

Increasing life effectiveness

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Introduction

The iPod, more than any other device, is indicative of the times in which we live. It provides entertainment and information at the click of a wheel, whenever, and wherever we want it. The iPod is tool of choice for many of the current generation of youth who fill their days with electronic devices, computer games, Youtube, Myspace, Facebook and talking to friends on MSN. These youth have been referred to as the iGeneration, or Google Generation; whatever you choose to call them, they are the young people in our schools.

Life is not simple for many of these students. They are growing up in a world vastly different to that of their parents. Today's world features "cultural pluralism, increased anxiety about personal and environmental risks, precarious employment, rampant consumerism, the information deluge, greater individualisation and increased instability in families" (Hughes, 2007).

Within this quickly changing world, there is a need for students to develop the capacity to cope with their ever-changing environment. They need to be resilient. Outdoor education activities have been proposed as one way of increasing a person's resilience through increasing 'Life Effectiveness' skills. These skills equip students to handle the demands of life and impact a person's capacity to adapt, survive, and thrive (Neill, 2008). They will enhance a person's resilience and their sense of wellbeing.

Benefits of outdoor education

As the name suggests, outdoor education involves experiences that take place in the outdoors. Most of these programs focus on the personal and social development of participants (Neill, 2008). Outdoor education programs have been shown to impact students' self-concept, self-esteem, social skills, decision making skills, problem solving skills, communication skills, and aspects of life

effectiveness such as time management, social competence, task leadership and emotional control (Allen-Craig & McLeod, 2005).

These results should not surprise us. For many years educators such as John Dewey have advocated experiential education as the best medium for gaining developmental outcomes in students (Neill, 2008). While traditional curriculums often struggle to develop connections between the theoretical and the practical, the use of the outdoors natural world has been found to be effective for instilling authentic, real life experiences into the learning process. (Bunting, 2006).

Youth require authentic activities to build connection to real world meaning for the value of one another and the need to protect our environment. Often lost in a make-believe world of video games in a mass marketed culture of violence and escapism, today's youth need mentoring to guide them to the world of authentic experience and personal connectedness. (Goodman & Jelmsberg, 2008)

Outdoor education offers authentic, holistic experiences. Educators have long supported approaches that combine the mental, the emotional, the social, the spiritual and the physical (Gilbertson et al., 2006). Natural settings provide direct and immediate consequences, along with positive and negative feedback from peers, in safe facilitated arenas. Students are required to use initiative, make decisions, and be responsible for outcomes (Gilbertson et al., 2006). The many choices required during an activity encourages individuals to make decisions based on their ethics and values, and personal growth is characterised by increases in self-esteem, confidence and motivation (Prouty et al., 2007). The resultant learning is personal and spontaneous.

Many of the approaches used in outdoor education are based in the theory of constructivism where prior knowledge is recognised and built on. Outdoor education provides teachable moments where students grasp concepts and facts that are

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less likely to be understood in static environments. The consequent learning is student-centred, developmental, and more likely to be retained in the student's memory (Goodman et al., 2008).

Another reason for the success of outdoor education activities may lie in the way that it connects the senses. Bunting (2006) claims the brain searches for meaning in interconnectedness.

The brain performs better with meaningful challenges that aren't overwhelming. Learning that engages the entire physiology, from emotions to cognitive processes, produces a greater likelihood of understanding. Outdoor education pedagogy uses direct sensory experiences involving nature and human community (Gilbertson et al., 2006) and in this way not only involves symbols and words but also the senses in the learning process (Bunting, 2006). Outdoor education connects the sensors in a way that makes learning not just an exercise in cognition, but also an emotional based experience (Goodman et al., 2008).

Beyond sensory awareness and skill development, outdoor education experiences tend to help students form a community among the group (Gilbertson et al., 2006). Outdoor education facilitates development through mentorship with teachers and peers (Bunting, 2006). Neill and Dias (2001) found that the most positive predictor of growth in the psychological resilience of 'Outward Bound' participants was the community formed and the removal of negative social influence.

Table 1: Significant differences in life effectiveness skills ($p < 0.05$)

Life effectiveness scales	Before	After	Effect size
Time management	4.9	5.4	0.40
Task leadership	5.2	5.7	0.43
Emotional control	5.2	5.6	0.23
Active initiative	5.7	6.1	0.26
Self confidence	5.9	6.2	0.22
Self efficacy	5.5	5.8	0.28

Table 2: Life effectiveness variables included in the study

Variable	Definition
Time management	The extent that an individual perceives that he / she makes optimum use of time
Social competence	The degree of personal confidence and self-perceived ability in social interactions
Achievement motivation	The extent to which the individual is motivated to achieve excellence and put the required effort into action to attain it
Intellectual flexibility	The extent to which the individual perceives he / she can adapt his / her thinking and accommodate new information from changing conditions and different perspectives
Task leadership	The extent to which the individual perceives he / she can lead other people effectively when a task needs to be done and productivity is the prime requirement
Emotional control	The extent to which the individual perceives he / she maintains emotional control when he / she is faced with potentially stressful situations
Active initiative	The extent to which the individual likes to initiate action in new situations
Self confidence	The degree of confidence the individual has in his / her abilities and the success of their actions
Cooperative teamwork	The extent to which an individual can work as a member of a team
Self efficacy	The degree of personal confidence and self-perceived ability in situations

The current study

The current study seeks to explore how participation by year nine students in a multidisciplinary, integrated (Pettus, 1994), experiential education program, based loosely on the model developed by Kurt Hahn, as used in the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme, impacts upon their Life Effectiveness.

Within the experiential education program, a framework was developed which allowed students to be involved in expeditionary learning, urban learning and service learning. Wherever possible, classroom studies were also linked to these broader themes.

The current study focuses on the expeditionary learning component, where students participated in a number of bushwalking based outdoor education activities which culminated in a six day expedition to the Walls of Jerusalem National Park in Tasmania. To finalise the expeditionary component of the program, students prepared a public presentation of their learning and experiences. On a given evening, each student was provided with a display space to organise as they wish. Parents, teachers, fellow students, and members of the community were invited to circulate among the displays. Students answered questions and gave detailed descriptions of their learning and experiences.

Students completed a questionnaire at the start of the year and again after they had completed the expeditionary part of the year long program. It included items from the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire along with the additional constructs of Cooperative Teamwork and Self Efficacy derived

from the Ropeloc Questionnaire (Richards, Ellis, and Neill, 2002). Table 2 contains an explanation of the Life Effectiveness variables included in the study.

The data collected from students was then coded and entered into SPSS. Descriptive analysis of the items was carried out and multivariate analyses were then undertaken to develop scales using factor analysis and reliability testing. All of the scales were satisfactory with good factor loadings and reliabilities (Cronbach's Alpha) between 0.74 and 0.91. Any items with negative loadings were recoded and the various factors were turned into composite variables by averaging the item scores across the factor.

Results

The results from the scales showed that at the beginning of the year, students were, on average, above the half way mark of the various Life Effectiveness scales. At the conclusion of the expeditionary component of the program, students had increased significantly ($p < 0.05$) in Time Management, Task Leadership, Emotional Control, Active Initiative, Self Confidence & Self Efficacy (see Table 1 & 2). That is, students increased their optimum use of time, their leadership in tasks, their emotional control when faced with potentially stressful situations, their ability to initiate action in new situations, their levels of confidence in their abilities and the success of their actions, and their beliefs of what they are capable.

While students do show development in these skills during a normal school year, one would not expect such significant increases in the relatively short time period (2 months) from the beginning of the school year to the completion of the expeditionary part of the program. Of particular note are the increases in Time Management and Task Leadership which achieved an effect size greater than 0.4. These results support the notion that outdoor education programs do assist students to develop their Life Effectiveness skills and are in line with other studies that have found similar results (Hattie et al., 1997; Neill, 2008).

When asked during an interview to reflect on their outdoor education experiences, many students could verbalise how they felt their lives had been impacted and Life Effectiveness skills improved. For example:

When you achieve by climbing up a mountain, you know you can do other stuff that you thought you couldn't do. (Student 1)

I learnt to be more coping with the situations that faced me and to remain calm rather than going nuts with everything that goes wrong. I need to control myself because there's nothing you can



[Photography:
Peter Beamish]

do about it, rather than giving up, and just keep fighting through. If things are going that wrong, you might just lose it anyway, because that is just too hard, you just have to keep trying. (Student 2)

These results are very encouraging and reveal that students felt an increase in self efficacy and emotional control.

Task leadership

During the bushwalking activities, the students were split into groups that were ability and gender streamed. Significant between group differences were found for Task Leadership. All groups experienced the stresses that come with leadership and found that the most successful way to navigate was to use a consultative approach.

Each person had to be a leader for some part of the trip. When I was leader it helped me because I got to ask people which way they think we should go and I could lead the group with compass and map. When I was leading I felt, like, listened too because everyone was following. I experienced a bit of stress choosing which way to go. It's important not to go the way you want to go but to get other people's ideas. (Student 3)

The more able groups showed a significant gain in Task Leadership while the less able groups showed little gain. This could have been a result of greater teacher dependence because the less able groups were over challenged. These groups, required more frequent intervention by the facilitator, which led to the students not developing significantly in Task Leadership.

There was also evidence of a significant gender effect on Task Leadership with boys making more significant gains than girls. Interviews suggested the style of facilitation in the girls groups was more directed and did not make use of error as constructively as the boys groups. It would seem that the facilitators of these groups may have had less confidence in the girls' ability to navigate and

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manage the party. Overall, the results suggest facilitation style can affect amount of change measured in an outcome.

Time management

Many of the students appreciated the importance of good time management as seen in the following interview statements:

You have to plan your time wisely so you can get to your destination before it gets dark. (Student 4)

You have to plan where you are going to go, your menu and how to pack your pack. It also helped me in my study. Before bushwalking I wouldn't plan, whatever comes up I would just do it, but after bushwalking I learned to plan each day what I would study, English, Maths, Science. (Student 5)

Significant between group differences were found for Time Management. The student interviews revealed that the style of facilitation in the groups was quite different. Those students in groups where time management skills were emphasised were those that increased in this area.

Educational implications

This study has significant implications for schools. Life Effectiveness skills are important and this study has added weight to the argument that these skills can be enhanced by outdoor education programs. Although Task Leadership and Time Management are two skill areas where the impact on the students was greatest, student levels of Emotional Control, Active Initiative, Self Confidence, and Self Efficacy all showed significant improvement.

These outcomes do not happen by chance but are the result of purposeful facilitation by outdoor educators. Hayllar (2005) believes that outdoor education goes beyond the mere supervision of an activity; but rather involves the purposeful facilitation of learning from a meaningful outdoor experience. Outdoor educators who are trained in the delivery of specific outcomes achieve better results (Allen-Craig & Miller, 2007). Neill (2000, p.2) goes as far as to state the disadvantages of running a poorly facilitated program can outweigh any possible gains from the experience.

This study supports the view that desired outcomes are best achieved by staff who effectively facilitate the outdoor experience. The differences between the groups were more likely the result of the different teacher facilitation styles than differences in group ability. To maximise the outcomes of outdoor education experiences, schools need to ensure that their outdoor educators have adequate facilitation skills.

Conclusion

In a digital world where students are often called to make sense of an increasingly complex environment, to become resilient and to develop adequate life skills, we find ourselves endorsing a call to interact more with the natural world and to participate in well facilitated outdoor education activities. In doing so, students may develop better life skills, and on the way, a clearer understanding their God.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse. (Romans 1:20) **TEACH**

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