

## **Leap of Faith (AARE 1997)**

### **Leap of Faith - Phil Fitzsimmons**

[T]he methodology of the constructivist is very different from the conventional inquirer [it] is iterative, interactive, hermeneutic and at times intuitive and certainly open [I]t makes demands of its own so heavy that anxiety and fatigue are the constructivist's most constant companions. It is a different path, one strewn with boulders, but one that leads to an extravagant and hitherto virtually unappreciated rose garden. (Guba and Lincoln, 1989:183)

#### **Purpose, Paradigm and Project**

This paper discusses the benefits derived from an 'adventure experience' as perceived by 150 young people. All 'first timers' from both sexes, their ages ranged from 9 to 25 years. Beginning with a pilot study in the Wollomai Canyon in the Blue Mountains of N.S.W., this project has since broadened out taking in the experiences of several other groups either undertaking the same canyon experience, or climbing in the region.

This project was initiated because of a series of nagging doubts that I had concerning the field of Outdoor Education. It seemed to me that field as a whole is struggling to find itself and has begun to exhibit symptoms of 'methodological pre-pubescence'. Symptoms of this state

include;

¥ Making grandiose claims without the benefit of experience. Recognised as a relatively young field, in research terms, in the past decade practitioners in this area have begun to call themselves 'Adventure Therapists'. While I have no problem with this nomenclature, I am concerned that many of the claims of the field appear to be based on short term academic point scoring research. Confirmation of my misgivings seem to be confirmed by Barret and Greenaway's (1995) extensive review of the literature which revealed a potted history in regards to the veracity of the findings and rigour of the research methodology.

¥ Reliance on a narrow world view. During the 1980's there were rumblings of discontent (albeit small) from researchers in the field that much of the 'outdoor' research is speculative or purely quantitative (Warner 1982, Easley 1986). It would appear that over a decade later very little has changed methodologically and that, as verified by McKenna (1995) and Barret and Greenaway (1996), Warner's conclusions are still relevant.

... it is generally accepted that the evaluation and research literature is insubstantial, and that the zeal and energy that it takes to chart new educational directions does not necessarily breed critical reflections and self analysis.(Warner 1982:309)

Thus in an attempt to overcome at my lingering concerns and begin to 'critically reflect and self analyse', it was decided to undertake this project from an ethnographic or anthropological perspective. In light of Barret and Greeaway's (1996) assertion that little attention is

given to the perspective's of the participants (especially younger participants), this study sought to describe ... the experience individuals are having and the meaning their actions are having for others (Eisner 1981:6).

Data were analysed by initially applying Schon's (1993) notion of learning as 'metaphoric change'. Schon describes this process as a series of developmental stages which include immersion in an experience, the triggering of a generative metaphor, the generation of new vocabulary leading to a 'naming and framing process in which the experience is articulated in new vocabulary.

During the final analysis phase six recognised experts, who worked or were involved various facets of outdoor education, were interviewed as part of a triangulation process.

## Facets of the Findings

### A New Frame and a New Metaphor

Similar to the findings of Spain (1990), McGowan (1991) and Yaffey (1993) the key respondents in this study also gained a broad range of perceived benefits which included heightened self esteem, self confidence and self awareness. However, when overlaying the language of the transcripts and survey data with Schon's (1993) stages of 'metaphor' development it appeared that all of the benefits that the respondents gained were nested within a broader framework. The generative metaphor created was similar to Iso-Aloha's (1980) notion of finding 'freedom' as a psychological reaction or release to a 'loss of

control'. It would seem that the initial feeling of loss led to hostility and confusion. However this dissipated in a relatively short space of time giving rise to a heightened sense of self awareness. With the exception of one female (who never overcame the initial hostility and fear state) all reported this growth to be characterised by a new awareness.

This awareness impacts individuals to the degree that their view of their life-world is changed, reflecting the new awareness we labelled "spiritual growth". Spiritual growth, by definition, requires change (in awareness, which is rarely planned or calculated (MacDonald 1988;194).

The facets of this new found awareness included;

¥ a suspension of personal context

The experience these respondents underwent drastically altered their view of themselves and their daily lives. Without exception the physical beauty of the environment in which they found themselves had a tremendous impact on them.

I/viewer: What was the greatest benefit?

Respondent A: The experience of doing it, the canyon itself. I totally lost track of where I was

Respondent B: The area was beautiful. like nothing I had experienced before. Looking up at the huge rock formations was incredible. I thought the majestic quality of the trip by far outweighed any discomfort experienced during the trip. I can't wait to do another more challenging canyon in the future.

During the course of the day they all found themselves at various times reflecting on and comparing the difference between the dynamic location

they were now engaged in and their own day to day existence. Indeed the "observation of the aesthetic splendour of nature" created more than a "dynamic natural encounter" (Rolston 1991:397), it formed the basis of a new understanding of themselves and the way they lived their day to daily life. While the emotional elements were 'short term, and lasted from the time we were in the canyon' (Geoff, respondent), the experience of having encountered an alternative 'space wholly different from others' (Graber 1976:196) appears to have transformed and widened their world view. It seems that the nature of their immediate environment combined with an activity that created new physical and emotional demands forced them to almost 'crash through' hidden psychological barriers engendered by the regularity, rituals and precision of their daily lives. The natural environment, which had once only been in the periphery of their vision, was now a dominant force and they were now released from the 'suppressed communities of the city' (Illich 1984:97).

This 'suspension of personal context' was the most commonly discussed theme amongst all the respondents. Two of the highly experienced respondents confirmed the classification of this experience in the following terms.

Robert: Look I agree with what your saying. I think you got it right.

When I get out in the water or the bush its like a 'washing machine for my head'. Its like taking my mind out of my body and just letting it sit for a while. You look at life in an entirely different way.

Everything stops. You can see the big picture and you realise how insignificant you are in the big scheme of things. But it makes me realise that I must matter and that I am a part of it and that I have to protect it.

Glenn: When I'm climbing everything that has gone before and will come after stops. You're focussed on one thing only. Its a quasi religious experience.

¥ a suspension of temporal perception

Even the most cursory reading of the interviews and survey responses reveals that, combined with the suspension of personal reference, there seems to be a distinct lack of reference to time. It would appear that once these groups entered the canyon time stood still. This suspension of the 'arrow of time' (Hawking 1988:145) seems to have lead to a view of time which was measured not in seconds or hours but relegated to cycles of deep reflection, interaction with others and personal victories which were cued by the successive impacts from their immediate environment. Measured time only restarted as they began to surface above the rim of the canyon. For the period of immersion within its natural walls they were in a junction between 'stillness and motion, time arrested and time passing' (Prigogin and Stengers 1984:312). Forced into a powerful but alien setting they turned inward and reflected deeply about their own abilities, but more importantly began to interact with others in the group more intensely than they had done previously. This turning to others may simply have been an attempt to reach out and stabilise themselves in the relatively unnatural

suspension of time and place, however it did produce for the majority of the respondents a new experience of unselfishness.

¥ suspension of self

A continually recurring theme in all of the recounts of the experience is the naturally arising demand to help fellow students meet the obstacles of the trip.

One of the positive aspects was that it provided opportunity for team work within the group. (Dean, respondent)

Although at times driven by necessity, the participants stopped continually to help each through rapids, abseil and manoeuvre throughout the canyon. Each individual reported that they began to look at others in a more caring and tolerant light. All came to realise that for efficiency in respect to time and safety, constant monitoring of not only their own progress but the progress of nearby team members had to be carefully watched. However it seems that lines of communication that had never been opened and elements of trust and openness spontaneously arose. For many of the respondents this was an unexpected bi-product to the excursion and an unknown trait of character.

It was interesting to observe students who had never spoken or who hardly knew each other establishing building relationships, communicating in highly effective ways and trusting personal safety to virtual strangers.

The bonds that can form between people in experiences of common challenge are invaluable because of the sense of support they create (Bunting 1987:30).

### Stages of Metaphor Growth

The change in 'awareness' would appear to move and grow through a series of relatively clear stages. While resembling the lock-step ladder development of personal development defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1991:221), the stages of metaphoric growth for the overwhelming majority of participants in this study were cyclical and recursive. More importantly, Csikszentmihalyi believes that such change occurs over a large stretch of time (it not a lifetime), where as the time frame for personal growth in this study occurred over a 10 hour period. While compressed, I believe that the personal development that occurred was greatly facilitated by the regular debriefing sessions that were undertaken by the two group leaders as they led their parties. The personal reflection that occurred during these debriefing sessions may also explain the recursive nature of the development. The overall pattern of development is described schematically in the following diagram.

### Table 1: Stages of Metaphor Growth

What does it mean?

The suspension of space, time and self are strikingly similar to the

basic elements which constitute the ecstatic experiences of African Bushman (Heinz 1978). While not arguing that the respondents in this study entered into any form of ecstatic experience, I believe that they did encounter an esoteric or spiritual experience. When analysing the transcripts of the interviews and the survey answers, the most common lexical items deal with looking out, looking to others and looking within. This language parallels the description, provided by a Bushman, of the ceremonial ritual of the ntum wherein the shaman dancer enters a spiritual realm and views the natural environment and themselves in a new light of freedom.

The 'spiritual' nature of these findings was totally unexpected and raises a series of interesting questions.

¥ How these findings impact on the current 'wilderness' courses offered by public providers?

¥ What are the implications for these findings in regard to the Health Curriculum?

¥ Could it be that research in the Outdoor area has been too shallow and needs to be refocussed?

¥ Does the change in self esteem and personal perception created by outdoor experiences represent only the surface features of the change process?

¥ What is the real nature of humankind given that one relatively simple experience can force us to explore and affiliate with life in a deeper and more complicated way?

The occasion and the experience are nothing. It all depends on the

capacity of the soul to be grasped, to have its life-currents absorbed  
by what is given. (James 1911:257)

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