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Trusting the journey

Citation for published version:

Beames, S & Asfeldt, M 2017, 'Trusting the journey: Embracing the unpredictable and difficult to measure nature of wilderness educational expeditions' *Journal of Experiential Education*, vol. 40, no. 1, pp. 72-86.
DOI: 10.1177/1053825916676101

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/1053825916676101](https://doi.org/10.1177/1053825916676101)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of Experiential Education

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Abstract

Outdoor adventure education (OAE) research has long aimed to explain and understand the inner workings of its programs. However, many questions remain and the search for sharper methodological tools with which to deepen our understanding of OAE continues. This paper is a collaborative autoethnographic investigation of the unpredictable and difficult to measure nature of wilderness educational expeditions (WEE). It is a reflexive journey of storytelling and critical analysis that demonstrates the power of story-based research as method. The findings indicate that conventional approaches to WEE research are limited in their capacity to fully understand and explain the inner workings of WEEs. We argue that practitioners need to ‘trust the journey’ to elicit learning that comes from responding to encounters with people and place. Further, we suggest that quests for a sequenced ‘journey recipe’ are unrealistic and do not honor the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of OAE. Finally, a case is made for alternative, rigorous research approaches to be embraced in order to gain richer and more nuanced understandings of the wonderfully diverse experiences that make-up WEEs.

Keywords: collaborative autoethnography, educational expeditions, story-telling, research methods.

Trusting the Journey: Embracing the Unpredictable and Difficult to Measure Nature of Wilderness Educational Expeditions

“Morten, there are wolves in camp”, shouted a student. I sat up and peered bleary eyed through the screen window of my tent into the arctic night of summer that was being bathed in the warm gloom of the midnight sun. The student was right: three large white arctic wolves were loping away from camp, glancing over their shoulders at our little village of yellow tents pitched on the banks of an arctic river. Their lope appeared effortless—smooth, rhythmical, strong, and confident. I assured the student that the wolves posed no danger and fell quickly back to sleep. In the morning, the student recounted to the group the remarkable story of her encounter with one of the wolves and how the encounter had led to profound understanding. I have stayed in contact with this student during the more than 20 years that have passed since her epiphany on the sandy shores of that arctic river, and the transformation has endured. It is serendipitous moments such as these, over which we have little control, that are the heart of our passion to lead and facilitate wilderness educational expeditions (WEEs) and that lie at the core of this research. We will return to this story later in the paper and share more of the student’s epiphany and what we learned from it.

This paper is a reflexive journey of storytelling and critical analysis. As friends and outdoor education colleagues for over 20 years, we have spent countless hours discussing our experiences in an attempt to understand the critical elements, learning outcomes, and lasting impacts of wilderness educational expeditions. These discussions have taken place in kitchens, conference halls and canoes, and via phone, email and Skype. We also share the research goal of adding to the body of knowledge that provides a portal into the inner workings of educational expeditions. However, through all these discussions and our collective research, something was

missing. Deep in our souls, we felt that somehow the research wasn't telling the whole story. It was this void that led to this collaborative autoethnographic (CAE) inquiry.

In 1983, Ewert called for the field of outdoor adventure education (OAE) to increase research efforts in order to understand the inner workings of OAE's "black box". At the time, the literature proposed several distinct and positive outcomes for OAE participants, such as self-discovery and increased self-concept (e.g., Kaplan, 1984; Lambert, Segger, Staley, Spencer & Nelson, 1978), yet it was unclear how or why these outcomes came about. In the 30 plus years since Ewert's decree, the outcomes-based literature on educational expeditions has grown steadily (e.g., Stott, Allison, Felter, & Beames, 2013 ; Stott & Hall, 2003; Takano, 2010) and there has been increased research aiming to answer the 'how' and 'why' questions (e.g., Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2014; Beames, 2004; Mackenzie, 2003; Morse, 2015), which has helped the educational expeditions field more deeply understand the inner workings of OAE.

We set out on this collaborative autoethnographic journey to interrogate and critically examine three assertions to which our discussions of the past 20 years had led us. The first assertion is that, much like the black box—or flight data recorder—in an aircraft, OAE's black box does not adequately capture all aspects of WEE programs, as some aspects of their outcomes and critical elements remain unpredictable and difficult to measure. Second, as outdoor educators, we must trust the journey to present opportunities for learning, rather than assuming that we can plan and anticipate specific and predictable educational experiences while 'on trip'. Third, we recommend that OAE researchers embrace diverse research methods in order to gain a deep and rich understanding of the inner workings of OAE generally and WEEs specifically.

Although some less common approaches within the qualitative research domain have surfaced in the last decade (e.g., Creative fiction: Beames & Pike, 2008 and Higgins &

Wattchow, 2013; Autoethnography: Nicol, 2013), they stand out as exceptions in the OAE literature. There is a much longer tradition of using alternative methods in the neighbouring fields of lifestyle sports (e.g., Olive, Thorpe, Roy, Nemani, Iisahunter, Wheaton & Humberstone, in press) and physical education research (e.g., Smith & Sparkes, 2009; Sparkes, 2002), and most notably in the more distant field of nursing (e.g., De Chesnay, 2015). We draw from Sparkes' (2002) comment that "there is little uniformity in the way that qualitative researchers report their work" (p. 39) and have attempted to employ a methodology that is new to us—one that privileges the richness of human narrative and the role of story. Skelton (2000) explains how "compared with academic texts, narrative is very accessible...because the stories [are] engaging and personal and the theoretical sources [are] embedded within the account" (p. 283), while Muncey (2005) describes autoethnography as a method that celebrates, rather than demonizes individuals' stories (p. 7). Guided by these characteristics of qualitative research, we first provide an explanation and rationale for our chosen research method, then share two stories that each feature a critical analysis with germane literature. We conclude with implications for further academic inquiry.

Methodology

When we first began searching for a deeper way to capture the richness of our educational expedition experiences, we were not sure what sort of journey we were on, or where it would lead us. We soon realized, however, that the launching point for our inquiry lay in the stories we were telling each other, and had been sharing with students and colleagues for years. These were tales from our experiences with students—rich stories where we recalled intimate details, and in

the telling, felt a deep emotion and conviction that our work was powerful and impactful. The stories we knew; the research methods we didn't.

At first, we investigated narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004). Then we considered narrative ethnography, memoir, and creative fiction (Tedlock, 2011), autoethnography (Chang, 2008), and finally settled on *collaborative autoethnography* (Chang, Ngunjiri & Hernandez, 2013). Chang and colleagues define CAE as a “qualitative research method that is simultaneously collaborative, autobiographical, and ethnographic” (p. 17). Important features of CAE that appealed to us were that it allowed us to use a variety of data sources (or ‘artefacts of life’), such as our memories, personal journals, conversations with students and each other, and photographs; we could ‘pool’ our stories as we searched for trends and patterns and then wrestle with them in a way that revealed hidden meanings of the stories in relation to assumptions and traditions of the OAE field. Pooling our stories increased data sources; collaborating added the perspectives of multiple researchers in the analysis.

In addition to the features identified above, two characteristics of CAE and autoethnography set them apart from more traditional positivist methods. First, autoethnographers reject “claims to objectivity and value subjectivity and researcher-participant intersubjectivity” (Forter, McAllister & O'Brien, 2006, p. 47), and second, researchers assume the dual role of both researcher and participant, which allows researchers to “tap into their most personal thoughts and experiences that are not readily opened to others” (Chang et al., 2013, p. 21). Collaborative autoethnography embraces the affordances of autoethnography, while guarding against the potentially self-absorbing nature of single researcher autoethnography; this balance was particularly appealing.

Collaborative autoethnography also shares characteristics with other research methods, such as narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2004) explain how narrative inquiry came to be a primary method in their careers as educational researchers. Grounding their narrative inquiry method are many of Dewey's ideas regarding the role of experience in education and life. For example, Dewey (1938/1963) believed in the fundamental nexus between experience and education—that knowledge is constructed from experience. Following Dewey, Clandinin and Connelly (2004) remind us that the social sciences are chiefly concerned with human relationships: relationship with self, others, and the environment—in other words: human experience. Experience, according to Clandinin and Connelly, is therefore the point of departure “for all social science inquiry” (p. xxiii).

We both work for university outdoor education programmes and for more than 25 years have each led wilderness educational expeditions in the commercial, non-profit, and university sectors. As outdoor adventure educators, we are reasonably well versed in Dewey's key ideas, and have used them to shape our educational expedition practices. However, as we searched for a method that allowed us to use our personal experiences as data in this research process, we had not made the now obvious realization that experience was the common starting point for both education *and* research. As we read and re-read Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) account of how their narrative inquiry method was grounded by Dewey's (1938/1963) primacy of experience, we were verging on embarrassment, as we wondered how we had not made this connection ourselves; a golden thread seemed to weave together our longstanding use of experiential education pedagogies and the shared epistemological foundations of narrative inquiry and experiential education. Once we had recognized the philosophical and practical overlaps of

narrative inquiry and CAE, we were armed with a potent alternative methodological structure that we could put to use.

There is no strict inquiry process for CAE. Rather, as with autoethnography, CAE begins by exploring personal experience and writing about it. This is then followed by a sharing of stories and critical analysis that together serve to reveal common meanings of the examined experience (Muncey, 2005). It is a forward-and-backward, in-and-out, around-and-around process of meaning-making that moves between memory, story, reading, individual and collaborative reflection, discussion, and analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000); no two autoethnographic or CAE journeys follow the same path. Nevertheless, our process is similar to that described by Anderson (2006), who describes autoethnography as a process where the researcher, as a full member of the group or setting under inquiry, is fully present in their published work, and their findings enhance theoretical understandings of the phenomenon under study.

Our initial task was to identify possible stories for analysis. First, we brainstormed a list of our stories. From this list, we each wrote up two stories and exchanged them. Once we had read each other's stories, we shared and discussed the issues, ideas, trends, patterns and questions revealed by each story, and then looked for commonalities and differences. With this initial list in hand, we reduced our stories for analysis to two¹. From here, we individually read and analyzed the two selected stories, followed by many conversations over a three-month period via phone, email and Skype. During these conversations we shared our independent reflections and discussed and challenged each other's views before identifying the themes and insights that we present here. Morten then wrote a first draft of the paper that was passed back-and-forth until we refined our analysis. The collaborative nature of CAE brings with it an inherent methodological

trustworthiness and dependability (see Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), as it combines the perspectives of multiple researchers and guards, at least in part, against investigator bias. This collaboration functions in a similar manner to investigator triangulation and member-checking (see Denscombe, 1998; Berg, 2004), in the way that it strives to render the work as credible as possible. To present our findings, we revisit the story of the wolves that opened this paper. All names in the stories are pseudonyms.

Stories and Analysis

The Wolf

About 10 days into a 21-day journey, we were camped at the confluence of two rivers. We had arrived there late the previous night, because we had chosen to paddle under the midnight sun to avoid daytime winds. Our six tents were pitched in close formation and I remember falling into my sleeping bag, exhausted after the long paddle. Sometime during the night I awoke to howling wolves; as an avid photographer, these howls would normally find me scrambling into my boots and reaching for my camera. However, being exhausted, I rolled over in my sleeping bag, silently wishing the wolves would ‘shut-it-down’ so I could sleep. It was at this point that the student called to me in a concerned voice about the wolves in camp. Here we pick-up Kerry’s story.

After waking to the same howling that had roused me from my sleep, Kerry sat up in her tent and looked out its screen window. While she was watching the wolves move between the tents, one of the wolves came and sat on its haunches a few feet from her thin screen window and the two made eye contact. Kerry says she doesn't know how long she sat eye-to-eye with the wolf, only that it was a moment of epiphany. She came from a broken home and for years had blamed

her father for the family breakdown because of the many summers he had spent away from the family doing research; her father was a wolf biologist. In an emotion-filled voice at breakfast the next morning, Kerry told the group that as she made peaceful eye contact with the wolf, she suddenly understood what had drawn her father into the field all those summers. She explained how, while staring into the wolf's eyes, a sudden and profound understanding of her father welled-up from deep within her. After our expedition, Kerry began a path of reconciliation with her father that has been lasting; just last summer—over 20 years later—I had a chance encounter with Kerry, as she and her two young children were on their way to pick-up her father and take him to a World Cup soccer match.

Wolf encounters such as this are clearly uncommon. However, as demonstrated by this story, they can have a profound impact for those who experience them. At the same time, such an intense and unusual encounter cannot possibly be planned or predicted. Similarly, there is no assurance that even if such experiences do occur that they will have a positive or profound impact. While such experiences cannot be planned, neither are they entirely accidental. We argue well-conceived journeys will present a myriad of unpredictable experiences that have the capacity to elicit meaningful and enduring learning. Seen this way, a primary role of the wilderness educator is to recognize these moments in order to help students maximize their learning from them.

As we analyzed the story of the wolf encounter, we recognized the important role of serendipitous learning and realized that we are both drawn to wilderness educational expeditions as a pedagogical method because of the potential for serendipitous learning that they offer. Krouwel (2005) explains that serendipity in education is characterized by “valuable and powerful learning experience[s]...[that] are unplanned and unexpected” (p. 28). As the wolf story

demonstrates, powerful learning experiences can be wholly unplanned and unexpected. Seen this way, serendipitous learning is a central affordance of wilderness expeditions, where the environment furnishes to its inhabitants certain features “for good or ill” (Gibson, 1979, p. 127).

It seems clear to us that experiences such as the wolf encounter can only come about by trusting the journeys that we share with our students will yield various kinds of serendipitous learning. It is difficult to argue that Kerry’s encounter with the wolf did not lead to important learning and insight. However, the profound nature of this experience is difficult to measure, particularly using strictly positivistic means. Yet, the experience, shared here as story and shared by Kerry as story the morning after, was concrete, emotive, and life-changing, and might well have been missed by an end-of-course evaluation sheet featuring Likert scales.

Our analysis of Kerry’s experience also led to discussions regarding critical elements of educational expeditions. This growing body of research in this small sub-field of OAE discloses a number of common critical elements that enhance our understanding of ‘how’ and ‘why’ educational expeditions work. These include: activities (e.g., McKenzie, 2003;); new environments (e.g., Takano, 2010; McKenzie, 2000); intentional processing and reflection (e.g., Paisley, Furman, Sibthorp, & Gookin, 2008); group experiences (e.g., Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2014; Beames, 2004); physical and mental challenges (e.g., Beames, 2004; Paisley et al., 2008) and a number of features resulting from immersion in the natural environment (e.g., Morse, 2015; Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2014). However, questions remain regarding the fluid and unpredictable nature of educational expeditions. Specifically, how does this fluid and unpredictable nature influence outcomes and what role does it play as a critical element?

Reflecting on the critical elements research of educational expeditions, we feel that unplanned and unpredictable experiences, such as the wolf encounter, do not reveal themselves

clearly in this research. For example, it is almost certain that the wolf experiences could not be replicated. While Morten, has spent over 400 days on northern expeditions with students since Kerry's wolf encounter, a similar wolf experience has never happened again, although other magical encounters with wildlife and local people certainly have. Many of these encounters could have been substituted for Kerry's story. The countless other untold stories were as unplanned, as powerful as the serendipitous nature of Kerry's wolf encounter, and together point to our call to trust that a well-conceived journey will yield rich opportunities to learn about nature, culture, others, and self. This begins with leaders having comprehensive knowledge of the history, culture, and geography of the journey's setting, which allows them to facilitate the journey with openness and flexibility that embraces uncertainty (see Beames & Brown, 2016) and is responsive to the unpredictable nature of WEE.

Bjørn

We had been skinning uphill for an hour, while being blasted by a snowy, sandpaper-like wind. My co-instructor and I (Simon) knew that a small rustic hut, where we could find respite from the wind, was about a half hour away.

This was day four of a hut-to-hut ski tour in Norway, where I had brought 10 MSc Outdoor Education students for an alternative outdoor learning experience. Despite the end of March conditions being ideal for ski touring, we had only bumped into two other parties on the trail. So far, the skiing had been excellent, the team relationships wonderful, and our interactions with the natural landscape awe-inspiring. While these were all positives, there was still something missing from this Norwegian cultural experience that we were trying to facilitate: Norwegian people!

Directly below an imposing cliff face, we spotted the two-bunk Langsbua hut. We were all ready for the wind to be ‘turned off’ for a little while, so that we could have a rest and eat some crackers and cheese in peace. As we approached the hut’s door, we noticed the dogsled. Someone was in ‘our’ lunch hut.

That ‘someone’ turned out to be Bjørn and his two enormous and friendly huskies, named Loki and Odin. We all piled in, quite obviously disturbing his rather tranquil existence. Bjørn fit all of my stereotypes of the Norwegian male: built like a line-backer, groomed like a sea-captain, and softly-spoken. He didn’t seem to mind us intruding—indeed, he hadn’t talked to anyone else for three days, so he was probably ready for a little chat.

While refuelling with fluids and trail mix, we proceeded to bombard him with all kinds of questions. Why did he come here? Why did he come alone with the dogs? Bjørn explained—in near flawless English, of course—how he had travelled the length of Norway and this was his favourite place. He now returned to this rustic cabin every winter for a week. Bjørn loved the rolling hills above the tree line, the different huts that were all perfectly located in a circle around a large massif, the lack of travellers in the area, and the fascinating human history of mining, settlements, boom, and now bust in the region.

Us outsiders were given a rich and multi-faceted perspective to the region that we would never have had, had we not had this serendipitous encounter with Bjørn. We all profited from this chance meeting, but it wasn’t all due to luck; I was confident that we’d meet some locals along the way and that they would share their insights of place and culture with us.

As with the story of the wolf, this story of Bjørn points to the importance of serendipity and embracing the unpredictable nature of journeys. As we discussed the story of Bjørn our reflections returned to a number of impactful experiences of place we have each had and to the

place-based literature. Specifically, Raffan's (1993) 'land as teacher' research spoke loudly: partly because his research took place in the Canadian north, as did the wolf encounter, and due to Bjørn's status as a 'local' Norwegian who was befriended in Norway. The purpose of Raffan's research was to increase our understanding of "people's attachment to place" (p. 39), and he explained how people are attached to place through ways of knowing that are "invoked and celebrated by the land as teacher" (p. 43). Raffan identified four components of sense of place that contribute to establishing land as teacher. One of those components is the *numinous*, which he describes as:

all that is awe-inspiring, all that transcends the rational, all that touches the heart more than the mind, all that goes beyond names, stories, and experience and yet still plays a significant role in the bond that links people and place. (p. 44)

Both Kerry's encounter with the wolf and Simon and his students' chance meeting with Bjørn are well represented by Raffan's description of the numinous component of sense of place: they were awe-inspiring, touched both our hearts and minds, and played a profound role in connecting to people and place. Being able to plan with certainty and predictability that the activities and experiences we incorporate into educational expeditions will manifest themselves numinously as described by Raffan, is simply unrealistic. For the numinous to reveal itself, we must trust the journey. Furthermore, measuring the transformational power of such numinous experiences is exceedingly difficult.

Baker (2005), Brookes (2002), and Wattachow and Brown (2011) are critical of outdoor education practices that universalize the nature of outdoor experiences and specific sites where outdoor education takes place. Wattachow and Brown (2011) claim "that outdoor places are not merely venues or empty spaces, rather they are rich in significance and meaning. Places are a

powerful pedagogic phenomenon” (p. 181). They go on to identify four signposts that are meant to guide educators towards a more place-responsive pedagogy: being present with a place; the power of place-based stories and narratives; apprenticing ourselves to outdoor places; and the representation of place experiences (p. 182). These signposts resonated with us as we discussed the meaning of our stories and again point to the importance of being open and responsive to the unpredictable nature of wilderness educational expeditions. For example, had we not been present in place to the wolf or present to people with Bjørn, or been receptive to the power of place-based stories and narratives, the learning outcomes of these experiences would not have been realized. Rather, these encounters may have simply been dismissed as irrelevant or unimportant, or perhaps even an imposition on our wilderness experience.

The two stories presented here demonstrate the pedagogical power of trusting the journey, particularly wilderness based journeys, by revealing that there are elements of journeys that go beyond simple explanation; no amount of research, theory, or planning can predict with certainty specific educational expedition events or ensure that specific journey events will be experienced. Our analysis reveals the need for researchers to balance their sources of evidence as they continue to develop a shared knowledge of how and why educational expeditions work. While there is danger in blindly stating that these outcomes can be explained through stories alone, it is equally dangerous to present over-simplified statistical results, which claim to neatly account for participant learning on educational expeditions. Both of these polarized perspectives misrepresent educational expeditions specifically, and OAE more generally, and weaken our credibility within the broader corpus of educational literature.

Implications for Future Academic Inquiry

Recognizing that OAE experiences are pathways for meaningful learning is not a new idea. Educators and philosophers have made this claim for hundreds of years. For example, Comenius, Rousseau, and Pestalozzi (Hammermann, Hammermann & Hammermann, 2001), Baden-Powell (MacDonald, 1993) and Thompson-Seton (Morris, 1970), as well as Hahn (James, 2008) all believed in challenging outdoor experiences as an effective pedagogical approach to personal growth and learning. However, as the field of OAE has developed and matured, Weberian forms of instrumental rationalization have crept in (e.g., Loynes, 1998): funders want proof that outdoor education works.

In some regional sectors, there now appears to exist an almost uncontested acceptance that the broader field of OAE needs to constantly bolster its body of statistically powerful, research-based evidence in order to demonstrate educational legitimacy. Although this body has grown steadily, its rigour has at times been questioned (Barrett & Greenaway, 1995) and it has tended to place a higher value on positivist approaches (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014); stories such as those in this paper were simply not enough. Ewert and Sibthorp posit that “anecdotes are nice. They are easy to come by. They are compelling. And they are sometimes easy to misinterpret” (p. 139). While Ewert and Sibthorp are correct about this on one level, we believe that to dismiss anecdotes and stories that are deeply rooted in human experience is misguided. The growth of research methods such as narrative inquiry, autoethnography, narrative of self, and other story-based qualitative research methods reflect a growing recognition of the limitations of positivistic research methods and the increasing value being placed on stories of experience as research data.

This shifting research perspective was highlighted more than 15 years ago by Allison and Pomeroy (2000), who claimed that traditional approaches to experiential education were inadequate. They explained how a disproportionate focus on whether or not programs ‘work’ was

resulting in individuals' experiences, and the meaning they make from them, being largely ignored. More recently, for example, the quest for alternative research methods that address the shortcomings of positivist approaches have been explored by Nicol (2013), who sees the primary motivation for adopting autoethnographic methods as "its recognition of 'self as enquirer' and also its close correspondence with experiential and participative approaches to learning..." (p. 13). Seen this way, examining one's experiences is regarded as a methodological strength.

Many OAE scholars have articulated the shortcomings of OAE research, such as poor study design, not developing and testing theory, and research that is largely based on practice (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2014); the problems of small sample sizes, poorly designed and administered questionnaires, and the management of the many confounding variables (Scrutton & Beames, 2015); and that we are simply asking the wrong questions (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). These are legitimate critiques and warrant serious consideration. At the same time, the current state of OAE research points to the inherent difficulty of measuring socio-affective outcomes and of identifying the critical elements of OAE in a manner that is convincing—particularly to funding bodies and external agencies—and whose methods demonstrate high degrees of validity and reliability. Despite these empirical challenges, the need for OAE to develop a robust body of knowledge that credibly demonstrate its outcomes and educational processes are as real and pressing as ever.

Thinking back to Clandinin and Connelly's (2004) insights regarding experience as the starting point for research that are rooted in Dewey's ideas, perhaps there is more we can learn from Dewey regarding the tension surrounding story in OAE research. We remind ourselves of Dewey's (1929/1958) attack on dualisms and his caution against the fallacy of selective emphasis. Dewey's perhaps most well-known dualistic concern was the role of experience

(primary) and thinking (secondary) in education. He resolved this dualism by claiming that we don't need one *or* the other in education. Rather, we need *both* (Hunt, 1995). Perhaps the same is true for OAE research: we need *both* traditional positivist *and* more story-based research in our quest for understanding 'how' and 'why' the OAE process works.

Outdoor adventure education appears to be trapped as a sub-field of education that is "organic and emergent in nature" (Loynes, 2002, p. 113), but which is being cajoled into privileging ways of measuring "environments, individuals, groups, cultures and activities and the experiences that arise from their interaction" (p. 113) in ways that predominantly satisfy funding bodies, administrators, governments, and parents who seek a highly elusive certain return on their investments. Perhaps, rather than searching for OAE's 'silver bullet', OAE researchers need to push back against society's thirst for statistically significant evidence and accept that some experiences go beyond tidy explanation.

While our proposed way forward may appear to be an affront against OAE's research heritage, this is not the intent. Rather, it highlights the need to acknowledge different ways of knowing, which includes quantitative and qualitative empirical research, but which also features experience-based anecdotal stories—all of which have methodological flaws of some kind.

We suggest that the field of OAE needs to be less bold and dogmatic with regard to the claims it makes. The more niche-market of educational expeditions is on safer 'research ground' if it acknowledges that there are 'reasonably assurable' outcomes that are likely, and that there are 'home-run' possibilities that are only achievable if we risk trusting the journey, while embracing their unpredictable and non-formulaic nature (Beames, 2006; Loynes 1998, 2002; and Roberts, 2012).

Finishing our Story

We suspect that most educators who have been leading OAE programs for a number of years have similar stories of profound experiences that cannot be planned nor predicted, and are difficult to measure. Therefore, while we have sometimes struggled to explain ‘what happens’ and ‘how it happens’ with our students on educational expeditions, the past outcomes research and stories shared here demonstrate that good things are happening. This deep academic interrogation of two educational expedition stories has confirmed our long-held belief that in order for students to experience the profound potential of educational expeditions, we need to trust the journey. By this we mean that we need to accept the unpredictable and difficult to measure aspects of OAE, knowing that not every student will sit eye-to-eye with a wolf or have lunch with a local Norwegian, but that these sorts of experiences will only come about if we journey with our students and are ready to help students respond to, and maximize their learning, from the unpredictable and difficult to measure experiences that journeys provide. This research journey has also given us the confidence and motivation to embrace emerging research methods as we continue our quest to deepen our understanding and practice of WEEs.

We set out on this journey to examine three assertions: First, that the OAE black box may not be capable of capturing all of the data needed to fully understand and explain the inner workings of WEEs; second, that in spite of the unpredictable and difficult to measure nature of WEEs, we need to trust the journey to elicit learning that comes from responding to encounters with people and place; and third, alternative and academically supportable research approaches need to be embraced in order to gain deep and nuanced understandings of the wonderfully diverse and rich experiences that make-up WEEs. Further to our three assertions, we argue that

the quest for a sequenced ‘journey recipe’ is unrealistic and does not honour the philosophical and pedagogical foundations of OAE.

We suggest that a journey worth trusting is one that is directed by Raffan’s (1993) concept of land-as-teacher, Wattoo and Brown’s (2011) signposts, Loynes’ (2002) generative paradigm, and Robert’s (2012) cautions about neo-experientialism. These stories also reflect the vision that Wattoo and Brown (2011) put forward when they describe outdoor education for a changing world as that which “rather than being prescriptive and formulaic...are responsive to their students, their community and their places” (p. 198).

Acknowledgements: We would like to thank Dr. Tom Potter for his useful comments on an early version of this paper.

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Footnotes

¹ When selecting one story from each author for analysis, we sought contrast. We wanted different regions of world, different seasons, and different modes of travel. It was also crucial to have stories that included interactions with at least two of wildlife, people, place, and legend.