OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS AND THERAPEUTIC INTERVENTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Outdoor environments have long been used as a setting for therapeutic or alternative health interventions for a variety of ‘at risk’ groups (Nicholls, 2008). In 2011 the Australian Catholic University (ACU), Melbourne integrated a new unit: Outdoor Environments and Therapeutic Interventions (OETI) into the Bachelor of Exercise and Health Sciences curriculum. This unit was a culmination of a variety of different units previously offered that explored aspects or dimensions of the field of Adventure Therapy. This unit aims to introduce students to the foundational principles of programs that utilise the outdoors for therapeutic interventions with specific populations. The unit examines the historic development of therapeutic interventions that incorporate outdoors environments and explores the range of applications that are evolving from these emerging alternative health programs. The use of outdoor settings and outdoor pursuits as part of these therapeutic health interventions are investigated. There is an expectation that students work towards developing a positive and supportive relationship with a young person as they participate in a community outdoor adventure therapy program.

The Outdoor Environments and Therapeutic Interventions unit offered at ACU is one of few units offered at tertiary level nationally. In Victoria, a Graduate Certificate in Experiential Learning offered from 1999-2005 at Victoria University engaged students in a dialogue about adventure therapy theory, practice and programming. In 2007 the University of South Australia conducted its first ‘Introduction to Adventure Therapy’ course as part of a study stream in Outdoor Education. The course is no longer offered. The Australian Association of Bush Adventure Therapy (AABAT) acknowledges a lack of a clear career pathway for prospective practitioners. At present, ACU’s emerging units in the field of Adventure Therapy offer the only opportunity in Victoria, and possibly nationally, for students to engage in learning in this field at a tertiary level.

RATIONALE: Initial motivation

The rationale for the inclusion of a unit offering students an insight into the growing field of Adventure Therapy (AT) or Bush Adventure Therapy (BAT) as it’s frequently referred to in Australia, grew out of discussions with various Adventure Therapy providers in Victoria in 2002. At that time a number of agencies were working with ACU students on placements in their programs. One such provider expressed an interest in offering a single placement opportunity to all students in the class (maximum 12 clients). The provider tailored a program for their clients and gave the students the responsibility for planning and implementing the program for their clientele. In addition, students were placed with a particular client in the
role of a mentor for the duration of the program. The adventure therapy provider ran a day of basic training for the students.

Whilst enthusiastic about the students’ contribution and confident in the overall success of the program the agency identified the potential benefits of additional pre placement training. It was suggested that providing the students with the opportunity to engage with issues such as personal boundaries, dealing with challenging behaviours, confidentiality and disclosure requirements prior to placement would significantly enhance and protect the placement experience. It was also anticipated that a longer lead in time for the placement would provide extra time for the acquisition of foundational outdoor acquisition for clients and students as well as additional time for the development of trust and engagement between mentor and mentoree. With this feedback in mind two new units were developed at the ACU: ‘Outdoor Programming and Mentoring Youth at Risk’ and ‘Outdoor Environments and Therapeutic Interventions’ (OETI). Key leaders and educators in the Adventure Therapy field were invited to have input into the curriculum development and both units were offered for the first time in 2011. At the end of 2011 an evaluation of the two units identified a number of areas of knowledge duplicity. For example it was desirable for students undertaking the OETI unit to gain experience on placement with a provider, this placement often entailed a mentoring role in much the same way as placements within the ‘mentoring’ unit. The evaluation also identified that students undertaking the mentoring unit were disadvantaged by a lack of depth in their understanding of foundational theories and philosophy underpinning adventure therapy practice. In response to these issues the OETI unit was rewritten so as to combine appropriate content and curriculum from each unit. The new composite ‘Outdoor Environments and Therapeutic Interventions’ unit was offered in 2012 and continues to date. Figure 1.0 depicts the evolution of the OETI units at ACU.
WHO IS IT FOR AND WHY

OETI was initially designed to give Exercise Science students who were undertaking a major stream in outdoor recreation leadership the opportunity to learn about the field of adventure therapy and to gain enough experience and knowledge to be able to competently assist a seasoned Adventure Therapy practitioner. One of the unanticipated benefits of combining the mentoring and OETI units is that the unit content has proved appealing to a number of Youth Studies students. Over the past two years a third of the class has been made up Youth Studies students electing to take the OETI Unit. The coming together of students from differing, but aligned, disciplines has added depth and breadth of perspective to class discussion. It also mirrors a practice amongst many Adventure Therapy programs of developing staff teams representing two or more professional disciplines. For example, The Outdoor Experience (T.O.E.) provides Outdoor Adventure Interventions for young people aged 15 – 25yrs. An Outdoor Educator and a Social worker or Counsellor staffs all programs.

DEVELOPING CURRICULUM

Decision making about curriculum posed a timely and intriguing challenge. Whilst the Proceedings of the third, fourth and fifth International Adventure Therapy Conferences held in Canada (2003), New Zealand (2006) and Edinburgh (2009) clearly demonstrate that AT is increasingly recognised as a credible alternative therapeutic approach they also highlight an imperative, expressed in other key contemporary texts that continued maturation requires engaging with the task of developing theoretical frameworks that foster comprehensive understandings of the field and a theory informed practice (Bandorff & Newes, 2004; Hoyer 2004; Gass, Gillis & Russell, 2012).

With these concerns in mind, the instigation of OETI and the development of its content could be appreciated as a contribution to the development of theory informed practice within the Australian context.

The challenge to expose students to enough theory to support but not overwhelm their placement experience was resolved via identification of a number of learning outcomes (Table 1) and relevant topic areas listed in (Table 2).
Table 1 OETI Unit descriptors of desired Student Learning Outcomes (2014)

On completion of this unit students should be able to:

- Describe different therapeutic interventions and their use of outdoor settings and programming
- Understand a variety of natural environments in outdoor programming and in particular their use to achieve program outcomes in therapeutic interventions.
- Describe the importance of therapeutic interventions within the context of health and wellbeing issues.
- Understand the professional practice of an Adventure or Wilderness Therapist.
- Outline the risk assessment needed to be undertaken for a participant of a therapeutic interventions process.
- Consider the management issues that could arise in an Adventure Therapy program.
- Describe a variety of therapeutic approaches and understand how to facilitate a group towards specific outcomes.
- Understand a range of therapeutic intervention agencies and how they work differently with specific client groups.
- Outline the key concepts of a successful mentor relationship.
- Develop a supportive and positive relationship with a young person and work alongside them on their journey and involvement with a community program and field trip.

Table 2. Course content for 2014

Topics include:

- Defining Adventure Therapy, Wilderness Therapy and Bush Adventure Therapy
- History of Australian and International therapeutic interventions in the outdoors
- Philosophical and theoretical foundations of nature and adventure based therapeutic interventions
- Spectrum of practice and programming
- Health and wellbeing of clients of Adventure Therapy programming
- Leadership styles, facilitation and micro counselling skills for Adventure Therapy
- Working with group process
- Holistic risk assessment and management for specific client groups
- Concepts of mentorship
- Applications of the mentoring practice in the context of outdoor therapeutic interventions
- Personal behaviour patterns and their effect on the mentoring relationship
- Privacy and ethics in the mentor relationship
The visual model presented in Figure 2 provides a simplistic visual representation of key components of AT theory and practice. Within the OETI unit students were introduced to key theories underpinning each of the elements identified. The central triangle depicts three integral and interdependent variables at the heart of AT: Relationships, Adventure and Nature.

Within the context of OETI ‘Relationships’ references inter, intra and transpersonal relationships (Gass, 1993); ‘Adventure’ implies any experience, whether a first abseil or conversation with a stranger, involving movement towards the unknown (Pryor, 2009). At the apex, ‘nature’ references an appreciation of the natural world as a therapeutic ally in the AT...
process of change (Miles, 1987). This ‘catalytic triangle’ (Beard, 2007) is contextualised within the complexity of group processes (Johnson & Johnson, 2009) and bounded by therapeutic frameworks (Corey, 2009; Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Gass, 2012) integral to intentional practice.

In the absence of clear recommendations as to how best prepare to work in an adventure therapy setting (Polley, 2009) a recommended reading list was complied from four classic texts: 1. Wilderness therapy: Foundations, theory, and research (Davis-Berman & Berman 1994). 2. Adventure therapy: theory, research and practice (Gass 1993). 3. Processing the adventure experience (Luckner & Nadler, 1992) and 4. Islands of Healing: A guide to adventure based counselling (Schoel, Prouty & Radcliffe, 1988) as well as selected readings from Australian Journal of Outdoor Education (AJOE); International Adventure Therapy Conference Proceedings and two recently completed PhD’s by Australian AT practitioners focussing on Adventure Therapy programming and practice in Australia (Nicholls, 2008; Pryor, 2009).

**Adapting Course Content**

It has become apparent that for many of the students the unit presents a first exposure to the kind of challenging life circumstances and mental health concerns that are part and parcel of everyday life for participants in Adventure Therapy programs. This insight has impacted upon both the content and delivery of OETI.

Over time the selection of academic content has become more discerning, offering a ‘Bite’ rather than a ‘Banquet’ of the wealth of literature underpinning the use of nature and adventure for therapeutic purpose. Based on student feedback and staff reflection it seems that any sacrifice in academic breadth is outweighed by the benefits of a focus on experiential, interactive, reflective and personally relevant approaches.

**THE MENTOR EXPERIENCE**

The ongoing success of the placement relies on access to therapeutic programs utilising nature and adventure experiences and the willingness of those programs to embrace the aims of OETI and welcome its students.

Over the past two years’ time has been well spent engaging and nurturing relationships with Adventure Therapy agencies in pursuit of a mutually beneficial placement program. A wide range of providers have offered to be involved. These include: Operation Newstart: S. East, Northern, Southern and Casey programs, Leaps and Bounds, People Outdoors, Lynall Hall Community School, Fitzroy Community School, and SKYS: St Kilda Youth Services. Previous and potentially new providers are contacted a few months prior to the commencement of teaching to provide an overview of the current program and invite participation. Providers willing and able to support the program provide, when possible dates and details of suitable upcoming programs. These details are provided to the students during their first OETI session. At this point students are required to take responsibility for their placement by establishing contact with a potential agency, organizing an interview and, if acceptable to both parties, negotiate their involvement in the program and ensure that all ACU and agency paperwork is completed. Students must commit to 4-5 days involvement.
At the end of their placement students are required to submit a reflection and report on their placement as part of an academic assignment. Providers submit an ACU formalized evaluation of the students’ participation and contribution.

**Q1. WHAT ARE THE BEST THINGS ABOUT THIS UNIT?**
| Experiential Learning | • “Learning practical skills”  
|                       | • “Interactive class time by balancing theory with a relevant activity” |
| Group Development     | • “Small group, good communication”  
|                       | • “Group becoming closer” |
| Course content        | • “Interesting and relevant”  
|                       | • “Learning how we as future leaders, facilitators and /or therapists can influence the lives of individuals who choose to use outdoor environment as a therapeutic process.”  
|                       | • “Learning theory behind the techniques and skills” |
| Placement             | • “What you get out of the placement and understanding of yourself is so worth it” |
| Teaching style        | • “Val! Expertise, experience, engaging etc” |

**Q2. HOW MIGHT THIS UNIT BE IMPROVED?**

| Location              | • More outdoors/Less time in class room…change up the setting…Perhaps a trip away together”  
|                       | • “I think it would be innovative in the Uni guidelines if we could do some theory and a base camp” |
| Practical Focus       | • “Less theory/ talk and more tasks” |

**Q 3. WHAT ARE THE BEST THINGS ABOUT THE TEACHING IN THIS UNIT?**

| Content               | • Content is very interesting…. the stories and anecdotes  
|                       | • Learning everything from the basics of adventure therapy to the more advanced techniques  
|                       | • Learning a variety of games and icebreakers |
| Enthusiasm and experience | • Enthusiasm and experience,  
|                       | • Dedication and passion |
| Fun                   | • Breaking up content with games, relaxed atmosphere…fun |
| Interactive           | • Interaction, teaching by example |

**Q4. HOW MIGHT THE TEACHING OF THIS UNIT BE IMPROVED?**

| More practical        | • More opportunities for practical learning will assist the theoretical aspects |
Table 3: Informal Student evaluation of OETI teaching and Content.

| Q5. WOULD YOU RECOMMEND THIS UNIT TO OTHER PEOPLE? | All student responses ‘Yes’ |
| Q6. ANY OTHER COMMENTS? | |
| Appreciation | • Loved this unit and learnt heaps  
• Very interesting and worthwhile |
| Enjoyment | • Really enjoyed the unit, got a lot more out of it than expected  
• Have thoroughly enjoyed the unit and Val’s endless supply of stories and experience |

Students identify the best aspects of the unit as relevant, interesting and engaging content delivered in a predominately experiential and interactive style. The enthusiasm and experience of the teacher is rated highly as is the opportunity for personal and interpersonal growth and development.

The students appreciate the opportunity to learn, grow and interact with participants. For some the placement experience is profound: “The best 9 days and the best opportunity of my life so far”; “I will have these memories with me for the rest of my life and hopefully the experience I have had can help me to overcome my battles at home” (Student diaries).

In combination with staff reflection annual feedback has informed the development of the unit content, structure and teaching style. Taking on board student suggestions as to how content and teaching might be improved, in 2014 the delivery of some single sessions will double up to facilitate the opportunity to provide extended sessions from 10am – 4pm in local natural environments. The quest for interactive and meaningful ways to engage students in theory and skill acquisition is ongoing and enticing.

To date the Adventure Therapy programs involved have expressed support and enthusiasm for OETI, recognizing a mutual benefit to themselves and the student. Providers appreciate students’ role as Mentors and informal facilitators of ‘games’ and activities. Each year a number of students have been invited back to their placement organization to participate in additional programs in either a volunteer or paid worker capacity.

Whilst there seems little doubt that from students’ perspective placement is the cornerstone of OETI, Placement is not without its challenges. Making contact with busy field staff, and endeavouring to align academic schedules with Adventure Therapy opportunities have often proven frustrating and time consuming. Adventure Therapy programs are frequently unable to confirm the go ahead for a program until close to departure, some run their programs towards the end of the academic year. Hence, some students remain uncertain about their placement beyond the last OETI session. In the past year financial pressure has seen the
closure of one well respected program and a reduction in programming of another. The clearly witnessed and expressed merits of placement continue to significantly outweigh organisational frustrations.

CONCLUSION

This paper sought to provide some insight into the development and delivery of an innovative unit for students at the Australian Catholic University in Victoria.

This unit has been well received by students. Through continuous reflection and feedback since the first offering of the opportunity to study in the AT field 12 years ago at ACU, a strong and well defined unit has emerged. Unexpected outcomes such as the depth of personal growth and maturity the students have identified as a key strength of the unit has enabled cross pollination of skills with the more traditional outdoor leadership units offered.

This unit has only touched the surface of the depth of content and knowledge to be explored, and the untapped experiential learning opportunities in the AT field. The success of this unit is encouraging and gives support to the possibility of the expansion of the unit into a major AT stream. We hope to continue to offer such study opportunities not only for the growth and learning of our students but also to support the quality and standard of the AT profession into the future.

REFERENCES


http://ro.uow.edu/thesis/132
