for the solo to be structured around the key interventions of a facilitator at the briefing, mid-solo and reviewing stages. I am not

suggesting that traditional facilitator-led solo activities should become a thing of the past. What I am saying is that facilitators should be acutely aware of their facilitation approach and the impact they have upon participants' learning. This study highlights the potential of a more open mode of facilitation in which participants have more ownership of the process and outcomes of their own learning because facilitators were encouraged to take a step back.

Author biography

Andy Williams is Director of the Centre for Outdoor Education Research at University of Wales Trinity Saint David. His research is focused on outdoor pedagogy.

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