

## Transitions and Transference: The “Ins and Outs” of Wilderness Educational Expeditions

By Pat Maher

When I think back to all the wilderness educational expeditions I’ve led, one thing sticks out in my mind: While I know these were amazing experiences for the students (primarily university undergraduates), could I have done more to help them transition into the experience and out again afterwards? Many times I, and I presume others, speak to the way that these sort of educational expeditions transform students—they’re often touted as once-in-a-lifetime events. But how do we know what transitions and transference happen? How do we connect these seemingly singular (and often isolated) events with the many years of “real life”?

This notion of transference was one aspect of my doctoral research when I worked with a group of graduate students who visited the Ross Sea region of Antarctica (see Maher, 2010). I’ve continued to contemplate transference during three expeditions to Haida Gwaii (the Queen Charlotte Islands), one on the Stikine River and another in the Antarctic. All of these subsequent expeditions were run as field courses at the University of Northern British Columbia. In this article I try to draw out theory as well as examples and lessons from practice that I feel are potentially valuable in re-shaping the way we, as educators/instructors/mentors, conceptualize transition and transference in our programs in the future.

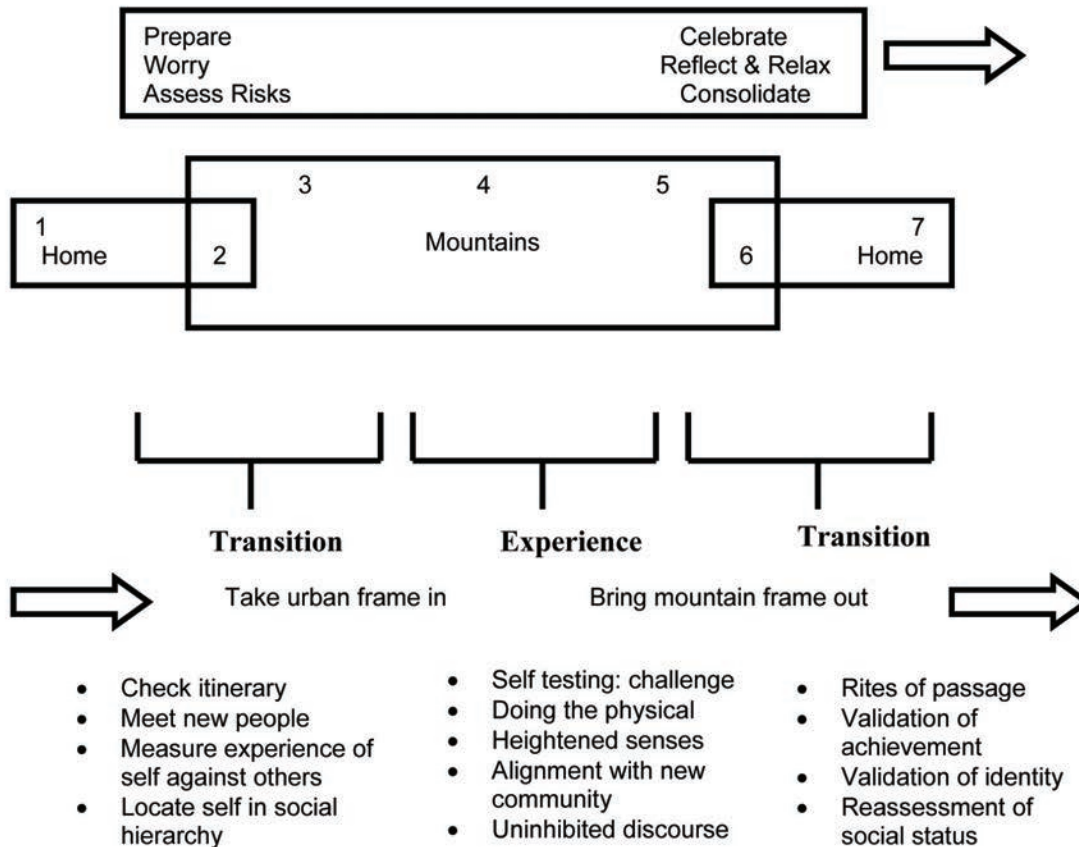
### A Wee Glance at Theory

Turner (1986) discusses the word “experience” with regard to its Greek and Latin roots, those being linkages to fear and peril. From these roots, Knapp writes that “in one sense, all of our interactions with the environment are experiments. We can never completely know—or accurately predict—the outcomes of our actions” (1992, p. 24). Caine and Caine contend that “life immerses us in some type of experience, every moment of our lives, much as water surrounds a fish” (1991, p. 104). These quotes seem to

support the argument that expeditions are far from singular, disconnected experiences, but rather are inextricably linked to a “real life” future at home. Not surprisingly then, many wilderness programs purport to create behavioural and attitudinal change in individuals in their home environments. In fact it is home that is the place where individuals (or their families or teachers) may desire the most evidence of transference—especially in terms of meaningful action and behaviour around topics such as sustainability.

Studies of the recreation, leisure and tourism experience have argued that “an experience” should not be considered as one dimensional, but as a multi-phase entity (see Hammitt, 1980; McIntyre & Roggenbuck, 1998; Borrie & Roggenbuck, 2001). The experience on-site interacts with and is influenced by many pre-visit (anticipation) and post-visit (recollection) factors. Characterising a complex and multi-faceted wilderness expedition as an experience, particularly an extraordinary one, is therefore problematic. Furthermore, few studies have tracked holistic experiences such as a typical wilderness expedition to remote settings. To contemplate the transference that can occur in conjunction with experience then, we need to more carefully consider the complexity of experience. While a full inquiry into the nature of experience is far beyond the scope of this paper, an overview of some conceptualizations of experience may help when thinking about transference.

As defined by early recreation theory (see Clawson & Knetsch, 1966), experience is thought to comprise five sequential phases: 1) anticipation; 2) travel to site; 3) on-site activity; 4) return travel home; and 5) recollection. The dynamic nature of experience is also well cited in literature from psychology and experiential education. Beedie and Hudson’s (2003) model of adventure tourism in mountain

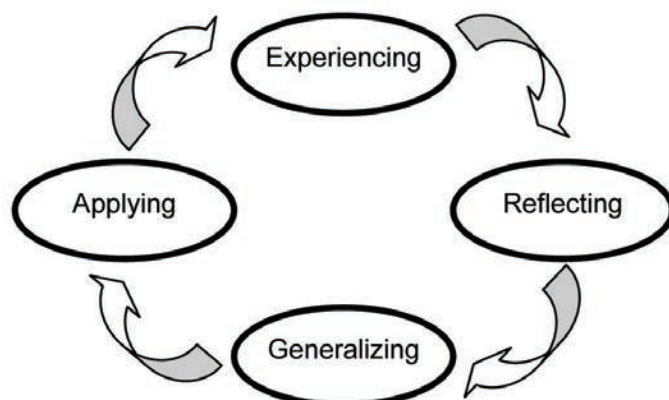


**Figure 1: The extraordinary experience. (Adapted from Beedie & Hudson, 2003, p. 629)**

locations conceptualises this “extraordinary experience” (see Figure 1). This model describes a continuum of recreational experience based on mountains acting as a “special place away from home” with a series of transitions to and from the mountains. Aspects of this model include taking in an urban frame, that includes worry, preparation and assessment of risk, and leaving with a mountain frame, comprising celebration, reflection and relaxation, and consolidation. This leaving signals to the potential benefits or transformation that may be derived from the experience.

Beedie and Hudson’s (2003) model is unfortunately uniformly positive, whereas

experiences in the mountains or elsewhere may not always be as such. Abrahams (1986) also recognised that experiences, no matter how extraordinary, are in fact made up of a number of ordinary acts, and perhaps an anthology of such acts needs to look at the way the ordinary acts coexist. Arnould and Price (1993) also used the terminology extraordinary experience to describe a “newness” of perception and process gained. There is a long theoretical history of examining experience across fields such as sociology, psychology, wilderness management, tourism, recreation and leisure. What I’ve noted above is but a scratch of the surface. However, the key is turning this theory into educational practice. How do we develop curriculum, or even simply



**Figure 2: A simplified version of Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle**

activities, that allow us to infuse wilderness educational expeditions with a greater sense of real life, or take an extraordinary experience such as a wilderness educational experience, learn from it and apply those learnings to our lives in other situations?

None of this is rocket science to outdoor educators. It is directly in line with John Dewey's thinking that, "when we experience something we act upon it, we do something with it; then we suffer or undergo the consequences" (1916, p. 163). Many outdoor educators are at least somewhat familiar with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (see Figure 2), which describes four phases of experiential learning as experience, reflection, generalization and application. Aldous Huxley (as cited in Henton (1996, p. 39)) insightfully articulated the importance of actively processing and subsequently acting upon an experience: "Experience is not what happens to you; it is what you do with what happens to you." Huxley makes a point for examining experience beyond one temporal moment, similar to the multi-phase/extraordinary approach. I believe his statement is a key to justifying wilderness educational expeditions. Yet while many of us know and use Kolb's (1984) cycle, we quite often forget the front and back ends to it, forget how it may relate to the cycles of others and society, and forget that we may need to assist students in dealing with the transitions.

### Creating Practices to Suit

At the end of the day, the key question is this: How do we create practices to match the theory, and essentially to assist what we know "is" and "should/could be" happening? From my experience with the expeditions I have worked with at UNBC and in other places, the transition into experience is far easier to effectively facilitate than is transference of learning to new situations post-expedition. This transition in can simply be a discussion early on—a discussion of what changes there will be on expedition, what affordances there are not, what connections this wilderness educational experience will have with home, and what differences there are.

Some of this entry transition is simply good expedition planning, such as knowing your participants' background stories. During transition into the expedition experience, this information might need to be brought out for all to hear, particularly in higher education settings. The fact that Tina has only paddled twice but was taught by her father, that John is afraid of paddling because he nearly drowned once while swimming, and that Sarah has worked at a paddling-focused summer camp for 10 years serve to shape a trip on the Anywhere River. The same could be said for many other parameters or examples. The whole picture of transition—missing partners, feeling sick

from expedition food, having a certain set of skills, and so on—transfers to the expedition itself. An effective wilderness expedition leader is not only aware of all of this sort of information, but intuitively understands how these factors may influence the trip and what he or she needs to do with the shared or private information in order to shape the experience of participants to be positive and educative.

Transference of participants' learnings from expedition experiences to post-expedition life is a different beast all together, mainly because expedition leaders do not always have the opportunity to interact with participants in their daily lives once the course ends. As facilitators our influence on student experience usually ends once the participants leave the course. As such we often find ourselves in the situation of trying to address the application of learning to new situations before participants actually encounter those new situations.

The practice I will outline now is one example of how an expedition leader could set up some authentic post-course communication or engagement with participants prior to their departure from the course in order to facilitate the process of transference. I presented this activity to other wilderness educators during the Mara-Burnside conference in 2010. It is a simple exercise, easy to run and just one idea. The practice is as follows:

1. More than halfway through the expedition (perhaps the last few days) sit the group down.
2. Initiate a discussion recalling all the good things that have happened, all the points to remember, all the key catalyzing moments and so on.
3. Pull out a stack of postcards and distribute one to each participant. [In the case of the 2010 conference, all my postcards were of Yellowknife, the location we had started, so just seeing the picture when it would later arrive in the mail would have an impact.]

4. Have the group divide off into pairs and then have the pairs discuss the most important things they want to take away from the expedition. [In my own case in 2010 those were to 1) slow down, 2) watch life, but experience it to its fullest, 3) avoid getting caught up in day-to-day minutia—the academic lifestyle.☺]
5. Ask each person in a pair to record these things for their partner by writing the postcard to that effect. As the facilitator, be sure to do this for yourself as well.
6. Once all the pairs are done, collect the postcards and, if you wish, open to a large group discussion for any last thoughts.
7. Get the postcards home safely—and remember where you put them until the agreed upon mailing date. [For the 2010 conference it was six months later when I put all those postcards in the mail.]

For me, just pulling those postcards out of the box I had kept them in before dropping them into the mail gave me a significant sense of reconnection. It reminded me of what was important during the conference-canoe trip—the reflective conversations around the campfire, thoughts that came to mind while I was sweating on the portage trail, unanswered questions posed by my paddling partner. When I re-read the postcards I thought about how those “ah ha” moments from the canoe trip had become relevant in other areas of my life as an educator and where I might still have transference and learning to go. I saw the picture of Yellowknife on the postcards, but also thought back to where I was on the river when my partner wrote the postcard and thought about him too. While sitting in my desk chair at the office I experienced a poignant reconnection to place and time.

### Conclusions

To conclude, transference is a complex process that significantly influences what we learn from our experiences. It is more than a unique consideration for our students;

we, as instructors and experienced outdoor educators, should also become skilled at considering our own transference processes before we go into the field. With a new son (now 18 months), I think about the risks of wilderness expeditions a lot more than before. Many of my colleagues and I always seem to bring in popular cultural nuances to an experience—quotes from a movie, song lyrics stuck in our heads. And then those shape what our expedition is like.

When we return from expedition we are immediately hit with popular culture and real life again—emails to check, news to catch up on and the like. However, we've had some sort of experience that we've learned from, though we may not know what we've learned until months or years later. We need that postcard to arrive so that we remember our need to still connect to that learning, whenever it may come.

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