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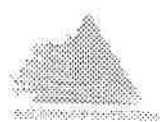
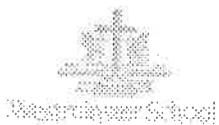
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## So what? A different way to conduct Outdoor Education research to build alternate knowledge(s)

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### Abstract

This paper focuses on one of the central concepts of this conference; Outdoor Education knowledge. The paper explores how the pre-occupation with 'outcome based' studies, typified by pre- and post-treatment questionnaires has produced particular, and possibly limited, conceptions of what constitutes valid/valued knowledge in outdoor education. The value of this 'knowledge' and how, or whether, it advances our knowledge base and our practice is discussed prior to positing an alternate way to approach research in our field. Drawing on the methodological position adopted in my doctoral thesis, which examined social relations in facilitation sessions, I argue that research conducted from a different epistemological foundation to that which has been predominant, provides a new lens through which to re-examine some of the commonly held assumptions which presently guide our field. The paper presents some findings that were made visible through the use of a 'Talk-in-interaction' approach to analysis which is drawn from the academic traditions of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis. This paper seeks to promote dialogue that will both encourage practitioners/researchers to explore new avenues of research and to critically reflect on the status of the knowledge that forms the basis of practice.

The paper urges educators and researchers to reflect on their choices in producing, consuming and perpetuating outdoor education 'knowledge' as how this knowledge is applied has consequences for our practice and ultimately our students.

### Introduction

In this paper I argue that the predominance of outcome-based research in outdoor education restricts the construction of 'knowledge' in outdoor education to phenomena and subject matter that can be 'captured' through measurement. The knowledge derived from studies with a focus on outcomes rather than process may not be perceived as being of relevance to practitioners. Many of the studies conducted on outcomes in outdoor education are problematic, not only from a methodological perspective but also from their practical application for educators. It is not my intention to dismiss a particular investigative paradigm or methodological position, rather I maintain that there are alternate ways to study outdoor education practices and processes that open up new ways of understanding what we know about our field. This is not an either-or nor qualitative vs. quantitative debate, both of which are flawed and fruitless arguments. What I wish to show is that different ways of conducting research provide different lenses through which to view the world and in doing so create a rich tapestry which is capable of capturing details that might not otherwise be observable.

The paper opens with an overview of research in adventure education that reveals some of the difficulties faced by researchers who have used research methodologies which have sought to quantify and measure outcomes of outdoor education programs. I follow this by a brief overview of the possibilities of using a sociological approach, based on the analysis of social interaction through the use of transcripts of audio tapes, which enables researchers to examine knowledge and power relations in facilitation sessions. The presentation of an 'alternate' approach is used to illustrate how we can expand the knowledge base in the field and make research findings relevant to current practice.

## A view of research in adventure education

Adventure education professionals may well agree with comments by Gass (1993) that like adventure therapy, the field lacks a strong research base (see Ewert, 1989; Richards, 1997; Warner, 1990). Richards (1997) claims that much of the research and evaluation in outdoor education has been of dubious value. Warner (1990) also maintains that too much time and effort has been devoted to poorly controlled outcome studies on psychological variables. Early research in the field was limited to and typified by 'one-time' outcome studies (Bocarro & Richards, 1998) conducted using pre- and post-treatment questionnaires in order to record changes in designated personality traits and attitudes, traits that are themselves the source of ongoing debate. Ibbott (1997) states that research in adventure education has tended to concentrate on the dependent variable that could commonly be referred to as 'personal development outcomes'; self-esteem, self-concept, self-efficacy, self-worth and self-confidence. Ibbott (1997) also notes that not only are these constructs conceptually difficult to define, but the measurement instruments and the effects of adventure programs do not necessarily translate readily into measurable differences.

Research on Outward Bound programs, for example, is weak with most studies focusing on outcome issues such as changes in self-concept and self-esteem, to the virtual exclusion of programmatic issues such as nature of instruction and the duration of the course (Bocarro & Richards, 1998 p. 102).

The rationale behind these outcome-based studies was to determine if outdoor education 'worked' (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Richards, 1997) and whether the program had an effect on the participants. The two main methodologies in the outcome-based approach were: a) interviewing the participants at the end of the experience to determine what they thought of the program and had gained from it; and b) giving participants some form of questionnaire at the start of the program and again at the end (a pre-post test design) and comparing the results (Richards, 1997). This research has received criticism for its "over reliance on self-selected samples and measures using a self-report format" (Ewert, 1989, p. 17), resulting in claims that such studies are often methodologically flawed (Miles, 1995). While the outcome-based approach to research may have been of some use in supporting educators' claims about the benefits of adventure education programs and provided external funding agencies with a justification for continuing their support, it did little to improve practice or the understanding of the experiences of program participants (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). Or as Ewert (1987, p. 5) states "All too often research in experiential education becomes an exercise in data generation rather than the production of meaningful findings".

The predominance of outcome-based research coupled with the lengthy and protracted debate in adventure education literature concerning appropriate methodological approaches to capturing the 'uniqueness' of experiential learning (Ewert, 1987; Kolb, 1991; Richards, 1997; Rowley, 1987), has meant that little research has been conducted concentrating on how adventure education programs are conducted. It is possible that this relative lack of research on 'process' reflects the prevailing dominance of researchers and graduate students from psychology departments who bring with them a set of research methods determined by the epistemological perspective in which they operate. This is not to cast doubt on the value of psychological approaches but to indicate that this approach can be complemented by the differing perspectives offered by sociology, linguistics or cultural studies researchers.

Researchers (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000; Richards, 1997) note that while process-oriented studies have not been as prevalent as outcome-based approaches, there is a growing recognition that these studies offer important insights not afforded by outcome-based approaches. There is "the increasing recognition that better outcomes will come from better processes and that therefore

understanding processes is the primary route to gaining better outcomes" (Richards, 1997, p. 245).

The increasing acceptance of process-oriented studies has been the result of a debate within experiential and adventure education circles which centres on the argument that research that is outcome-based and seeks to treat the program or the individual in neatly packaged discrete portions is "philosophically out of tune with experiential theory and practice" (Warner, 1990 p. 310). In a similar vein Allison and Pomeroy (2000) advocate for a shift in the epistemological basis of existing research and the embracing of a new set of research questions. Like Warner (1990) they argue that an "incongruent epistemology is often employed in research in this field" (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000 p. 97). They maintain that the experiential approach to learning is based on a constructivist epistemological vision that is not reflected in the outcome-focused objectivist epistemology on which most research in the field is based. Allison and Pomeroy (2000) argue that in the field of experiential and adventure education there is the need to move away from proving that these programs work to develop an understanding of the processes that are involved through the use of ethnography, case studies, phenomenology and biographies. Bocarro and Richards (1998) also assert that there is the continual need to develop new research techniques and measures in order to better understand and deal with the uniqueness of adventure-based experiential learning programs. "This may require a paradigm shift away from what has traditionally been considered the 'correct' way to conduct research" (Bocarro & Richards, 1998 p. 107). Kolb (1991) asserts that as an educational endeavour that is devoted to exploring alternatives to 'conventional' approaches to education it is odd that as a discipline it relies so "heavily upon conventional methods of inquiry when evaluating its work" (p. 40). Miles and Priest (1990) assert that

Practitioners are only beginning to explore the theoretical underpinnings of their work. They are only beginning to ask why they do things in a certain way, what the outcomes of their approaches are, what alternatives to their approaches might be. They have little idea which parts of the processes they use result in which effects. ... Questioning and probing and theorizing about adventure education may well confirm practitioners' intuitive beliefs about what they do, while suggesting strengths and weaknesses in their approaches, and pointing in fruitful new directions (p. 2).

In providing this review of approaches to research in adventure education and the various paradigmatic positions adopted I do not want to construct or re-enact the unproductive debate surrounding qualitative versus quantitative research methods. The intention has been to provide a background to the type of research that has been traditionally conducted in adventure education and to foreshadow the changing nature of research in the area and acknowledge that there is a call for, and a valued place, for process-oriented studies in this field.

As Warner (1984) states,

It is paradoxical that an educational movement which places so much emphasis on learning as a process focuses its research efforts on documenting products. It is both of practical and theoretical interest to begin to explore which components of the programs produce particularly valuable learning experiences (p. 41).

It was with these concerns in mind and an interest in "what it is that we are doing when we facilitate experiences through verbal discussions" that I sought an alternative approach to investigating the 'process' of facilitation. What became apparent from my review of literature was that while there were many articles and books on how to plan and conduct activities, and considerable research on outcomes (see Cason & Gillis, 1994; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997), there appeared to be no published studies investigating the process of facilitation as it is enacted or on patterns of power and knowledge in verbal facilitation sessions.

## Ethnomethodology- what is it and what does it offer?

### Ethnomethodology (EM)

Ethnomethodological studies focus on the methods that participants use to produce and make sense of their social world through interaction. The term ethnomethodology was coined by Garfinkel (1967) and refers to the study of:

the body of common-sense knowledge and the range of procedures and considerations by means of which the ordinary members of society make sense of, find their way about in, and act on the circumstances in which they find themselves (Heritage, 1984 p. 4).

What marks ethnomethodological studies as distinct from conventional sociological approaches to phenomena is its insistence on the examination of the common-sense and routine knowledge(s) employed by social actors during the course of their ongoing interaction in social activities. In EM the term common-sense is used not to support nor advocate particular localised beliefs that are relevant to one social group but not to another. Rather the term indicates that any course of action depends on what people take for granted as being obvious and apparently known to all participants without need for further explanation (Cuff, Sharrock, & Francis, 1998). This common-sense knowledge refers to the knowledge that participants have as a result of operating in an orderly and accountable 'everyday' world.

Ethnomethodology addresses the problem of order with a phenomenological sensibility (Maynard & Clayman, 1991) and in so doing explains 'social facts' as accomplishments of participants' interpretive work by which everyday life is made accountable (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). In contrast to treating sociological inquiries' prime objective to be 'discovering' the objective reality of social facts, Garfinkel viewed the objective reality of social facts as an ongoing accomplishment of daily life constructed from and consisting in members' understandings and actions. Social settings are not 'out there' independent of the actions of participants, but are rather the ongoing accomplishment of the interactional work in which participants in a social setting are engaged (Cuff, Sharrock, & Francis, 1990).

For Garfinkel the central question for ethnomethodologically motivated research was "how do social actors come to know, and know in common, what they are doing and the circumstances in which they are doing it?" (Heritage, 1984 p. 76).

Ethnomethodological analysis focuses on the interactionally unfolding features of social settings, treating talk and interaction as topics for analysis rather than as mere communications about more sociologically important underlying phenomena (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994 p. 265).

In order to determine the stable organisation of social activities, an ethnomethodological approach requires the analyst to give careful consideration to the participants' understandings of their empirical circumstances (Heritage, 1984). The approach to analysis based on the adoption of the participants' orientation to the interaction has been labelled the situated perspective (Heap, 1990). This distinctive methodological position, of explicating the participants' orientation, is based on EM's intertwining of phenomenology, interpretive sociology and ordinary language philosophy (Heap, 1990).

### The situated perspective

Analysis from an EM perspective seeks to answer the question, "what does this action mean to the participant?" Analysis must be based on the participant's observable orientation to ongoing interaction, an orientation that is not 'interior' but is audible and visible to all, rather than "what does this mean to me the analyst, as my understanding of the event?" (Heap, 1990; 1991).

Therefore an ethnomethodologist's purpose is not to attempt to interpret the intentions or motivations of the participants, but to look for what participants are visibly orienting to. Using talk as a resource (discussed in more detail below), ethnomethodological analysis focuses on how the participants in facilitation sessions use talk-in-interaction to accomplish what is a recognisable social order.

From the situated perspective, examination of the participant's orientation to an event means working "with the visible (and audible) structures of talk and action: what the actors do and say as speakers and what the actors who are listening do and say in response" (Danby, 1998 p. 60). This ongoing interpretative work by participants is inextricably linked to the reflexive nature of interaction whereby actions reflexively and accountably determine and redetermine the features of the social setting in which they occur (Heritage, 1984). In other words, regardless of what one person may or may not do in response to an initiation by another person, the scene has been reconstituted or transformed. For example, the response or lack of response to a greeting may be treated by the recipient as routine or problematic, but in either case the issuing of the greeting has reconstituted the setting. It is via the reflexive properties of actions that the participants find themselves in a world whose characteristics they are both engaged in producing and reproducing (Heritage, 1984).

A central point proposed by Garfinkel was that there was no value in making a distinction between 'actions/events' on the one hand and 'talk about actions/events' on the other, for talking is action (Cuff et al., 1990). Understanding language is therefore not a matter of understanding sentences but of understanding utterances, as actions, which are interpreted in relation to their contexts (Heritage, 1984). The focus of ethnomethodological analysis is on how people use language in the ongoing process of social interaction, and what they do with words rather than a concern with what words they use (Baker, 1997). The emphasis on talk-in-interaction (rather than talk and interaction) has developed into what has perhaps become the most influential form of ethnomethodological study, conversation analysis, to which attention will now be directed (Heritage, 1984; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994; Maynard & Clayman, 1991).

### Conversation analysis

Conversation analysis (CA) is one of a variety of distinctive sub-fields of the ethnomethodological program. The term 'conversation analysis' is credited to Sacks who sought to use conversation, as an interactional activity, to examine the local and methodical construction of accountable and analysable social action (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Sacks regarded conversation as a practically organised social activity where participants ongoingly engage in sense making procedures that are analysable. Given that ethnomethodological analysis is grounded in empirical investigations rather than the application of a theory 'from above', the detailed examination of conversational interaction provides a rich source of data that resists simplification. Based on transcriptions of audio (and more recently video) recordings, CA avoids idealisations of interaction by focusing on the local, embodied, and accountable organisation of social interaction evidenced in talk (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994). Analysis focuses on the competencies that are employed in the production and recognition of actions by participants.

Focussing on the competencies that underlie ordinary social activities, conversation analysis attempts to describe and explicate the collaborative practices speakers use and rely upon when they engage in intelligible interaction (Holstein & Gubrium, 1994 p. 265).

Heritage (1984) states that conversation analysis is based on three fundamental premises:

- 1). Interaction is structurally organised to exhibit patterns of stable, identifiable structural features that stand independently of the psychological or other characteristics of particular speakers.
- "There is a strong bias against a priori speculation about the orientations and motives of speakers

and in favour of detailed examination of conversationalists' actual actions" (Heritage, 1984 p. 243). Knowledge of this structural organisation is a competence which speakers bring to interaction and this knowledge influences their conduct and their interpretation of the conduct of others. Interaction can be analysed to identify the patterns to which participants orient.

2). Contributions to interaction are contextually oriented.

From a CA perspective a speaker's action is doubly contextual, it is both context-shaped and context-renewing.

A speaker's action is *context-shaped* in that its contribution to an on-going sequence of actions cannot adequately be understood except by reference to the context - including, especially, the immediately preceding configuration of actions - in which it participates. The *context-renewing* character of conversational actions is directly related to the fact that they are context shaped. Since every 'current' action will itself form the immediate context for some 'next' action in a sequence, it will inevitably contribute to the framework in terms of which the next action will be understood (Heritage, 1984 p. 242).

3). No detail in interaction can be dismissed, *a priori*, as disorderly, accidental or irrelevant. Heritage (1984) argues that this premise is based on ethnomethodology's strong preference and grounding in empirical investigations of social interaction. This "general retreat from premature theory construction" (p. 242) is reflected in the ethnomethodological interest in the details of the mundane organisation of everyday life. The detailed and careful analysis of social interaction avoids the idealisations of earlier, more abstract sociological accounts of interaction (Heritage, 1984).

Significance of an ethnomethodologically inspired study

As a paradigm that advocates the primacy of the learner's experience as the basis for valid knowledge an examination of how participants interact to build and sustain social relations is of paramount importance to adventure education theory and practice. An examination of leader-student interaction in facilitation sessions is necessary if outdoor educators are to understand how students are enabled and constrained in 'learning from their experiences'.

By analysing how participants collaboratively built, sustained and oriented to features of a setting, I was able to explicate the social order that was talked into being in verbal facilitation sessions and explain how power and knowledge were produced. The issues of power and knowledge are not peripheral issues for adventure educators. They are central to adventure education's conceptualisation of learning that is based on the premise that the learner's experience, and their reflection on that experience, is the basis of valid knowledge.

The effectiveness of experiential learning is derived from the maxim that nothing is more relevant to us than ourselves. One's own reactions to, observations about, and understanding of something are more important than someone else's opinion about it (University Associates, 1990 p. 2).

Using an EM/CA approach I was able to detail the interactional procedures that participants used as they 'did' what they understand to be facilitation. In this way I was able to "question the taken-for-grantedness, the essentialisms, and the naturalisations that are deeply embedded in educational theories and practices" (Baker, 1997, p.50).

A detailed study of the way that power is exercised and knowledge is constructed in facilitation sessions may assist adventure educators to gain an understanding of their role in potentially 'opening up' or 'closing down' options for student contributions in these sessions. The data gathered for EM/CA analysis is not idealised or presented as an exemplar of what talk in these

sessions should or could be like. Rather it is a record of how one practitioner conducted sessions with students. It does not postulate about what should or should not occur. It examines what did occur.

In adopting this methodological approach it is possible to make visible concerns that have been voiced by some researchers but have not been articulated from an empirical perspective. Boud (1997) argues that the problem of leader power is "compounded by the fact that many practitioners are simply not conscious of what they are doing and would be quite offended if it were suggested to them that they were even exercising power over students" (p. 5). While Boud acknowledged that the influence of power and knowledge can never be avoided, he was unable to demonstrate how they operated in particular settings. Likewise Bell (1993) provided a thoughtful and theoretically important critical analysis of how experience was constituted in adventure education when she questioned whose memories were privileged in the facilitation of experience and how as a practitioner she may have been complicit in this practice. The detailed examination of talk from facilitation sessions provided a window to view a social order that to date has been neglected in adventure education research. As Silverman and Gubrium (1994) note, "the work of everyday life needs less a priori analytic elaboration than it requires fine-grained documentation and understanding" (p.194).

The types of findings made available from an EM/CA study.

In several recent publications (Brown 2002a, 2002b) I have argued that the leader's ability to determine the topic for discussion, allocate the student turns at talk and to evaluate student contributions are evidence of asymmetric distributions of power and knowledge. In particular I have argued that in the verbal facilitation sessions analysed, the use of the three part initiation-response-evaluation (I-R-E) format (see Mehan 1979) demonstrates how the leader engages in direct instruction. Furthermore, the common practice of paraphrasing student responses allows the leader to articulate a 'preferred' version of events, in this case the student's account of his experiences, in such a way as to favour the construction of officially sanctioned knowledge for which all participants are held accountable. By making 'visible' the unseen and unintended consequences of leader-student interactions we have cause to reflect on our practice and develop alternate strategies that may better serve the needs and authentic learning of our students.

By using an ethnomethodological approach and the tools of conversational analysis I was able to detail how social order was collaboratively built and sustained in these settings. As a consequence outdoor educators may have cause to reflect on, and generate ideas on, how to do things differently (Heap, 1990). By making the consequences of the leaders' actions more transparent it is hoped that practitioners will critically reflect on their practice with a view to exploring other avenues for facilitating learning. An understanding of "what is occurring here" is a useful precursor to asking "what should be occurring?" An examination of the consequences of current practices, many of which may be unintended, may raise questions in regard to the current theorisation of facilitators' work and practice.

## Conclusion

My aim has been to highlight that there are alternate ways of conducted research in adventure education, ways that enable new insights to be gained that expand our knowledge base. In this particular study this knowledge relates to the process of facilitation. There is no 'right' way to conduct outdoor education research, (although there are undoubtedly examples of poor practice within a particular methodological approach), but there are different ways of examining the phenomena under investigation. What I have tried to show is that there are alternate approaches, as exemplified by ethnomethodology, that provide a news lens through which to examine practice. The findings of such research may add to, or create new knowledge which will in turn

inform future practice. Based in empirical data and rigorous analysis EM/CA provides the possibility of providing feedback to educators that is of value to practice. The use of an alternate method of investigation may in part answer the criticism leveled at the field of educational research.

For years educational evaluation and research has been perceived as number crunching. Indeed, the power of statistical analysis has in many cases led to a tyranny of method. The crunch of numbers has unfortunately produced a crunch in thinking about evaluation and its role as a feedback mechanism for practitioners (Kolb, 1991, p. 44).

I would encourage existing researchers and those embarking on a research career to investigate alternate approaches to the 'traditional' pre and post-test method of investigation that focuses on the outcomes of outdoor education programs. The findings of research informed from feminist, post-colonial, post-structuralist theories for example, can create new knowledge(s) that will open up further avenues for reflection and research in the hope of improving the quality of the learning experiences for students on our programs.

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This paper is based on his doctoral thesis which was completed at the School of Education, The University of Queensland.