

**Adventure Education as Cultural-Historical Activity:
A Study of Experience, Learning and Social Processes in Project
Adventure Workshops**

by

Jayson Seaman

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EXPERIENCE, LEARNING AND SOCIAL PROCESSES IN PROJECT ADVENTURE
WORKSHOPS

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Education

May, 2006

DEDICATION

For Kim
and, for my father

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I want to begin by acknowledging my family, and especially my father, who mentioned one day (after I quit my job at a school), “maybe now would be a good time to pursue a Ph.D.” Little did I know the changes that would result from that one comment. Their support and encouragement was integral to making it through.

I also must go farther back than that comment from my dad, to the beginning of my career as a teacher, and thank Mark Roth for being an early mentor. His willingness to support my ideas exceeded what any principal should probably exhibit toward a young, eager teacher, but without him many of the ideas that formed the basis for this inquiry would never even have germinated. I cannot thank him enough for his trust. I also want to thank Amy Kohut, for both being a mentor and for helping me with the early logistics of this project. Our co-leadership in one particular workshop inspired some of the ideas in this project, and will always stand out as an exemplary professional experience. I hope my project has done some kind of justice to the moments we shared that week. While attending to these influences, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the students, participants and colleagues with whom I worked over the years, because if not for you this project would have no substance at all. I can now say in all honesty that I have learned more from you than I could ever have hoped to “teach,” and your footprints are all over this dissertation.

Aside from my early influences, I have relied on the generosity and tutelage of many people on the way to completing this degree. The staff at Project

Adventure, especially the trainers whose workshops I attended, were more than willing to open themselves up to my questions. Through your openness, I was able to learn a lot about myself in addition to what I learned in this project. I admire your skill as trainers. Furthermore, Project Adventure provided me with whatever information I asked for, as well as giving me free access to their workshops and opening up their lodging and meals to me at a greatly discounted rate. I value everyone at Project Adventure as a colleague and owe a considerable debt of gratitude to you.

I cannot begin to satisfactorily acknowledge on one page (or even a few pages) my appreciation for the support the education faculty at UNH has given me since I began this program. Scott Fletcher, Ann Diller, Barbara Houston, Bill Wansart and Mike Middleton especially have been tremendously influential not only in my studies, but in my growth and development as a professional. The doctoral program affected me in ways I could not comprehend at the outset, and that cannot appear on any transcript; I am a different person now than I was four years ago. It is my honor to call you my colleagues, and my pleasure to call you my friends.

I happened to meet Dr. Pablo Chavajay almost by accident. Since our initial chance meeting, Dr. Chavajay's expertise with sociocultural theories has been most helpful in my understanding of learning and development. I have also learned a great deal over and above my own studies, about child-rearing and cultural practices in Guatemala, through his explanation of his own work with sociocultural principles. And, since I am not a student in his department, his participation in my studies and on my committee was truly above and beyond the call of duty. I would not have been able to complete this project without his

methodological and conceptual guidance, and his generosity in supporting me.

Mike Gass' ongoing guidance and friendship will remain an important part of my professional past and future. Many of the practices in the field of outdoor experiential education grew directly out of Dr. Gass' pioneering work, and my hope is that new scholars like myself can take the field further because of his influence and the foundation he has built for us. I look forward to continuing our dialogue about how to make things better for students, and also to put ideas into practice.

Tom Schram's mentorship and patience over the last two and a half years has been remarkable. He supported my early wanderings in his Qualitative Inquiry class and helped me conceive of, map out, and complete this project. His even-handedness was always a necessary corrective for my sometimes incoherent ramblings, especially at key times during the coding and conceptualization stages. I want to thank him particularly for his patient reading of the many drafts it took to complete this project. Tom is a role model for committee chairs, and I hope I get the chance someday to treat a doctoral candidate as well as he treated me.

Finally, Kim and I have now made it through three graduate degrees, the construction of two houses from scratch, several job changes, a few relocations, and everything else that comes along with being happily married. Our love, and the idea of spending our lives together, is what makes any of it worthwhile.

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ABSTRACT

ADVENTURE EDUCATION AS CULTURAL-HISTORICAL ACTIVITY: A STUDY OF EXPERIENCE, LEARNING AND SOCIAL PROCESSES IN PROJECT ADVENTURE WORKSHOPS

by

Jayson Seaman

University of New Hampshire, May 2006

The present study aims to illuminate the way participant learning in adventure experiences intersects with broader social, cultural and institutional contexts, and was guided by the following questions: How is participant experience constructed in a facilitated, small group adventure setting? How is the construction of the adventure experience related to the intentions and orchestrations of the trainer? How is the construction of the adventure experience related to the institutional and social context in which it occurs?

This study used grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) and cultural-historical activity theory (Engeström, 1987; Leontiev, 1977; Vygotsky, 1978). Activity as an analytic device facilitates the mapping of historical, social and cultural influences on local action, while grounded theory helps maintain close attention to local phenomena.

Aside from making methodological advances, I develop several major concepts. First, I identify the *object* of adventure education as the morally improved and socially interdependent subject. It is this object that defines and establishes the conditions toward which the *activity* is oriented and must be

understood. Second, *Participation frameworks* position the subjects as interested actors who negotiate and align with one another through the course of different exercises. As an analytic device, participation frameworks help identify the way subjects expect the workshop to conform with their goals, and act on the basis of their expectations. Third, *collaborative ideation* is the process through which the object of adventure education is realized. There are two sub-parts to collaborative ideation: *vertically mediated action*, or the ways participants' encounters with speech, kinesthetic poses, and physical instruments are orchestrated by the trainer for particular effect; and *horizontally mediated action*, or the ways participants become resources for each other's learning. These factors reflect a complex process of interaction in which participants experience *contradictions* between the actions required for involvement in the adventure, and the social expectations they have for situations.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Research Questions

In this dissertation, I study the social, cultural and historical context for individual participation, learning and social processes in four-day, adult professional development workshops conducted in an adventure education setting. I begin my inquiry by asking the following questions:

- How is participant experience constructed in a facilitated, small group adventure setting?
- How is this construction related to the intentions and orchestrations of the trainer?
- How is this construction related to the institutional and social context in which it occurs?

Research Objectives

By focusing on these questions, I aim to accomplish two central, interrelated objectives:

- To develop a technical understanding of the constituent parts of *participant experience*. In other words, to determine its *structure*.
- To situate *participant experience* in its historical, cultural, social and institutional context. In other words, to determine its *location*.

Focusing on these aims accomplishes two things. An emphasis on *structure* can develop dexterity with respect to future uses of “experience” to teach. An

emphasis on *location* helps recognize the social and cultural resources subjects draw on to make sense of their experience. As will become apparent, structure and location are mutually entailed.

Project Background

The underlying motivation for the project comes directly out of my practice as an educator, with extensive background with experiential education in various settings. I have participated with service learning, adventure education and outdoor experiences as the context for teaching and learning in multiple settings, with multiple age groups, with multiple social characteristics, toward multiple objectives: backpacking, rock and ice climbing, kayaking, canoeing, winter travel, challenge courses, classroom-based situations, rebuilding rural homes, serving in urban environments, and so on. My career has been one of struggle, trying to incorporate experiential methods of teaching and learning into more “traditional” institutions ranging from the direct level of the classroom to the policy level of state and federal bureaucracy. In these settings, I have attempted to teach (or work with other teachers to teach) science, English literature, writing, environmental studies, social studies, math, and of course, the usual menu of “character building” (Brookes, 2003) and outdoor skill goals commonly associated with outdoor programs. At each level and in each subject area, I often felt like I had no language with which to describe the complexity of teaching through experience—regardless of its perceived benefits to students—let alone make the most effective educational decisions and recommendations (although this did not stop me from making them).

The institutional context of my work aside, I have probably logged more days on a challenge course than any of the other mediums, but the interests I take

up in this project derive from persistent questions about my participation in all these settings—including service learning. I realized, upon reflection, that despite using these mediums as avenues for teaching and learning, I knew little about how they functioned to teach or how I was able to guide my own practical decisions.

Turning to the literature of experiential education provided me with few satisfactory answers. Of course, I often pointed to models like Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984) as a foundational aspect of my practice, even though I was never quite satisfied with its ability to characterize some of the powerful and transformative moments of learning my students and I seemed to have. As it turns out, I was not the first practitioner to have misgivings about some of the acknowledged foundations in the field (DeLay, 1996). Many of the outcome studies appearing in the literature, showing that students' self-esteem (or some other dependent variable) increased after participating in outdoor programs (e.g., Bisson, 1998; Iso-Ahola, 1997; Paxton & McAvoy, 1998), provided helpful data but only seemed to reduce the vibrancy of the actual experiences to a single dimension and fail to capture the dynamic, interactive aspects of experience. And many of the qualitative studies in the experiential education literature seemed to do a decent job of describing the kinds of scenes I was used to witnessing, but added little theoretical depth to my understanding of the practice (e.g., Festeu, 2002; Long, 2001). Much, much more seemed to be going on than any of the models or studies indicated, and it was difficult to develop a deeper understanding of the constitutive social processes from these studies and reports. Even after receiving a master's degree in outdoor education, I couldn't answer the questions that persisted in my practice; not only could I not answer them, but I did not even

know how one might precisely identify them.

My motivation in this project is thus not to romanticize experiential education—in this case, in an outdoor adventure setting—by adding to the body of evidence that it works, but rather to interrogate its processes and see what it works *at*, and how it does it. Many studies have been conducted that connect programmatic means to ends, arriving at conclusions supportive of the general notion that outdoor education works at some aspect of character building (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Marsh, Richards, & Barnes, 1987; McKenzie, 2000). Such studies often seem to focus on justifying the instructional procedures and methods used rather than identifying the underlying social and individual processes operating during those procedures (e.g., McKenzie, 2003). These largely affirmational studies aside, a sufficient number of studies and articles critical of outdoor experiential practices also exist to warrant some degree of skepticism as to the unqualified benefits to all participants (Bell, 1997; Haluza-DeLay, 2001; Pinch, 2003).

It is at this point almost a cliché to comment on the absence of rigorous inquiry into the social and cognitive processes involved with outdoor experiential education. It does not seem to me that the current theoretical “lacunae” (Quay, 2003) is likely to be addressed by doing another means-ends outcome study, at least until greater theoretical sophistication is achieved. Approaching the problem from another angle seems to be required. That said, I do understand the current desire to demonstrate outdoor education’s effectiveness by conducting outcome studies and evaluations in order to secure the longevity of programs operating in mainstream educational institutions (Gass, 2005); a desire, it seems to me, motivated (legitimately) as much by the current political environment surrounding

education as by research interest (see Seaman & Gass, 2004). Of course, mine is also a political project, inasmuch as one's question, methodology, interpretations and conclusions are inherently and unavoidably political. I suspect these politics will become clear throughout the dissertation—I will at least do my best to make them explicit.

It is also important to point out that I am not endeavoring to argue that the methods involved with outdoor experiential education are or are not effective at causing learning to occur, even though I will spend some time discussing the effectiveness of specific approaches near the end of the dissertation, based on the conclusions drawn from my research. Instead, mine is largely a theoretical and methodological project, aimed at closely examining and ultimately redefining the perspectives that underwrite some of the commonsense notions actively maintained in the field. I mean to address some of the genuinely persistent and ongoing questions I, and others, have about what experiential education is, and what claims one can make about learning as a result of it. It is my belief that, upon revisiting the asserted theoretical foundations—especially once they are situated in a historical context—a reappraisal of current practices will be a more manageable, more effective, and more fruitful project.

History of the Questions

Since this project arose largely from my experience as a practitioner, it will provide the reader with important contextual background if I situate it in some of the practical situations giving rise to my questions. I present three episodes to help illustrate my reasons for making some of the methodological decisions I did in this study, and to help explain why I was drawn to sociocultural and activity theoretical approaches as the conceptual context for the project. While the

following examples do not provide an exhaustive illustration of the background for the project, they should suffice for establishing several key, underlying themes that will hopefully be visible in the rest of the text. They should also alert the reader to potential gaps in the analysis that follows: did I, in fact, address the questions raised by these examples?

Situation 1: Culture and environmental conditions. In 2001, I taught a course at a rural high school called “Winter traditions and technology.” It was designed to give students experience with qualitatively different modes of travel and existence in the winter, so as to highlight the differences between modern and ‘traditional’ ways of living. The educational intent was for students to a) have their own cultural experience on which to reflect that would b) address understandings about the cultural experiences afforded by modern means of existence and the traditional, close-to-the-land means of existence of the Cree tribe of Northern Quebec. Broadly speaking, we wanted to illustrate how culture is bound up in the material conditions of existence, and using an outdoor education context—one that was characteristically different from the ordinary conditions of students’ existence—seemed to provide an opportunity to make that inquiry with students.

To address this objective, we designed and redesigned four aspects to the environmental conditions throughout the course that, we hoped, would result in qualitative differences in the students’ social organization: food, travel, shelter, and clothing. We decided it was possible to address the notion of cultural difference experientially, and set about to accomplish that through three trips (as well as many daily in-class exercises). The trips are listed in order of their occurrence in the course:

1. Modern, goal directed winter backpacking, using lightweight equipment, no external heat sources, food that is prepared quickly and efficiently, and in terrain typical of this approach to winter mobility—up and over mountains.
2. Modern clothing and sleeping bags, pulling sleds, sleeping in a yurt and a snow shelter, cooking only whole foods (i.e. flour, a whole chicken, etc), traveling over relatively flat terrain (as necessitated by our means of travel). We also did some dogsledding on this trip.
3. Traditional shelters (canvas tents) with woodstoves, cooking whole foods over wood fires (the students skinned rabbits and made stew), wearing only wool and cotton, and traveling over flat terrain with toboggans the students made by hand. We did use modern sleeping bags out of concern for safety.

As it turned out, the trips were indeed qualitatively different. The first trip was somewhat grueling and unpleasant, with little time to socialize (everyone just wanted to eat and get into their sleeping bags), and the other two were easier but also drew out different experiences—during the two hours it took to cook meals the students socialized and told stories. These trips were characterized as more fun, more relaxed, and with different goals. For instance, the first trip had the definitive goal of getting up and down a mountain (typical of modern goal-directed winter travel). The other two had as their goals (not really goals—necessities driven by our chosen constraints) to set up camp and make food, which took almost the whole day. The course was, in our view, successful in meeting its educational objectives.

After the course was over, I asked one of the students with whom I had a positive relationship what the most important thing in the course was. He responded (and I'm paraphrasing): "Everyone in the class came together, even

though we had differences. It didn't matter who we were in school—*all that stuff fell away.*”

The student's comment stood out in my mind as a compelling statement. What stuff was he talking about? How did this falling away happen? How was this related to the changes in the environment? How did the design of the trips and classes relate to this change? And, how did this falling away relate to the students' learning of the content and engagement with different aspects of the course?

Situation 2: The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. One of the most powerful experiences I've had on a challenge course happened in my first Project Adventure workshop that I co-instructed. The workshop was not supposed to be a facilitation-heavy workshop—just a basic, entry-level introduction to some aspects of working on a challenge course.

In this workshop, it is not uncommon for two trainers to each take half of the group. Typically, the trainers negotiate the amount of large group (20-30 people) time and the amount of small group (10-15 people) time. Also, sometimes the trainers switch groups, sometimes they mix up the participants over and over, and sometimes they stay with the same small groups throughout. Each of these approaches has advantages and disadvantages. Mixing participants up facilitates interaction with a greater number of people. Staying with the same trainer builds a stronger relationship within the group and between the group and the trainer. The trainers switching groups allows more group cohesion among participants, but introduces the groups to different teaching styles (also, if there are challenging participants, this last approach splits the burden between trainers). There is no specified pattern, and each workshop is therefore different.

In this particular workshop, I remember distinctly having a conversation

with my co-leader about how we wanted to approach this decision. She favored mixing up the groups, and I favored sticking with the same groups throughout the week. My rationale was that, as future practitioners, I wanted them to have a powerful group experience themselves so they'd know what it feels like as a participant. My belief was that this was a desirable outcome of the workshop. Otherwise, they'd simply leave knowing a bunch of new games and activities but not knowing the potential of these exercises in any personal way.

We decided to stay separated for most of the workshop, but also come together at key points as a large group so as to not prohibit participants' interaction, and also as a way to offer views of our different teaching styles. The workshop proceeded apace. Somewhere around the third day, the group I had been working with (which had been very pleasant, personable, and self-congratulatory as groups tend to be in the beginning of the workshops) was engaging in an exercise called the spider web.¹ I noticed, as is typical to this exercise, that the group decided to have the physically strongest member pass through the web first, and then proceed to pass the "weaker" participants through since there is some lifting involved in the later phases of the event. Typically, women are volunteered or volunteer to be lifted because it "makes sense." After the exercise, we were discussing their strategy and, as usual, the group congratulated themselves on their success, stating that they had been inclusive in their approach, hearing ideas from everyone, trying new ideas, and so on. They expressed that they felt like they were really functioning well together. I shared with them my observation about the handling of gender roles (literally), and they

¹ See Appendix B for illustrations of the elements referenced in the text.

stopped short—they were quite astonished. The discussion turned and we began talking about assumptions, equality, the limits that group members place on other members but that they don't realize. I hadn't intended such a deep conversation, but there it was.

In the end, this was a turning point for the group. We closed the day by doing a debriefing exercise called "appreciation circles" wherein people share several appreciations of others in the group and give them a Hershey's Hug (a small chocolate candy) as a symbol of their appreciation. During this, several of the group members started crying. In particular one of the older, male physical education teachers was especially choked up as he specifically thanked one of the women in the group for opening his eyes about engaging with women differently.

At the end of the workshop, we closed as a large group. We did a closing ceremony where people swap certificates of attendance and exchange words of thanks or acknowledgement. I don't think there was a dry eye in the room: 30 adults cried in front of one another, embracing after what had clearly been a powerful learning experience. The only comment I could share was that I understood for the first time the phrase "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Later, other PA trainers gave my co-leader and me grief, jokingly. They commented that people are supposed to laugh at the end of adventure programming workshops and cry after adventure-based counseling workshops (another of the PA workshops, usually more personal and intimate).

There are several relevant aspects to this situation. First, the deliberate design decision my co-leader and I made about how to configure the groups. Second, my decision to point out the gender roles in the group seemed to give permission to address some unspoken themes. Interestingly, I have pointed this

out in other groups, but it did not yield the same result. Third, the sheer emotion with which the group engaged with one another seemed to elevate the discourse to an intensely personal level. Fourth, the exercises themselves allowed for certain kinds of interaction, and how my co-leader and I orchestrated them must have contributed to the end result. Fifth, I became incredibly intrigued by the nexus of language and action, after our discussion at the spider web. Which came first? New language or new action? Or, new views on old action, expressed in new language? Finally, and perhaps most significant to a theoretical appreciation of the event, it does not seem possible to reduce this experience into any one of its dimensions or attribute the change to any one of the participants—the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. Something new seemed to be created for all of us, that cannot be reduced to the ideas belonging to any one of us.

Situation 3: Expertise, content, and the formation of a group. In my first year teaching I had what was perhaps the most pivotal moment in my career as an educator. This experience would largely come to define my pedagogy and my career.

In college, I attended an alternative spring break (ASB) program which took me to Washington DC to work in an elementary school with poor, African American youth. It was extremely powerful for many reasons, which I won't discuss here. When I began teaching, I had the idea of doing an ASB trip with high school students, and luckily the principal was supportive of the idea. In fact, when I told him the idea he personally walked out to the secretary and made sure the van was reserved for the week I intended to go.

Planning for the trip went well, and enrollment quickly reached the 10-student limit. The students who signed up were an eclectic group. They were not