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'Go somewhere, do something'. How students responded to the opportunity to complete an unstructured, five-day, wilderness solo in the Cantabrian Mountains, Northern Spain

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This study explored the response of 28, second year undergraduate students to an innovative approach to a five-day solo. Periods of solitude are more likely to lead to positive outcomes when they are freely chosen than when they are programmed as part of a course. The extent to which a programmed solo can be 'freely chosen' by the individual is traditionally perceived as being constrained by logistic, safety and group needs. This study describes a solo, delivered as a required part of a core academic module, in which these perceived limitations were challenged. It describes an attempt to empower students to make their own choices about the nature of their solo experience and risk management. The study evaluates the extent to which individual students felt that they had freedom of choice; the choices they made and the outcomes of their solos. An intrinsic case study approach was used to explore the choices made by all students before, during and immediately after their solo as well as the more considered responses of 14 students eight months later. The data suggest that the pre-solo mindset was the most important factor in determining positive outcomes for participants and that offering students the opportunity to take responsibility for the structure of their own solo increased the likelihood that this would be achieved.

Introduction

I looked at my watch. It was 02:30. The noise of the wind and the heavy rain pounding on my tent had woken me. I could not go back to sleep.

> It would be a storm up there. How would it be, alone, high in the mountains, on the first night of a long solo? Would they be able to sleep? What would they be doing, thinking, feeling? Where are they? Do they have the skills they need? Should I still be up there?

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> What use would that be? I would feel better but would it help them? I feel powerless, unable to answer my questions. I feel vulnerable, worried about being judged by Health and Safety 'experts' in the UK. Have I made the right decisions? Years of experience tells me that the risks can easily be justified; I just have to let them take real responsibility for themselves but with that comes this uncertainty that gnaws away at my resolve. This is not a rehearsal. This feels like real learning—is that OK? Yes of course it is—it is essential (from the author's field notes, May 2008).

The use of extended solo with young adults in formal education has a strong tradition in the USA, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (Knapp & Smith, 2005a), but, although they are an important element in the thinking of Kurt Hahn (James, 1990) and Colin Mortlock (1987), extended solos are no longer an integral part of outdoor learning in the UK. Exploring the reasons for this is beyond the scope of this paper but recent research in Canada (Potter & O'Connell, 2005) identified a number of potential barriers to using solos with students such as lack of time, general safety of soloists, inclement weather, lack of solo sites and lack of appropriately experienced and motivated staff.

The value of periods of solitude has been widely recognized (Gibbens, 1991a; Hollenhorst, Frank, & Watson, 1994) and they are frequently cited as the most meaningful part of outdoor programmes (Bobilya et al., 2005a; Daniel, 2005). Periods of solitude can clarify one's place, purpose, and direction in life (Knapp & Smith, 2005a), they can provide opportunities for 'not doing' (Castaneda, 1974) and they can help participants to increase their self-reliance or, equally useful, make them aware of their need for other people (Gibbens, 1991b). Solo time is an opportunity for 'time-out' from the social pressures commonly felt in Western society: space to explore personal thoughts and feelings, to reflect on one's relationship with others and with the natural world.

To help to ensure positive outcomes from solo experiences a clear philosophical framework for the solo is very important (Smith, 2005) but for pragmatic reasons the structure is often determined by group needs at the expense of individual needs. For example, the management of safety is commonly dealt with by selecting solo sites fairly close to each other, by setting up a communication system between soloists and staff, by scheduling regular checks (Knapp & Smith, 2005b) and by imposing a set of rules on the soloists. These strategies, although effective in terms of managing safety, threaten the sanctity of the individual soloist and, in my opinion, can discourage students from taking personal responsibility for their experience and may limit individual student learning.

The context for this research was a five-day solo which formed part of a second year module on a BA (Hons) Outdoor Studies degree. The theoretical part of the module examines how the perception of mountain environments has developed through the major ages of Western Civilization. The solo forms the experiential part of the module during which the students are encouraged to explore their own perceptions of, and personal response to, mountain environments. They are asked to draw on their solo experience to produce a piece of creative work and a piece of reflective writing. Students choose this module in the knowledge that it includes a

solo but typically they have little, or no, previous experience of solo wild camping in the mountains. In the past we have responded to this lack of experience by asking them to make a static camp in a staff-selected location with regular staff checks and to abide by a set of negotiated rules. Personal observation during 2004–2006 reinforced my concerns about the strategies we were using to deliver the solo and led me to acknowledge that breaking the 'rules' was quite common. Students were making their own decisions and managing their own safety quite effectively but at times ignoring the agreed boundaries; and by the very act of doing this some may actually have been enhancing their self-reliance (Maxted, 2005) and solo experience.

Knapp (2005) identifies a number of areas that should be defined before a group of students undertake a solo and stresses the importance of the role of the facilitator. Bobilya et al. (2005a) examined the role of this facilitator in more detail and concluded that they not only have an important role to play in briefing and debriefing the solo but should also consider carefully planned visits during a solo. Although these visits necessarily restrict the sense of freedom experienced by individuals they can also help them to make sense of the experience and help them make positive use of the remaining time on solo. Visits are particularly useful to students who are finding the solo difficult (Bobilya et al., 2005).

How the solo is perceived, in advance, by the individual for whom it was created has a big impact on its outcome (McIntosh, 1989) but is sometimes overlooked (Cline, 2002) and is often not easy to discover. Assessing pre-solo fears and anxieties is made even harder because young people typically under-report them (Maxted, 2005). Every outdoor activity will elicit a range of responses from individual participants but there is evidence that for solo experiences the responses are of greater intensity and more polarized (Daniel, 2005). This is supported by my own observations of this module over the last three years; most students report a strongly positive or strongly negative response and few return ambivalent about their experience. There is a suggestion that regardless of the structure, mode of facilitation or nature of the solo experience, a small percentage of participants (13% according to Bobilya et al. (2005b) and 8% according to Greenway (1995)), experience difficulties and, as a result, in the short term at least, have a negative response to their solo.

Bochniak, Todd, and Young (2007) attempted to quantify the relationship between personality variables and 'wilderness solitude attainment' but their results were inconclusive because, as with studies by Bobilya (2005) and Daniel, Bobilya, and Kalisch (2006), they found that there were too many other variables involved. There appears to be some consensus that solos typically have positive outcomes for adults when they have free choice about when and where they spend their period of solitude, but Maxted (2005) suggests that they may not have the same positive outcomes for young people who undertake solo time as part of a structured course. Larson (1997, cited in Maxted, 2005, p. 128) argues that solitude for adolescents is a more lonely experience than solitude for adults and suggests that this is because adults develop an affinity for loneliness that is perhaps to do with advanced reasoning skills and a developing sense of self-identity. Although it would be patronizing to directly compare second year undergraduate students to adolescents it is clear that in

a group of 28 students there will be a diverse range of emotional needs, cognitive abilities and physical skills.

To increase the chance of positive outcomes, some commentators argue that students should be encouraged to identify specific personal goals (Maddux, 2002) and to structure their own experience (Krouwel, 2004). Greenway (1995, pp. 131–132) on the other hand, argues that goal setting and self-reflection are inappropriate, especially when the essence of the particular wilderness solo is to understand human/nature relationships. He suggests that the western world has a cultural obsession with needs and wants which results in a split or dualism between subjects and objects that is perhaps, 'the source of our pervasive sense of being disconnected' (from nature). Greenway believes that a psychological shift can take place during a wilderness solo. He describes this as a move towards a more non-dualistic mode of processing and the development of a non-goal orientated awareness, which he believes, enables more 'natural flows of information from nature'. It would follow that having an extended solo is important as it increases the probability that individuals will be able to cross this 'psychological wilderness boundary'.

For many outdoor and adventure educators, 'natural' or 'wild' areas are often presented as ideal learning-places that challenge participants physically, mentally, emotionally and socially (Miles, 1987). Wilderness areas are a natural choice for solos but given the increasing pressures on the more accessible wilderness areas it is becoming harder to justify their use. The majority of our students arrive on the course familiar with 'playing in' the environment but with no concept of 'playing for' (Miles, 1990) the environment, and staff therefore have an additional ethical responsibility both to explain the difference between the two and to ensure that their students leave no trace of their stay after their solo. The justification for the continued use of wild places for programmed solos hinges on the assumption that experiences such as these will help students to build a greater awareness of how humans should and can relate to the natural world and will help them to appreciate biological diversity, sustainability and the awe and wonder that comes from more focused and prolonged interactions with nature. A subsidiary aim of this study was to test this assumption.

Background to this study

The solo took place in May 2008, at the end of a two-week residential field course, in the Cordillera Cantabrica south of the Picos de Europa National Park. In addition to lectures and tutorials students were encouraged to read accounts of other people's solos and to spend some solo time in the UK to help them make informed decisions about how they wanted to spend their solo in Spain. The solo itself did not form part of the module assessment although students were encouraged to draw on their solo experiences to inform their academic work. It was possible for a student who had a negative solo experience to achieve a high module mark in the same way that it was possible for a student who had a really positive solo experience to fail the module. In this cohort all students passed the module at their first attempt.

Method

This study is essentially an intrinsic case study (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998) where I sought to gain a better understanding of:

- the extent to which the students felt that they had freedom to structure their own solo;
- why they made the choices they made;
- their solo experience and their lasting memories of it; and
- whether or not the solo had any impact on their relationship with the environment.

I have presented the data so that the story of this particular solo is meaningful, while at the same time trying to highlight some of the learning, which might be of wider interest.

Description of the 2008 solo opportunity

My aim for this solo was to offer students real choice about where they went, how long they stayed out, what they did, and what support they had.

All 28 students registered on the module completed a solo and participated in this study. All students were offered control over the structure and duration of their own solo. The actual structure was decided on the basis of discussion with individual students and with other staff members and followed five principles:

1. The duration of the experience and the notion of what constituted solitude was open to personal interpretation and preference. Individual students could decide:
   - how long they stayed out; and
   - whether to go on their own, to work as a group or to work as part of a community of individuals.
2. Students could choose their location and how they got to it, they could decide:
   - to be located in the woods or higher up in the mountains; and
   - to walk out from and or back to the base camp or get a lift to the nearest road head.
3. Students could decide to be static, mobile or a mixture of the two.
4. Students could control their level of support. They could choose:
   - to camp close to a member of staff;
   - to be visited on solo;
   - to have contact by mobile phone or to have no contact at all;
   - to have help to find a good solo site or be left to their own devices to find one; and
   - to leave an exact route card and contact us if they deviated from it, to define a rough route or to be nomadic. Nomads were totally independent and could be spontaneous. They had complete freedom about where they went and what they did.

5. Non-negotiable rules were kept to a minimum. Students were not allowed to light open fires, to take any non-prescribed drugs or alcohol or any specialist mountaineering equipment.

Students had individual tutorials before leaving the base camp in which their choices and personal goals were discussed and a strategy agreed for the sequence of actions that would be initiated, should they fail to return at the end of the five days. Although there was some negotiation during these tutorials, based on my knowledge of their strengths and weaknesses, I made strenuous efforts to allow them to make their own decisions. My intention was that students should feel supported and empowered to make their own choices and take responsibility for their own experience.

Sample selection

Data were collected from:

- field notes before and during the solo;
- questionnaires immediately after the solo ($n = 28$);
- student reflective writing assignments ($n = 28$); and
- from individual semi structured interviews eight months after the solo.

Fourteen students were selected for post-solo interviews on the basis of criterion sampling (Patton, 2002). Information on which to base this selection came from my own knowledge of their mountaineering skills, field notes immediately after the solo, questionnaires and their reflective writing assignments. The sample was an attempt to provide a cross-sectional representation of the students based on gender, age, outdoor experience, previous experiences of solitude, solo choices, academic ability and stated response to the solo. Of the 14 students interviewed, six were female and eight were male. They varied in age from 20–26 years and had a range of outdoor experience from expert (qualified outdoor professional) to novice (started participating in mountaineering activities during the last year). Students' past solo experiences ranged from no experience at all through to frequent experiences of extended periods of solitude. Their academic ability ranged from a third class average (from all second year modules) through to a first class average.

Data collection

Immediately on their return from the solo, the whole cohort of 28 students completed a questionnaire. In this they recorded the nature of their solo experience and were encouraged to make an initial analysis of their decision-making, their response to the solo and their relationship with the environment. One month after the solo all students submitted a piece of creative work and a piece of reflective writing about the solo.

Inductive thematic analysis was used to develop the questions for the student interviews. Themes emerged from repeatedly reading the records of student comments

made immediately after the solo and their written assignments. In order to enhance internal validity the data were scrutinized by an independent researcher and the resulting themes were compared with relevant literature and emerging theory. The semi-structured interviews were conducted at the University Campus in December 2008 and January 2009 and lasted from 25 to 40 minutes. Students were asked questions about, and encouraged to discuss, the following themes:

1. How they perceived the opportunity prior to the solo.
2. Their analysis of the choices they made about the structure of their solo both before and during the experience.
3. Their personal response to the period of solitude.

As the interviews progressed, probing with 'how' and 'why' questions determined the depth of feeling about particular topics. Students were also asked to comment on the relevance of the chosen themes.

Data analysis

The quantitative data from the questionnaires were analysed and descriptive statistics providing background information on the participants and the nature of their solo were produced. Qualitative data analysis began at the start of the interviews. This was a simultaneous process during which the emerging dimensions and patterns from the interview transcripts were constantly compared to the new data being analysed. Logical analysis (Patton, 2002) was used to create a grid where different dimensions were crossed in order to give a clearer descriptive analysis of the data.

Results and discussion

As part of the questionnaire, students were asked to describe the structure of their solo and why they made particular choices. Three students chose to camp in a community, two students worked in a pair and one had external support; and 22 students chose to be solo. Of the soloists, two chose to do day walks from their camp; 13 chose to remain static in one place; five did a solo journey; and the remaining four students chose to be 'nomadic'. The most frequently cited reason for going solo was simply the desire to be alone and try something new. Students wanted to be away from socially imposed constraints of normal life and were attracted by the challenge of this opportunity. For some there was 'no question that I would be solo' because 'to be by yourself is the only way that pure imagination can be accessed' but for others 'the decision just happened'.

The second, and for some the most important, factor in choosing to go solo was the collective and individual student expectation. The power of the extended solo has been widely reported and longitudinal studies by Greenway (1995) and Daniel et al. (2006) identify that, for a number of people, facilitated periods of solitude become significant life experiences. They suggest that this is because the solo is usually a

novel event, which is strongly emotional at the time and for most, remains a unique experience, helping participants gain a new perspective on their lives. The Picos expedition is a significant event for our graduates (Prince, 2005) and current students report that there is an 'urban myth' surrounding the BA solo. Completing the five-day solo experience is viewed amongst undergraduates as something akin to a 'rite of passage'. Stories are passed forward from one year to the next and most students have quite clear preconceptions about it long before they reach Spain.

> I knew about the solo right from when I started in Outdoor Studies, everyone talks about it . . . If you do BA you will do a five day solo . . . you have to go through hell to pass this module! (Student interview).

Although not all students anticipate having to 'go through hell' to pass the module most viewed it as a challenge. Students are encouraged to talk to previous year groups and to share their concerns with peers and tutors. However, in line with Maxted's (2005) findings, they typically avoided talking about their fears and anxieties prior to the solo, but were much more relaxed about describing them retrospectively. One student was unable to complete the solo as described in this paper and an alternative, externally supported task, was negotiated for her.

The third reason cited for choosing to go solo was that it was the default option. Some students, who, in hindsight would have preferred to go in a group, felt as though they could not approach anyone else to ask if they wanted to go as a pair. 'It was almost bad form to ask someone else if they want to go with you'. It is interesting to note that two of the three students who felt that they had no control of the experience had chosen to go in a community but then afterwards reported that they offered each other little support!

Finally, in the academic context, there was a strong feeling that the experience, and therefore the response, would in some way be diluted by interaction with other people. The higher achieving students, in particular, did not perceive a positive relationship between collaborative working and an increase in marks and so did not entertain the idea of working as a group.

Students were encouraged to identify specific personal goals. Some, but no means all, students set goals which illustrated that they understood the need to feel safe, warm and comfortable if they were to aspire to thinking about themselves and their relationship with the mountains. Others did not prioritize the academic objectives of the task and set themselves gruelling physical challenges such as being blindfolded, or not taking shoes, or living above ground in the trees for the whole time. Others, such as Terry, set their goals based on minimal physical challenge or risk in an attempt to find simplicity and stillness. When reflecting on this choice, six months later, Terry was shocked to realize that there was something powerful inside him telling him that it was 'a cop out' going for a such a low physical risk strategy. Intellectually he recognized that this was not true but he was taken unawares by how deeply ingrained the social pressure to perform physically was in him. Ian clearly articulated the pressures that most students felt at having to structure their own experience:

> It was excitement at the thought of being able to do something really cool like that . . . but there is also this nervous pressure because you know when you look back at it you don't want to feel like you didn't make your own decisions or that you didn't make the most of your opportunities or you settled for the easy option.

A number of students wrote goals that expressed their concerns about the physical and psychological demands of the task. Their need to be able to cope with the 'loneliness, solitude and boredom' when alone for 'such a long period of time'; and to find constructive occupation for 'all those hours'. There was a tacit acknowledgement that what was acceptable, as productive use of time alone at home, such as curling up on a sofa and reading a good book, should probably not be acceptable in a tent in the high mountains but also an unspoken belief that the experience would, in some way, be beneficial. One student argued articulately that goal setting went against the essence of the experience while others found solace in having something tangible to aim for and a clear philosophy and rationale.

Of the 14 students interviewed eight months after the solo all but one felt that the experience had been worthwhile and the clear majority remained enthused by it. Figure 1 shows a diagrammatic representation of the main factors that contributed to their positive memories of the solo. Of these the liberating sense of freedom, which came from feeling in control of decision-making, and a positive pre-solo mindset were most frequently cited as having been important.

The freedom to make choices

Several students identified the freedom to make choices as the key element of the experience. Some 80% of the cohort felt that they were empowered to make real choices about where they went and what they did, although most qualified this by accepting that there were some aspects out of their control such as the timing, the general area, and broad safety rules. One student, Charlie, identified that she needed advice but then 'felt a strange need to rebel against the advice given', while another student Iain recognized the impact of his choice to be a nomad; 'for me personally I knew I was asking a lot of you really to let me do the things I wanted to do. . . . I felt like I was putting you in an awkward position'. Four students felt they had no control at all. For example, Jane felt powerless in the situation and these feelings of 'giving away control', of being 'subordinate to my circumstances' released emotional baggage which, when compounded with the weather, sabotaged the experience for her. Four others felt in complete control and James summarized their interpretation of the brief by saying 'we had complete control, we were simply told we could go somewhere and do something!'

The four students who felt they had no control over the experience chose to go as a pair or in a group. Arguably these students were the ones who exercised the greatest freedom of choice because they chose to be different, to take a risk and to go against the accepted norms of what they perceived the module and the solo to be about. On the other hand the students who claimed to have exercised the greatest

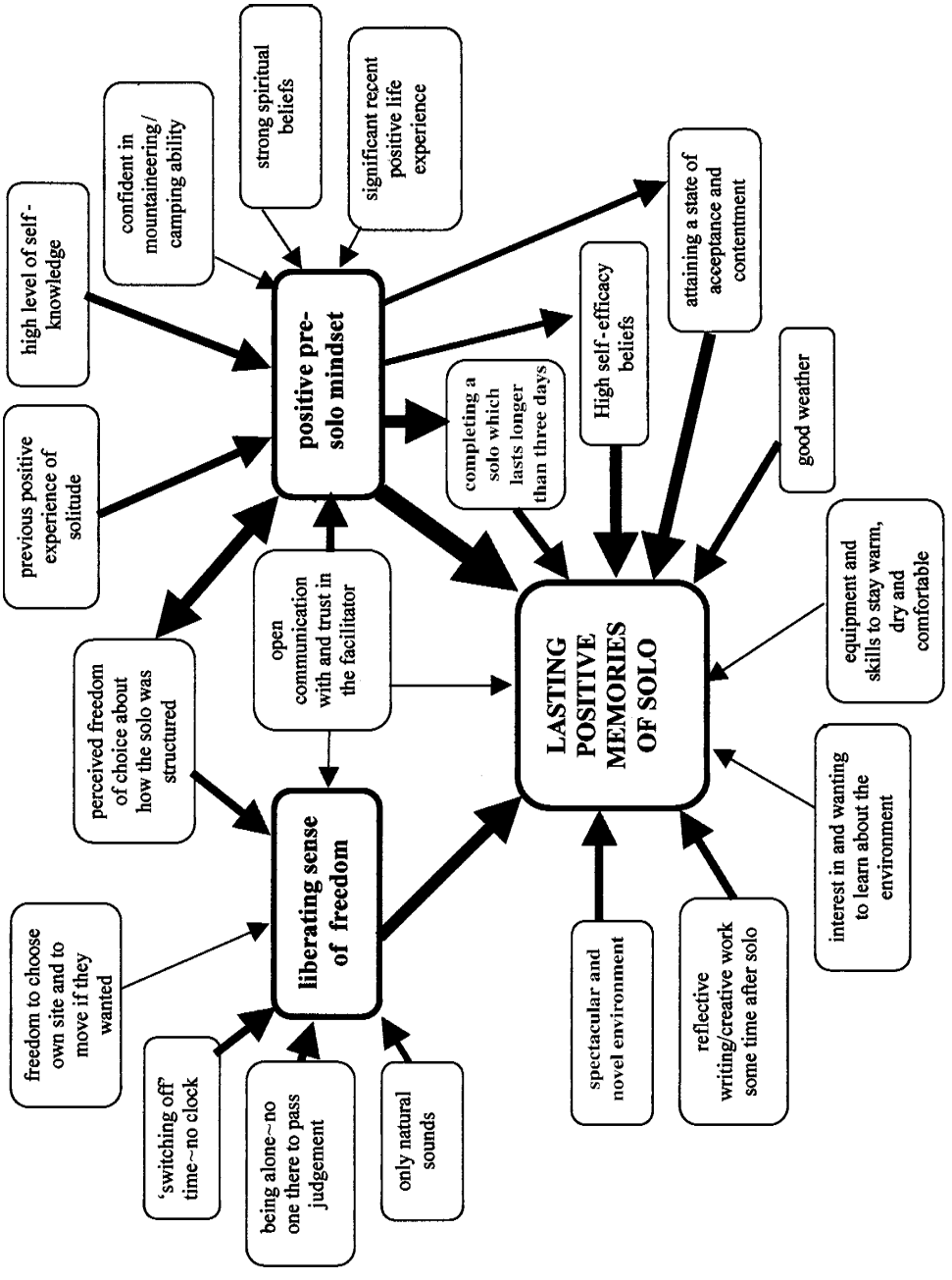

Figure 1. The main factors that contributed to students having lasting positive memories of their solo

freedom of choice, the nomads, could have actually been conforming by choosing something which they thought would meet with approval and therefore result in higher marks.

Positive pre-solo mindset

Students who felt that they had complete freedom of choice over their solo and also reported high magnitude self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1977) prior to the experience had positive experiences of solitude. Students in this group were most likely to view the opportunity as a chance to do something different to 'experience being alone', 'expand my mind', 'to understand nature' and most used words such as 'powerful', 'free', 'excited' and 'full of expectation' to describe their first night on solo.

Some students, who also felt that they had choices and reported high self-efficacy beliefs prior to the experience, found that they were unable to sustain their expectations and returned early. Two of these students had imposed physical restrictions on themselves and found that the additional psychological and physical pressure was too great. Students in this group used words such as 'adventure' and 'challenge' to describe what they wanted to achieve and conveyed their feelings on the first night using words such as 'nervous', 'excited at a new experience', 'keen to get on with it'. One student, Martin, who also felt confident beforehand completely underestimated what it would feel like to be alone.

> I was really scared. Being on my own and not having the opportunity to speak to someone for so long. I have been on my own in the city but on the hillside it was different. I was completely on my own. It was just unbearable pressure.

He returned after only a few hours and went out again the following day in a pair.

Another student, Charlie, who wanted to challenge herself physically and push her limits, said that she was quite confident about her choice of a solo journey but her body language and her need to seek reassurance suggested otherwise to the staff. Afterwards she confessed to feeling right on the edge physically and emotionally.

> It was quite high risk for me . . .. Looking back it wasn't that big but at the time it was huge, it was massive, and just being there and making all the decisions it was massive. I have learnt loads from it. It was so challenging. So close to the border of misadventure that is why I learnt so much from it. It was massively a confidence builder but it was very close to the edge it could easily have gone wrong.

Some students reported that before the solo they did not know how well they would cope but surprised themselves at how resilient they actually were. Several of these students reported how it got easier as the time went on and they became more at ease with their new environment. James, in particular, was very positive about his response:

> When I got there I felt really lonely, as if someone close to me had died. Sick. Bored. The thought of staying there for three more days was daunting which is why I felt sick. I couldn't cope with the scale of it at first. I felt imprisoned . . .. Once I got through the first couple of days I was OK. It made me realise that life goes too fast it was brilliant to sit on a hillside alone for four days and watch a world that doesn't move, experience a timeless existence.

Students who felt they had little choice felt compelled to stay in one place and frequently spoke of 'enduring the experience' and 'oppressive feelings', 'loneliness', 'resentment and hatred of the environment'. Two of these students felt the only purpose of being on solo was to pass the module. Three out of four of these students felt quite negative about the experience when they returned and despite knowing that they had been told that they should return if the solo was not working for them, in reality did not feel empowered to do so. Interestingly, and unlike the other groups of students, this group attributed the outcome of their experience primarily to external factors, for example the weather, the rules, or the lack of choice about timing or location. Despite these negative feelings immediately after the experience they all felt that something positive had come out of it and even Jane, who six months later still resented it, was able to stand back from it in her reflective writing and acknowledge that 'had I chosen a different mindset, I could have had a more positive experience'.

Lasting positive memories of solo

Most students reported that they had a positive experience and even Maggie who reported that she had experienced 'no connection with my solo areas, there was no magic there, it did not excite me' and Jane who 'endured the time', felt that, on reflection, there had been positive outcomes. Three students, all new to solos, stated that they had continued to make space for regular periods of solitude in their lives.

Many students identified a liberating sense of freedom as being novel and important:

> The feelings of no obligations, restrictions and boundaries that I experienced so dramatically on my expedition was one that I had never felt before. I was able to think about things in every day living that are normally pushed to one side . . . but a lot of the time I thought of nothing . . . A totally blank mind was incredible and amazing (Trish).

> At first I viewed the 10 m square area I had confined myself to as a restriction to my freedom which caused me to have negative feelings but after a few days I realised how confined people in the western world are by social pressures and that this is what freedom is (Lee).

It was found that this was also associated with a changing perspective on time.

> Becoming aware of how time restricts our freedom was a large revelation to me during this experience (Trish).

> Everything stopped, time was just switched off. I was making this piece of art but really, really slowly. It took me days but it didn't matter (Iain).

Kock (1994, p.107) refers to this as 'attentive time', a time controlled solely by the object itself and one's interest in it; an opportunity for free imaginative pretending. When we designed this module, this opportunity for 'free imaginative pretending' was one of the outcomes we dreamed that students would achieve.

The lasting benefits of this 'attentive time', when combined with the extended expedition and the facilitated discussions with staff and other students was evident

from the improvement in their level of creativity and critical thinking in the assignment for this module. Students produced artistic responses ranging from art installations in a local wood, and films and videos, through to detailed paintings and poems such as the one below:

> I went into the woods and wept
> sorrow bound my heart
> with silken threads
> of spiders webs
> it led me through
> (though with no haste)
> the fertile caverns of my mind
> Where firefly matchsticks
> Illuminate dark with dark
> Devouring places time and space
> Statically
> Falling up through nothings grasp,
> I glimpsed
> Restrained freely by itself
> A child
> Slip its bounds with thrilling ease
> And dance away among the trees (Sian Comerford, 2008).

The fact that many of the students were 'bowled over' by their ability to create a meaningful piece of artwork, poetry and reflective writing suggests that the opportunity for structured reflection sometime after helps individuals to make sense of a significant experience.

Relationship with the environment

The extended duration of the solo sought to move students away from a sampling mentality (Wattchow, 2004) and to help them to pass over the psychological wilderness barrier identified by Greenway (1995) and establish a meaningful relationship with their environment. Immediately after the experience and contrary to expectations the majority of students reported a negative or ambivalent relationship with the environment. Students who had been static in the woods, with the exception of the two students who were very accustomed to spending reflective time with nature, were most likely to feel this way and those who were journeying in the mountains were least likely. The weather had a significant impact for all the students; many felt confined to their tents in the bad weather and found it difficult to have any external focus. For some the impact of the weather was extreme: 'Weather was a dense rain cloud that obscured everything around me . . . my response to the rain was to stay inside . . . and the despair that followed was remarkable and devastatingly powerful', while for others it was an inconvenience that had to be worked at.

Seven of the students who did a static solo talked of a more intimate attachment to their environment: 'Leaving my 20 m box (was the hardest part)—you get very attached' and some feelings of possession and ownership.

> It felt almost like walking around the garden of a house surveying the land that I had won. Later I noticed a person on the ridge above and found myself hoping that they would not come close enough to communicate. It seemed as if I had a feeling of ownership over the environment that I was in.

Several students described how they suddenly realized that they had personified various aspects of the environment, a mountain, a flower or a waterfall, and felt that they were leaving 'friends' behind.

Six months after the experience, 12 out of the 14 students interviewed felt that this experience had caused them to re-evaluate their place in the world and their relationship with the environment. Terry articulated this very clearly:

> Something for me that had a lasting effect was it never felt like I was walking away from anything. Really, I didn't feel alone at all I actually felt nurtured by where I was. I felt like I was in company with the place that I was in. I felt looked after, all those good things, I felt belonging with the place that I was and that is so powerful because if you can feel that, on your own, then wherever you are you feel comfortable with your place in the world. it sort of dissolves the idea of individuality. I guess I felt a part of a whole and that has stayed with me. I don't feel that same idea of loneliness. I don't feel that. It challenged my idea of what it is to be an individual and what it is to be a part of the world. As a result I feel more secure.

Conclusions

Pre-solo expectations had a strong impact on how individuals perceived the solo opportunity described above and on how they chose to interpret the pre-solo briefing. Although these expectations are likely to be more clearly formed when students, year after year, take part in a solo as part of an undergraduate degree course they are probably also significant in other contexts, such as on Outward Bound Solos, but this area does not appear to have received much attention in the literature.

The students responded positively to the trust which was placed in them to manage their own physical and emotional safety and many were openly grateful for this opportunity. Those who got into difficulties either phoned for support or returned to camp. Two out of the 28 students really struggled and described a negative response to the solo. Although this was lower than the percentage which could have been expected (Bobilya et al. 2005b; Greenway, 1995) it still felt too high and was a clear indication that some students did not feel empowered to make their own choices. As a facilitator it felt, more than usual, like walking across a tight rope balancing my responsibilities as an outdoor educator with my responsibility to manage risks according to a set of well established rules. The outcomes for individual students could not be attributed solely to the way in which the solo was set up but I felt that my approach was justified by the strongly positive feedback from the majority.

Most students perceived that they were being offered a liberating degree of freedom of choice and managed to engage with this and really make the experience their own. For a few this feeling of freedom arrived early on while others only felt released from the constraints of the module towards the end of the experience. These students talked of reaching a state of acceptance and contentment and of seeing themselves and the environment through different eyes. Perhaps this was the state that Greenway (1995) was describing when he talked of a 'psychological wilderness shift'. It was certainly difficult to attain and only two students talked about sustaining this state through the whole solo.

Positive outcomes were personal and varied and not necessarily linked to the module outcomes. Supported goal setting was useful for some students but not for others. However all the students agreed that they had found the reflective writing and creative response helpful in pinpointing their learning. This suggests that structured reflective writing some time after the event helps young adults to make sense of significant outdoor experiences such as this.

A key factor in determining the positive outcome of the solo was a positive pre-solo mindset. Allowing students the freedom to structure the nature of their own solo helped some, but not all, individuals attain this positive mindset. Students who struggled to develop a positive pre-solo mindset were unlikely to articulate this before they left on solo and although some asked for help during solo others simply endured the task. Perceived low competence in camping skills (fear that they could not stay warm and dry); low self-esteem (inability to seek support or resist perceived peer group pressure); insufficient trust in the facilitator (recently joined the cohort, little contact); fear of wild animals and unresolved personal issues were all found to be important factors which predisposed participants to having a negative pre-solo mindset. Students who struggled with just one of these factors managed to maintain a positive mindset during their solo while students who struggled with three or more of these factors reported a mainly negative solo experience.

Feedback immediately after the experience suggests that these solos had little or no impact on how individuals relate to the environment. However interviews conducted 6 months later gave a completely different picture when all but one of the students interviewed felt that the experience had had a significant impact on how they relate to the mountains and other wild places. It would be useful to undertake a longitudinal study to try to determine the long-term impact of an extended solo, compared to other significant outdoor experiences, on an individual's relationship with the environment.

Author biography

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