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Wilderness Writing: Using Personal Narrative to Enhance Outdoor Experience

John Bennion and Burton Olsen

While writing is used to enhance learning in many outdoor programs, it is rarely used as a method for focused self-exploration. A partnership between a recreation professor and a writing teacher provides the training to have both a solid outdoor program and a solid experience in personal narrative in journals and essays. Students participating in such a combined program benefit by a) learning technical outdoor skills and a process of self-discovery, and b) experiencing the complete writing process, and building a cohesive discourse community. Educators desiring to design an outdoor writing program can make goals, design a program, create a curriculum, and establish a process of program review.

Keywords: Writing, outdoor education, wilderness

Introduction

I fumbled down the steep precipice, my arms extended from my side like wings. ...I walked just like Rob's grandma after her stroke; fumbling, shaking, stumbling—clutching to a steady arm. ...I had lost all faith and trust. The cairns were no comfort, I couldn't hold on to them. Even the trees seemed to cling as desperately as I—did. I grasped Jeff's hand and concentrated on the task at hand—getting down.

—Josie, Wilderness Writing student

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For over 35 years, Burton Olsen has been a professor in the Department of Recreation Management & Youth Leadership at Brigham Young University, where he teaches kayaking, fly tying, fly fishing, hiking, rock climbing and canoeing in his outdoor recreation classes. Currently, he is a recreation resource specialist doing workshops in group work skills and initiative test activities throughout the Midwest and the West. Besides adventures in the out-of-doors, Burton enjoys woodworking, gardening, and Dutch oven cooking activities. He received his Ph. D. from the University of Minnesota and his master's and bachelor's from BYU.

make personal discoveries. Our partnership has created a pool of expertise and resources which increases our options for classroom activity and field work with the students. This article includes a brief history of our experience, and suggests a process that other teachers of recreation and writing could use to form similar partnerships at other universities, colleges, or high schools.

Writing and Outdoor Education

Our program is an adventure education program with emphasis on self-definition of students and formation of an environmental ethic. We try to bridge the gap between nature programs and adventure education (Haluzi-DeLay, 1999; Priest, 1986), alternating group encounter and adventure with quiet meditation and exploration. Self-analysis through journal and personal essay writing is at the center of our program.

A variety of experiential programs and classes use writing to enhance the learning of a subject—everything from opera to physics, service learning to entrepreneurship training. They know that writing helps students apply content knowledge to other contexts and to make connections with knowledge gleaned from other disciplines. Writing helps give students context for what they learn.

While many outdoor programs, both wilderness and adventure education, use writing as part of their curriculum, in the past five years few educators have published articles on how to integrate the outdoor activity and the writing component in a manner that helps students explore themselves and define their values. Adventure education programs focus on personal growth, and many use writing as part of their curriculum, but we could find no published discussion concerning how to use writing to amplify the students' personal growth.

Wilderness or environmental programs use writing regularly but most often with the emphasis on nature as content. Many define growth in terms of the students' development of a natural ethic (Tunstall et al., 1997; The Orion Society, 1999a). Many suggest writing activities that encourage students to define themselves in the context of the natural world (Brown, 2000; Ellis, 1997; Orion Society, 1999b; Knapp, 1999; MacEachren, 1999; Roorda, 1997).

Despite these few exceptions, the published record indicates that much outdoor education is conducted by people trained in disciplines such as recreation or environmental science, but not in the use of journals and personal essays to promote self-exploration. One solution to this problem is to form partnerships between teachers of recreation, environmental science, and writing. In the rest of this article we discuss how to construct

a writing-centered, student-centered outdoor program in the context of a college or university.

Benefits of a Symbiotic Relationship

The following benefits of a partnership between writing and recreation professors can be presented to departments as a rationale for a similar experiment:

1. *Writing helps students learn technical skills and discover themselves.* We have discovered that writing accelerates technical learning and makes personal exploration possible. Writing about the skills necessary for rock climbing, cross-country skiing, or backpacking helps students remember and analyze the skills necessary to complete the task. As our students give oral reports which summarize the informative articles they have written, we find that they know the subjects—the techniques of road or mountain biking, building a snow cave, setting up a recreational web site, or leading a group in singing camp songs—much better after they write about them.

Writing helps students interpret, summarize, and analyze complex information, but more importantly, meditative writing helps students explore themselves (Progoff, 1992). Socrates said that "the unexamined life is not worth living" (Apology of Socrates, sect. 38). Students who take journal notes, meditate, and write essays about their activities in the wilderness have a growing understanding of their own competence and values. The most growth occurs when students discuss their feelings about what they've done; record in a journal initial responses to their experience; meditate on the experience; and finally, reform those feelings into a personal narrative.

Evidence can be found in the student's own journals and polished personal narratives. In the student essay quoted above, Josie described her humiliation at being frozen by vertigo, her ambivalence toward the members of the class who coaxed her down, and her fear of being a foreigner in the vertical space of the southern Utah desert. After reaching the canyon floor, she felt exhilaration and self-confidence. She writes,

In looking back, I realize that everyone has their [sic] fear. And maybe it's not something that can be overcome. That's okay. We can't be courageous if there's nothing to fear. Maybe that was the message on the Anasazi cliff miles and mile away. Maybe in pictures that anyone could understand it said, "We will all fear. We are all human."

The trek down the slick rock and the writing worked together to give her a transforming experience—a feeling of personal accomplishment and identification of her experience as common to all people.

Another student, Linda, froze when confronted with

the prospect of climbing through a pool of knee-deep water. Later she wrote the following:

My face is inches from the dark swirling water and I realize that I can't see the bottom. My backpack catches on the gritty rock as I wedge myself under the tiny crawl space and someone yells from behind that I need to get down on my knees in order to make it. My wet sneakers slip on the slippery banks and I fall to my knees unwillingly. The sound of rushing water mingles with the sound of my pounding heart. I have always been afraid of deep waters and this time my fear paralyzes me. Like a child, I hug the rough wall for comfort but I am unable to find it. Doug and those hiking ahead of me see my predicament and assure me that the waters are safe. I feel like I am five years old. . . . 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' I say repeatedly. He flashes me a white smile and calmly says, 'Everyone has to face some fears out here.' I relax slightly and begin to move off the ledge and into the water.

Later in the essay she explained her fear. When she was a small child, her swimming teacher threw her into deep water as an experimental method of forcing her to learn to swim. She had been petrified of deep water ever since. Wading through the water and examining her fear through writing worked together to increase her self-confidence.

Another young man, who was newly married, faced his own ambivalence about leaving his wife behind. Her diabetes was of such a serious nature that she was in constant danger, and he had begun to feel the strain her illness put on their relationship. His essay took the form of a letter to her, in which he discussed his feelings and proposed ways they could continue to grow as a married couple. In another essay, a female student worked through her feelings of hurt and betrayal, when, after she helped a football player down the slick rock, he said something rude to her. After writing the essay she understood and rejected his macho embarrassment at being helped through a frightening experience by a woman who was much smaller and weaker than he.

While some of these discoveries might have been made without a sustained focus on personal writing, the writing sensitizes students to the implications of their experience. The process of working from journal entry to polished personal narrative turns an exciting outdoor adventure into an opportunity for unpredictable varieties of personal growth. Not all students will face fear or a feeling of being in foreign territory on a normal out-of-door experience, but most will discover something new about themselves or the environment they encounter. During a backpacking trip, Lynn wrote,

I awake to the sound of shaking nylon at the back of the tent. Nate waits for me as I slip into my shirt and jeans. I take my notepad and a granola bar. We climb the talus cliff to a

plateau for contemplation. Nate straddles the red wall and tries to go higher. He may kill himself. He finally comes down and sits. The tents belong to plastic toys with round heads. There is a ribbon of dead lichens leading to the tents. Even up here on the rock face, we have left our mark. Boot prints in the sand, an astronaut's first walk.

The acts of meditating and writing focused her attention so that she could perceive something new—the recognition that wherever humans go they affect the environment. The experience left her with a slightly heightened awareness of her own responsibility to care for the environment. She also discovered that humans are small in the universal scope of life. If she had not had her journal with her, she might have had an impulse, quickly felt and then quickly forgotten.

In summary, the outdoor experience gives students something immediate and deeply felt to write about. Students find material as they ski to an iced-over waterfall in the moonlight, jump-step down a mountainside on snowshoes, shiver as they wonder whether their stove would light in the wind, observe how members of a group work together to make camp, watch their nearly-completed snow cave collapse, observe modern graffiti painted over hieroglyphics, or share yarns across a campfire. Their essays are more detailed, fresher, deeper, and more vital than essays written by classroom-bound students.

2. *Extended time with teachers helps students experience the complete writing process.* Although the ways students explore and transform themselves through their writing is the most important outcome of this class, we find that students receive other, more practical benefits. As we move from the wilderness to the classroom, students experience the full process of working a sketchy journal entry to a fully-developed personal essay. Generally, writing teachers see only the finished product. Even when teachers work through pre-writing exercises with their students and ask for repeated drafts, their contact with students is limited to the classroom. In a combined outdoor/indoor class students and teacher explore nature together, record their experiences in a journal, and then together discuss and practice generating essays, poetry, and fiction from the material they've just gathered. This shared creation helps shift the emphasis from literary products to the process of observing, inventing, shaping, and refining. As they learn the process of constructing a piece of writing, they prepare themselves for writing professionally. The ability to push a piece of writing from conception to a final polished draft is valuable preparation for most careers.

3. *Extended time with each other helps students build a cohesive discourse community.* A final related benefit is that students who get together outside of the

classroom are quick to build a cohesive local writing community. We construct each experience so that students have room for solo observation, but they also experience nature with other intelligent observers. Because they spend extended time talking with each other on the trips and working over their writing in class, a tight-knit community forms. Rhonda wrote the following concerning the increased feeling of connection that comes from camping together:

I shared a tent with Mari and Heidi. We picked a spot as far away from the others that would give us autonomy but not destroy the idea of community. We pulled together some of the long cut grass to make a mattress and I dug a fire pit with the end of an old board. . . Heidi and Mari are cool and we have gotten to know each other and feel comfortable together. I don't begrudge them my fire. Heidi is particularly enthralled with the blue haze directly on top of the wood. . . It is a nice shade, almost purple, but it doesn't excite me as much as [it does] her tonight. . . it's starting to rain but I'm not cold. The fire is burning strong and won't be hurt by the cold drops.

From writing about the experience, she acquired a sense of the identity of individuals and of the group that a normal classroom cannot produce. We have found that cohesiveness makes possible open discussion about controversial subjects. Students feel free to express themselves in writing in such an atmosphere. As students work together in small groups to improve and edit their drafts, they learn how to collaborate; they also experience collaboration on their articles and reports. Through these experiences within this small writing community, students begin to feel the nature of larger, professional discourse communities, once again preparing them for their careers.

The Decision-Making Process

When we began teaching this course together, we assumed that the simple linking of the two courses would be enough. Through ten years of experience we have discovered that the benefits to students are greater after we established non-technical, affective goals for each curricular experience. For example, at first our plan was to hike to the top of a mountain and have the students later write about their experience. When we shifted our goal to that of personal growth for the students through self-exploration, we begin to see both the mountain and the classroom as two parts of a laboratory. Our perspective changed and we began to insert into the hike points of discussion, journal writing, exercises, and talking which helped students focus on the experience they were having. In short, a solid program must

have not only outdoor experience and a process-centered writing program, but also a philosophical and pedagogical focus that brings the two disciplines together.

In the following section, we have identified four recursive steps that others might follow to establish a similar program. These steps are: a) defining pedagogical goals which are connected organically to the environment and resources of the university, b) designing a program, c) creating a curriculum which will meet the goals of the teachers and disciplines involved, and d) establishing a system of review.

Establishing Goals

Because we are interested in personal growth and the development of lifetime habits for our students, we have articulated the following three goals: a) to teach students the skills of non-competitive lifetime recreation in the out-of-doors; b) to teach them the process of using a journal and polished personal narratives to meditate on their experiences, using outdoor activity as a catalyst for self-exploration and discovery; and c) to help them make decisions about their relationship to the environment. The differences between our two disciplines—the tension between some recreationists and some environmentalists—provides good material for discussion and writing.

The specific goals for an outdoor writing program should take into account the unique setting and resources of the university. Our university is located on the Wasatch Front, the range that divides the high Colorado Plateau from the western basin and range in Utah. We are within a few hours drive of good hiking locations in alpine forests and red rock desert. Other campuses might be close to rivers, lakes, the ocean, caves, grassland, forests, parks, zoological or botanical gardens. The physical resources of a given university affect not only the outdoor possibilities but also the pedagogical goals. For example, our location—near extensive government lands designated as wilderness study areas—makes it possible to easily discuss environmental politics. While I imagine that most outdoor writing programs would focus on environmental issues, other programs could focus on such subjects as the nature of lifetime recreation, outdoor experience and writing used as tools in therapy, specific aspects of local history or urban nature, studies which break down the division between wilderness and human creation.

As previously mentioned, we have had the cart before the horse—developing our goals after we thrust the two classes together. While we think it would have been better for us to be more goal driven at first, we recognize the virtue of refining or even discovering goals through experiment and interaction with the students.

Making Program Decisions

A decade ago, because both of us were interested in the benefits that could come from a joint experience, we began experimenting with a format we could use to meet the goals of our two disciplines. We needed to decide how credit would be given to the students, develop a system for managing risk and liability, and create a method way for giving students access to equipment and resources.

In terms of level of organization, we have gradually developed a compromise between the English Department, the Department of Recreation Management and Youth Leadership, and the Honors program. The English Department supplies classroom and computer space. The English professor brings expertise in professional writing, techniques of using journals to enhance experience, and a methodology and curriculum for teaching the writing of personal narratives. The Recreation Management Department has an established program, with safety procedures (leaders who are trained in first aid, release forms, a program for training students in safety, and a form which guarantees that students are insured) and access to equipment. The recreation professor provides technical expertise in outdoor experience, a network of other experts, and a tested outdoor curriculum. The Honors Program provides some transportation money, announces the class in a bulletin, and registers the students in a manner that insures they know what the course entails.

Other programs could be organized on various administrative levels: an individual writing teacher could plan a few field trips; the continuing education or special conferences programs at a university could sponsor a class; or college or honors program administrators could take responsibility. It is important to recognize, however, that the smaller the unit, the greater the hazard because an individual will not have the resources, established procedures, and experience of a department in managing a safe program.

We give credit through two linked courses: three hours of English credit, and two hours of credit in Youth Leadership and Recreation Management. This method of linking gives the teachers some autonomy but still allows for overlap between the two courses. This overlap is the core of our program. Students write in their journals, discuss writing, discuss values on the outdoor trips; they also plan trips and talk about outdoor activity in the writing class. Other programs may choose to have greater or lesser overlap. Other possibilities are to team-teach a course that has one block of credit, or simply offer the course as an extracurricular activity.

Creating a Curriculum

The next stage is to set up a curriculum—determining the number and nature of the outdoor experiences, the number and nature of the writing assignments, and the degree of interdisciplinary integration in terms of activities and assignments. We have discovered that several short, relatively easy outdoor experiences are better than one long, rigorous one. In addition to the benefit that derives from alternating activity and discussion, we have found other advantages of taking short trips. First, most university students don't have the emotional and physical stamina to exist comfortably for long periods of time away from the trappings of civilization—beds, chairs, stoves, and phones. In addition, about half of our students have done some backpacking before and half are first timers, so we have to plan our experience to be rigorous enough that it is a good experience for the strongest but not overwhelming for the novice. We believe that extreme or survivalist approach is not necessary to give students a profound experience. It is the connection between the experience and the written meditation on the experience that gives the benefit. The spirit of community is the glue that makes the program work. Other programs may find that one trip or no overnight trips best fits their needs.

During the first two class periods of the recreation class, students select a manageable curriculum from a smorgasbord of 40-plus activities, which range from horseback riding to skydiving, from spelunking to scuba diving. They choose 20 points worth of activities (a camping trip may be worth three points, while an afternoon of mountain bike riding is worth one point). The class participates in about six of these activities as a group—snow shoeing, doing a ropes course, cross-country skiing, snow cave camping, hiking, and backpacking. Part of each activity is technical training. For example, before the snow cave camp students meet to learn about winter survival and equipment. Each student must spend four hours helping organize, lead, or aid in the various activities. Other class periods discuss low-impact camping, the importance of taking care of our natural environment, and the value of leisure in a person's professional and personal growth. The last of the four required recreation class periods is the final exam. A potpourri of experience occurs: giving an oral report on the special projects, evaluation, and eating together for one last time. Each student selects his/her choice of the five best activities, then, using a Likert scale, evaluates all of his/her activities.

We give the following writing assignments: keeping a journal, writing two personal narratives, and writing a collaborative article. The journal is the basis for meditation and recording of information. Because our focus is self-exploration, we assign two extended personal

essays or narratives, through which the students examine their own values. In order to help develop skills and values pertaining to lifetime habits of recreation, we have them write an informative article on some aspect of the outdoor recreation field. The journal and the informative article receive credit in both classes.

The English class meets twice a week. The first class each week is spent in a traditional classroom—reading and discussing journal entries, listening to guests, and discussing essays from our environmental reader. The second is spent in a computer classroom—working through exercises that generate writing ideas, occasionally drafting essays, editing in peer groups, and critiquing essays as a class.

We make the writing/experiencing process as unified as possible—writing and talking in the outdoors blends into the classroom experience, instead of having a sharp division between those two experiences. On one trip, after coming down a steep slick-rock trail and wading through water in a narrows, we stopped under a natural amphitheater and wrote in journals. We then read from the journals and discussed what happened. This moved the experience beyond mere physical exercise and rush of adrenalin, to the realm of self-exploration, consideration of values, as well as emotional and mental growth. Close contact with the writing teacher produces a better worked as pre-writing experience and teaches them the complete composing process. The following are aspects of this process:

1. *The Journal*: The traditional method of examining any kind of experience is writing in a journal. The journal is the backbone of the course; the most essential segment of the writing/self-exploration process is that done as part of the outdoor experience. Journal entries made on the trail are sharper and more specific. Conversation and discussion in the out-of-doors feels more significant to students than when done in the classroom.

Most natural history writers keep journals to explore themselves, as well as their natural surroundings—writers such as Henry David Thoreau, Edward Abbey, Anne Dillard, and Wendell Berry. For a teacher who has not used journal writing before the following are excellent resources: Elbow, *Writing without Teachers* (1973); Proff, *At a Journal Workshop: Writing to Access the Power of the Unconscious and Evoke Creative Ability* (1992); and Rainer, *The New Diary* (1978).

In class and on our trips, we read to each other from the journals. Such discussion is valuable in itself, but also serves to introduce talk about the value and nature of the outdoor experience. Specifically, journal writing increases the students' abilities to observe the natural world, helps them sort out feelings about the outdoor excursions, and enables them to formulate philosophies

of their relation to the wilderness. Beginning writers, when asked to read from their journals, will often try to verbalize the experience. When they are continually forced against the difficulty of putting their experience into written language, they gradually express themselves more and more precisely.

2. *Discussions*: Students need to talk about their experience before they write and after they write. This interchange of talk and writing builds a community. Hiking together provides for self-discovery and a bond of community, and focusing students' minds as they stop along the trail on talking, writing, and meditating, amplifies that core experience. Not all focus points should be formally organized or spontaneity is gone. These focus points can be during rest breaks, at the campfire, and along the trail as the group pauses for journal writing. Important discussion can also be done in the classroom. To aid us in our goal to confront the students with environmental issues and to provide examples of professional writing, we read and discuss the articles included in an environmental reader.

3. *The Exercises*: Students go through prescribed journal exercises that help them get started writing. Samples are as follows: a) a three thousand word natural autobiography; b) a list of the student's values; c) close observation (on a snow shoeing or cross-country skiing trip students record 20 unusual observations); d) description of a process (such as building a fire or a snow cave); e) description of an animal or natural object; f) two voices talking (students in pairs generate dialogue after imagining a confined space and two people trapped there).

4. *The Essays and the Groups*: Later in the class, these pre-writing exercises extend into classroom discussion, drafting of personal narratives, interviews on writing, small group work, and workshops, as students work toward a final portfolio of their personal narratives. Students write essays from materials developed in their journals and through the exercises. In groups of four, they discuss and edit their essays before turning them in. Two students bring their essays one week (starting about three weeks into the semester); the other two bring their essays the next week. Each student brings an essay once a semester for critique by the whole class. Students turn in a portfolio of their best work at the end of the semester.

We also use visiting lecturers to introduce students to the various political entities and communities concerned with the wilderness. We've had an assortment of experts on wilderness: environmental activists, a scholar of Native American creation myths, a proponent of the Wise Use movement, a developer, a professor of range science, scholars of natural history writing, a potter and a painter who involve the natural world in their

work and lives, personal essayists who write about Utah, and a professional fly fishing instructor. Through discussing the contrasting views of these guests, students begin to articulate their own attitudes about the natural world.

Reviewing the Program

The final step is implementing a regular schedule of program and safety review. Recently, we received some local publicity concerning our program. Consequently, one of the university's risk management personnel decided to review our program. At first we were apprehensive; but as he reviewed our classes, we assured ourselves that we were running a safe program. Of course, we also saw how we could improve. Some aspects of our program were modified or eliminated in order to maintain a high level of safety for the students. This conference helped us refine our program for equipment rotation, modify our system of waivers, eliminate an aspect of the program which had become dangerous because of the age of the equipment, and certify that vendors from outside the university must have an established record of safety and liability insurance. We are happier and the university is happier with periodic reviews of our programs and practices.

In addition to this kind of review that focuses on safety, we meet before each semester begins and discuss modifications to our program. Then again at the end of each course we review and evaluate. Through these self-evaluations we continue to refine our goals and curriculum.

Conclusion

Students grow when confronted with unfamiliar surroundings. Our trips are relatively low impact—the water we wade through is generally knee deep, the pathways clear and not too steep. We eat well and make the trips convenient and practical for everyone. But because we enter foreign territory for most students, and because they are urged to meditate and write about their experiences, the trips transform them. As mentioned above, the best evidence of the effectiveness of the program is how well the students integrate into their lives their thoughts and emotions concerning their experiences in the outdoors. The following extract was taken from an essay, in which Derk used the trip and the writing to work toward his personal philosophy of life:

This pack trip is hard work. With forty or so pounds on my

back, sun bouncing off every surface, it would be easy to complain, to beg for breaks every ten minutes. But some masochistic element in me likes this, likes being pushed, likes the burned soles, the sweat bunching on my brow, dripping down my spine. Something about this is satisfying, elemental, practical. . . . I notice that Don, our guide, maintains a steady, almost slow pace, but hardly ever rests. Keeping up with him, I find his pace and his strategy to be easier than the walk-and-stop mule train mentality of the rest of the group. I notice also that the football players, Karl and Bill, keep a constant supply of water. When a bottle is empty, and we're near a water source, it gets filled and purified with iodine immediately. I try to do the same, keeping one full, purified bottle in my tummy bag and one full, purifying bottle in my pack. When the one is empty, the other one is ready to drink. Besides conserving energy, it is immensely practical. While these things may seem trivial, they become essential when other members of the group spend hours boiling water when they could be walking, or borrow water from other, more prepared members. I'm reminded of the parable of the ten virgins, or something my uncle says: "Common sense isn't." I come to believe it's a gift to know what to do in difficult and unknown circumstances, to put things in the proper order, to do things the right way. . . . What all this practicality boils down to is economy. Thoreau's ideal ("Simplify!") must be an essential element of any strenuous activity. Those who conserve all energy, not just their butane cook stove fuel but every little movement, are the ones who survive. (Koldewyn, 1994, p. 2)

Perhaps on this trip Derk gained the skills and desire necessary to become a lifelong back packer. More importantly he learned observational skills, the ability to adapt his behavior to a new situation, and a sensitivity to resources. He learned the philosophy of personal economy.

We have found that this dual course helps students develop solid habits in recreation, reflection, and writing. The symbiosis in the class between the two of us represents a greater compromise between the disciplines of recreation science, environmentalism, and writing. This collaboration also helps students see how they can synthesize components of their own lives which they previously held separate—their education, their personal writing, their relationship to others, and their place in the natural world.

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The Effects of an Adventure Education Program on Perceptions of Alienation and Personal Control Among At-Risk Adolescents

Reid Cross

The purpose of this study was to determine whether an intervention using adventure education (specifically rock climbing) would effect a change in students': (a) sense of alienation, and, (b) sense of control over their own lives. Perceptions of alienation were measured using the Dean Alienation Scale; and Connell's, the New Multidimensional Measure of Children's Perceptions of Control measured sense of control. Data were analyzed using four separate two-way analyses of variance (ANOVAs). Results indicated that after experiencing the climbing program, the experimental group was less alienated than its control counterparts. In addition, following the treatment the experimental group demonstrated a stronger sense of personal control than did the control group.

Keywords: Alienation, adolescence, adventure education, sense of belonging, rock climbing

Adolescence

Cynicism, bitterness, loneliness, aimlessness, no faith in the future, and lacking a sense of belonging; these conditions define the feelings that many adolescents share. Adolescence is an awkward transitional period of development between youth and maturity, a time when young people search for meaning. The adolescent is no longer a child, but an adult. However, the adolescent does not have the responsibilities, rights, roles, or respect of adult status. Society has no role prepared for adolescents. Even so, adolescents

are expected to accomplish two major tasks: identity formation and finding self-worth, often with little or no guidance from adult society (Nightingale & Wolverton, 1993). This is a tumultuous, complicated time, with a tremendous number of outside influences affecting the way they think and feel about life. It is a time with so many, seemingly opposing influences, acting on an adolescent's spirit. It is no wonder that many times adolescents lose their way in the search for identity formation.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) identified four spheres of influence that affect the way adolescents act, and react, in life situations. He describes these as the four worlds of a child: family, school, peers, and work or play. All four of these worlds are important to an adolescent's development. When these worlds are out of balance, the adolescent may become alienated. Bronfenbrenner defined alienation as simply a lack of a sense of belonging. Unfortunately, keeping the balance is a difficult role for these young people on the verge of adulthood,

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