Developing Outdoor Adventure Activities within Pre-Service Physical Education Teacher Education Programs

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Introduction

Within the Australian education system Outdoor Education (OE) and Outdoor Adventure Activities (OAA) are proving to be popular subject areas within school curriculums and as a consequence pre-service teacher education programs. At this time, however, within Physical Education Teacher Education (PETE) it remains unclear as to what role OAA has as a knowledge area that pre-service teachers need to cover. This paper reviews the initial phases and philosophies of the introduction of a basic OAA program within a redeveloped unit of study in a 4 year PETE program. The specific aims of this paper are to: 1. provide a brief overview of the change in practice to incorporate OAA content within the current PETE program; 2. discuss the underlying principles for including OAA within PETE; 3. the role of experiential learning as a concept within OAA and PETE; and 4. propose possible future developments in regards to managing the inclusion of OAA with PETE.

Change in Practice to Include OAA within PETE

As an outcome of course changes to the sequence of subjects taught within a 4 year Bachelor of Physical Education degree at Victoria University, it was decided that an OAA component be written into a third year unit of study. The critical motivators for this change were the acknowledgement of the framework for best practice physical education curriculum proposed by the Australian Council for Health, Physical Education, and Recreation to include OAA within the school physical education curriculum, and the professional acceptance by many physical educators that OAA serves as useful form of health related physical activity that can be maintained into adulthood (Rose, 2001). The PETE unit of study was written to include a sequence of 6 hours of lectures examining a range of general hiking and camping information and specific overviews of the activities of rockclimbing, mountain biking, and canoeing. The information was partnered with a 3 day OAA experience in which the PETE students selected one of the three areas in which to participate. The results of student evaluation of subject surveys between the previous year and the current year (involving OAA) clearly indicated students’ satisfaction with the inclusion OAA, and that the program was both personally enjoyable and professionally relevant.

Principles for including OAA in PETE

The state of Victoria in Australia has a long history of outdoor education starting with school camps in the 1960s leading to the current provision of Outdoor Education as an accredited final year subject since 1982. A large number of Government, Catholic and Independent secondary schools run a range of outdoor education programs from grades 7 to 12. Programs range from a several day camping experience to a whole term, as is the case for some year 9 students who spend as term at the Department of Education & Training Alpine School Camp in the Victorian Alps (Brookes, 2002).

Valuable outcomes of OE for secondary school students have been acknowledged by a number of researchers (e.g., Brookes, 2002; Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997; Rose, 2001). Hattie et al. (1997) conducted a meta analysis study of 96 studies identifying 40 major outcomes of adventure programs that were classified into 6 areas; academic, leadership, self-concept, personality, interpersonal and adventurousome. It was found that “the major benefits for adventure programs are reasonably consistent across all six major categories of outcomes” (p.70), although greater effects were noted in areas relating to self control, including independence, assertiveness and decision making.

The non competitive focus and lack of formal assessment on outdoor education programs provides opportunities for students to develop personal and interpersonal skills. Getting to know class members in a different setting, becoming less judgemental of people and more compassionate and supportive of fellow participants (Burridge, 2004, Hastie, 1995)

Unfortunately, the growth of outdoor education programs in schools has not been supported by formal university teaching courses until recently and still relies on physical education teachers to support outdoor education programs. Lugg and Martin (2001) highlighted this situation in their 1999 survey of outdoor education in Victorian schools where they found 66% of Government schools 54% of Catholic schools and 84% of Independent schools offered camping programs, with between 20% and 40% offering VCE outdoor education units. This extensive amount of outdoor education was supported by a staff with a variety of academic backgrounds: 52% being physical education 17% outdoor education with the remainder being all other academic backgrounds. As seen by these statistics it is important that pre-service physical education teachers have a clear understanding of outdoor education to support the extensive outdoor education programs across Victoria.
The Role of Experiential Learning as a Concept within OAA and PETE

Experiential learning theory is the theory that informs the delivery of the outdoor education activities at Victoria University. Although ELT has been used to inform outdoor education for many years in educational institutions it is now being used in many area as diverse as nursing, engineering and media studies (Carr & Carmondy, 2006; Silyn-Roberts, 2006; Jong, 2006). David Kolb developed ELT from the theories of John Dewey, Kurt Lewin, Jean Piaget, William James and others, where learning begins with the experiences of the learner. In ELT learning is a “process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experiences. Knowledge results from the combination of grasping and transforming the experience” (Kolb, 1984, p41). This process is summarised in Figure 1.

The pre-service teachers experience the different aspects of the experiential learning cycle as they participate in the outdoor education activities. Starting at University where they share stories about memorable outdoor experiences in the past examining why they are memorable and what learning or insights they took away from these experiences. This is used as a starting point for the university outdoor experience where they will choose an activity which involves travelling as a small self-sufficient group through the natural environment. Once immersed in the activity there will be many concrete experiences, from putting up a tent to deciding as a group which way to go. These experiences are learner focused with the learner actively involved with the experience observing what is happening and reflection upon it (Reflective observation), processing these observations into theories and concepts (abstract conceptualisation) and applying these concepts and theories to different situations (active experimentation). This processing, theorising and experimenting process may lead to new meanings or understandings about a situation that may be applied to the next concrete experience thus new meanings and understandings are built on and developed from past experiences (Kolb & Kolb, 2005). This process does not happen in isolation but through social interaction with others in the group. In outdoor education the leader or teacher actively facilitates opportunities for discussion or analysis around the concrete experiences.

Future Developments — An Explicit Focus on Experiential Learning Theory

For the majority of the physical education pre-service teachers OAA require the development of new knowledge and skill. Participation in these activities not only provides an opportunity to develop new skills and engagement strategies but also gain an understanding of ELT. The next development of the course will include the pre-service teachers investigating ELT and developing an understanding of how it is being applied to their learning of OAA. Once understood the pre-service teachers will be able to apply the ELT to their own teaching practice, be it physical education or OAA.

References


