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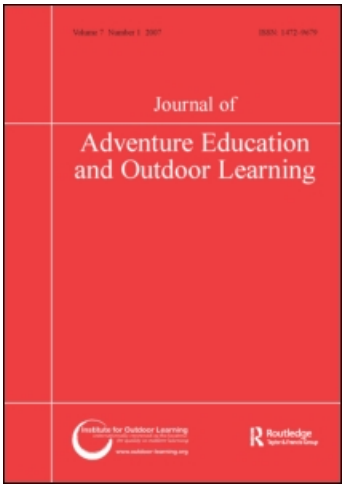

Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning
Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t777550184

Re-evaluating risk and exploring educational alternatives

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To cite this Article Brown, Mike and Fraser, Deborah(2009) 'Re-evaluating risk and exploring educational alternatives', Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning, 9: 1, 61 — 77
To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/14729670902789529
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14729670902789529

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Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning
Vol. 9, No. 1, June 2009, pp. 61–77

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Re-evaluating risk and exploring educational alternatives

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Risk is positioned as a distinguishing feature of outdoor adventure education (OAE) pedagogy. Risk defines much of what happens in OAE, from participants 'taking' risks to instructors 'managing' risks. The taken-for-granted centrality of risk continues to have currency due to the thrill and allure of adventurous outdoor activities. This paper questions the centrality of some current conceptions of risk in OAE and explores an alternative pedagogical perspective where risk is less central. A sociocultural lens expands possibilities for how OAE is conceptualized, with a focus more on learning than on risk. This alternative approach is well supported by research on teaching and learning, and as such offers an opportunity to broaden instructors' repertoires of practice for the benefit of OAE participants.

Introduction

Some time ago, towards the end of the first author's doctoral studies, a conversation occurred with one of his supervisors about future research plans. Discussions covered several possibilities including doing further studies in the area of the methodological speciality utilized in the PhD. It was not a pathway that was appealing as it seemed that this analytic approach suited the particular research question for the doctorate and there was little interest in continuing with this line of inquiry as an academic speciality. A comment by the supervisor struck a chord, 'some academics only have a hammer in their toolbox and they spend their career looking for the right nails to bash whilst others see different issues/questions and will select the appropriate tool for the task', or words to that effect. When reading outdoor adventure education (OAE)[1] texts it often appears that perhaps like the myopic researcher, OAE has little more than a hammer in its toolbox when it comes to justifying the philosophical position which underpins the central rationale on which much practice appears to be based. The hammer, the apparently unique and distinguishing characteristic of OAE, is the use of risk to achieve educational outcomes. The role of risk is taken for granted and

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ISSN 1472-9679 (print)/ISSN 1754-0402 (online)
© 2009 Institute for Outdoor Learning
DOI: 10.1080/14729670902789529

treated in an unproblematic manner in many definitions of OAE. For example, Miles and Priest (1990, p.1) state that, 'Adventure education involves the purposeful planning and implementation of educational processes that involve risk in some way'. In his influential treatise, *The adventure alternative*, Mortlock (1984) proposes that adventure is:

> a state of mind that will initially accept unpleasant feelings of fear, uncertainty and discomfort, and the need for luck, because we instinctively know that, if we are successful, these will be counterbalanced by opposite feelings of exhilaration and joy (p. 19).

He also asserts that a 'journey with a degree of uncertainty in the "University of the Wilderness" ' may well lead to 'one of the greatest experiences of your life' (1984, p. 19). More recently Ewert and Garvey (2007) state that 'inherent in adventure education is the inclusion of activities and experiences that often include elements of danger or risk and uncertain outcomes' (p. 22). While OAE texts promote notions of adventure, risk, and uncertainty[2] and extol the virtues and supposedly intrinsic values of a peak experience as a contrast to the humdrum 'anxieties of modern existence' (Mortlock, 1984, p. 19) few attempt to provide a sound educational justification for the use of risk as an effective learning strategy (Beedie, 1994; Wurdinger, 1997; Bunting, 1999; Beedie & Bourne, 2005). Extended discussions concerning risk are centred principally around strategies relating to the reduction and management of physical harm to participants and the associated legal liabilities (T. Brown, 1999; Dickson, 2005; Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, & Breunig, 2006; Brookes, 2007). Zink and Leberman (2001) have suggested that the risk discourse of OAE is characterized by 'uniform and narrow definitions' (p. 50) which focus on rational, objective and linear models of thinking.

This paper aims to broaden outdoor and adventure educators' knowledge of the pedagogical possibilities for engaging students, rather than relying on definitions of adventure education featuring discourses of risk and uncertainty (Mortlock, 1984; Miles & Priest, 1990; Ewert & Garvey, 2007).

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The impetus to reflect on established practice

Several streams of critical inquiry have provided the catalyst for this exploration of alternate pedagogical approaches. First, observations made by one of the authors in a 15-year career in the OAE sector. While not part of a formal research project, these observations of residential and expedition programmes, discussions with fellow instructors and familiarization with training and induction materials have provided an 'insider's' perspective of practice in a range of Australian and New Zealand OAE providers.[3] Second, a questioning of the role and appropriateness of adventure activities in outdoor education. In particular, the acknowledgement of the historical and cultural milieu in which these activities arose along with the critique of these practices given the changing social, geographic, economic and ecological conditions that have emerged, and continue to emerge (Lugg, 2004). For example, there is little doubt that imperial and militaristic historical antecedents have influenced the form of OAE

that is practiced today (Beedie, 1995/6; Nichol, 2002a; Lugg, 2004). The risks associated with the battlefield or imperial endeavours manifest themselves in the form of OAE that was appropriate in that socio-political context, however 'that era has passed and outdoor educationalists need to understand our present position' (Beedie, 1995/6, p. 13). How can contemporary outdoor/adventure educators best assist participants to deal with the complexities of the world in which they live? Third, Brookes' critique that OAE is a means of 'character building' (Brookes, 2003a, 2003b). He argues that the notion that character can be built through OAE is a flawed concept. While outdoor adventure programmes may shape behaviour for the duration of the programme and lead to changes in self-perception, the evidence does not support the assertion that outdoor experiences change character traits. Brookes challenges the dispositionist assumptions inherent in many outdoor programmes and he calls for a situationist approach which recognizes and displays sensitivity to the cultural, regional, historical and social contexts in which outdoor education programmes are conducted. Wolfe and Samdahl (2005) also question the assumption that changes that occur during an OAE programme will be manifested in other contexts. They suggest that the complexity of behavioural change processes 'has fostered entire fields like psychotherapy and social work; the assumption that a challenge course leader can effect this type of change in a few hours . . . certainly needs to be examined more critically' (p. 38).

Fourth, is the critique of the role of risk and the use of stress/anxiety as a beneficial pedagogical tool (Zink & Leberman, 2001; Davis-Berman & Berman, 2002; Leberman & Martin, 2003; Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; M. Brown, 2008). Beedie (1994) argues that the problem with the ' "empowering through taking risks" theory of the learning process' is that it is difficult to determine what happens if students 'fail to cross the line' (p. 17). In an activity such as abseiling where there is a clearly defined crux, does a student 'fail' if they do not step over the edge? What, in Dewey's (1938) terms, might be the miseducative implications for not having completed the task? Perhaps, in this instance, with knowledge of the student's background, it may have been more beneficial for them not to have attempted the abseil. Estrellas (1996) argues that the manipulation of risk and the associated stress can be dysfunctional and impact negatively on both individuals and groups. Additionally the use of stress to create a state of disequilibrium, supposedly requiring resolution, is theoretically contestable (Lourenco & Machado, 1996). The benefits of manipulating stress to create disequilibrium is questionable and is not a valid rationale for using risk as an aid to learning (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005; Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005; M. Brown, 2008). Moreover, Leberman and Martin (2003) point out that activities in which students had been pushed outside their 'comfort zone' were not necessarily the activities that resulted in peak learning experiences. In research with Japanese students on an Australian Outward Bound programme, Purdie and Neill (1999) suggest that courses premised on the need to facilitate disequilibrium so 'that individuals can learn about themselves as agencies of change and be encouraged to take leadership and show initiative in order to solve personal and group problems', may not be appropriate in non-western cultural contexts (p. 56).

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Beedie (1994) suggests that the relationship between risk-taking and learning is far more complex than it might at first appear. Csikszentmihayli (1996) and Claxton (2002) confirm the value of being stretched 'by the "risky edge" of our experience' (Claxton, 2002, p. 21) but they maintain that such risk is highly personal, contextual and often unpredictable. In other words risk for one person is not necessarily risk for another as how risk is defined invariably depends upon the skills, abilities and dispositions one brings to any given situation. As Berman and Davis-Berman (2005) point out, anxiety and perception of risk are subjective and an individual's experience of, and capacity to deal with, perceived risk can vary widely. For some people exposure to risky situations can become debilitating for people, which may work against the process of change (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005). Indeed, as Davidson (2008) has suggested, the discourses of risk are both complex and multilayered. Zink and Leberman (2001, p. 56) suggest that risk is a 'social process as much as a process about rational decision-making'. As such, what constitutes risk is based on discourses that are always partial and incomplete and on social relations; relations in which decisions are made which privilege some ideas/relationships and ignore others.

There is a growing body of literature which questions some of the underlying philosophical and pedagogical assumptions on which much practice is based (Burrus-Bammel & Bammel, 1990; Wurdinger, 1997; Brookes, 2000, 2003a, 2003b; Haluza-DeLay, 2001; Hovelynck, 2001; Nichol, 2002a, 2002b, 2003; Payne, 2002; M. Brown, 2003, 2004, 2008; Lynch & Moore, 2004; Zink, 2004). These critiques call into question some of the taken-for-granted assumptions that inform current practice and in so doing, call for reflection as we endeavour to improve the educational outcomes for OAE participants.

Our attention now turns to the positioning of risk within contemporary OAE discourse.

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Risk within the outdoor adventure education discourse

The promotion of risk is arguably a central pillar and distinguishing characteristic of OAE pedagogy (Miles & Priest, 1990, 1999; Priest & Gass, 1997; Wurdinger, 1997; Zink & Leberman, 2001). Risk has been defined as 'the potential to lose something of value. The loss may lead to physical (broken bones), mental (psychological fear), social (peer embarrassment), or financial harm (lost or damaged equipment) . . . Risk is created from the presence of dangers' (Priest, 1999, p. 113). Priest and Gass (1997) assert that risk is an integral component of the OAE model and one of the reasons it is popular and successful. Wurdinger (1997) suggests that risk 'is the element that distinguishes adventure education from other educational fields' (p. 43). The role of risk in OAE pedagogy is well summed up in the following quote:

> To maximize safety, adventure professionals structure risk in a manner that causes participants to perceive it as being enormously high, while in actuality it is much lower than perceived and more acceptable as a medium for producing functional change and growth. By responding to seemingly insurmountable tasks, participants often learn to overcome self-imposed perceptions of their capabilities to succeed (Priest & Gass, 1997, p. 17).

Thus risk is also seen to have a positive side; growth and development of individuals and teams. For example Haddock (1993, p.1) states that, 'It is widely accepted that adventure-based outdoor educational programmes offering *risk* are a medium for personal growth and development and team building' (original emphasis). Zink and Leberman (2001) suggest that instructors' accounts of their lived experiences indicates that practitioners also perceive that there are potential positive benefits of risk for participants. From this perspective, personal growth or transformation is dependent on the participant being placed in a setting of stress where there is, at the very least the perception, if not the reality of risk and the chance to lose something of value (Estrellas, 1996). However, Wolfe and Samdahl (2005) have questioned whether risk and challenge lead to positive outcomes. They suggest that there are several underlying assumptions regarding the value of risk in OAE. The first is that learners need to learn how to deal with risk and that this will be beneficial for them. The second assumption is that 'the potential benefits from an adventure experience outweigh the potential risks . . . The overt assumption is that participants have the ability to recover from negative situations' (Wolfe & Samdahl, 2005, p. 33). Berman and Davis-Berman (2005) have recently questioned the need to create a state of tension, or disequilibrium, as a way to bring about change and growth. They suggest that challenges to a person's perceived sense of safety and security through the promotion of risk (physical, emotional or mental) 'bears a striking resemblance to many of psychology's early theories and approaches' (p. 20). In the light of contemporary understandings of change conditions, people are more likely to respond positively when they feel safe, secure and there is a level of predictability in the environment (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2005). They contend that it might be ethically suspect to heighten 'levels of anxiety or perceived risk in order to facilitate change' (p. 20).

The utilization of risk assumes that the outdoor/adventure instructor is capable of assessing each individual's level of perceived risk to ensure that optimal learning will occur and to objectively quantify the 'real' risk thereby avoiding harm to participants. However incident records confirm that it is difficult, if not impossible, for instructors to assess risk (real or perceived) with precision. So why is it that risk has become such a central component of OAE theory and practice?

Risk: confusion between personal preference and pedagogical principles

Central to this discussion is the role of risk as a rationale for achieving educational objectives in OAE. We need to be clear that as the authors we are not arguing whether risk is of value to society, or whether risk is something which those involved in OAE should value. Our purpose is to question the role of risk in an educational context as a teaching and learning strategy and to suggest that learning may be equally, or better served by other pedagogical approaches.

Those working in OAE have often been brought up with, or been introduced into outdoor education/recreation through, involvement in kayaking, climbing, skiing, and so forth, and can attest to the benefits of adventurous endeavours, perhaps without reflection as to whether the benefits are assumed or real. It is probable that

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individually they value challenge, and the taking of risks. This assertion is supported by Zink and Leberman's (2001) findings that all 12 instructors in a study at two OAE providers in New Zealand reported that, 'risk had a positive, if not essential role in their lives' (p. 53). Responses also included 'risk is healthy . . . the risk is fun' (p. 54).[4] It is also likely that people gravitate to others who share similar interests and outlooks on life.

The rationale for risk as a pedagogical strategy in OAE goes something like this; outdoor/adventure educators deem that adventure is what society and, perhaps more specifically, young people need. Adventure is good and helps to realize one's fullest potential. To adventure is praiseworthy, it naturally involves risks, therefore risk-taking is beneficial and educationally justifiable. These beliefs about the value of risk are also repeated in 'authoritative' texts on OAE that often make up the required reading in introductory courses on outdoor recreation (Mortlock, 1984; Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988; Luckner & Nadler, 1997; Priest & Gass, 1997). In this light, risk has become a point of difference from other educational approaches. It has, in some ways, become OAE's hammer.

It is pertinent therefore to consider Brookes' (2002) caution to be conscious of too closely aligning our practice with 'strongly held personal beliefs and values' (p. 422). Interestingly, all of the instructors in Zink and Leberman's (2001) study considered that risk was a defining element of adventure education. Bunting (1999) also expresses the concern that some OAE instructors may be more interested in pursuing their own objectives in the desire for personal gratification than accomplishing appropriate educational objectives for their students. Lugg (2004) suggests that the passion which is a strength of the profession, can also be a weakness, in that 'it can create a "blinkered" view of outdoor education practice rather than an openness to critique, debate and, possibly, change' (p. 10).

Other factors, in addition to the suggestion that a merging of personal preference with professional practice, have been suggested which may contribute to the dominance of the risk discourse. In a review of outdoor education textbooks Brookes (2004) suggests that:

> The proffered theory seemed steeped in the overall commitment to established outdoor education practices which defines many of the discursive situations . . . it was difficult to avoid the impression that whatever the educational problem, the solution always seemed to be some mixture or selection of ice-breaking, trust activities, ropes course, environmental awareness activities, an expedition and adventure activities (p. 23).

He goes on to argue that authors of outdoor education textbooks seem to assume that the acceptance of outdoor education programming principles conducted in the past implied such programmes were educationally sound, rather than critiquing them as socially constructed and therefore being situated in particular social and historical contexts which may no longer be applicable to today's learners. Brookes (2002) suggests that the search for universals in OAE practice, coupled with the uncritical acceptance of imported outdoor education theory, has inhibited the development of critical perspectives. The net effect has been the development of

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'widespread inadequacies in outdoor-education theory internationally' (Brookes, 2002, p. 406). This theme is commented on by Wolfe and Samdahl (2005) who suggest that the pedagogy utilized in OAE is based on two central assumptions: that risk leads to positive outcomes and that these benefits are transferable to contexts other than those experienced during an OAE programme. They argue that these assumptions have been accepted as foundational tenets for programming without having been tested as to their veracity. In a similar vein McKenzie (2000) points out that 'the current understanding of how adventure education programme outcomes are achieved is based largely on theory, rather than empirical research' and as a result, 'practice is grounded in assumptions' (p. 19).

Additionally, the commodification of risk in the provision of adventure experiences and the 'dominance of the voice of this paradigm' which 'gives the impression of only one way or, perhaps a right way to do things' (Loynes, 2002, p. 113) has been critiqued by authors who deplore the production-line approach inherent in much OAE practice (Loynes, 1998, 2002; Ringer, 1999). OAE pedagogy has been described as, 'an enclave, a sub-set and out there somewhere beyond the everyday experiences of the majority of the population . . . seen by non-practitioners swathed in a foggy mist which practitioners have been slow to clear' (Beedie, 1995/6, p. 12). Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards (1997) concur and suggest that adventure programmes 'have been conducted as if they operated in isolation from the educational world. There is little incorporation of research on group dynamics, attitude change, educational theory, and cognitive processes' (p. 77). While Nichols (2000) is so bold as to suggest that:

> An underdeveloped understanding of the process of adventure education, an inability to go deeper than the understandings of those such as Mortlock and Priest, which focus on the physical experience (Beedie, 1995) has left adventure education in a particularly vulnerable position when society's judgement of the risks involved in the activities it uses change (p. 127).

Brookes (2004) suggests, 'that outdoor education discourse has tended to regard educational enquiry in outdoor education as a way to find uses or justifications for established outdoor education practices' (p. 27). Nichols (2000) posits that OAE employs a somewhat circular line of reasoning in regard to risk in that there has been a tendency to find uses for established practices:

> Adventure education has to relate its educational objectives to the use of risk in its programmes. It has to try and justify risk by showing that it does lead to personal growth and valued outcomes if it is to establish that risks are worth taking and can be managed constructively in the education process (p. 133).

Nicol (2002b) suggests that OAE philosophy has emerged from accepted practice, perhaps more by chance than design and therefore it arguably lacks clarity and purpose:

> Consequently philosophical debate proceeds in defence of what has already been done . . . In this respect outdoor education shares a philosophy which is more likely to be a reinforcement of the status quo than a visionary pedagogical endeavour (p. 90).

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Contemporary OAE practice/theory has been built on a mixture of educational and psychological theories and traditions which have been transplanted from other historical, cultural and academic contexts. The field has seldom engaged with the broader 'mainstream' educational discourses; discourses which do not require risk to enhance learning.

While some will dismiss aspects of the critiques above as being in conflict with their experiences, we have chosen to acknowledge the concerns raised. In what follows we call for a re-evaluation of the role of risk and explore other educational perspectives on learning. We draw on both research findings and theoretical understandings about the contextual nature of learning. In an effort to reframe, rather than merely to engage in a critique which does not offer an alternative, we ask: What does recent research within the broader area of learning theory contribute to OAE pedagogy to ensure that it is relevant and reflects the needs of learners? An engagement with broader educational discourses may prove fruitful, for as Hattie et al. (1997) note, 'Teachers of adventure programs, however, have all too rarely used the research from their in-class counterparts to improve their programs, and they need to more fully appreciate that they are conducting an educational experience' (p. 78). Bunting (1999) also challenges adventure educators to expand their repertoire of practice and move beyond merely increasing the level of risk in activities in an effort to improve outcomes.

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Alternate approaches to risk within OAE

Nichols (2000) alludes to an alternate approach to conceptualizing risk in an educational sense when he states that:

> the predominance of activities associated with physical risk have had the unfortunate effect of diverting the focus of adventure education from understanding the most important types of risks involved. Focus has been concentrated on the physical risks associated with activities . . . [i]n contrast, some have argued that 'it is not the activity itself that is central to the experience' and 'adventure education is not essentially risky' (Loynes, 1996) . . . the most important risks in adventure education are the risks involved in experiments in self concept. These are central to the process of personal growth. Thus the process is risky, but not in the sense so often associated with it, and these risks need particularly sensitive handling (p. 126).

Beedie (1994) also makes a case for viewing risk as part and parcel of everyday life, rather than the potential for physical harm. Beedie discusses education's role in 'risk management' where educators equip students to manage the risks associated with learning. It is the encouragement and support to take risks 'which places the locus of responsibility for learning firmly in the individual' (p. 15). He claims that this approach has the potential to lead to empowerment, the development of life skills, and enhancing dignity. It is the process of taking a risk to learn which is central to development rather than the nature of the activity. Creating an environment where students feel able to move beyond what they know, to question and to speculate without fear or risk of being wrong, is the educational challenge. Education

should be concerned with 'risk management' which empowers students to explore and take risks to aid learning (Beedie, 1994). An educator's role is to facilitate conditions where risk taking in social situations is managed in such a way to provide opportunities for students to develop skills which will increase their dignity. Beedie suggests that 'outdoor education, because it can involve adventure and/or risk activities is one way of achieving risk management' (p. 17). Zink and Leberman (2001) also suggest that future research be conducted on the meanings students give to their OAE experiences in relation to risk rather than focusing on what is deemed to be 'risky' as defined by experts. Educational theory more generally also attests to the value of taking responsible risks (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Sternberg, 2000) with the aim of building resilience in the face of setbacks and frustration (Claxton, 2002). Resilience requires the learner to manage and recognize risks, persevere at things that are challenging and tolerate the feelings that inevitably accompany difficulties. As Beedie (1994) suggests, building resilience empowers the learner. The focus is very much on how the learner perceives the situation and how they can manage it, rather than how the instructor provides and manages the risk.

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Contesting notions of risk

Clearly risk can be reconceptualized as described above. However, there are other lenses through which to view the learning opportunities afforded by OAE experiences. These alternatives are worth considering as they offer opportunities to reconsider existing conceptions of learning in OAE and develop possibilities for practice. Not only is risk presented all too often as a central 'good' for all learners at all times, it is presented by the instructor in situations that are highly orchestrated. The ropes course, the abseiling event, the zip line are all chosen, planned and controlled to a large extent by the instructor. The rhetoric of risk is highly appealing, as surmounting one's fears through risk taking has the lure of mastery, survival, accomplishment and immense satisfaction. However, mistaking the thrill of taking risks and the relief of surmounting these, for deep learning is tempting but fraught. For as Berman and Davis-Berman (2005) have suggested, 'when participants are placed in situations with little perceived control and high perceived risk, they may change some behaviors in order to cope and better conform, but these changes will probably not be internalized very well' (p. 20). While risk taking has a part to play in learning (Costa & Kallick, 2000; Sternberg, 2000; Claxton, 2002), the predominance of risk as central in OAE pedagogy creates a potentially limited construct that diminishes the learning possibilities for participants. If the instructor shifts their focus from providing thrilling experiences to connecting with learners, and the social and environmental context, then a more contextualized approach to learning can emerge.

A more subtle and more responsive pedagogical approach would be to focus less upon risk and its perceived effects for everyone, and more upon the learning that occurs. With a focus on learning, instructors shift their focus from 'what risk activities can I provide?' to 'what educational opportunities are available in this setting?'. This question is far more difficult to examine with any certainty yet it goes to the heart of the matter.

Insights from the socio-cultural perspective on learning

While learning *is* inevitably highly individual, it is also highly social and inextricably linked with peer culture and the historical context in which the activities are encountered (Rogoff, 2003; Nuthall, 2005, 2007). It is readily apparent that learners participating in OAE are not just operating independently and nor are they just interacting with the instructor. Their learning is 'embedded within the environment, it is entwined with people, places and things' (Carr et al., 2008, p. 51). Isolating the learner's personal experience misses a multitude of contributions that comprise that experience. A sociocultural lens on learning reminds us that the terrain of learning is navigated with others (peers, instructors) so that there is both individual and collective agency and participation in shared activity. It is also navigated with tools (such as language, various forms of specialized outdoor equipment, maps and other technologies) and with historical and cultural values, rituals and traditions (related to the environment and OAE). All of these contribute to the type and quality of learning a person experiences. Furthermore, Rogoff (2003) argues that all of these do not just influence learning; they constitute learning. The way in which a learner makes sense of OAE is mediated by the context and all that comprises that context. Transformation, if it occurs, is not just what happens to a learner. The sociocultural view is that instructors and the context itself are transformed through shared endeavours. This seriously challenges the notion of instructors providing a one-way experiential learning activity constructed around notions of manipulating and managing risk for learners. A 'one-way' form of instruction is where the instructor tells, directs, advises, challenges and informs. The learner's role in the one-way approach is to listen, comply, receive, follow and submit. This transmissive model of pedagogy assumes that risk is what is provided by the instructor for the learner's growth and development. Such an assumption presumes that learning is a one-way process wherein what is taught, or facilitated through an activity, is what people learn. This notion has persisted in education for some time and while there is a place for lecturing, instructing and telling, this traditional didactic view of learning is inevitably limited (see, for example, critiques from Bruner, 1996; Nuthall, 2007; Sewell & St George, 2008). Transmissive one-way pedagogy exists in both 'mainstream' education and OAE contexts. By way of example, Brown (2003, 2004) shows how facilitation can function as a means of direct instruction. Hovelynck (2001) also argues that 'adventure education is increasingly adopting the didactic teaching methods that it set out to be an alternative for' (p. 4). Estes (2004) also questions the discrepancies between espoused student-centred learning and the practice which is often teacher-centred.

Moreover, externally imposed risk and the necessary management strategies can undermine internal decision-making and learners' sense of agency. The contrived nature of many risk-oriented activities that are highly-orchestrated provide learners with a 'do' or 'not do' binary. Either they take the risk (and hopefully succeed) or do not (and are found wanting). Little in the way of growth and learning opportunities are afforded in such artificial situations that in effect, do not require significant decision-making by the learner, and thus no ownership of consequences. For

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example, the use of ropes courses, abseil towers and so forth, requires the careful management of risk by expert instructors which often prevents participants from engaging in, developing and extending complex risk-taking strategies of their own volition, albeit in supported circumstances. Participation becomes a zero-sum equation whereby the participant is 'enclosed' by a network of technologies (safety equipment, procedural requirements and predetermined and mechanistic sequencing) which potentially prevent the development of autonomy or resilience by the removal of natural consequences due to the need to manage risk. Hunt (1990) picks up on this point when he questions the lack of opportunity in some programmes for students to take responsibility for their actions when risk is managed by experts on their behalf. Such programmes, he suggests may be more amusement park than educational.

A less contrived approach to OAE could emphasize the social and cultural context (Beedie, 1995/6) wherein decisions are socially mediated and consequences for all are considered. What could emerge is a transformed territory of meaning (Onore & Lubetsky, 1992) in which the elements of place, space and cultural tools combine with interactions between people. This transformed territory stresses the totality of the experience as a shared enterprise; one in which all may be changed. Thus, such learning emanates from a view of OAE as a community of practice where mutual engagement is sustained through 'pursuing an enterprise together to share some significant learning' (Wenger, 1998, p. 86). For Rogoff (2003), 'learning is a process of changing participation in community activities. It is a process of taking on new roles and responsibilities' (p. 284). This emphasis on changing participation in community disrupts the notion that learning can be 'forced' on anyone and that risk activities alone offer some 'answer'. It also encourages OAE to consider views of learning that acknowledge the role of the individual in learning but also the social and cultural context in which learning occurs. It offers up opportunities for learners to have more agency as they *take* new roles, rather than have new roles thrust upon them. This shift in emphasis is subtle but important as it encourages greater ownership and decision-making by participants than is traditionally evident.

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Summary of possibilities

OAE instructors still need to manage and lead, and risk still needs to be considered and assessed. The critical examination of risk and the emphasis here on agency and community does not mean that instructors abdicate responsibility for programming or that they merely learn alongside their participants. What is argued is an extension of the repertoire that instructors employ, beyond the one-way provision of risk activities to a broader emphasis in OAE on educational possibilities (Lugg, 2004). Some of these possibilities and alternatives have been outlined above; the implications of these are outlined below.

- Enables participants to re-visit activities, experiences and ideas; not just have one-off adventures. This is more likely to maximize engagement, enhance ownership and deepen learning.

- Acknowledge the social context and mutual engagement with peers and others as part and parcel of the learning process; not just focus on individual development and achievement through risk-taking. Learning is as much a social endeavour as it is a personal one, and the two cannot be neatly separated.
- Increase opportunities for participants to take on new roles, make decisions through appropriate activities, evaluate ideas and exercise both individual and collective agency. For example, participants planning provisions for an overnight excursion.

All of these points have emerged from over 40 years of empirical research into learning and teaching (Nuthall, 2007) and thus have considerable currency as well as applicability to OAE. Moreover, an emphasis on learning as a shared territory of meaning (Onore & Lubetsky, 1992) requires that the instructor's role shifts from one of external orchestrator of risk events to a much more nuanced, interactive and responsive role which views learning as a conjoint endeavour between and within people, places and events. In addition, these three points position the learner more centrally in the process as having 'agency' by contributing to how and what they learn.

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Conclusion

It appears that contemporary OAE discourse holds risk 'in tension'. The tension is a result of the assumption that participation in activities involving the 'potential to lose something of value' (Priest, 1999, p. 113) is inherently positive and integral to enhancing learning. However this 'positive' and life-affirming component is conducted under the constant shadow of an 'uncertainty of outcome', the potential for injury and/or a fatality. Thus, from the focus on activities which expose participants to risk, has arisen the pervasive discourse of risk management. Risk management is the flip-side of the coin that requires participants to be placed in situations of risk if learning is to occur. However as we have argued, the current emphasis on risk as an integral component of OAE has created a paradox which potentially removes agency and authentic decision-making from the participants. This paradox has led Wurdinger (1997) to describe the field of OAE as schizophrenic. The technical expertise required to manage risk activities potentially reinforces power and knowledge differentials in OAE settings that are evident in other aspects of OAE practice (M. Brown, 2003, 2004) and classroom based student-teacher interactions (Edwards, 1980; Young, 1984; Bishop & Berryman, 2006). As Giddens (1991) suggests, 'the concept of risk becomes fundamental to the way both lay actors and technical specialists organise the social world' (p. 3). It is timely to rethink aspects of the OAE discourse and regain balance with the educational dimensions of the endeavour rather than the placing undue emphasis on the adventure component. This calls into question the common nomenclature of 'instructor' as opposed to 'educator'. The former sits comfortably with notions of risk and risk management while the term 'educator' is a broader more complex and nuanced term that requires

a greater concern for effective pedagogy and quality learning. 'If individuals are going to call themselves adventure *educators*, then they should provide programs which offer educational value' (Wurdinger, 1997, p. 74). Beedie and Bourne (2005) argue that the debate around risk needs to be moved from a focus on 'risk activities *per se*' (p. 338) to a broader conceptualization of education which prioritizes holistic and democratic learning outside the classroom rather than what often amounts to little more than adventure holidays:

> Outdoor education has a role to play in re-dressing the current imbalance by broadening constructions of risk taking beyond its present educational focus on activities. This is not to say that the activities have no value, but rather to recognize the role schools can play in promoting an informed and balanced understanding of risk in contemporary society (Beedie & Bourne, 2005, p. 338).

As Loynes (1998) argued a decade ago, risk need not be central to adventure education, nor should it dominate and preclude alternatives (Allison & Wurdinger, 2005). However, risk has monopolized OAE due to its allure. As Loynes (1998) suggests, 'Risk can therefore be viewed as a marketing strategy. Much like overt sexuality sells ice cream, cosmetics, cars, and just about anything, so risk sells outdoor adventure' (p. 37).

Thus, risk is a seductive quality that can mesmerize participants and obscure other opportunities for learning. Reliance on a paradigm of OAE based on risk as a means to develop physical endurance, courage, and leadership qualities may be appealing to some sections of society but fails to encompass the wider needs of an increasingly diverse society. As Lugg (2004, p. 10) reminds us, 'for outdoor education to develop as a relevant *educational* pursuit we must be prepared to examine our own practices in relation to contemporary social issues in *this* place and culture' (original emphasis).

The challenge is to further the impetus to 'disentangle ideas of adventure and risk from adventure pursuits' (Beedie & Bourne, 2005, p. 337). This involves examining the pedagogical opportunities afforded by creating situations for students to engage in activities which encourage participants to make authentic decisions, to exercise individual and collective agency, and to take some responsibility for their actions.

The current ways in which OAE is taught offers many authentic learning experiences and this should not be dismissed. There is much potential, however, for enhancing the educative aspects of these experiences when viewing OAE through approaches that acknowledge the complexity of learning. The 'hammer' of risk and a mechanistic approach to experiential learning dominates how OAE is perceived and interpreted. There can still be a place for such concepts but we restrict and narrow the possibilities when too narrow a view dominates the field. OAE like any cultural community is subject to ongoing change, and such change inextricably changes those who participate in it (Rogoff, 2003). It is timely to question the assumptions underpinning this aspect of practice in OAE and consider changes that enhance and extend the repertoire of teaching and learning possibilities.

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Acknowledgements

The authors are grateful for the informative feedback provided by the reviewers during the submission process.

Notes

1. Outdoor adventure education refers to the particular branch of outdoor education that has developed with a primary focus on developing interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships (Priest & Gass, 1997).
2. While adventure, risk and uncertainty are not necessarily synonymous their usage indicates connectedness at the 'common definition' level as expressed in the quotes above. Beedie and Bourne (2005) have also pointed out that while risk is not the same as uncertainty or danger it can refer to similar concepts.
3. Providers refers to external agencies or companies that provide OAE programmes to the public, industry groups or schools. As such they are not necessarily bound, nor guided by official curriculum documents. Such organizations are often staffed by skilled outdoors people who may have little or no formal training in education. The first author has recently returned to an academic position after two and half years 'in the field' with one such organization in New Zealand.
4. Zink and Leberman's (2001) findings indicate that those involved in OAE may have different views of the role of risk than those who engage in voluntary risk taking in recreational pursuits. Ewert (1985, 1994) has reported that risk-taking was not of high motivational importance in high altitude climbing; in fact those with more experience are more motivated by intrinsic factors which they found personally rewarding. Lyng (1990) has also reported that experienced outdoor recreators value decision making and control rather than risk taking. The difference in the role of risk between outdoor educators and experienced voluntary recreators is a potential area of further research.

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