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AUTHOR	Hall, Roger; Rowland, Caroline
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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relationship between experiential learning theory and outdoor management training, and describes a British outdoor management program grounded in adult learning theory. An introduction explores competing paradigms in management education: the managerialist perspective, which focuses on development of skills and competencies; the critical perspective, which analyzes political aspects of management; and the humanist perspective, which is rooted in human relations theory. Originating in the Outward Bound movement, outdoor development emerged in the 1970s as a mechanism for developing managers and organizations. Today, outdoor management development is used by a third of British corporations. The rationale for using the outdoors as a training environment emphasizes novel activities that heighten awareness of interpersonal behavior, psychological risk, and elimination of role conflict common in office settings. An outdoor management development program, offered for 10 years at a business school in northwest England, includes a mandatory 2-day residential program. Large- and small-group outdoor activities are designed around adult learning theory, particularly Kolb's learning cycle, and include review and feedback sessions and reflective tasks. Themes emerging from participant comments and evaluations indicate that outdoor management programs can fulfill both educational and training roles and can stimulate the development of analytical skills, and that structure, relevance, and perceived transferability are important features of effective outdoor programs. (Contains 22 references.) (SV)

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Roger Hall, University of Huddersfield and Caroline Rowland, Liverpool Hope University College

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This paper explores the relationship between experiential learning theory and the development of managers in the context of outdoor management programmes. It begins with an exploration of the contours and boundaries of competing paradigms in management education. We discuss the development of programmes grounded in adult learning theory and analyse the outcomes of one such programme at a particular business school. The suitability and effectiveness of the outdoors as a learning environment is evaluated, using feedback, student reflections and assessments.

Introduction

The outdoors has, for many decades been used as an environment for management training courses. These range from Outward Bound programmes which began during the second world war to programmes which form part of the development of senior management competences. Implicit within much of the literature on management training is the notion of management as a professional activity for which individuals can be trained through structured activities. There is less emphasis on the educative aspects of management development programmes. Yet, it is in university business schools and management departments where much of such development takes place. The managerialist paradigm, which views management education as a means of developing the skills, competencies and capabilities of managers, has long been dominant in business schools. This focus was reinforced by reports into management education (Constable and McCormick, 1987; Handy, 1987) and the subsequent development of competence-based standards MCI, 1992, 1997).

French and Grey (1996) identify two further broad paradigms in management education – critical and humanist. Within the critical school, management and management teaching are scrutinised and analysed from a perspective, which is not concerned with improving the way in which organisations are managed. Critical theory includes neo-Marxist interpretations, focusing on concepts of management as a political process, post-modern approaches which view management discourses as a social construct and feminism, where the central concern is organisational gender inequalities. Humanism, with its roots in human relations theory, may be thought of as contributing to both the managerialist and critical perspectives. Certainly, humanist concepts and research from the Hawthorne experiments (Mayo, 1933) to ideas of organisational learning (Senge, 1990; Pedler and others, 1997) form much of the theoretical underpinning of many business school programmes in organisational behaviour.

Education and training

The above typology has resonances of a much older debate between instrumental and liberal education. In management development the words *training* and *education* are often used interchangeably and there are clear overlaps between the two. To evaluate the extent to which the outdoors can contribute to management education it is necessary to begin with operational definitions, which distinguish between education and training.

Reid and Barrington (1994 : 45) argue that education and training differ in the following ways:

- *In the degree to which their objectives can be specified in behavioural terms*
- *In the time normally taken to realise learning objectives*
- *In their methods and content of learning*

- *In the context within which the learning materials are used.*

Traditionally, educational objectives are less specific and tend to focus more on the person than the task. They have a longer time scale, measured in years or a lifetime rather than weeks or months. Education employs methods of learning which are organic rather than mechanistic (Tannehill, 1970) and the content emphasises theory and concepts rather than job-specific knowledge, skills and attitudes. The context of learning also influences the focus; a health and safety programme may be training for supervisors but education for management students.

The Dearing Report laid out the purposes of higher education:

- *To inspire and enable individuals to develop their capabilities to the highest potential levels throughout life, so that they can grow intellectually, are well equipped for work, can contribute effectively to society and achieve personal fulfilment;*
- *To increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake and to foster their application for the benefit of the economy and society;*
- *To serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge-based economy at local, regional and national levels;*
- *To play a major role in shaping a democratic, civilised, inclusive society.*

(NCIHE, 1997. Summary Report, 23)

For the purposes of making judgements about the educative nature of management learning, we shall use the Dearing criteria as indicative features of educational as opposed to training programmes, together with the following:

- The use of theories and conceptual frameworks which stimulate analytical and evaluative skills
- Consideration of critical research into management and management education

Historical perspective

Modern outdoor development originated in the Outward Bound movement. In 1941 Kurt Hahn used the outdoors to provide a learning environment through which sailors could recognise and achieve their potential (Irvine and Wilson, 1994). Modern Outward Bound courses reflect those original objectives:

> Outward Bound is intended to be catalytic; to encourage change and to help each participant more fully to achieve self-knowledge and understanding of others. It embraces both personal development and preparation for life in society. (Putnam, 1994)

It was from these educational beginnings that outdoor development emerged in the 1970s as a mechanism for developing managers and organisations. Today, outdoor management development is used extensively (6%) or occasionally (32%) by a third of British corporations (Financial Times, 9.1.1995). The most commonly cited objectives of such programmes are increasing self-esteem, leadership skills, problem-solving ability, decision-making, team-building and personal development (Wagner and others, 1991).

The claims made for outdoor management development are extensive and are reflected in advertisements in professional magazines for the large number of providers. There has, however, been very little evaluation of the effectiveness of such programmes. Mazany, Francis and Smith (1995) cite ten studies without any objective measures of effectiveness, a finding that is echoed by others (Buller and others, 1991; Irvine and Wilson, 1994; Burletson and Grint, 1996). In those studies, where evaluation of effectiveness has taken place, this has focused largely on the transfer of learning to the workplace (McGraw, 1993; Wagner and Campbell, 1994). This reflects the fact that many programmes are financed by organisations as part of management development initiatives. It emphasises the managerialist paradigm, which dominates management education in general and outdoor management training in particular.

Before examining the rationale for using the outdoors as an environment for management development, it is useful to distinguish between two types of programme, as the emphasis has an impact on the validity of the rationale. Programmes, which take managers from a range of organisations or from different parts of the same organisation, may be thought of as *manager* development programmes. Here the emphasis is on personal development through critical insight and a focus on interpersonal skills. Corporate programmes may be thought of as *management* development. Here the focus is on building teams of people who work together.

Critiques of outdoor management development

The rationale for using the outdoors as an environment for management training may be summarised as follows:

- The outdoors provides novel activities in an unfamiliar setting, which heightens awareness of interpersonal behaviour. (Irvine and Wilson, 1994)
- There is an element of real danger, which stimulates radically new forms of thought. (Pettigrew, 1974)
- The outdoor environment tends to eliminate much of the role conflict so common in office settings and forces participants to act in a much more honest and transparent way. (Wagner and Campbell, 1994)

The outdoors provides opportunities which allow managers to learn through three interrelated processes: cognition, emotions and behaviour (Schein, 1993). It is argued that the experiential activities which are integral to outdoor management development are more powerful than traditional methods (Mullen, 1992).

Burletson and Grint (1996) take up the idea that outdoor activities are devoid of traditional norms. Their ethnographic studies conclude that many outdoor management programmes are not novel and, in some cases, merely replicate the politics of office life. Irvine and Wilson (1994) endorse this view and also dismiss the notion that physical injury is a real risk. Potential litigation has ensured that the risk of serious physical injury has been minimised in most programmes but perceived danger and psychological risk remain. It is, perhaps, the combination of novelty, unfamiliarity and a degree of psychological risk, which creates an aura of difference in outdoor management development programmes. Decisions made tend to have immediate and potentially uncomfortable consequences. The process of establishing fresh norms may give insights into behaviour, which more conventional learning settings may not allow. The argument that the outdoors alone can create the conditions where behaviour is unconstrained by existing roles and relationships is much more powerful in the case of corporate programmes than in the case of programmes designed to develop individual managers.

Few of the outdoor management development programmes described in the literature are based on rigorous theoretical foundations. There is often, a naïve belief in the character building nature of outdoor adventure programmes and of the transfer of learning to the world of work. Where programmes are planned, using established concepts of adult learning, there are indications that such programmes may come nearer to meeting the educational criteria we set out above.

Irvine and Wilson (1994) consider such issues as appropriate levels of stress, the extent to which training reflects the working environment, the types of skills utilised and process review as part of Kolb's learning cycle. They suggest that effective outdoor management development meets the following criteria:

- It is likely to be novel.
- It involves psychological risk – trusting others.
- Activities match individual needs and can be made more complex.
- It reflects the workplace environment.
- There is an emphasis on managerial, not activity skills.
- The experience can be reviewed.

McGraw (1993) argues that, in addition to organisational barriers to the transfer of learning, individual learning styles may not be suited to outdoor management development programmes. He suggests that short sessions on theories of leadership, teambuilding and personal development may

help those, whose learning styles are neither activist nor pragmatist. Theory and reflection may provide a more balanced approach to learning than experiential activities alone.

Mazany, Francis and Smith (1995) used Kolb's learning cycle (1976) and the three processes of cognitive, emotional and behavioural learning to design an outdoor workshop for the University of Auckland MBA programme. The workshops included icebreaking exercises, learning teams, creative problem solving, skits and debriefings, where participants were allowed to analyse and reflect on their efforts to solve problems as a team. An evaluation, involving pre- and post-workshop case studies and a control group demonstrated the following changes:

- A more consensus-oriented decision-making process
- More active, equal participation
- More member satisfaction with team output
- Improved intra-group communication
- Greater commitment, more enjoyment

Although these examples address the criticisms levelled at outdoor management development programmes, which focus on the lack of theoretical underpinning, there are a number of other concerns. Some of these are more illusory than real. Physical danger is not significant on most programmes, as long as basic health and safety precautions are adopted. Nonetheless, in a litigious world, emotional and psychological stress may be very real concerns. Equal opportunities legislation has implications for access to outdoor training in terms of race, gender and disability. As Clements, Wagner and Roland (1995) point out, this raises questions about fair treatment based on abilities not related to people's jobs. They also raise concerns about activities, which require people to touch each other. Older managers, those with dependent relatives and those who work unsocial hours may be disadvantaged on outdoor programmes, which are typically held in the country at weekends and may involve strenuous activity.

It was with the above rationales, critiques and issues in mind that the authors designed and modified an outdoor management development programme, which has run for the last ten years at a Business School in the North West of England

Certificate in Management outdoor development programme.

The Certificate in Management Programme described in this paper includes a mandatory two day weekend residential programme, based on a series of outdoor activities and designed around the learning models described above, with a particular emphasis on Kolb's learning cycle. Its aims were to introduce key concepts of teambuilding to line managers and to develop relevant transferable management skills and encourage their application in the workplace. The programme used criteria from the Management Standards and personal competencies, based on the Management Charter Initiative model (1997).

Participants were introduced to group behavioural and process theories and models prior to the weekends in away similar to that described by McGraw (1993). Large and small group activities were used throughout the programme. These activities were in unfamiliar outdoor surroundings to provide a challenge, but ensured equality of opportunity by offering activities that did not all focus on physical activities. Review sessions were held during and after the programme. Assessment and feedback were based on tutor observation, peer assessment and self-assessment by means of a reflective assignment completed immediately after the programme. An action learning approach was taken and participants were encouraged to perform a task, reflect on their performance, relate it to theory and to use the new knowledge and skills in both their social and working lives.

From the outset the programme was designed with a reflective element (Kolb, 1976). Over a ten-year period the activities and outcomes were reviewed by tutors and participants and appropriate modifications made. For the first three years the aims of the programme were shared with the participants prior to its start. However, the aims of the participants were not made explicit and emerged only after the programme in individual reflective analyses, completed as part of the

assessment process. The programme was modified in the fourth year and participants were asked in the first activity to write out their individual and group aims and concerns and to share these with all members.

Care had been taken since the inception of the programme to ensure that none of the activities were of high risk (Irvine and Watson, 1994) and, because of this, additional insurance was not required. The programme had never been envisaged as a physical test but as a vehicle for learning team skills. However, the issue of equal opportunities was not fully explored until relatively recently. The programme had been designed to be safe for people with conditions such as asthma, back troubles and pregnancy and, although contingencies were in place for persons with other needs, no participants with disabilities had attended the programme. This was largely a reflection on the nature of the organisations, from which the participants came and was not a representative cross-section of society. It was not until the seventh year that we had experience of registered disabled people attending the weekend. It was through their contributions that we were able to modify the programme further, allowing people to choose activities, based on their own capabilities and learning needs. Qualified helpers were also provided for disabled participants if they wished.

Another modification made in the same year was the removal of some of the *apparent* danger. This was made explicit to participants in a briefing session prior to the weekend, explaining that there would be no hidden surprises and that the most physically demanding task would be a two-mile walk. Participant concerns had emerged in the first exercise of the weekend when many people wrote that they were anxious about having to abseil, climb, swim or even have spies in their group. These concerns had arisen through negative previous experiences on outdoor management development programmes, from colleagues' anecdotes and from documentaries such as the Ridgeway programme.

The consequent modification of the programme design to fit individual learning needs more closely had some interesting outcomes. With a choice of tasks, some participants chose to try and test themselves by engaging in riskier activities, such as making presentations or learning new skills such as map-reading. (Pettigrew, 1974) Others chose to remain in their comfort zone and consolidate their skills. On a more negative note, some participants, who had recognised prior to the weekend that they needed practice in areas such as oral presentation, feeding back or chairing a group, chose to forgo those opportunities. Self-assessment was emphasised as being an important aspect of the activity because of a tendency for people to *perform* when being assessed by tutors or peers. There was no grading of the weekend to encourage a focus on self-development and an exploration of the relationship between attitude and performance.

Participants were asked to submit a personal reflection and analysis of the programme and its effect on the individual and the group. They were also asked to comment on the relevance of its application to their workplace and how it related to management concepts and models. (McGraw, 1993)
Strongly emerging themes common to all programmes were:

- People are eager to learn about themselves and develop individual and team skills
- People are anxious about the unknown and unexpected
- The programme had highlighted the need for continued learning
- Planning, communication and organising are important in forming effective teams
- Feedback and evaluation are crucial
- Peer feedback is a powerful tool
- Building a team is complex; sometimes anger and frustration occur
- Working in large groups is difficult; sometimes strong personalities take over and chaos may ensue
- The experience helped reinforce theoretical learning about teams
- All participants felt that they had learned something; most felt positive about themselves, even where there were self-identified weaknesses, which needed working on.

Conclusions

The emerging themes clearly demonstrate that outdoor management development programmes can fulfil both educational and training roles. The themes reflect the purposes of higher education, which Dearing set out. One of our further criteria is also met. The use of theories and conceptual frameworks stimulated the development of analytical skills. This was demonstrated in participant reflective reports, particularly in the areas of personal competencies and group roles. However, the programmes are still firmly located within a managerialist paradigm; there are few concessions to critical theory, although humanist perspectives are apparent, both in the theories and models employed and in the reflective reports prepared by participants. It is also clear from these reports that the outdoor environment can stimulate learning under appropriate conditions. Learning is improved if the purpose of learning is clear and understood by all involved. The outdoors is stimulating because of its unfamiliarity, but physical challenges can inhibit learning. Tasks, which require skills of team-working, problem-solving and creativity, provide more relevant learning opportunities than overtly physical tasks. Structure, relevance and perceived transferability are important features of effective outdoor programmes. Those, which in their design, address individual differences through choice, can obviate some of the equal opportunities issues, which often beset such programmes.

The experiential activities, the structured learning cycle approach and the powerful combination of cognitive, behavioural and emotional learning, which are focal to the programmes described, provide the potential for shaping learning in a unique and enduring way. The process of continuous review ensures that programmes are updated in the light of experience to provide current and relevant learning opportunities.

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