

Conference as Journey: Honouring our Pedagogical Roots

By Morten Asfeldt and Simon Beames

Most of us have spent many days and thousands of dollars attending academic conferences around the world, only to find ourselves sitting in ballrooms, listening to speakers and watching PowerPoint presentations. In most cases, this conference format represents a profound pedagogical contradiction for outdoor and experiential educators. This paper examines this contradiction and shares the story of an alternative conference design aimed at honouring the dominant pedagogy of outdoor and experiential education.

The Contradiction

Central to outdoor and experiential education is the belief that students should engage and experience the subject of study (Dewey, 1938). Ideally, students are presented with problems relevant to their daily lives, and that subsequently draw their interest. In the process of seeking resolutions to their problems, learners find themselves engaged in an ongoing cycle of thinking, doing and reflecting as they propose and test solutions (Kolb, 1984). This process requires students to activate all of their senses and, regardless of whether they discover a solution to their immediate problem, the experience provides a foundation for further learning (Dewey, 1938).

The contradiction that often arises from traditional academic conference participation is that we are forced to abandon the pedagogical essence that makes outdoor and experiential education so effective and that drives us to devote whole careers to creating lively learning experiences for our students. With this tension in mind, the two of us set out to test an alternative conference structure. We exchanged ballrooms for a bug-tent, buses for canoes, cityscapes for tundra landscapes and static presentations to large audiences for interactive sessions with an intimate group. And we required presenters to root their theories and

presentations in practice. Ultimately, our goal was as follows:

To gather an international group of academics who use wilderness educational expeditions as a part of their teaching to share a specific element of their practice along with its underpinning theoretical foundations. Ultimately, the “conference as journey” [aimed] to provide a forum for rich discussion about the varying international practices of wilderness educational expeditions. (excerpted from conference material)

Conference as Journey Overview

To achieve this aim, we gathered 14 delegates from Canada, Denmark, Japan, Norway, Scotland and Sweden and traveled together by canoe down a Canadian Arctic river for 14 days. Participants each submitted a paper that was reviewed and circulated prior to the event. They each then engaged the group in an expedition “practice” (or practical session), and facilitated a discussion of the theoretical foundations of that practice. It was our belief that this design would provide a forum for deep and meaningful scholarly conversation, effectively combine theory with practice, arm delegates with practical ideas ready for use, build relationships for collaborative teaching and research, and expand our understanding and effective use of educational expeditions.

With these goals and unique format, several questions were raised in our minds: Would our colleagues be able to find 16–18 days to participate? Would the cost be prohibitive? Would the structure work well? Would so many strong personalities be able to function effectively as a group? Would we build lasting relationships that would lead to future collaborations? On reflection it seems clear that we can answer all of these questions with a resounding “yes.” The conference was a grand success and our goals and expectations were far exceeded.

Traditional Academic Conferences

Research suggests that common goals of conventional academic conferences include engaging in scholarly conversations, being exposed to new colleagues and ideas, and sharing and receiving feedback on research and scholarly work (Behrens, 2008; Major, 2006). Recurrent shortcomings include the lack of meaningful scholarly conversations, poor session attendance, too little time for discussion following presentations, presenters simply reading their papers to an audience (which leads to decreased participant engagement), too much formality, session fatigue, break-time discussions that focus predominantly on “where to eat” and “what to see,” and the high environmental cost associated with conference hosting by way of fossil fuel consumption (energy used for travel, accommodations, presentation equipment, and so on) and other resource consumption (programs, cups, swag and bottled water, among other things) (Behrens, 2008; Major, 2006).

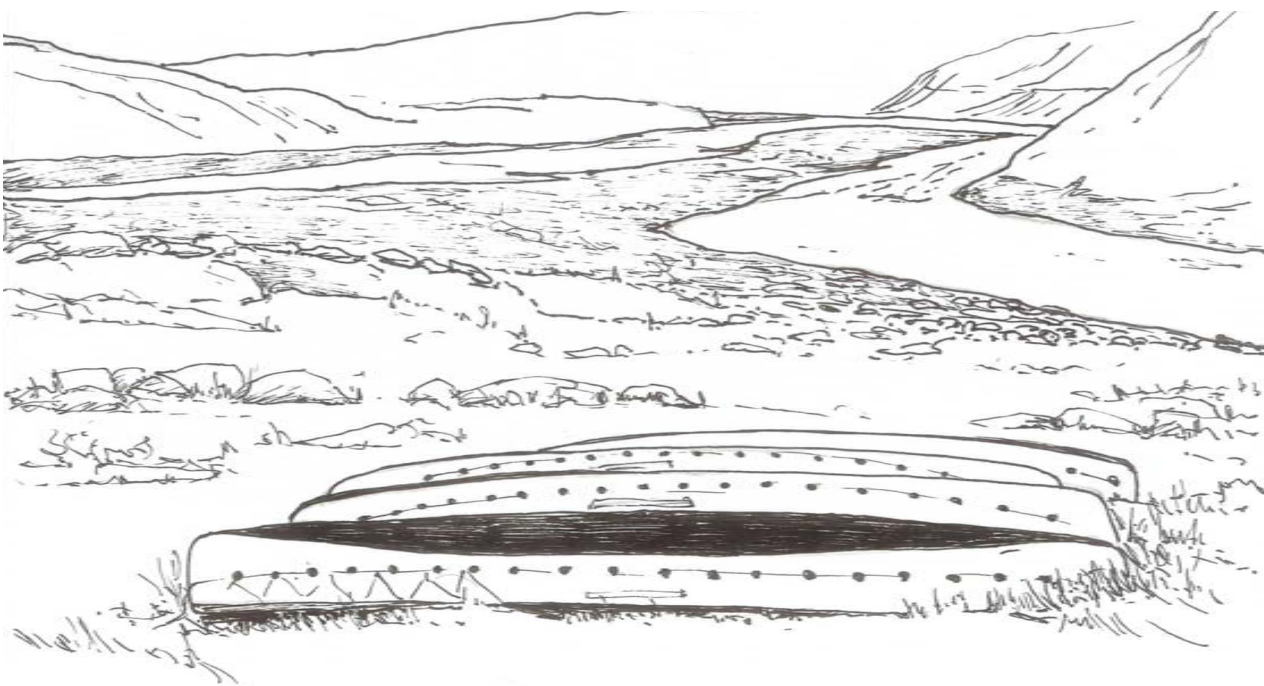
To improve conferences, Barton (2005), Behrens (2008), and Major (2006) suggest that presenters should be interactive and aim to increase attendee involvement, refrain from reading their papers, include

a “useful” or “practical” component that can be implemented in teaching or research, decrease presentation time and increase discussion time, and make a priority of sharing conference insights and ideas with colleagues back home.

Conference as Journey Assessment

While our “conference as journey” shared many goals of traditional academic conferences, it also had the potential to succumb to the everyday limitations (as noted above), as well as some that were unique to the intense small group experience and unpredictable nature of wilderness travel. To more deeply understand the strengths and weaknesses of our approach, we sought post-conference feedback from our delegates.

Reported strengths of the conference included the abundance of meaningful conversations, ample time for discussion (both formal and informal), the building of strong relationships (both personally and professionally), effective blending of theory and practice, the opportunity to read all presenter papers beforehand, and traveling as a group in the wilderness, which added a unique and vital richness to the discussions.



Weaknesses included constantly negotiating the tension between the demands of travel and the time for formal discussion of papers (more time could have been used for each), not having enough time to explore the place, the significant time and money commitment, the limited number of attendees (potential to be an elitist experience), and the carbon emissions associated with flying to and from the conference.

Overall, delegates universally reported that the conference as journey was a rewarding experience and that their motivations for participation were met. Furthermore, they indicated that the structure successfully addressed a number of inadequacies of traditional conferences (e.g., meaningful scholarly conversations, adequate time for these formal and informal discussions, a high level of delegate engagement, excellent collegial and personal relationship building, and an effective blending of theory and practice). In addition, delegates claimed that the combined conference and expedition design added a high degree of authenticity and relevance to the learning; it made the learning “real” and honoured the pedagogical foundations that guide outdoor and experiential education.

Conference Recommendations

Based on the literature related to academic conferences, our experience of this alternative set-up, and the feedback from participants, we make the following recommendations for future attempts to organize similar educational gatherings:

- choose expedition routes carefully to reduce tension between the need for travel and the desire to do other things
- build-in time to have formal discussions and explore the place you are in
- limit the group size to preserve intimacy within the group (14 is likely the maximum)

To allow for increased opportunities for relationship-building and informal discussions,

- make presenters’ papers available prior to the conference
- have a pre-established plan for disseminating conference insights and ideas to the practitioners and academics
- make conscious efforts to reduce environmental costs.

Finally, all conference organizers should ask themselves if the experience is worth traveling for (Behrens, 2008). In some cases, it may be that a large portion of the discussion and interaction can take place much closer to home, with consumption associated with time, money and fossil fuels being greatly reduced. In other cases, as with our conference as journey canoe expedition, the experience may be so central to the aims of the event that it would be impossible to reach these aims any other way.

References

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