

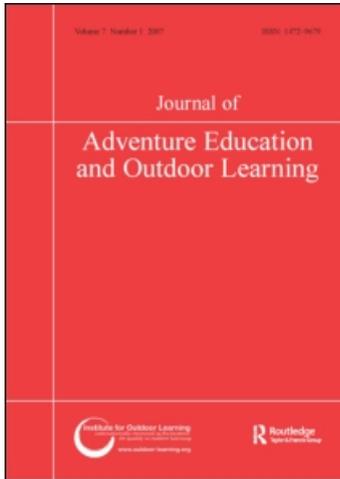
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Methodology in outdoor research: approaches from an alternative discourse

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Powerful, dominant discourses surrounding neo-Hahnian theory (as discussed by Brookes in 2003) and effectiveness (as discussed by Hargreaves and Fullan in 1998, for example) have influenced both practice and research in outdoor adventure education. This has led to a concentration of research that focuses on the impact of outdoor programmes. It has also led to the objectivization of outcomes and the essentializing of participant responses. An alternative approach, embedded in a discourse of situatedness is proposed. Using examples from research in progress, it is argued that qualitative data represented as fictional narrative can be useful both in aiding the understanding of participant experiences during outdoor programmes, and in engaging participants and readers in the research process.

Introduction

The outdoor education literature is rich with many different approaches to research, which make claims regarding the efficacy of outdoor programmes (for an overview see McKenzie, 2000; Rickinson et al., 2004). Perhaps because of the claims, the UK Government's manifesto for outdoor learning (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2006) presents an argument for outdoor learning as an entitlement for all, and states that:

Learning outside the classroom is about *raising achievement* through an organised, powerful approach to learning (DfES, 2006, my italics).

This is a good example of how Government agendas have colonized the language and work of others, in this case defining outdoor learning in terms of schools effectiveness, an agenda that has been heavily criticized (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Wrigley, 2003, 2007). Some of the outdoor research has focused on the impact on the academic performance of children (Christie, 2004; Dismore & Bailey, 2005;

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Nundy, 1998) and on aspects of self-concept (Ewert, 1983; Gibbs & Bunyan, 1997; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997). Critical engagement with this research literature exposes what I consider to be important issues relating to research approaches. I argue that the dominant discourses of the late twentieth century, of which school effectiveness is one example, have influenced education and other aspects of social life in Britain, and have also influenced research in outdoor learning. Brookes (2003a, 2003b) has argued that a dispositional, neo-Hahnian discourse that focuses outdoor adventure education on ‘character’ building is dominant. He argues that this discourse is built upon the notion that character traits can be changed through engagement in outdoor programmes. The dominance of this discourse on practice, I argue, is reflected in research approaches focused on those practices. Adopting a social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1999; Burr, 2003) has enabled me to form a critique of this research and suggest alternative research approaches.

Discourse power and outdoor research

Social constructionism is the epistemological view that meaning is constructed through discourse, and that meaning is deeply situated in socio-cultural contexts; is multiple and subject to change. Burr (2003) has developed Parker’s (1992) working definition of ‘discourse’ as a social constructionist term, meaning a system of statements or set of meanings that together produce or construct a particular version of events. Some discourses have far more power than others and may become dominant.

An example of this is the schools effectiveness discourse (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Wrigley, 2007) which has become dominant in many areas of education (and other areas of social life such as health and social care). This has led to the widespread use in England of school ‘league tables’ reporting examination outcomes to compare school performance; target-driven performance management for teachers and school managers, and a focus on impact in school inspections by Ofsted. Within this discourse ‘impact’ is viewed very broadly, to the extent that ‘impact on what?’ is rarely questioned. Rather, it is based upon the assumption that there exists a causal link between educational aims, objectives and pedagogy; and learning outcomes or benefits. Impact became a mantra of late twentieth-century state schooling in Britain.

I suggest that this same school effectiveness discourse and search for impact has led to the predominance of outcome-focused research in the literature on outdoor learning. I suggest that much literature on outdoor learning programmes focuses on programme outcomes and that such research may value programme outcomes, such that can be observed and measured in some way, over participant experience. Dismore and Bailey’s (2005) work is a very good illustration of research of this nature. It focuses on the impact of outdoor programmes on academic achievement, and typifies research from a perspective that focuses on outcomes and impact (Dierking & Falk, 1997; Hattie et al., 1997; Christie, 2004; Ewert, 2004).

Other research has searched for the impact of outdoor programmes on the self-concept of participants (Ewert, 1983; Gibbs & Bunyan, 1997). The idea of outdoor challenge building character was formulated by Baden-Powell (1930) and Hahn (Flavin, 1996) who tended to define 'character' in terms of duty, responsibility and service to society. Brookes has argued that character building in outdoor adventure education is a flawed concept (2003a) and that outdoor adventure cannot change personal traits (Brookes 2003b). Drawing on the work of Ross and Nisbett (1991), Brookes suggests a 'situationist' perspective on outdoor adventure education, that focuses upon changing behaviour rather than changes to personality traits, and I build upon this below.

First, it is important to point out that, in line with what Furedi (2004, p. 143) terms the 'turn inward', 'character' has been re-written in self-conceptual terms such as resilience (Neill & Dias, 2001), self-esteem (Gibbs and Bunyan, 1997) and self-efficacy (Hattie et al., 1997). The contribution to knowledge and understanding about the efficacy of outdoor education programmes on the self-concept made by this body of research is substantial. It does, however, raise epistemological questions that may affect research approaches in a general sense. I argue that notions of self-concept can be viewed from either essentialist (i.e. having intrinsic, indispensable properties that characterize something) or social constructionist perspectives; and the way they are seen can have a substantial bearing on research questions and research methodology.

An illuminating example of essentialization occurs in Gibbs and Bunyan's (1997) paper on self-esteem and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and it illustrates the epistemological issues that arise when self-conceptual ideas are considered in essentialist terms. Their paper is representative of research interest in self-esteem (McRoberts, 1994; Pommier & Witt, 1995; Hattie et al., 1997; Neill & Dias, 2001; Swarbrick, Eastwood, & Tutton, 2004). Gibbs and Bunyan report on the contribution that participation in an adventurous expedition had on self-esteem. Using a hierarchical model of self-esteem, which focuses on physical self-worth (Fox, 1990) they argue that self-esteem increased as a result of participation in Duke of Edinburgh's Award expeditions. Central to this argument is the notion that quantifiable positive benefits are identifiable. A number of internal criticisms can be made of this research. For example, those surrounding claims of generalization within the Award, the impact of the expedition on self-esteem in the longer term, the adoption of Fox's (1990) physical self-worth model which ignores other contributory factors.

Such an internal critique accepts the epistemological and philosophical stance of the authors, but I want to go further than this and challenge epistemological understanding of self-esteem rather than the research into it. I want to question the epistemological assumptions that the authors' claims are based on and to pose questions such as:

- What is self-esteem?
- Does self-esteem exist in the natural world or in the social world?
- Does self-esteem exist apart from our talk about it?

Although Gibbs and Bunyan maintain that self-esteem is ‘the evaluative judgments an individual makes about their own worth’ (1997, p. 3), suggesting its subjective nature, I see their work as situated within a discourse that is objectivist (i.e. something that actually exists) and essentialist. Their work can be placed within an essentialist, humanist discourse, that assumes there is an essence of self at the core of an individual that is distinct, consistent and unchanging. Brookes (2003a) has challenged a similar essentialized view of ‘character’, arguing that an individual’s behaviour in one situation may give little indication about their behaviour in different situations. Thus, character is contextually situated rather than essential. A reading of Foucault may help us to understand how essentialization occurs. He explains how different words for what are nominally the same phenomena have the power to change meanings. For example, while sodomy focuses on a physical act, homosexuality essentializes such acts as character traits (Foucault, 1981). Similarly, in Foucaultian terms, with madness and mental illness (Foucault, 1965). If somebody backs out of a climbing activity because they are nervous or lack confidence, the implication is that this is a transitory state contextualized through the activity. If they are termed to be of ‘weak character’, or suffer low self-esteem the implication is of a personality trait in need of remedy or therapy.

The essentialized view of self-esteem is evident in attempts to measure it (Gibbs & Bunyan, 1997). Self-esteem is viewed in terms of de-contextualized, finite personality characteristics that exist apart from a social context. I see this treatment of self-esteem as an example of reification (i.e. the treatment of something abstract as a material or concrete thing) and feel it is more useful to think of self-esteem as deeply contextualized and embedded within social situations.

This reified, realist view of self-esteem, stemming from an essentialist discourse has helped to shape research approaches. It has helped to sustain a prevalent epistemology of objectivism and positivist perspectives, which have led to the proliferation of testing and measurement through experimental methodological approaches.

I am not arguing that such research is without use, nor that it does not have an important place. However, for researchers who do not share such a realist, essentialist view of the social world, such research approaches may be uncomfortable, and I wish to present an alternative.

Alternative discourses and research perspectives

Burr and Butt (2000) argue that the increasing number of identifiable syndromes, and conditions such as low self-esteem, together with the increasing numbers who are diagnosed or self-label as suffering from them, can be understood as the product of widely circulating discourses that have become dominant. Their alternative perspective sees self-esteem not as essentialist, but as a socially constructed reality; embedded in social context (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999). Viewed from a social constructionist perspective, self-esteem can be seen as constructed by social actors in a particular socio-historical context. Taking this perspective positions researchers into strongly foregrounding both the social context and the participants’ views.

Allison (2000) has made a major contribution to the process/outcome debate in questioning the value of outcome-focused research. While acknowledging that research that attempts to prove that outdoor education works may be useful (to stakeholders and external funders) and may increase practitioner confidence in their work, he has questioned the value of focusing only on programme outcome and impact, suggesting that this 'does little to help improve practice or understanding of the experiences of participants' (Allison, 2000, p. 22). He challenges the notion that it is possible to provide meaningful answers to what he calls 'does it work?' questions aimed at outdoor education programmes. Instead Allison proposes the use of alternative questions such as 'what processes are at work in this situation, or what is the nature of the participant's experiences?' (Allison, 2000, p. 23). Burr regards the 'democratization' (2003, p. 154) of the research relationship, one that acknowledges the value of accounts other than those of the researcher, as an important aspect of social constructionist research.

Research methodology

My reading of the literature has had major implications for my research. Like Allison (2000) I wanted to focus on the processes at work in the residential outdoor education centre I was investigating, and sought to understand more deeply the highly contextual and situated nature of the participants' experiences there. I felt it important to 'democratize' (Burr, 2003) the research process as much as possible, acknowledging and valuing the accounts of others, especially the children who take part. Rather than essentializing and attempting to objectivize concepts of the self, I sought to emphasize the situatedness, diversity and emergent nature of participant experience and to produce rich descriptions of both the social context and the children's learning experiences. To begin to address this it was necessary to investigate the lived experiences of children when they take part in residential outdoor programmes. Ethnography provided a useful approach to the construction and interpretation of qualitative data. I made direct observations and talked with participants in order to construct a full, rich description (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001) of groups of children experiencing the outdoor centre.

Heron (1981) suggests two applications of the concept of 'collaborative inquiry'; a weak and a strong sense. In the weak sense, the participants are consulted for affirmation or rejection of preliminary findings, providing a kind of check for credibility akin to triangulation. In the strong sense, Heron suggests, there is intense involvement of participants at every stage of inquiry, and here Heron is writing about participation and co-construction. I am seeking a position akin to Heron's stronger sense by involving participants at multiple stages of the inquiry:

- Some participants (the head of centre and head teachers) were involved at an early stage in decisions about the research design and research process.
- Participants were informed of the aims of the research at the onset and informed consent obtained from all participants, including the children.

- When analysing the data I consulted participants in focus groups during follow-up visits to the schools.
- Preliminary findings were shared with participants, providing participant validation of my preliminary analysis of the data, helping me to see if I had interpreted events in similar ways to the participants; if I have missed things that they see as important.

Representing the data as fictional narrative

There are major ethical considerations in how researchers represent data that publicizes young participants as failing, crying and being embarrassed. Fictionalization has been useful to me because it protected participants' anonymity, without 'stripping away the rawness of real happenings' (Clough, 2002, p. 8). Furthermore, I see narrative as a useful form of research writing, especially when this is to be shared with child participants. Thus, short narrative vignettes constructed from observations made during my ethnography can be shared with children and used as a stimulus for the focus group stage of the research.

Clough (2002) also argues that fictionalization allows the prospect of introducing pieces of data from a number of events and weaving these into versions of the truth. I see this as most useful to my research as it has allowed me to describe experiences at the centre in a holistic and meaningful way while using data constructed and collected from a large number of events and from many participants over time.

Without doubt, there is a need for research to be seen as rigorous, valid and honest. Explaining from where the data are derived and how narratives have been constructed from them is a vital part of the research process. In the case of my narratives I have been transparent and have discussed their derivation fully in Rea (2006), rejecting the schema approach used by Clough (2002) (the highly structured nature of which I found to be in conflict with a narrative approach) in favour of a 'dual narrative' approach.

Clough (2002) has argued that presenting data and findings as stories demands that they be actively read, and that each reading presents a different perspective of the data. I follow this approach in presenting my readings alongside the following short narratives.

Provisional findings, presented as three short narratives with readings of each

1. The lambing shed

'Look,' cries Josh, 'this one's having its baby now.' The other children crowd round. Mr Brennan looks over their shoulders. Ted prefers to look away.

After a struggle the lamb is born and the children watch enthralled as it tries to get to its feet. Two boys are mesmerized as the ewe, tired after her efforts, looks at the afterbirth. 'That's the yolk,' speculates Johnny. The farmer comes around with an

antiseptic to put onto the open wound that was the umbilical cord. He picks up another lamb and lets the children hold it if they want to; not for too long, as the mother may yet reject it. In the corner behind them are a ewe and two lambs that didn't survive the birth. The children don't notice this yet, but later a few will. There is a lot for Mr Brennan to follow up back at school.

As the group walk back to the Centre Mr Brennan is talking to Ted. 'You know, it's this they will remember. Not the end-of-keystage tests or the literacy hour. The children come back to visit us years after they have left the school, and it's their visit to the centre that they want to talk about.'

A reading of the lambing shed

Clough has argued that a story needs no analysis, 'it is presumptuous to believe that one can analyse a... story' (Clough in Goodley, Lawthom, Clough, & Moore, 2004, pp. 121–122). I see the writing of a narrative as an analysis of data. In this analytical process meaning is made from the data and it is rendered intelligible to the reader.

Meaning here concerns impact. In 'The lambing shed' the sense of awe and wonder experienced by the children is as tangible to a reader as it is to their teacher. Mr Brennan gives a view of the impact of this, and similar, activities. This impact has not been objectivized or quantified, perhaps it cannot be, but is none the less important.

2. Josh's story

Johnny and Josh are excited as they work together on the rock-climbing wall. Johnny is belaying at the bottom of the climb. Josh begins to go up. He gets about two metres off the ground then stops.

'I can't do it!' he calls.

Johnny gives the younger boy plenty of encouragement, 'Come on Josh!' he calls.

Josh makes an attempt to shift his right foot, then freezes.

'I can't do it! I can't do it! I'm not doing it!'

Ted climbs to the side of him and suggests some moves.

'I can't do it!' says Josh.

'OK. You have to come down then,' says Ted.

'I can't do it!' shouts Josh.

The following day is Survival Day. Johnny sings as he walks along the lane by Hollins Farm. He falls over a great deal, but seems not to mind. The going gets tougher as the group slip and slide down through the rhododendrons. It is a lengthy scramble through bushes and over loose scree and mud down towards a secluded beach.

Everybody is finding it difficult to keep on their feet.

'I can't do it!' shouts Josh. 'Can't do it!'

At first Johnny helps, but as he finds it increasingly difficult to keep his own balance he cannot carry on looking out for the other boy.

'I can't do it!'

'Course you can fucking do it!' calls out Johnny.

Ted has heard this and rounds on Johnny.

'Were not having that,' he says. 'When we are down on the beach I want a word with you. You'll have to sit out the activity there.'

Moody and sullen Johnny walks on in silence. He refuses to collect tinder or wood for the fire, but his sulking does not seem to affect the group which is seated on the beach. Eager hands break open sandwich boxes and hungrily they begin to eat.

Except one.

'I can't do it!' says Josh.

'Can't do what?' someone asks.

'I can't eat because my hands are dirty.'

'Loser!'

A reading of Josh's story

This narrative is an antidote to those who uncritically claim the benefits of outdoor adventure on the self-concept of all participants. I do not essentialize self-concept. I recognize that while he struggles to overcome certain challenges, Josh retains agency and dignity in other social settings (c/f the lambing shed). Yet I fail to see how Josh's self-esteem was raised by these particular events.

That is my reading of the data. The analysis embedded in Josh's story may be considered partial because there is opportunity here for the reader to play a part in the analytic process. Thus, it is up to the reader to decide the impact of these adventures on Josh and Johnny; to decide what effect they may have had on their self-concept.

3. The last day

At once Kirsty breaks into a clapping, dancing, chanting routine learnt, she tells Ted, at Girl Guides.

'So, what's been the best part of the residential, Kirsty?'

'Staying away from my mum and dad,' she replied.

'Did you like that?'

'No. But I know I can do it. I'm not scared of the sea now, either. I just smiled when I swallowed a bit of the water.'

'Anything else?' Ted asked.

She thought for a while. She glanced at Johnny and Josh.

'I put my hand up more, I've not been such a scaredy-cat!'

A reading of the last day

In Rea (2006) I discuss fully how this story has been derived from the data, it is constructed from an amalgamation of observational data and writings of child

participants. Again, in 'the last day' the reader is left to decide the impact of the programme on Kirsty. When Clough says a story needs no analysis, I argue that this is because some analysis has already been done. Thus, 'the last day' is my analysis and interpretation of multiple data. It is my findings. Perhaps impact on Kirsty's self-concept is evidenced in these data, but I have not tried to objectivize the effect of the programme on Kirsty's self-esteem, because I do not believe that to be fruitful; I have just used narrative to represent what participants said and did.

Conclusion

In these narratives I am doing more than adopting an experimental genre of writing (Sparkes, 2002). I am also turning away from another powerful discourse; that of the traditional, modernist research paper. In that discourse the researcher decides the question, selects an appropriate methodology, generates or collects data, analyses it, then makes concluding comments. One might say it becomes neatly packaged; research 'in a bun' (after Loynes, 1996).

In my narrative approach, the reader is being allowed, to some small extent, to make their own findings from my representation of the data. A criticism of this approach may be that reader bias may distort meanings. I reject this criticism, seeing that it only applies if a realist view of research findings is adopted, and such a view is not appropriate to narrative research such as this. If we accept that nothing exists outside the text (Derrida, 1976) we must also accept that everyone will have their reading and interpretation of text.

I am not arguing that narratives constructed from qualitative, ethnographic data are any more or less important than the findings reported by research of a different genre; indeed they, too, are problematic. Issues of authenticity, researcher bias and transparency, and the need to demonstrate robustness and verisimilitude predominate and require full and frank discussion. However, I suggest that they are equally useful. If we adopt a social constructionist perspective and seek to democratize research relationships (Burr, 2003) then our research needs to be situated; strongly foregrounding the social context where the research takes place, which has consequences for generalizability. Equally, there is a need to focus on both the experiences and voice of the participants. Where children are involved as participants, fictional narratives are a useful way to engage them with data. Narratives also engage the reader, for a good story can draw a reader into it. In this way readers become more participatory in the research process, even to the extent of being allowed to make analytical judgements for themselves.

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Author biography

Tony Rea is a lecturer at the University of Plymouth, UK, and University College Jarna, Sweden. He is interested in many aspects of outdoor learning, sustainability and edu-tourism and in methodologies for researching these areas. In his spare time he enjoys walking, sailing and reading.

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