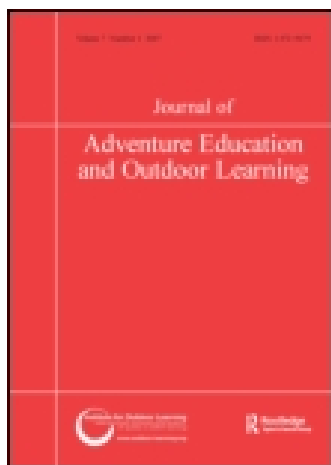




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Reflecting on the experience: musings from the Antipodes

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Reflecting on the experience: musings from the Antipodes

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Facilitating the reflection upon outdoor and adventure experiences is a common practice for many leaders and instructors. This article draws upon visual semiotics to provide reflections upon three images from books that originate from within the dominant North American paradigm. These musings are from one Antipodean's perspective, who may see the world differently from their position 'down under' and as a result of her own subjective space. These musings lead to further questions being raised as to how reflection and facilitation may differ if other factors, such as gender, culture, and learning styles, were considered by researchers and practitioners.

Introduction

This article presents insights gleaned during my PhD that began as an exploration of the facilitation of learning in corporate experiential learning programs. Through the PhD journey the research evolved into a heuristic research process that included an autoethnography exploring my own learning preferences (Dickson, 2003). The motivation for my study was my dissatisfaction with what I had seen, read and experienced in the facilitation of experiential learning and in particular the 'debriefing' of activities. The model of: 'brief, activity and debrief' (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988) fell flat with me. We would sit in a circle and be expected to discuss what had happened. This did not work; I did not feel like I could fully participate at the time and place as initiated by the facilitator. As I observed others in the group, I surmised that there may be others who may have felt the same. The reasons for my discomfort could be due to a range of factors such as gender and culture, education and socialisation as well as personality and learning style.

Experiential learning and facilitation of, and reflection upon, those experiences, has been broadly examined, published, researched and discussed in many places and at many conferences. An 'orthodoxy' seems to exist as to the right or best way to facilitate

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experiences. The dominant voices in the writing, talking and presenting has been that of males and predominantly white North American males (e.g. Dewey, 1938/1976; James, 1980; Knapp, 1993; Priest & Gass, 1997; Priest, Gass, & Gillis, 2000) with other notable writers being from the United Kingdom (e.g. Brookfield, 1995; Heron, 1999). Another shared characteristic is that they are predominantly well educated. Not that this is a problem for readers who are white, North American, well educated males, but I wonder about those readers who aren't white, who do not originate from a North American culture, those with lesser education (or no education) and who are not males.

In reflecting upon over ten years of letters and stories on the original edition of *In a different voice*, Carol Gilligan wrote that

by restricting their voices, many women are wittingly or unwittingly perpetuating a male-voiced civilization and an order of living that is founded on disconnection from women (Gilligan, 1993, p. xi).

Further, Bell suggests that

the subject, or author, of Western definitions of rationality was always those with access to the texts and their transmission: masculine, Caucasian, well-educated and heterosexual (Bell, 1993, p. 21).

In the context of experiential learning, and the facilitation and reflection upon those experiences, the same may be said, not just of women, but of any 'others' outside the dominant paradigm, i.e. the majority of the world's population. The experience of this majority is often subordinated to the elite minority. Do the women and men outside of the dominant paradigm have the same or similar experiences of learning, of facilitation, and of processing of experiences, as the dominant voices?

Questioning the position or presupposition of the dominant voice, if not the dominant paradigm, and its universal application to all people may reflect the perspective of critical theorists. Giroux suggests that critical theorists 'rejected all forms of rationality that subordinated human consciousness and action to the imperatives of universal laws' (Giroux, 1983, p. 8) and thus may highlight the mechanisms of 'ideological control that permeate(s) the consciousness and practices of advanced capitalist societ(ies)' (Giroux, 1983, p.13). I do not fully subscribe to the concept that there is a conscious control in action in this situation. However, the possibility that we are being controlled by barriers such as pragmatism, limited time and insufficient resources to look elsewhere, or even our lack of knowledge of other ways of being or doing, provides an impetus for me to help locate and break down those barriers and pursue new and different journeys.

Part of my PhD journey involved delving into the literature on experiential learning and facilitation of learning. While I had completed some study looking at experiential learning in adult education, at the time that I began my PhD I had just returned from spending seven months in the USA as an intern with Project Adventure, thus my experiences, learnings and reading had been greatly influenced by a dominant North American paradigm. This material was not new to me. Prior to going to the USA I had come across a wide range of materials that originated from there. I was familiar

with the material of authors such as Rohnke, Gass, Gillis, Priest, Kolb, Schoel, Prouty and Radcliffe. What relevance did their views have for me, a white Australian woman, or for the 'others' whose paths I may cross as a facilitator and fellow learner?

This article presents one person's musings upon three images that seem to have a pre-eminent position in some of the North American adventure and outdoor education literature I encountered on this journey. This is not to say there may be contrasting literature or images, but this article focuses upon those that have been influential for me in the early phases of my professional development. The purpose here is to cast a 'critical eye' over the material and consider what other messages are conveyed through the visual images in use and what a critical reading may reveal about the images. The article concludes with a discussion of the insights and other questions that emerge for me as a result of these considerations and internal dialogues that may lead to further investigations into the process, practices and theorising of the facilitation of experiences.

Facilitation is a term that needs exploring further as it is a term that may be perceived as being used indiscriminately, and possibly inconsistently, to cover a range of aspects of an experiential program. Conversely, several terms may be used to label the same thing. At the dictionary level, the core of facilitation is the central intent of making things easier or helping move things forward (Crowther, 1995). Heron supports this position in saying that 'What I mean by a facilitator in this book is a person who has the role of helping participants to learn in an experiential group.' (Heron, 1989, p. 11). Gass and Priest when defining facilitation say that

Sometimes referred to by other names, such as processing and debriefing, we can define facilitation as "those techniques that are used to augment the qualities of the adventure experience based on an accurate assessment of the client's needs" (Priest and Gass, 1997, p. 174).

'Basic techniques' may include discussion, debriefing, reflection and frontloading, while 'advanced techniques' may include metaphoric transfer and isomorphic framing (Priest & Gass, 1993).

Using the analogy of the medical doctor, the doctor is trained and employed as a medical practitioner, but in fulfilling her or his duties, the doctor may use skills and/or techniques of scientific analysis, research, counselling, inductive reasoning and plain old guess work, but they are still a doctor. To this end the facilitator of an experiential group may also apply a range of skills and techniques that traditionally may be associated with other professions or vocations and may include, but may not be limited to: instruction, programming, counselling, teaching, entertaining and guiding. Thus, facilitation would involve a broader set of skills that cover not only processing of the activities but also the programming, communication, leadership and instruction.

Methodology

The dominant literature, brochures and other sources provide a particular insight into how people may perceive outdoor and experiential learning. These perceptions

include images of how one is to construct the place of reflection or processing. Rather than focusing upon the words within the dominant literature that may have led to the use of visual semiotics, what I sought to explore were the images that stood out to me from the texts that I had been reading on facilitation. Strati (2000, p. 50), writing from the perspective of organisational theory, notes that semiotics 'seeks to construe the "signs that convey discourse", from architecture to modes of dress, from visible signs to hidden messages which communicates values'.

Visual images have the potential to provide a powerful impression, with the possibility of influencing the understanding and interpretation of the text. Yet, they are not used extensively in research, nor are they covered to any great extent in books on research (Crotty, 1998; Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Grbich, 1999; Harper, 2000). This may be due to the understanding that photographs and other visual images are not impartial communicators of objective truth. For example, photographs are made from within a particular theoretical and social context. The photographer, the authors and the editors of books and publications are looking for a particular focus; they are looking to portray a particular perspective. In many cases the photograph can 're-create our unexamined, taken-for-granted perceptions. We are interpreting sociological topics in our unexamined theorizing, and our photographs are our conclusions' (Harper, 2000, p. 729).

Out of respect for my more visual learning style, I have chosen images from books that broadly relate to experiential learning, often within sections or chapters on facilitation and reflection. For each of these images I have provided an objective analysis of key aspects of the images, including location, size, colour and group structure. Secondly, I have made comments and observations that emerge from my own experience and interpretations of images in books. It is not intended that this paper provide an in-depth critique of the models or theories associated with experiential learning, which have been covered elsewhere,¹ rather to provide the reflections of one person.

The images used here are public images, images where the context is the publication in which they appear and the topic they discuss. Where there is no explanation or description of the context or meaning from the perspective of photographer, author, editor or participant the interpretation rests with the viewer, me. In my case, I may be considered a viewer who is a cultural insider because of my experience and thus appreciate many of the rules and norms that guide the behaviour of participants in the images. I can place myself in those images. I can imagine some of the feelings, the questions, the conversations that could be taking place. I may also be projecting much of my experience onto those images! These rules and norms may not be obvious to the cultural outsider; that is someone who does not facilitate experiential learning (Harper, 2000).

Pictures convey strong messages. What is *in* the image is as important as what is *not* in the image (Grbich, 1999). Any image as displayed in a publication is a result of how the photographer has made that image as well as the impact of the author and/or editor regarding how the image is used within the publication. This use will

include colours, cropping and location with respect to particular explicit narratives and/or themes. Another aspect of the use of visual images is the interpretation by the viewer/reader whereby 'people tend to read the photograph with reference to their own biographies' (Grbich, 1999, p. 146). Previously Barthes (1961/1997) has suggested that the meaning of photographs within newspapers is transmitted by both the photo as well as the text surrounding it. In selecting these images, I have focused upon images from within sections that discuss how to facilitate experiential learning. The reflections upon these images are my own interpretations, which reflect some of my own story and range of experiences, my biography, as an Australian woman. This frame of reference influences what I 'see' and 'hear' via these images (Delahaye, 2000).

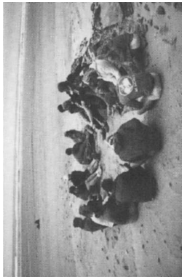
Observations and discussions

The images considered here are from three popular books in the North American outdoor and experiential learning literature: *Islands of healing* (Schoel et al., 1988), *Processing the experience* (Luckner & Nadler, 1997) and *Effective leadership in adventure programming* (Priest & Gass, 1997). Each of these images is within a chapter related to facilitating groups, for the first and third images they are the lead picture for the chapter, taking a full page. All these images convey an impression of the large group 'debrief', sitting in a circle, as the norm. It is these sorts of images and practices that I struggle with as I try to weave the theory with my experience, practice and preferences.

An objective assessment of the images, as summarised in Table 1 reveals that each of these images was within books published in the United States of America between 1988 and 1997 and all by North American male authors. In each case, the images are located within sections on group facilitation, where each book is seeking to convey what may be considered best practice. All the images are black and white, with one image being a drawing (Schoel et al., 1988), while the other two are photographs. Each image portrays a group in a rough circular formation in an outdoor setting. Most people are seated, with between 12 and an estimated 19 people within the group. In each case there appears to be a mix of males and females, though the exact ratio is not clear. It is not possible to identify who the leader may be and thus how the group formation may be related to the position and posture of any facilitator who may be present.

If a picture paints a thousand words, then a question is whether the same words would be 'heard' by several people observing the one image? What follows are the words that these three images 'speak' to me in my subjective space, and the questions that flow from these words. My subjective space, or paradigm, is influenced by many factors such as my gender, history (or 'herstory'), culture, education, faith, personality, learning style, professional and leisure experiences. These reflections may change over time, depending upon my interests or experiences at the time, my current work and leisure, the conversations I am having, and whose perspective I may seek to explore.

Table 1. Analysis of three images

					
Figure 1. (Schoel, Prouty and Radcliffe, 1998, p. 162). Used with permission		Figure 2. (Luckner & Nadler, 1997, p. 102). Used with permission		Figure 3. (Priest & Gass, 1997, p. 189). Used with permission	
Publication year	1988	1997	1997	1997	
Authors	Male	Male	Male	Male	
Location within book	Chapter 7: Debriefing the adventure experience	Part III: Effective leadership knowledge and skills	Chapter 15: Basic facilitation techniques	Chapter title page	
Location within section	Facing page to chapter beginning	Section on 'Group ground rules'	Black and white photograph	Black and white photograph	
Image type	Black and white drawing	Black and white photograph	Black and white photograph	Black and white photograph	
Picture size (w * h)	16 cm * 16 cm	12.5 cm * 9 cm	12.5 cm * 9 cm	16.5 cm * 11 cm (picture only)	
Group structure	Circle	Circle	Circle	Circle	
Group size	12	Est. 19	Est. 19	18	
Group positioning	12 seated	9 standing, 10 seated	9 standing, 10 seated	18 seated	
Estimated gender split	6 females, 6 males	3 females, 13 males, 3 unclear	3 females, 13 males, 3 unclear	4 female, 10 males, 4 unclear	
Physical environment	Outdoor, flat area, trees in the background	Outdoor, flat area, trees in the background	Outdoor, flat area, trees in the background	Outdoor, flat area, on beach	

The image from Schoel et al. (1988) acts like a table of contents to the chapter entitled '*Debriefing: Processing the adventure experience*'. It frames what I am 'to see' in the chapter. The group formation is the dominant practice I have observed. Yet, there seems to be a contradiction in the various messages being conveyed by the image in the context of this book. I would have assumed that within the debriefing phase when 'the group moves into a time of reflection' (Schoel et al., 1988, p. 163) what is being encouraged is open communication but many of the group are sitting there with arms crossed over their knees. Is this a sign of defensiveness or of the person trying to cover up? Alternatively, could it be that they are uncomfortable and that they are trying to find a comfortable way to sit? If defensive, then how effective is this method? If uncomfortable, what hope is there of achieving reflection, focus and participation? Will the participants say what they think the facilitator wants just so they can get to a more comfortable place, or will the participants say what they mean (at the risk of generating more conversation and more physical discomfort)? And what of the person whose body faces away from the centre of the circle (bottom left of picture)? Is there any significance in the position of this person's body? Do they feel part of the group and the conversation? If I were the facilitator how would I interpret what I see in this situation?

The photograph from Luckner and Nadler (1997) is within a part of the book on *Effective leadership knowledge and skills*. This section is on *Group ground rules*. As a visual learner, the photo is an image that drives how I 'see' the words. As with the previous image, the group are in a circle, with around 19 people in this case. Circles for me can be threatening spaces, there is nowhere to 'hide', they can increase my feelings of exposure and decrease my desire to participate. The use of logs as seats, may provide physical comfort initially, but for a longer discussion, will the participants' concentration be affected? I wonder how these physical conditions will impact upon the concentration of the participants. It appears to be in an open space, with trees in the background. How does this environment impact upon the reflection, sharing (listening and hearing) and learning? Are the participants sensitive to the influence of their environment? Also, how do the different heights of people (standing, sitting on logs, sitting on the ground) influence the power relationships within the group, especially within a group that appears to be dominated by males?

In the image from Priest and Gass (1997) the group is sitting in a circle in a Spartan environment that conveys impressions of being exposed and unprotected. For me, the physical environment does not appear to be a supportive and caring environment that would be conducive to exploring issues of behaviour, feelings and personal goals as may be implied from the previous images. This image triggers mixed responses within me. At one level, I personally enjoy the dominance and sparseness of the landscape, the overwhelming presence of nature and our comparative 'smallness' in contrast. It is a place I may go on my own for personal reflection and inspiration. Yet, if I place myself in the picture as a participant, I begin to feel the impact of that dominance and the exposed place in which we sit. I begin to feel small and exposed and it is these feelings that begin to suppress my desire to be open and communicative in that place. It is not an intimate place. It is a place where

I cannot hide or be protected and feel safe to reveal who I am. Again, what is the influence of the natural environment upon the participants, and upon the process? How has this been considered and included?

As you may see within my reflections, some of the themes that emerge for me relate to physical comfort, participation, power and the role of the natural environment. These reflections reflect who I am. The insights, reflections and questions of the reader, will influence what you see, hear or feel from observing these images.

Where to from here?

This paper does not provide any answers, it is more a basis to encourage further exploration of our practice. As a reflective piece, I have not endeavoured to reach any neat conclusion. I am comfortable leaving open the door for further insights and questions from the reader. In reflecting upon my reflections, or being reflexive, further questions that emerge for me from these musings about three images of facilitating reflection, include:

- How do my life experiences and formal education influence my views and expectations of learning?
- How does someone's experience of gender, culture or geography influence their preferred ways of learning and reflection?
- How do our reflective strategies connect with the diverse ways people prefer to learn, such as their sensory modalities, brain dominance preferred time of day and preferred physical environments?
- What is the impact of the social context, the size of the group and the location (the physical and natural environment) upon the learning experience?

The ongoing discussion of facilitation and reflective practices will take into account these diverse perspectives and influences. Other readers will bring to the discussion their unique perspectives, that also need to be considered and woven into the diversity of facilitation practices. It is hoped that these musings that have been part of my learning journey, may encourage others from diverse backgrounds to honour and explore how your individual paradigms may impact your experiences and expectations of facilitation of experiential learning.

Note

1. Fenwick (2000) and Kayes (2002) are two examples of critiques of different models used within experiential learning.

Author biography

Tracey J. Dickson is a Research Fellow with the Centre for Tourism Research at the University of Canberra where she has the pleasure of researching summer and winter

alpine tourism and visitor safety. This research interest builds upon her previous research and experience in outdoor and experiential learning, which has focused upon facilitation and risk management. Email: Tracey.Dickson@canberra.edu.au.

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