

Reality Television: Altering Participants' Expectations of Adventure Programs

by Kevin Lindner

Have you ever felt that when explaining adventure programming to people they have a different understanding and expectations than the context you are trying to convey? Over the past few years, there has been a growing appreciation of group dynamics programs within schools and companies – a fantastic opportunity for the adventure programming field. When people come to us, however, their expectations may be quite different from ours: their expectations may be based on what they have seen on television, perhaps informed by their favourite program, such as *Survivor*.

After working in many adventure programs where I heard comments such as “We’re not going to be doing that stuff they do on *Survivor* or *Fear Factor*, are we?” or “Who is going to be the first one kicked off the island today?” or “This is nothing compared to the stuff on *The Amazing Race*. When do we get to do that stuff?”, I decided to try to find out why people have these thoughts and images and how it effects what we do with groups when they come for an adventure education program.

I learned that reality television has been around for many years; it was first in the form of pageants or game shows (Anderson, 2007). Then in 2000, a show by the name of *Survivor* was introduced: this show brought 16 individuals to a deserted island where they were divided into two teams. Teams and then individuals competed against each other in hopes of winning the grand prize of \$1 million. Each week someone was voted off the island. I found out that the show’s premiere had 15 million viewers and grew to 51.7 million viewers for the finale (Anderson, 2007). *Survivor* became a cultural event that provided a way for viewers to experience

adventure through others. The show produced activities that people watched, activities in which groups had to work together to survive. Those images stand out for many individuals when they hear they are going to participate in an adventure-based learning program.

Due to the wide popularity of *Survivor*, television companies quickly developed other reality shows like *The Amazing Race* and *Fear Factor* that use “ordinary” people to show how groups can work towards a common goal. With the growing popularity of these competitive challenge reality shows, companies, classroom teachers, and community and youth group leaders have seen the types of activities these shows produce and feel that this is the way to bring their group together. When individuals hear they are going to participate in an adventure program, their expectations of our programs may be based on the various reality television programs that they may have watched or heard about.

For some individuals, the chance to participate in an adventure program focused on group building is exciting. Participants have seen challenging activities on some of the reality shows, feel exhilarated and excited by the opportunity to participate in these tasks and expect to ultimately find them thrilling. From my experience, I have found that when these types of individuals arrive at the adventure education program, they are the ones who are extremely excited, who are ready for anything, and who want to get right into things without any context-setting, framing or reflection. They tend to be the ones who want to be the first people to participate in an activity or to take the lead in an initiative task. Unfortunately for

some adventure program leaders, many of these participants become bored with the activities as they are not meeting the expectations that these excited participants had when they arrived. They were hoping to have more “thrilling” experiences instead of taking part in a program designed to foster an understanding of the process taking place within a group. The reality television shows have affected this type of individual who tends to be (and remains) disinterested in reflecting on the group process and wants to focus solely on the accomplishment of numerous exciting tasks instead.

On the other hand, some individuals may be reluctant to come to the adventure program as they have watched these different activities on television and have developed a sense of nervousness or anxiety before even reaching the program site or seeing the actual activities planned for their adventure-based learning experience. I have found that these individuals want to know what is happening before coming to the adventure education program and want to have a very clear idea of the program’s activities. They have seen what happens on the television shows and don’t want to let their team down if they cannot perform a certain task. All of these thoughts run through their heads before and sometimes even during an activity. Many of them have seen the results of not being able to perform a task or voicing a concern on television – it usually equates to being eliminated from the group or group members being disappointed in you. I have found these participants have a tendency to be quiet and not want to actively engage in the challenge either physically or verbally since they don’t want to be known as “that” person.

As you can see, there are two extremes on a continuum of how reality television can affect a person’s expectations and perception of adventure programming before even arriving and participating in an activity. I have found that different reality shows have different goals in mind for the participants.

For instance, a show like *Fear Factor* focuses on personal growth and motivation, as participants try to conquer fears by taking risks they avoid in their daily lives. The show *The Amazing Race* tries to focus on partners and their relationships together. The pairs participate in challenging activities that they would never have the opportunity to engage in under other circumstances. Many of these activities are culturally based due to the travel that happens on the show. Lastly, the show *Survivor* aims to teach participants to work with new people in novel and challenging environments and to leverage the strength of each member within the group to achieve success.

Within these reality television themes, participants learn many things about each other and each show ends the same way: with the award of a monetary prize. Each show gives the viewer a different perspective regarding what is considered successful and how to apply successful behaviours to reach an ultimate goal. I have found that using these shows in designing adventure programs is an intriguing way to develop group behaviours. At the same time, it is important to make sure that the participants understand the expectations of adventure-based learning programs, which are not just about winning a prize. I have utilized some of the themes that reality television shows have provided, but change the activities to stress cooperation and growth instead of competition and negative group responses. I found that it was important for me to apply these themes in some adventure program settings to create that sense of excitement for the individuals who need it, while at the same time try to ensure that everyone would feel comfortable participating in the activities.

Ultimately, reality television has demonstrated many ways in which people can grow as individuals and groups in unique situations. When using these reality show themes in adventure programming, I have found that at the end of the day it is truly

important that all participants have a clear understanding of the expectations of each individual in our programs through our common language and explanations of the programs. Reality shows have become a form of television programming that will be around for many years. In addition, reality television will probably take on different forms in the years to come. Consequently, we must make sure that every participant has a clear understanding of what will be happening in an adventure education program, so that their reality television-based expectations do not overtake the outcomes that we ultimately want to achieve: the development of groups and the personal growth of every individual.

References

Anderson, K. (2007, December 1). Has reality TV finally run its course? Realscreen Magazine. Retrieved December 15, 2007, from www.realscreen.com/articles/magazine/20071201/page13.html

Kevin Lindner worked as an Outdoor Education Program Director in Ontario for five years. He is currently working as a Senior Consultant with Adventureworks! Associates Inc. and teaches a course in Small Group Communications at Conestoga College.

