



Outdoor Experiential Education Programmes for Socially Excluded

Young People

An Evaluation of the Venture Trust's 10-day Pilot Programme

Final Report

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Executive Summary and Recommendations

Introduction

In 2004, the Community Fund supported a programme of 10-day pilot courses at the Venture Trust in Applecross. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme the Venture Trust contracted the University of Edinburgh to study the outcomes of the 10 of these courses conducted in 2004. The following summarises the research approach taken and the main outcomes. Full details of these and a thorough literature review are presented in the main report.

Participants in the programme were referred by one of three main agencies; Fairbridge, Foyer Federation, and National Children's Homes and the study was carried out over a period of about 9 months. A combination of questionnaires and semi-structured interviews provided primarily qualitative data on 94 participants of which complete data sets were collected on 24. Results from both participants and their referral agency key-workers indicated that the 10-day course had, to a greater or lesser extent, a positive effect on personal and social aspects of the participant's lives and most notably on vocational development.

Participant Outcomes

- **Personal and Social Development:** The findings show signs of developing self-confidence amongst participants. This is reinforced by the experience of referral agencies, which suggests that, in the medium term, (up to three months after the course) young people benefited from programmes offered by the Venture Trust. These programmes were intended to encourage the development of self-awareness and self-confidence, improve communication and problem solving skills and develop team-work.
- **Vocational Development:** One of the areas affected to a greater degree than had previously been thought, was that of vocational development. Unemployment rates amongst participants were shown to have dropped by almost 50% post-course and significant numbers of participants not in full-time employment had taken up some form of voluntary work or training position since attending a Venture Trust course.
- **Drug and Alcohol Use:** Though not a significant issue with the majority in this client group, the Venture Trust course also appeared to have had a modest positive impact on those involved in drug use and offending behaviour. Though alcohol use was not an issue for the majority, the small numbers reporting medium to heavy use did not decline over the course of the research.
- **Offending Behaviour:** Results were similar to those for drug use.

The Venture Trust Programme

- The Venture Trust programme appears to be successful in establishing a level of understanding that is conducive to positive change; introducing techniques and approaches for dealing with issues faced by participants.
- By extending the study beyond the end of each course, results and feedback were collected which highlight the value of continued post-course support.
- Most referral agencies and participants reported congruence between the standards they expected and those they experienced on the Venture Trust programmes. This sense of congruence was reflected in the positive feedback from most participants about their experiences while on a course.

- The study indicates that the Venture Trust programme comprises a number of elements that are sequential, progressive and cumulative, supporting learning at a range of levels. It is developmental rather than simply a collection of isolated activities. The commitment to post-course follow up improved the chances of such learning being integrated into the lives of the participants through links and positive relationships with partner agencies.

Programme Delivery

The study found that the Venture Trust programme was characterised by:

- An effective balance between the giving of responsibility to participants and the maintenance of a clear safety framework.
- An emphasis on the importance of co-operation for the attainment of successful outcomes.
- The progressive transfer of appropriate responsibility to participants and encouragement to apply this to their home circumstances.
- The relaxed and congenial style of the Venture Trust staff, combined with the structure and programming, works to avoid conflict and prevent the alienation of individuals with challenging behaviour.
- Examples of diligent and comprehensive follow-on action plans and report systems to support on-going participant development.

Recommendations

- In order to ensure appropriate referrals to the course, guidelines on course content and participation should be clarified for referring agencies. This might be done using a variety of methods aimed at both participants and referral workers.
- There is evidence of good practice in the feedback process within some referral agency partnerships. Based on this experience, links with referral agencies should be developed and strengthened, implementing continued and sustained follow-up procedures to ensure continued and appropriate support for young people attending Venture Trust courses to reinforce their learning.
- The Venture Trust should consider encouraging its staff to gain experience of the referral agencies. This may be possible through short-term secondment or shared practice meetings. The Venture Trust should continue to support staff in developing further skills to maintain a high level of reflective, up-to-date practice, through appropriate training and appraisal procedures.
- The Venture Trust should consider ways in which evidence can be collated and recorded both in the long and short-term, to ensure its effective use in evaluation and analysis and future development of their course programmes.
- In order for ongoing evaluation of the programme to be most effective, it is necessary to develop a strategy for the continued collection of appropriate data. This will allow more detailed analysis of programme design. For example, are specific approaches and activities in current use those most effective in meeting the needs of the participants?

1 Introduction

Adventurous experiences in the outdoors have been used as a medium for personal growth and development in young people for many thousands of years, though over the last century this has become more stylised and formalised in western society. Whilst some trace the written origins of an understanding of an experiential approach to learning as far back as Plato (1955), it is Dewey (1938) who is often credited with promoting this as an approach to learning. In recent years a growing body of literature has further developed the philosophy and practice of outdoor education (for example, Nichols, 2000; Higgins & Nicol, 2002; Kolb, 1984, 1988; Warren, Sakofs & Hunt, 1995; Wurdinger, 1997).

Whilst outdoor adventure programmes have become increasingly diverse one specific strand has become particularly popular; the use of adventurous activities within an experiential learning context to bring about positive change in young people who, for various reasons may be experiencing 'exclusion' from or conflict with society. This practice involves engaging people in activities which are used as a medium to discuss the way in which they interact with the world and potentially change those patterns to be more satisfactory for themselves and for society.

The purpose of the present study is to evaluate the outcomes of a pilot experiential outdoor educational programme, which was developed at the Venture Trust to provide a medium for 16-25 year-olds to bring about positive change in their lives. The 10-day course was aimed at young people from across the United Kingdom, who are already engaged with youth organisations, such as:

- Fairbridge
- Foyer Federation
- National Children's Homes

A multi-method approach was developed to identify the outcomes of the 10-day programme and to evaluate the extent to which the programme's aims have been achieved. A comparison was also made between the effectiveness of this new 10-day programme and the 20-day programme previously conducted for a similar client group.

2 The Venture Trust in Context

2.1 The Outdoor Educational Context

To understand the context of the work at the Venture Trust it is useful to briefly review the history of outdoor education, particularly its application for personal and social development, and then to focus on the specific work of the Venture Trust.

According to Gillis and Priest (2003), the notion of using outdoor adventure education as a medium for personal development for a variety of groups in society has been in evidence since 1861. Specific references to the importance of experiential education for developing morals and values in young people can be found in the work of Socrates, Aristotle and Plato, as well as the work of Dewey (1925, 1938) and Maslow (1962). Although these authors are also pivotal in much of the theory which underpins outdoor adventure education, the academic body of knowledge to support its value has only been gathered over the last half-century (for example, Gibson, 1979; Hopkins & Putnam, 1993; Higgins & Loynes, 1997a; Miles and Priest, 1990; Mortlock, 1984). Much of this has been more of a philosophical nature than based on empirical evidence.

Outdoor adventure education programmes have become increasingly diverse, in both their uses of the outdoors and in their underpinning philosophy or purpose. To place the work of the Venture Trust in context some of the most relevant examples of the literature relating to the field are reviewed and presented in Appendix 8.1.

There are several terms used to describe outdoor adventure programmes which use an experiential learning foundation. Therefore it is useful to establish a working definition for the purposes of this study.

Barrett and Greenaway (1995) suggest that outdoor adventure education "*denotes a package containing a number of different ingredients, any of which may have a significant impact on the personal and social development of the young people involved*" (p3). Further to this, Higgins and Loynes (1997a) advocate that each element, outdoor, adventure, and education are fundamental in the process:

[It] should not simply be recreational, nor should it take place without at least some experience of the outdoors. Adventure in this context implies that there is a 'journeying out' (a move into new ground) to embrace the experience. The process engaged in is that of learning 'experientially'. To maximise the effect,

the experience should be direct rather than meditated, with the facilitator acting as a guide rather than in the usual formal capacity of a teacher.

Higgins & Loynes (1997a, p. 2)

In defining the nature of outdoor education Higgins and Loynes (1997b) also refer to the field *“as drawing on three main areas of outdoor activities, environmental education and personal and social development”* (see Figure 2.1). They suggest that effective facilitators often do not have an equal focus on all three areas at the same time, often concentrating on one or two areas particularly, *“but will still be sensitive to opportunities to guide experience within complimentary areas...tak[ing] place in a framework of safety”* (p.6). Programme delivery at the Venture Trust is an example of this, where general practice focuses within the outdoor activity and personal and social development areas, but due care and attention is still paid to the natural environment within which they operate, so as to educate within this area on a more subtle level.



Figure 2.1 The Range and Scope of Outdoor Education (Higgins and Loynes, 1997b, p. 6)

2.2 The Venture Trust

The Venture Trust (VT) was established 22 years ago and has been running residential courses for young people for nine years. Set in its own grounds, located in the rugged landscape of the northwest of Scotland, VT offers its participants the chance to take a break from their routine with space and support to reconsider their personal and social attitudes and circumstances. Their mission statement proposes that:

Venture Trust works to enable young people from throughout Great Britain to grasp the responsibilities and opportunities of a modern and complex society, by offering them a residential programme of opportunities that promotes increases in self-esteem, confidence and motivation and develops personal, social and life skills.

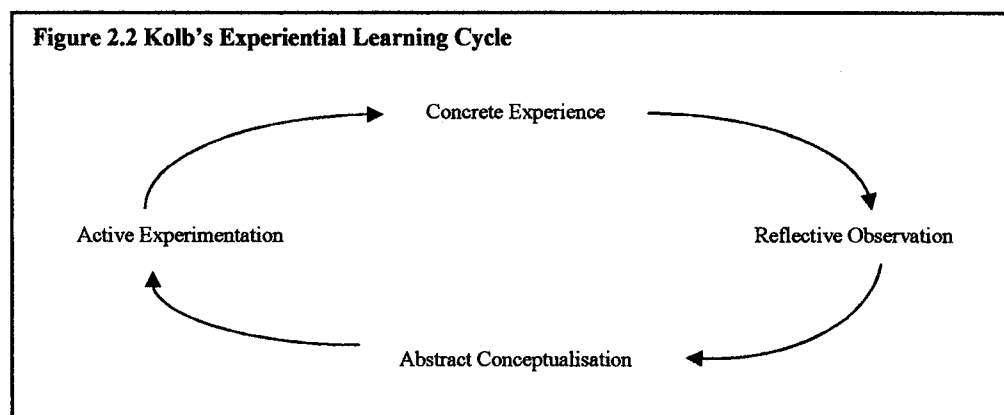
Venture Trust (2000, p.1)

With a focus on young people aged 16-25 years, who are often experiencing difficulties in their relationship with their community and the wider society (such as being out of education, training or employment; homelessness; problems with drugs or alcohol; or offending behaviour) VT strives to provide an environment where young people are comfortable to explore their beliefs, values and goals, aiming to raise awareness of the wide range of possibilities available to each participant.

Prerequisites for courses are simple; referral agents must be committed to providing a minimum of 3 -months post-course support, in order to help establish any new learning and build some structure to work within once the young person returns home; participants must possess the commitment to make changes to their lives. Wurdinger (1997) states that,

“...choice is the first step towards a meaningful learning experience. Adventure educators believe that in order for meaningful learning to occur students must determine that they want to participate, otherwise the activity is forced and may result in no learning at all. Therefore, choice is an important element not only in the midst of adventure, but at the very outset as well” (p.6).

Based on this enthusiasm and dedication, VT's courses are grounded in cognitive behavioural approaches (Gillen, 2003) to aid understanding and insight, combined with Kolb's experiential learning cycle theory (Kolb, 1984) (see Figure 2.2).



The structure of course programmes, which are of ten days duration, is grounded in the principle that experiences, which have the potential to nurture increases in self-awareness and responsibility in young people, can lead to a positive transformation in an individual's attitudes and behaviour. A range of approaches are used to guide the young people towards a greater level of self-awareness, understanding and learning.

In partnership with the referring agencies (Fairbridge, Foyer Federation and National Children's Homes being the main feeder organisations), VT's work with young people aims to build upon a foundation of development, which is already in progress. Therefore, individual needs are identified prior to the course, so that a more appropriate programme can be delivered to meet those needs. Throughout the course, close attention is paid to each young person, in order to work in a fashion that is appropriate to their learning style, thus maximising their learning potential. Within this supportive framework, attitudes, values and beliefs, which could be interpreted as negative, are confronted.

2.3 Course Structure

Courses offered are mixed gender, though generally, a higher percentage of referrals are male. Those who attend are made up of young people from across the United Kingdom, with a maximum of 24 on any one course. Venture Trust recognises that some of its participants will not have been as successful during formal education and therefore the programmes work with an experiential learning focus.

Using a combination of challenging indoor and outdoor activities, group work and one-to-one sessions, participants are provided with what is designed to be a solid foundation, from which they can work on developing their individual needs, such as raising self-awareness, motivation and personal and social skills.

The majority of the course is delivered using activities that explore themes around journeying, working with other people and reflection. This includes an actual journey in the form of an 'expedition', lasting several days, where the young people may rock-climb, abseil, hike or canoe and sleep out in tents or mountain huts. This medium is used as a metaphor to symbolise the journey each young person is passing through in his or her life. The intention of the expedition is to encourage each individual to face up to and overcome the challenges in the physical journey, with guidance (through group and one-to-one

discussions) enabling them to then develop the necessary skills, knowledge and confidence to transfer their learning for use in their everyday lives.

The discussion periods are a chance for the young people to review how they feel they are progressing and with their one-to-one worker, discuss and work towards goals to help them succeed. Strategies to apply what they have learned in their everyday lives are discussed and action plans drawn up to help guide them once they have left VT. This action plan forms part of a detailed report, which highlights individual progress throughout the course. In order to maintain a solid structure to support their development the participants are then encouraged to re-establish contact with their referral worker when they return home.

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