

Outdoor leadership education: Do recent textbooks focus on what is important to effective practice?

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Abstract

My research, exploring the theories and practices of facilitator educators, raises some questions about some potential gaps in a number of outdoor leadership texts published in the last five years. Do the authors and editors of these texts focus on the things that are really important to the effective practice of outdoor leadership? Using a naturalistic inquiry approach, I developed a theoretical framework that categorised the different facets of facilitator education programs. One of these facets, the person-centred facilitator education dimension, described the importance of the person of the facilitator when working with groups. In this dimension of facilitator education emerging facilitators are encouraged to develop their self-awareness and an awareness of the 'importance of being.' This paper compares the foci of facilitator education programs in my study with the foci of four popular outdoor leadership textbooks. My analysis of the content of these four texts reveals that none of them provide any real focus on what I categorise as the person-centred dimension and the implications of this gap are discussed.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to question the foci of four recent textbooks commonly used to educate or prepare leaders to work in outdoor education and related fields. My doctoral research, which explored the way that facilitator educators prepare facilitators to work in a range of fields, will be used to highlight some of the potential gaps or blind spots that may have been missed in outdoor leadership texts commonly used in outdoor leadership courses. I have not made any attempt to analyse or critique the curriculum of outdoor leadership courses because of the difficulties in accessing this information. However, it is my contention that the more popular textbooks available for use in outdoor leadership programs provide a reasonable indication of what is considered to be important when educating outdoor leaders – at least by authors and publishers.

The four textbooks that are analysed in this paper are *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming* (Priest & Gass, 2005), *Outdoor Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006), *Adventure Education: Theory and Practice* (Prouty, Panicucci, & Collinson, 2007), and *Teaching Adventure Education Theory: Best Practices* (Stremba & Bisson, 2009). Fortunately, the authors or editors of these texts provide clear descriptions of the purposes that their books are intended to serve. Priest and Gass (2005) wrote their book as "a course text for preparing undergraduate and graduate students in outdoor leadership" (p. xii). Martin et al.'s (2006) text was written to "serve as a primary textbook in introductory courses in outdoor leadership" and the authors sought to find "a middle ground between the theory and practice that does not appear to exist in the texts that are currently available for use in the introductory-level college courses on outdoor leadership" (p. ix). The textbook edited by Prouty et al. (2007) was created to help the reader to "find [his/her] own path in a workplace where experiential and adventure education is practiced, probably in multiple ways and multiple locations" (p. vii). Stremba and Bisson (2009) set out to create a text that would "provide a toolbox of lessons for

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those who prepare adventure educators concerning the *why* behind the *what* – the theories, models, and concepts that inform practice” (p. vii).

In terms of the content or focus chosen in each of these texts, none of the authors or editors provides a rationale explaining why the chosen foci were selected and why other foci were omitted. In some cases the texts appear to be a collection of previous writings by the authors on a range of topics to do with outdoor leadership (for example Priest & Gass, 2005) and in some of the edited books the process or rationale for choosing some authors (and not choosing others) to write chapters is not articulated (Prouty et al., 2007; Stremba & Bisson, 2009). Suffice to say, I am not convinced that the choice of content in the texts analysed in this paper has been based on careful research to ensure that they focus on the skills, knowledge, and experience that are essential to effective outdoor leadership practice. Stremba and Bisson (2009) are atypical in this regard because they do give some explanation (and honest analysis) of their intentions.

We have witnessed common themes and content areas taught in many academic adventure education degree programs and appearing in many recent texts used in these programs. The lessons in this book attempt to cover many of these topics, but there will undoubtedly be gaps. (p. ix)

The purpose of this paper is to highlight one such gap within outdoor leadership textbooks by drawing on the insights gained in my study of the theories and practices of facilitator educators. First though, I will outline my research design before sharing some of the key findings.

Research design

My doctoral study explored the theories and practices of facilitator educators offering facilitator training courses in Australia and New Zealand in 2005. I used a naturalistic inquiry approach to find out how the facilitator educators made sense of the things they do by studying them in their natural settings (Rossman & Rallis, 2003). The study sought to involve facilitator educators in developing a project of mutual interest, blurring the line between the researcher and subject, and sharing responsibility for the findings that emerged and how they would be shared (Gergen & Gergen, 2003).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and participant observations with seven facilitator educators and also some qualitative surveys with the graduates of their programs. The primary foci of my observations and interviews were the strategies used by the facilitator educators to assist their emerging facilitators to develop their skills, knowledge and competence. Secondary foci included: the sequencing of their programs; key elements of the facilitator education process; references to theoretical foundations; and potential omissions or processes excluded from the facilitator education process. A form of reputational-case sampling (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000) was used and facilitator educators offering programs in Australia in 2005 were invited to participate in the study based on their profile in the field as a result of: their contribution to the literature (books and/or journals); their delivery of reputable facilitation training courses; and/or their involvement in facilitation conferences, meetings, and list-serves.

To provide another perspective on the facilitator education process, and a source of triangulation, random samples of the graduates of the facilitator educators’ programs were invited to complete a survey. The survey involved three open-ended questions which sought to establish which processes within the training program the graduates found most helpful with their development

as a facilitator, and what improvements they suggested. Data analysis involved a combination of three concurrent flows of activity: data reduction; data display; and conclusion drawing and verification (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The constant comparison method, conceptualised by Glaser and Strauss (1967), was used once the data were coded to identify themes, essences or patterns within research data. The trustworthiness of the findings, were enhanced through prolonged engagement of 35 days of participant observation and interviews with the facilitator educators over an 18-month period, thick description of findings, and auditing in the form of member checking and the use of research journals (Creswell, 1998).

The theoretical framework of my study

I conceptualised four dimensions of facilitator education described (either explicitly or implicitly) in the facilitation literature (Thomas, 2004, 2005) and developed a nested boxes model which portrayed the relationship between these dimensions (see Figure 1). The dimensions portrayed in the larger boxes are extensions of those portrayed in the smaller boxes nested inside them. In this respect, the model implies a progression in the depth and complexity of the facilitator education process. The four dimensions shown in Figure 1 include: *Technical Facilitator Education* approaches which are skills based and formulaic; whereas *Intentional Facilitator Education* approaches are purposively grounded in theory. *Person-centred Facilitator Education* approaches are still intentional but they emphasise the attitudes, personal qualities, or presence of the facilitator. Finally, *Critical Facilitator Education* approaches seek to raise an awareness of the political nature of facilitation.

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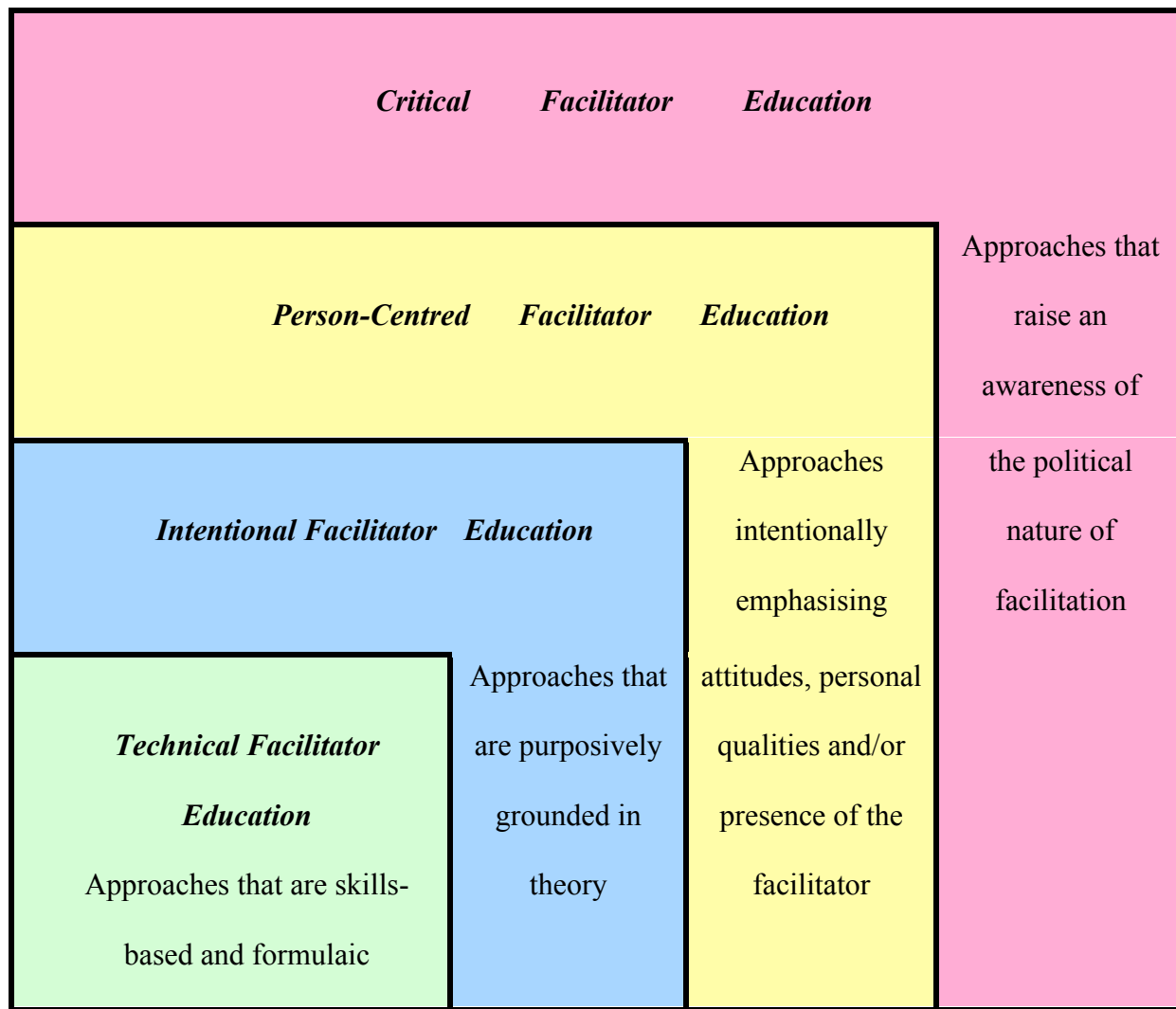


Figure 1. The dimensions of facilitator education (Thomas, 2005)

More recently, following feedback from colleagues and responses to presentations at conferences, I have chosen to present the four dimensions of facilitator education as equally important facets of facilitator education (see Figure 2), which would all be present in some proportion in effective facilitator education programs.

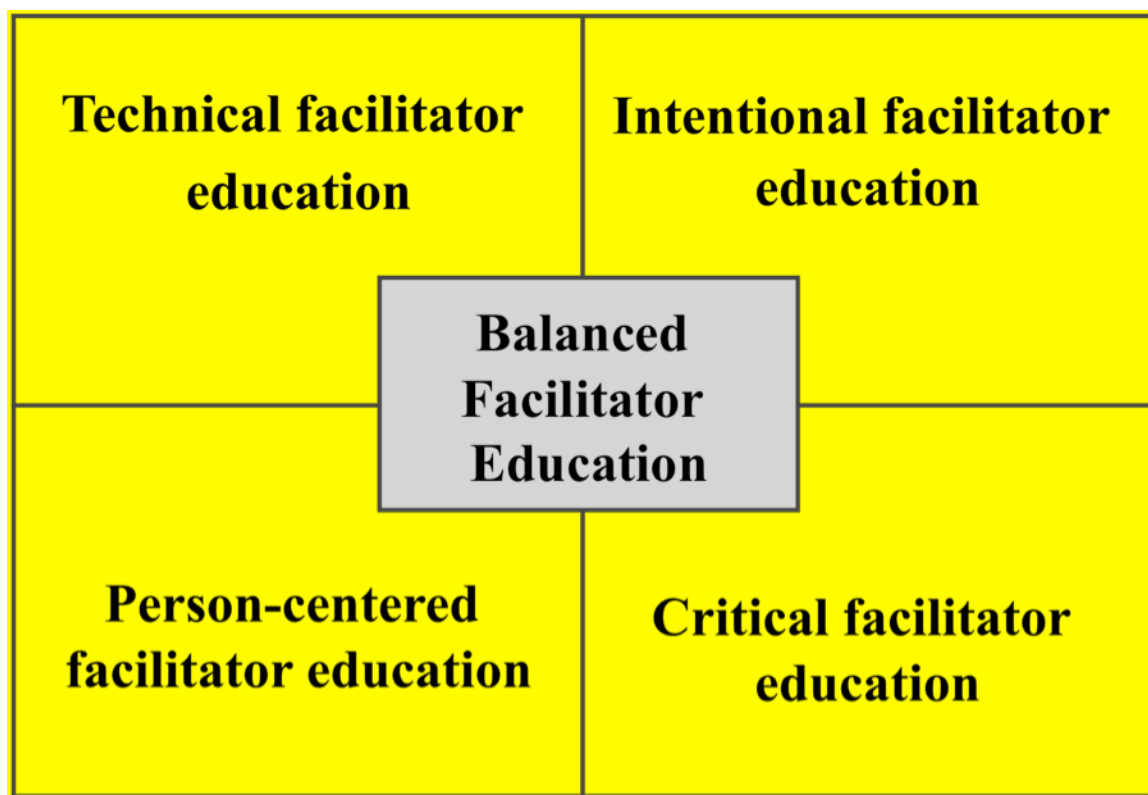


Figure 2: The facets of balanced facilitator education.

The dimension of most interest to this paper is the person-centred facilitator education dimension although some discussion of the critical facilitator education dimension will also be provided. First though, a brief summary of the facilitation literature in these two areas of facilitator education will now be provided.

Person-centred facilitator education and critical facilitator education in the literature.

There are numerous examples in the facilitation literature suggesting that as well as focussing on skills, techniques or theories that a facilitator may use, the personal qualities of the facilitator and the interpersonal relationship between the facilitator and group is also critical. Carl Rogers (1983, 1989a, 1989b) wrote extensively on the importance of the relationships involved in teaching, counseling and facilitation. He claimed that the personal qualities and attitudes of the facilitator were more important than any methods they employ. The facilitation competencies identified by the International Association of Facilitators (Pierce, Cheesebrow, & Braun, 2000) recognise the need for facilitators to develop an awareness that they themselves are an important part of the facilitation process and that they must develop personal qualities in order to help groups achieve their purposes. Similarly, Hunter (1995) explained that the secret to being an effective facilitator has “more to do with who you are and who you are being for the group you’re working with. . . . The relationship you develop with the group is the key” (p. 201). Similarly, in her approach to facilitator education Hogan (2002) enumerated the importance of relationships and the need for facilitators to be fully present and authentic with group members.

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Ghais (2005) explained that no amount of brilliant skills and techniques will help emerging facilitators if they lack personal awareness, and “whether we’re aware of it or not, our inner states, moods, attitudes, and thoughts are always on our sleeves” (p. 14).

Herein lies one of the complexities of person-centred facilitator education, as Ghais (2005) explained, facilitators “must be able to bring authenticity, confidence, presence, trustworthiness, and calm into the room. It is much more difficult to explain how to build these inner qualities than to teach skills and techniques” (p. 14). She encouraged emerging facilitators to get to know more about themselves by getting feedback from others, taking personality inventories, observing themselves on video, and building on their strengths. Finally, Jenkins and Jenkins (2006) focused on the nine disciplines they believe emerging facilitators must master to be effective and the focus on what happens inside the leader and how he or she makes decisions and functions as a whole person. They explained,

The most difficult thing any facilitative leader can do is master himself or herself. Every leader experiences doubt, anxiety, cynicism, and his or her own dark side. Facilitative leaders need to restore their personal energy, maintain respect for both colleagues and themselves, find new sources of ideas and inspiration, and battle the human propensity toward self-limitation, caution, mediocrity, and dependency. (p. 1)

Critical facilitator education approaches are based on critical theory, which originated from the work of Kant, Hegel, and Marx and was further developed by Habermas and his predecessors in the Frankfurt School (Rasmussen, 1996). Critical theory seeks to expose the operation of power, and to bring about social justice by redressing inequalities and promoting individual freedoms within a democratic society. Hence, critical facilitator education encourages emerging facilitators to examine their own practice to create optimal learning experiences for participants. The underpinning premise is that “where our beliefs remain unexamined, we are not free; we act without thinking about why we act, and thus do not exercise control over our own destinies” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 46). Although the skills and disposition of critical thinking can infuse person-centred facilitator education, critical facilitator education goes a step further because it is “specifically concerned with the influences of educational knowledge, and of cultural formations generally, that perpetuate or legitimate an unjust status quo” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 46).

Mindell (1995) maintained that it is the responsibility of facilitators to “bring forth and appreciate the views of those in power or in the mainstream, while dealing with the prejudices and hidden social, psychological and historical factors which create the experience of inequity” (p. 21). Critical facilitator education challenges commonly held assumptions about facilitation, for example, an increasing number of writers in recent times have questioned the idea of neutral facilitation. Kirk and Broussine (2000) refuted the notion of facilitation as a set of skills and processes which are value free, objective and neutral. Although facilitators are often portrayed as people apart, distanced from an organisation’s political networks, able to comment and intervene independently and neutrally, Kirk and Broussine (2000) contend that facilitators must recognise the political and emotional impact an organisation has on them. In an ethnomethodological study of facilitation in an experiential education setting, Brown (2002) found that facilitators frequently assumed the role of ‘gatekeeper,’ controlling what were supposed to be student-centred discussions. In this respect, the facilitators in the study played a “central role in creating and limiting opportunities for discussion, for evaluating student contributions and in collaboration with students to construct and articulate acceptable knowledge” (p. 111). This is

problematic if the participants' "right and responsibility to set their own learning agenda" is considered to be a foundational principle of experiential education (Hovelynck, 2003, p. 5).

Within this critical facilitator education approach, several authors have espoused the need for a socially critical approach to facilitation. Kirk and Broussine (2000) warned that whilst most facilitators would aim to be emancipators, "facilitation can become part of a system of oppression and perpetuation of dependant relations, with facilitators becoming unwitting agents of manipulation and managerialism" (p. 14). Warren (1998) suggested that socially critical facilitation requires us to "become more conscious of how methods can advance or impede social justice" (p. 21). She is also critical of facilitation lacking in theoretical validation and described it as "empty attempts to practice without a sound grounding" and that it is particularly irresponsible if facilitators "attempt to 'do the right thing' without an understanding of their own biases or the current anti-bias work theory" (p. 23).

Mindell's (1995) writing has the potential to inform the practice of critical facilitator education, particularly through his encouragement of facilitators to be mindful of their rank which he defined as "a conscious or unconscious, social or personal ability or power arising from culture, community support, personal psychology and/or spiritual power" (p. 43). Regardless as to whether the rank that a facilitator possesses is earned or inherited, it shapes much of his or her communication behaviour with a group. All facilitators have some form of rank, but "our behaviour shows how conscious we are of this rank. When we are heedless of rank, communications become confused and chronic relationship problems develop" (p. 49). Mindell argued that rank could be like a drug: "The more you have, the less you are aware of how it affects others negatively" (p. 49). However, he also explained that rank is not inherently bad, and nor is abuse of rank inevitable. In fact, if facilitators are aware of their rank, they can use it to their own benefit and the benefit of others as well. In this regard, the objective of critical facilitator education approaches is not to help emerging facilitators transcend the influence of rank, but rather to help them notice their rank and use it constructively. As Mindell posits, "The facilitator's task is not to do away with the use of rank and power, but to notice them and make their dynamics explicit for the whole group to see" (p. 37).

Study findings.

This paper focuses on only one small part of the findings of my doctoral research and I have shared the findings more extensively elsewhere (Thomas, 2005, 2006, 2008a, 2008b, 2008c, 2008d). Hence, I do not wish to completely rehash the findings in this paper, but to support my argument I will summarise some of the key points in order to define what I believe is a significant gap in the current outdoor leadership texts. The majority of the facilitator educators in my study focused some of their facilitator education programs on person-centred and critical facilitator education in a manner that was consistent with the literature. The two longer programs I observed (20-30 days) probably had a stronger focus on these dimensions than the three shorter (one to three day programs) I observed.

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Glen Ochre¹ from the *Groupwork Institute of Australia*, taught in her programs that the effectiveness of a facilitator is determined by “who you are and who you are being for the group you’re working with. . . . The relationship you develop with the group is the key.” She maintained that “Facilitation processes, skills, and tools are built on a firm foundation of self-awareness and we must be able to facilitate first thyself.” Similarly, Shirli Kirschner from *Resolve Advisors* taught her emerging facilitators that they needed to see themselves as instruments of facilitation. Dale Hunter, from a New Zealand based organisation called *Zenergy*, also encouraged a strong focus on developing self-awareness but she explained that it is not about ‘fixing ourselves up,’ rather it is about becoming more ‘awake.’ It is particularly important that the facilitator become aware of the unhelpful interactions between participants and the facilitator which psychologists define as *transference* and *countertransference* (Yalom & Leszcz, 2005). Both of these phenomena can lead to the facilitator being triggered or caught up in unhelpful distractions which lead to a reduction in the facilitators free attention which Dale Hunter defined as “the part of your awareness not caught up with thoughts, feelings (emotions), and body sensations.”

Another important person-centred aspect of several of the facilitator educators programs was their emphasis on ‘being.’ This included an emphasis on *being present*, *being in-the-moment*, and *being-with*. Dale Hunter explained that “Being-with is a conscious act of connecting with others . . . [it’s] about being aware of your own sense of self and at the same time sensing the self of another.” One of the most debilitating detractors from being-present when facilitating was the fear of failure that some emerging facilitators reported. The facilitator educators were mostly in agreement that the mythical quest for facilitation perfection was both a distraction and a deterrent to good facilitation. This idea connects nicely with the concept of a ‘good enough’ parent, which was first espoused by Donald Winnicott (1965) and further refined by Bruno Bettelheim (1995). Borrowing from this idea, a *good-enough-facilitator* would not get bogged down in fear-of-failure but would accept their limitations, work within them, and practice more freely and responsively.

Not all of the facilitator educators in my study focused extensively on critical facilitator education but those that did saw it as an extension of person-centred facilitator education – a demonstration of increased self-awareness. Glen Ochre drew heavily on the work of Mindell (1995) in her programs and she devoted a whole module of her program to the study of rank, power and diversity in the facilitation process. Roger Schwarz, from the USA did not overtly focus on critical facilitator education in his program, but his *Skilled Facilitator Approach* certainly encouraged emerging facilitators to consider the complex web of interactions that can occur in any facilitation process.

To summarise my findings, all of the facilitator educators in my study focused part of their program on what I have defined as person-centred facilitator education and some also focused on critical facilitator education. For some facilitator educators the person-centred dimension was the most important focus of their program. Despite the fact that none of the facilitator education programs I observed specifically set out to prepare outdoor leaders I can testify, based on my participation and observation, that the majority of the content of their programs was readily

¹ All of my research participants gave me permission to identify them in the presentation of my research findings. This is consistent with my intent to blur the lines between researcher and participant and to give credit where it was due.

transferable to outdoor leadership contexts. To what extent then should outdoor leadership texts include a similar focus on person-centred facilitator education programs? The next section describes the results of my analysis of the foci of the four outdoor leadership texts.

Foci of current outdoor leadership texts.

Using an adaption of the theoretical framework I used in my doctoral study, Figure 3 shows the results of my analysis of the content of each of the textbooks analysed in this paper. To assist with the interpretation of Figure 3, all of the texts included chapters that focused on the skills, methods, strategies and theories of outdoor leadership as demonstrated by the ticks in the first two rows. However, none of the textbooks significantly focused on what I have labeled *person-centred outdoor leadership education* as shown by the crosses in Figure 3. The Strembla and Bisson (2009) textbook was the only text to focus on what I would categorise as *critical outdoor leadership education*. This was a result of the inclusion of two chapters by Karen Warren who sought to encourage dialogue and raise awareness of social justice and gender-sensitive outdoor leadership. Without this contribution from Warren, the four textbooks analysed would also have no focus on political aspects of outdoor leadership.

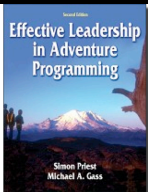
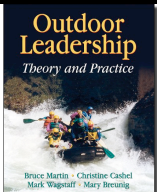
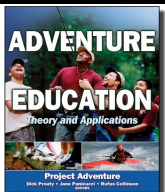
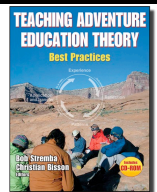
Dimensions of Outdoor Leadership Education	 Priest & Gass (2005)	 Martin et al. (2006)	 Prouty et al. (2007)	 Strembla & Bisson (2009)
Technical outdoor leadership education	✓	✓	✓	✗
Intentional outdoor leadership education	✓	✓	✓	✓
Person-centred outdoor leadership education	✗	✗	✗	✗
Critical outdoor leadership education	✗	✗	✗	✓

Figure 3. A foci analysis of four recent outdoor leadership texts.

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Before considering the implications of the apparent gaps highlighted in Figure 3 it is important to note that there have been some other books within the outdoor leadership field that have focused on person-centred outdoor leadership education. School and Maizell (2002) in their textbook, *Exploring islands of healing: New perspectives on adventure based counseling*, dedicate almost an entire chapter to the discussion of leadership voice and the importance of knowing oneself. They point out that “Techniques are essential but so is each individual facilitator – the person ‘behind the scalpel’” (p. 128). Simpson (2003) in his text *The leader who is hardly known: Self-less teaching from the Chinese tradition* also focuses on personal dimensions of the outdoor leader. Ringer (2002) also provides an excellent discussion of the subjective role of the facilitator in a range of settings, in his text *Group action: The dynamics of groups in therapeutic, educational and corporate settings*. These authors were not included in the analysis conducted in this paper because they do not set out to be generic outdoor leadership education texts. Importantly, there have also been numerous articles in outdoor journals that could be classified as contributing to either person-centred or critical outdoor leadership education (for examples, see Beames & Pike, 2008; Brown, 2002, 2003, 2004; Dickson, 2008; Thomas, 2008a; Warren, 1998, 2002).

The fact that these four recent textbooks are all relatively silent on these dimensions of outdoor leadership education (as conceptualised in Figure 3) is clearly at odds with the findings of my research on facilitator education programs. Moreover, the gaps in outdoor leadership education shown in Figure 3 are also at odds with the literature in the fields of teacher education and group-counsellor education. In the field of teacher education there are a growing number of authors who claim that a clear sense of self may contribute to an improvement in teachers’ effectiveness as well as in their levels of self-efficacy, motivation, and job satisfaction (Ben-Peretz, Mendelson, & Kron, 2003; Flores & Day, 2006; Korthagen, 2004; O'Connor, 2007). One of the challenges for teacher educators identified by Freese (2006) and Romano (2006) is to help teachers to identify inconsistencies between their beliefs and practices and assist them to uncover the knowledge and beliefs underpinning actions, especially if they have been guiding practice intuitively or automatically. Hamachek (1999) summarises this concern by explaining,

Consciously, we teach what we know; unconsciously, we teach who we are. The ‘who we are’ facet of our teaching personality contributes significantly to the positive or negative tone of a classroom and, certainly, to students’ receptivity to learning. (p. 210)

The teacher education literature describes a range of approaches teachers can use to explore their inner lives including personal journals, self-assessments, personal narratives, metaphors, action research, peer observation, the use of mentors, and participation in learning communities (Freese, 2006; Korthagen, 1993, 2004; Palmer, 2007; Romano, 2006; Zehm, 1999).

The group counselor education field also provides a similar focus on the person of the counsellor. Previously, I have described how the facilitator education field can learn from the group-counselor education literature (Thomas, 2006). In their popular group psychotherapy text, Yalom and Leszcz (2005) reported that experiential participation in group counseling sessions is widely accepted as an essential part of a group counselor training program and that one half to two thirds of training providers include it. Not only do the group counselors learn valuable skills in these sessions they also get the chance to experience and develop empathy, self-disclosure, confrontation, and self-growth (Morran, 2005).

Implications for outdoor leadership education texts and programs

Can those involved in outdoor leadership education ignore the fact that there seems to be discrepancy between the foci of outdoor leadership texts and what seems to be occurring in facilitator education, teacher education, and group counselor education? Quite reasonably outdoor leadership educators may provide a range of responses to this question. Here are some possible scripts with my response to these scripts.

“It sounds like you want outdoor leaders to be in psychotherapy.”

This was a valid concern in the group counselor education literature and numerous authors (Anderson & Price, 2001; Berger, 1996; Morran, 2005; Yalom & Leszcz, 2005) identified that the line between group counselor education and ‘being in psychotherapy’ can get blurred. Anderson and Price (2001) recommended that group counselor educators remain sensitive to students’ fears and apprehension about participation, but that feelings of discomfort should not necessarily be construed negatively. In spite of these difficulties Kottler (2004) is blunt and to the point,

How can you ask group members to open up, to share themselves in honest ways, to own and work on their issues, when you are not willing to do the same? Would it be easier for students in such an experience if a faculty member were not in the room? Certainly, but I am not so sure that easier is better. That is a lie; I am certain that easier is not better. (p. 52)

None of the facilitator educators in my study engaged in what could be described as individual or group psychotherapy, but a small number of program graduates expressed concerns about inappropriate levels of psychological depth (Ringer & Gillis, 1995) in the program they experienced. Although the facilitator educators did not practice or condone psychotherapy within their programs, this does not rule out the possibility that some outdoor leaders may find therapeutic sessions with a suitably qualified practitioner a beneficial part of their developmental journey as an outdoor leader.

“We’ve never focussed on the person of the outdoor leader much before.”

This is likely to be true for most outdoor leadership programs judging by the silence of popular outdoor leadership texts. However, this does not negate the potential need for person-centred outdoor leadership education and it is not a good excuse for excluding person-centred content that may be important to effective outdoor leadership.

“We wouldn’t have any staff qualified or experienced enough to facilitate person-centred outdoor leadership training.”

It is possible that teaching staff in outdoor leadership programs will not currently be equipped, or feel comfortable, to facilitate person-centred outdoor leadership education. This does not negate the potential need for such foci in outdoor leadership programs, it just highlights a potential professional development need for teaching staff.

“We don’t have space in our program”

The designers and teachers of outdoor leadership programs allocate space and time to teach the things that they believe are important to teach. They do this intentionally or unintentionally. The

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challenge is to thoughtfully identify what should be taught in outdoor leadership education programs and allocate time and space accordingly.

“Where’s the evidence?”

The evidence of what is occurring in similar fields such as facilitator education, group-counselor education and teacher education has been provided in this paper. However, I have not argued that all outdoor leadership programs must include a person-centred dimension. I have not argued that person-centred outdoor leadership education works, or that it makes a difference to outdoor leaders and their participants. These claims, though difficult to measure, could be the focus of future research and must be considered carefully by all outdoor leadership education program designers. What I have done is compare what is being taught in facilitator education programs and texts, and the related fields of teacher education and group counselor education, to what is being taught in outdoor leadership textbooks. How outdoor leadership educators respond is up to them.

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