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BOBILYA & KALISCH

THE WILDERNESS SOLO: THE EFFECT OF INTENTIONAL DESIGN

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Background

The Solo experience within wilderness programs has had an anecdotal reputation for enhancing the quality of the participant's experience. For this reason, the Solo has been a popular component of most wilderness experience programs (Knapp & Smith, 2005). In recent years researchers have shown the Solo to be one of the most influential program components related to participant learning and growth (Daniel, 2003; Sibthorp, 2000). Furthermore, the findings of previous Solo studies address the need for research focusing on the intentional programmatic decisions of instructors (Bobilya, 2004; Bobilya, Kalisch, McAvoy, & Jacobs, 2005; Bobilya, McAvoy & Kalisch, 2005). The adventure education literature indicates the importance of the role of the instructor in wilderness programming (Kalisch, 1999; McIntosh, 1989; McKenzie, 2000, 2003) and calls for an increased effort to "ascertain the effects of the instructor" (Hattie, Marsh, Neill & Richards, 1997, p. 72).

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the influence of intentional design by the instructor regarding the Solo's (a) purpose and framing, (b) instructor visit, and (c) individual and group debriefing. This study extends the previous Solo research by hypothesizing that the purposeful planning, framing, visits, and debriefing by the instructor play a role in determining the quality of Solo experience. The study was supported by three major theoretical frames – the Hendee & Brown Model (1988), Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle, and Csikszentmihalyi's (1991) Flow Theory.

Methods

This study used primarily qualitative survey methods. Participants included first-year college students (n=85) and field instructors (n = 21) in the High Road program during August 2005. High Road is an 18-day wilderness program offered for first-year Wheaton College students and is modeled after an Outward Bound wilderness course. Each expedition group participated in a 24-48 hour Solo experience as a component of the program. The study involved three phases of questionnaire-based data collection. The first phase provided instructors a worksheet designed to assist in their intentional programming of the Solo. Phase 2 captured the participant's perception of their Solo while alone in the wilderness. Phase 3 focused on the actual implementation of the Solo from the instructor's perspective. All phases of data collection were completed in August of 2005.

Results and Discussion

Results of the qualitative analysis indicate that the following instructional strategies combined to enhance the student's Solo experience: (a) prior activities (readings, group discussions and mini-solos), (b) logistical preparation (location near water, timing of information, and schedule for Solo), and (c) debriefing methods (timing of return, opportunity for sharing, and ceremonial celebration). The most critical strategies are those prior to Solo that build the participant's capacity to be alone and reflect (e.g. journaling and mini-solos). Given the Solo's high ranking in its contribution toward participant growth, it is important that it be intentionally designed for

maximum effectiveness. These findings may provide wilderness instructors and program managers with methods for the intentional use of wilderness solitude and a point of departure for research on the instructional design of specific course components.

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