Whose Journeys?
The Outdoors and Adventure as Social and Cultural Phenomena

Critical explorations of relations between individuals, ‘others’ and the environment

Editors
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Overseas Youth Expeditions

Simon Beames

British youth expeditions have existed for almost seventy years, but little credible research has been conducted on this ever-growing industry. This paper considers several aspects of the overseas youth expedition phenomenon: its history and development, current issues in the industry, and relevant research. It concludes with a summary of my own preliminary research on overseas youth expeditions.

Introduction

Of the 28 organisations that are members of the Year Out Group (YOG) (2002), at least seven offer an overseas expedition experience to British youth. Countless other non-member expedition providers offer similar adventures that involve working with a group on a meaningful project in another country. Though the Oxford dictionary defines an expedition as a journey with a particular purpose (Fowler, 1995), I believe the word “group” must be added to the definition in order to distinguish expeditions from a voluntary work placement that one could do alone. I find it curious that so little research has been conducted on the subject of overseas expeditions for young people in Britain.

This paper is a summary of my initial learnings about these expeditions, divided into two parts. The first part covers the history of overseas youth expeditions coupled with a summary of the current issues in the field, as well as an overview of the research closely related to my own interest in identifying the key elements, or ingredients, of these expeditions. The second part of the paper is a synopsis of a pilot study conducted in early March 2002.

Roots

British overseas youth expeditions began in 1932 when Surgeon Commander Murray Levick founded the Public Schools Exploring Society, known today as the British Schools Exploring Society (BSES). They used field projects and outdoor challenges in remote regions of the world as a means to help the development of young people. In 1969 and 1970, two youth development charities were created: Project Trust and Gap Activity Programme. Both organisations offered eleven month overseas work placements. In 1972, the Young Explorers Trust (YET) was founded in association with the Royal Geographical Society to advise, approve, and fund youth expeditions. Since then, almost 600 expeditions have received approval from the YET (Grey, 1998). The next overseas youth expedition organisation to emerge, in 1984, was Operation Raleigh (now called Raleigh International or just “Raleigh”). It was founded by Sir John Blashford-Snell and Prince Charles. Though originally offering adventures based from their globetrotting brigantine “Zebu”, by the late 1980s a Raleigh International expedition
comprised a ten week journey in a developing nation, split into three phases: community service, environmental research, and adventure.

**Overseas youth expeditions today**

Today there is an increasing number of organisations offering structured overseas educational experiences for young people. Many of these organisations:

- offer at least one or a combination of: development work, scientific or environmental research, and adventure travel
- offer experiences ranging from two weeks to one year long
- have emerged in the last 15 years.

Still, I believe it is important to emphasise that an expedition, for the purposes of this paper, involves a group of people going on a journey for a particular purpose. This distinction enables us to narrow down our discussion to topics specifically concerning overseas expeditions, as opposed to year out programmes in general, which would cover a huge range of activities. Allison (2001) suggested that three main issues surrounding overseas youth expeditions needed to be examined:

1. The questionable practices of expedition providers: insensitivity to the host culture through inappropriate attire, the obligatory use of high altitude acclimatisation drugs, using predominantly male instructors on trips with mostly female participants.
2. The high prices needed to send British young people across the world for an overseas experience.
3. The lack of a united front between different organisations involved in screening and administering expeditions and school trips.

A fourth issue that I would offer is accessibility. If such a large number of expedition providers are convinced that the types of overseas experiences they offer are beneficial for British young people, why do the majority of them not cater to excluded youth? There are a few organisations who support the notion that groups comprising a rich mix of different individuals will yield greater opportunities for growth, but they are the exception. As far as I can surmise, only Raleigh International assists young people who have experienced some form of social exclusion to participate on overseas expeditions. World Challenge runs UK-based expedition programmes in conjunction with schools from areas that have a history of catering to disaffected youth. More recently the RGS-IBG and Shell have formed a partnership that aims to encourage more inclusive expedition practice and opportunities for people with disabilities (Darke, 2002). These three examples notwithstanding, I believe the demographics of the young people having expedition experiences should more closely reflect the demographics of the young people in our society.
Related research

What follows is not an exhaustive literature review, but rather four pieces of work directly related to my research interest of identifying the critical elements of an overseas youth expedition. Kaplan and Talbot (1983) identified four factors of a wilderness experience, which they also referred to as a “restorative environment”.
1. Being away from one’s everyday environment
2. Being interested in the activities
3. Learning to function in an alternative environment
4. A strong link between what is necessary to do and what is desirable to do (e.g. cooking when hungry)

Expeditionary Learning Outward Bound (ELOB) is a progressive in-school educational program in America. Their main belief is that “experiences draw together personal experience and intellectual growth to promote self-discovery and the construction of knowledge” (ELOB, 1992:1). The organisation lists ten guiding principles: self-discovery, having wonderful ideas, responsibility for learning, intimacy and caring, success and failure, collaboration and competition, diversity and inclusivity, the natural world, solitude and reflection, service and compassion (ELOB, 1992).

Only two major studies have been specifically conducted on British youth expeditions that have travelled overseas (Allison, 2000; Kennedy, 1992). During the 70s and 80s, Kennedy, an inner-city school teacher in Liverpool, took young people on nine ten week overland expeditions to the Sahara Desert. On two of these trips, 31 participants filled out questionnaires regarding what they had they gained from their experience. The study’s principal claim was that expeditions increase moral development in young people. Kennedy’s expeditions were particularly noteworthy because the participants were not selected or interviewed: They were part of the team regardless of their ability or behaviour. Kennedy (1992) offered three possible factors of an expedition that might accelerate a young person’s personal development:
1. Small communities that offer greater stability and let young people reassess their role in society through increased communal responsibility
2. The increased relationship between effort and rewards (which may not have been experienced in their academic life, for example)
3. The power of wild places: young people respect the power, violence, and beauty of the outdoors, yet rarely take notice of their natural surroundings at home.

In 1997, Allison did research on a six week BSES expedition to Greenland. Like all BSES expeditions, the programme comprised a combination of scientific research and adventurous pursuits. Allison interpreted letters written to him by 20 participants, 6, 12, and 18 months post-expedition. The letters answered one question: “How have you been influenced by the expedition?”. Allison’s three cycles of data collection, analysis and interpretation, and feedback to the respondents yielded four areas of personal growth within expedition participants (Allison, 2000):
1. The relationship with one’s self
2. Relationships with friends, team-members, colleagues
3. Relationships with the natural world
4. Perspectives on education/career.

There have been a number of texts describing how educational and powerful overseas youth expeditions can be, yet they are mostly anecdotal and cannot be considered proof that anyone who goes on an expedition is better off than anyone who stays at home. If we accept Allison’s findings regarding how participants are influenced by expeditions, then there are two important questions surrounding overseas youth expeditions that remain unexplored by rigorous research. One, why are more and more young people going on overseas expeditions every year? And two, what key elements of an expedition elicit personal growth? This second question is at the root of my research.

My research

Heeding the advice from critics of past research in outdoor education (Barratt & Greenaway, 1995), I have decided against using positivist methods to measure thoughts, emotions, and ideas and have opted to hear participants’ views on what makes an expedition, “an expedition”, through free flowing conversation.

The research I am doing is through Raleigh International, a youth development charity that helps young people discover their full potential by working on challenging environmental and community projects around the world (Raleigh, 2000). In March 2002, I conducted a pilot study with the primary goal of practising data collection, management, analysis, and interpretation. The secondary goal was to learn what people consider to be the main ingredients of a Raleigh expedition, what they expect participants to gain from a Raleigh expedition, and how the elements of expeditions affect the learner outcomes.

My philosophical framework is grounded within a constructivist paradigm, which makes three principal assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Stake, 1995):
1. Reality is constructed differently by different people - a relativist ontology.
2. Personal experience is the sole source of knowledge - a subjectivist epistemology.
3. The research occurs in a natural setting, findings are interpreted by the researcher, and verified for accuracy with the participants - a naturalistic methodology.

The above three assumptions lead most naturally to a method that involves, a) data collection consisting of having conversations with participants who will be experiencing or have experienced the phenomenon of an overseas youth expedition, and b) deriving research findings from the analysis and interpretation of these conversations.

For the pilot study, short interviews were conducted with both full-time and volunteer Raleigh staff and with prospective Youth Development Programme (YDP) participants during an introductory weekend at a Scout Camp in Sheffield. The data collected specifically pertain to Raleigh’s YDP programme, which caters to youth who have experienced some form of social exclusion, such as: criminal convictions, homelessness, long term unemployment and substance abuse.
I interviewed three groups of staff and three groups of participants in three different arrangements: one person alone, a pair, and a group of three, per population. The young people were male and female aged between 18 and 25 years, the volunteer staff were former YDP venturers, male, aged 20 and 21 years old, and the full-time Raleigh staff were male and female, all over 25 years old. By using crude purposive sampling I hoped to hear varying views on expeditions from people that have greatly differing relationships with Raleigh. I also wanted to compare the interpersonal and mechanical aspects of interviewing groups of various sizes.

I tape-recorded all of the interviews and transcribed them into text. Next, I read the texts over and over, highlighting meaningful statements. I then extracted these statements and clustered them together into themes that I judged to be most appropriate. Broadly speaking, these three steps to analyse text are consistent with methods used in hermeneutics (Patterson, Watson, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 1998) and phenomenology (Colaizzi, 1978; Moustakas, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1989).

The credibility of this research rests not in using proven methods of investigation, but in the evaluation of the research product itself (Patterson et al., 1998). To this end, I have employed two methods to verify the trustworthiness of my findings (Stake, 1995):
1. Investigator triangulation: having other researchers use the same procedure to analyse your data to see if they find similar themes
2. Member checks: asking the participants if the author’s interpretations are accurate

In keeping with these two methods of verification, the first step I took was to write to all the respondents, asking them to verify the accuracy of the themes I had outlined. All of the four full-time staff respondents wrote back saying that they were satisfied with my interpretation of the interview (one respondent requested that I add one point that had been missed - that these expeditions added a considerable “sense of occasion” to a young person’s life). I heard back from both of the two ex-YDP respondents and five of the six YDP prospective expedition venturers. Though I was disappointed in not being able to track down the last of the prospective venturers, those that did respond indicated that my interpretation of our conversation was accurate. Investigator triangulation took the form of two colleagues reading through one third of the transcribed interviews, using the same crude three step method of analysis described two paragraphs above. The general themes that they arrived at were consistent with mine.

Preliminary findings

The findings pertain to conversations with all participants (staff and young people) about overseas youth expeditions conducted by Raleigh International.

The critical elements of an overseas youth expedition:

- a “once in lifetime” opportunity
- being immersed in a foreign culture
- working with a diverse group of participants
- being in a supportive environment
- having equal opportunities to contribute
- helping people in great need (outside the UK)
- having opportunities to make decisions
- a high level of intensity
- a variety of projects
- being challenged (a mental "stretch" and physical hard work).

The outcomes experienced by, and expected from, an overseas youth expedition:

- increased independence
- increased self-esteem
- increased self-confidence
- feeling a sense of achievement
- the ability to find work post-expedition.

Several points of interest emerged:

- the prospective expedition participants and the ex-YDP participants (volunteer staff) made no mention of the importance of being in an affirming, supportive community, whereas full-time Raleigh staff thought this was an important factor.
- helping those in greater need than themselves is huge draw for the young people
- no respondents mentioned the adventure component of a Raleigh expedition
- none of the young people spoke of the importance of being an equal stakeholder in a diverse group, whereas Raleigh staff see this as a major strength of their programme
- full-time Raleigh staff commented that the YDP participants must be willing to go on the expedition in order for it to be worthwhile (i.e. they shouldn't be coerced into going)
- the young people were most interested in intra-personal gains such as increased self-esteem and self-confidence, rather than learning inter-personal skills such as leading a team through a challenging task and conflict resolution.

The findings from this small study are not particularly surprising. Anyone familiar with youth expeditions could probably have guessed that many respondents would say that participating in challenging projects in a foreign country would help them develop interpersonal skills and self-confidence. More intriguing opportunities for further investigation lie in delving deeper into the subject of the key elements of an expedition, for example: Specifically what makes a programme "once in a lifetime"? Several participants stated that it was, or would be, such "an experience". What is at the root of this amorphous, powerful "experience" that people find so difficult to articulate?
Besides getting an initial feel of peoples’ ideas on the key ingredients and outcomes of an overseas youth expedition, the other goal of the pilot study was to learn about the nuts and bolts of research using tape-recorded interviews. In this respect, it became very clear to me that interviewing two people at once was more effective than interviewing one person or three people at a time. With one person, the respondent often went on and on, unnecessarily repeating themselves – perhaps to fill some void. With three people, the quality of the tape recording suffered greatly as the machine’s microphone was not powerful enough to pick up four peoples’ voices. Furthermore, there was the possibility of the third, less dominant person, contributing much less than the others. With pairs, however, the two people built on each others’ ideas while giving each other space to speak.

I learned two other practical things from this pilot study exercise. The first is to ensure that participants write down as many contact details as possible, so I can be sure to locate them in order for them verify my interpretation of the data. For example, this might mean getting parents’ addresses and phone numbers in addition to their own addresses, email addresses, and phone numbers. Another realisation is that even though the process of transcribing recordings to text is long and tedious, I will always do it myself – even if I win the lottery and can pay someone else to do it! By hearing the dialogue over and over during this transcription process I am convinced that I gained a deeper understanding of the respondents’ thoughts.

This study was limited by the superficiality of the conversations themselves, as they may not have been as revealing as a longer, more in-depth interview. As such, I would caution against making any generalisations from these findings to any expedition provider operating expeditions that are much different in nature to those of Raleigh International.

Conclusion

By outlining what I have learned about overseas youth expeditions during the first six months of my research I hope to have presented a brief, but accurate, representation of their history, current issues, and related studies, as well as the beginnings of my own research.

References


Whose Journeys? offers a timely and valuable contribution to the debates and developments in the emerging field of outdoor studies. It provides critical discussion around ‘adventure’ and the ‘outdoors’ and in particular the relations between individuals, ‘others’, the environment and society.

The papers are presented within seven themes:
- inclusion and the outdoors
- philosophy and the outdoors
- adventure and society
- outdoor practitioners
- research and outdoor experience
- encountering nature
- contested adventures and identities.

These papers are valuable for those interested in exploring the outdoors and adventure as important cultural and social phenomena. While the range of the Whose Journeys? conference is wider than education, including topics such as nature and adventure, outdoor learning practitioners will find in them much to stimulate and inform their work. The outdoors provides a powerful medium for learning and development. Research and academic enquiry are essential activities which underlie professional development and which are necessary to establish outdoor learning as a significant professional field.

This collection, from leading researchers and thinkers, provides stimuli for further debates within the outdoor studies field.
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