Processing Adventure Experiences: It's the Story that Counts

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The field of therapeutic recreation recently has experienced an increase in the use of outdoor-adventure activities, such as ropes courses, group initiatives, and wilderness travel. Through the use of these experiences, professionals seek to assist participants to develop insight and skills that transfers to their lives after they have completed the activities. Without such positive transfer, programs have limited long-term value. The purpose of this article is to discuss the importance of processing in relation to the transferability of outdoor-adventure experiences. Specifically, the constructivist view of learning and the role of narrative are discussed. Strategies that can be used by professionals to help individuals develop new self stories that generalize the learning to settings and situations after the adventure-based experience are presented.

KEY WORDS: *Adventure Programs, Processing, Constructivism*

Recently, therapeutic recreation was described as the use of recreation/leisure as a purposeful intervention designed to elicit change in an individual" (Henderson, Bedini, & Bialeschki, 1993, p. 34). In an effort to promote these desired changes, increasing numbers of educational and therapeutic programs are using outdoor adventure activities as a catalyst (e.g., Gass, 1993a; Kelley, 1993; Rudolph & Luckner, 1986; Witman, 1993). One reason for this growth is the expanding body of research conducted over the past two decades demonstrating the value of using adventure activities to increase participants' self-esteem, alter their locus of control, reduce asocial behavior

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and improve problem solving abilities (e.g., Luckner, 1989; Rawson & McIntosh, 1991; Smith, Roland, Havens, & Hoyt, 1992; Stich & Senior, 1984; Wichmann, 1991).

Outdoor-adventure is a type of program in which outdoor activities that are physically and/or psychologically demanding are used within a framework of safety and skills instruction to promote interpersonal and intrapersonal growth (Bagby & Chavarria, 1980; Nadler & Luckner, 1992). Generally, the program includes a sequence of activities/experiences such as goal setting, awareness activities, trust activities, group problem-solving, individual problem-solving, and processing/transfer (Roland, Summers, Friedman, Barton, & McCarthy, 1987). While every component of an outdoor-adventure experience is important, there are many writers and researchers who would argue that the processing/transfer elements is the most essential (i.e., Gass, 1993b; Knapp, 1993; Nadler & Luckner, 1992). In fact, research reported by Witman (1993) suggested that adolescents participating in outdoor adventure programs, as well as experts in the field of adventure programming, value process" over content." Specifically, activity items such as rope course and problem solving activities were rated less valuable than items related to the process of the program, such as being able to take risks or getting support from other participants. Consequently, Witman (1993) suggested that the integration of interpersonal and human relations skills such as, the understanding of group dynamics, building a climate of trust within a group, knowing how to stimulate motivation, and interpreting nonverbal expressions" (p. 48) are essential skills that staff must develop.

As more educational and therapeutic programs integrate outdoor-adventure activities into their array of available services, there is a need to explore ways to increase professionals' processing skills to generalize the learning from the experience to other settings. The purpose of this paper is to define processing and present an introduction to constructivism and narrative approaches and suggest strategies that can be used by professionals who are interested in increasing their repertoire of processing skills.

Processing

Processing has been defined as those techniques that are used to augment the therapeutic qualities of the adventure experience based on an accurate assessment of client's needs" (Gass, 1993b, p. 219). Processing can occur prior to, during, or after the adventure experience. Processing activities can be used to: (a) help individuals focus or increase their awareness on issues prior to an event or the entire experience; (b) facilitate awareness or promote change while an experience is occurring; (c) reflect, analyze, describe, or discuss an experience after it is completed; and/or (d) reinforce perceptions of change and promote integration in participants' lives after the experience is completed (Gass, 1993a).

As we witness an increase in the number of professionals and the diversity of populations who use outdoor-adventure programming, the skills required by educators and therapists using this form of adjunctive therapy also need to increase (Nadler & Luckner, 1992). Two contemporary theories of learning and development that are significantly impacting the fields of psychology and education are constructivism and narrative approaches, which utilize a constructivist perspective (e.g., Combs & Freedman, 1990; de Shazer, 1991; Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990; Walter & Peller, 1992; White & Epston, 1990). Developing an understanding of each of these theories and their application to the field of therapeutic recreation would be beneficial to professionals interested in using outdoor-adventure programming with their clients.

Fundamental to the constructivist perspective is the tenet that we learn by making

sense of what is experienced. Efficient learning is predicted on individuals' active involvement in the learning process and opportunities for interactive communication among other learners (Fosnot, 1989). In the narrative approach to therapy, there is the search for the exception," when the problem does not exist, (de Shazer, 1988) or the unique outcome" in someone's history (White & Epston, 1990). We believe that each of these elements is applicable to the fields of therapeutic recreation and outdoor adventure programming.

Constructivism

Constructivism is a theory of learning and change that has gathered considerable attention among educators and psychologists in recent years. Constructivists posit that learning is a process whereby new meanings are created (constructed) by learners within the context of their current knowledge. They believe that knowledge is constructed in the process of reflection, inquiry, and action, by learners themselves. Within this perspective, individuals are considered as inherently active, self-regulating beings, who act intelligently on their perceived worlds, in contrast to responding passively to their environments (Iran-Nejad, 1990; Paris & Byrnes, 1989; Resnick, 1987).

Individuals who adhere to a constructivist perspective contend that people are always trying to make sense of their own lives and the things they experience around them. The process of making sense of things involves a never-ending search for and construction of personal meaning. Consequently, learning is not simply the taking in of new information as it exists externally; it is the natural, continuous construction and reconstruction of new, richer, connected, and more complex meanings by the learner.

One of the major tenets of constructivism is that in order to learn new information, learners must be actively involved in the learning process. Constructivism suggests that individuals do not acquire knowledge from outside information given to them, but rather they learn by constructing new meanings from new and old experiences in a context of rich social interactions. Similarly, learning does not occur by transmission but by interpretation and interpretation is always influenced by prior knowledge. Individuals, in an attempt to make sense of new information and experiences, transform and organize the new information in relation to their own meaning base. Consequently, learning is viewed as an organic process of invention, rather than a mechanical process of accumulation. As a result, constructivists view the learning process as analogous to impressionistic art rather than photography. Several principles of constructivism, adapted from Fosnot (1989) and Poplin (1988), which are especially applicable to the field of therapeutic recreation are found in Table 1.

Narrative

A story is a telling or recounting of a string of events" (Scholes, 1982, p. 59). Stories consist of events, characters, and settings arranged in a temporal sequence that imply both causality and significance. In essence, stories become a way of capturing the complexity, specificity, and interconnectedness of an experience and conjoining them into coherent, meaningful, unified themes.

Stories, or narrative, involve the gathering together of events into a plot in which significance is given to the events as they relate to the theme of the story. The plot configures the events into a whole, and the events are transformed from merely serial, independent happenings into meaningful happenings that contribute to the whole theme (Polkinghorne, 1988). Social scientists such as Bruner (1985) who spoke of a narrative mode of thought and Sarbin (1986) who proposed story as a root metaphor" for the study of human conduct, support an interpretive method that embraces

Table 1.
Principles of Constructivism

1. All people are learners, always actively searching for and constructing new meanings, always learning.
2. The process of learning is self-regulating and self-preserving.
3. Knowledge consists of past constructions.
4. The best predictor of what and how someone will learn is what they already know.
5. Learning often proceeds from whole to part to whole.
6. Errors are critical to learning.
7. Meaningful learning occurs through reflection and resolution of cognitive conflict and thus serves to negate earlier, incomplete levels of understanding.
8. People learn best from experiences about which they are passionately interested and involved.
9. People learn best from people they trust.

the use of narrative. They contend that story" provides the dominant frame or structure for the lived experience which helps individuals organize and understand the new experience. The story then provides a unit of meaning that stores and permits retrieval of the new experience. As noted by Olson (1990), Narrative structures provide a format into which experienced events can be cast in the attempt to make them comprehensible, memorable, and shareable" (p. 100–101). From this perspective, it is contended that we live storied lives; human beings think, perceive, imagine, and make moral choices according to narrative structures" (Sarbin, 1986, p. 8).

Story is at the center of the constructive process. In constructing stories, individuals attempt to convey their intentions by selecting incidents and details, arranging time and sequence, and employing a variety of codes and conventions that exist in a culture. Stories are constructions that give meaning to events and convey a particular sense of experience. Consequently, stories are not merely raw data from which to construct interpretations but products of an interpretive process that are shaped by the impulses of the author and by the requirements of narrative structure.

The process of transforming experience into story is so much a part of our daily existence that we usually are not aware of its operation (Polkinghorne, 1988). Simultaneously, the stories we live by are not purely private inventions. Rather, we build them from the information provided by experience, from the inventory of stories or prepackaged expectations and ways of interpreting" (Chafe, 1990, p. 80) supplied by our culture and from those significant individuals that we interact with in our lives. With regard to outdoor adventure experiences, the role of stories play an integral part in the following ways:

1. The story that is created from the experience determines the meaning given to the experience.

2. The stories determine the real effects, type and degree of transfer of the experience.

3. The stories select which aspects of the experience will be highlighted and then given expression.

4. The stories encompass the learning, helping us store the information in our memory and generalize to other experiences in the future.

As professionals seeking to promote change, we can help course participants co-create their new stories that are developed as a result of their adventure based experience as well as help them re-create more positive perspectives of old stories. By helping them become aware of and articulate the narratives they have developed to give meaning to their lives, individuals are then able to ex-

Table 2.

Sample Questions to Ask Participants to Help them Construct New Self Stories

Responsibility and Owning the Success. The goal is to internalize, document, and codify the unique outcome.
How do you account for this success?
How did you get that to happen?
What steps did you take to ready yourself for this success?
What does it say about you that you did (*the success*)?
How did you stand up to the influence of the old story?
What support or resources did you utilize to have this success?
Was there a moment that you could have given in to the old story and refused to be taken? How did you free yourself?
When were you first aware of your decision to take this risk?
Do you think this new story about you suits you better than the old story?

Expand the Temporal Plane. The goal is to situate the unique outcome or success in time by giving it a past and a future.
What sort of training did you do to prepare yourself for this kind of endeavor?
How do you see this success fitting in with your hopes and aspirations?
What in your past would let us predict that you are the sort of person who could do such a (success)?
When in your past do you think you started moving in this new direction?
What steps will you have to take to employ this learning at home?
What will be the first road sign that you see that will tell you that you are still on track at home?
What other accomplishments await you down the road?
What other possibilities are closer to you now with this success?

Increasing Descriptions. The goal is to open up space for as many alternative stories as possible by including other's viewpoints.
How did others see (name) prepare for this success?
Who in your past would be least surprised that you accomplished such a feat?
What did they see in you then to predict this success?
Who will be first to notice your changes at home?
What will they see?
Who else in this group might have known that you were ready for such a big step?
What do you think this tells me about you?
What do you think (other's name) saw as the highlight of your accomplishment?

Meaning and Difference. The goal is to help participants make distinctions in how they will make sense of the learning and apply it.
What difference will this make for you now that you know you can do the success?
What does it say about you now that you have done this?
How will others see your differently?
What difference will it make in your relationships when you stay on the new path?
Did you surprise yourself with anything today and what does that mean about you?
How do you see yourself now after completing this task?
What difference will it make to you knowing that you wrote a new chapter about yourself?

amine and reflect on the themes they are using to organize their lives and to interpret their own actions and the actions of others. The reflective awareness of one's personal narrative helps individuals realize that past events are not meaningful in themselves but are given significance by the configuration of one's narrative. This realization can release people from the control of past interpretations they have attached to events and open up the possibility of renewal and freedom of change.

Expanding the Story

The goal of the narrative approach is to expand the alternative story" which is in contrast to one's dominant story. The focal point of attention should be on the information that is useful, constructive, helpful, and empowering. We can assist in the reconstruction of individual's narratives that have been too restrictive in several ways. First, we can ask questions about the quality of existence and the freedom of choice that an individual's narrative allows. Second, we can draw attention to events and attributes, from the experience, not accounted for by the individual's narrative, which can challenge and test the story as told. And, third we can offer alternative narratives that more fully incorporate an individual's life events in a more coherent and powerful narrative. A case study that provides an example of how this information can be integrated into adventure experiences is found in the appendix.

Examples of questions, that have been adapted from White (1989), which help participants construct and retain new self stories are found in Table 2. These questions can be asked in a group, individually, or through journal writing assignments.

Use of Reflective Teams

Another technique that can be used to help individuals create new stories or re-create old stories is the use of reflective teams.

Table 3.
Guidelines for Using Reflective Teams

1. The goal is to maximize the numbers of alternative stories and unusual unique outcomes witnessed and give a voice to them. Comments should be generative.
2. Be curious about how people were able to achieve what they did. Describe what you were surprised by in individuals or the group and wonder what future changes may be.
3. Focus on experiences that are judged by the participants to be preferred developments or developments that the reflective team believes might expand the individuals personal story.
4. Reflective team members should actively interview each other. They should not merely point out the positives (White, 1992b).
5. Remain aware of the various histories, narratives, and metaphors that were expressed by the person or group and use the language that they used.
6. Try to suspend judgment or the urge to figure things out", assess or diagnose others. The goal is to open up space for new discoveries and stories by asking for hard thinking" rather easy thinking" (Andersen, 1991).
7. Keep the process short and void of jargon.

Reflective teams were first used by a group of Norwegian family therapists (Andersen, 1991). While working with a family, several members of the therapeutic team were observing from behind a one way mirror. When the therapeutic team began to consult with the therapist, who was working directly with the family, they were unable to reach consensus about what they observed. Consequently, they had the family and the therapist listen to their conversations, or differing stories, about what they had witnessed

during the recent session with the family. The result became a quick way to obtain multiple descriptions of an event with the goal of expanding the alternative story for the family. Andersen (1991) wrote that the reflective team should search for the appropriately unusual questions." He stated, If people are exposed to the usual they tend to stay the same. If they meet something unusual, this un-usual might induce a change" (p. 19).

This method can easily be adapted to adventure-based experiences. First, the group, or reflective team, witnesses others in an activity, as they normally would. Second, when the activity is over the participants create their own story about the experience they recently had, possibly responding to some of the questions suggested above. Third, the group or designated reflective team has a conversation among themselves, commenting on what they saw by asking unusual questions to generate some alternative stories. Fourth, the participants have a conversation about what they just heard from the reflective team. In effect, the whole group becomes co-authors with the person or persons in their new story, as each person will notice a different or unusual strength or resource. Guidelines to consider when using reflective teams are presented in Table 3.

Summary

> The stories that we enter into with our experience have real effects on our lives. The expression of our experience through these stories shapes or makes-up our lives and our relationships. (White, 1992, p. 81)

One of the primary purposes of adventure-based experiences is to assist participants in developing insight and skills that transfer to their lives when they complete the course. Without such positive transfer, programs have limited long-term value (Gass, 1993b). The role of the instructor in facilitating meaningful exchanges of insights, thoughts, feelings, reactions and the co-constructing of new stories is a delicate and complex one (Smith 1993). In this article the concepts of constructivism and narrative were explained along with suggestions for helping individuals develop new self stories based on what they learned on the outdoor-adventure experience. We have attempted to argue that leaders who employ these strategies will help participants in the co-authoring of their self story and foster generalization of the learning that occurred during the experience to their lives at home, school and/or work.

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Appendix

Case Study

Mary was a participant on a ropes course for people with alcohol and drug dependence. She had an intense personal experience on the trapeze leap, which is an activity that requires participants to jump from a tree to a trapeze bar 35 feet in the air, while being belayed with ropes from below. The instructor and other members of the group watched Mary as she climbed the ladder to the tree slowly. In the tree, she exhibited extreme fear, continually breathing deeply, sighing, and taking a long time before jumping. Finally, she leaped for the bar and caught it. When she released the bar to come down to the ground she let out a scream of fright. Mary burst into tears when she reached the ground, while the other members of the group verbally and physically supported her. At that point, the instructor felt certain that this was one of those breakthrough experiences that participants occasionally have on a ropes course.

Fifteen minutes later when the group was discussing the experience, Mary shared her perceptions of what occurred. Interestingly, what she described was more of the same old story." She said, I really climbed up the ladder slowly, I could have gone faster. When I was in the tree, I waited a long time, I don't know why. I should have put the trapeze further out. And, when I came down I was holding the belay rope behind me. I don't know why I did that." The instructor was taken back by her perceptions. He felt that he had provided a meaningful learning experience for Mary. But initially, it did not seem to make a difference to her.

To help Mary entertain a different story, various members of the group shared their perceptions of what happened and their interpretation of the significance of the jump. They outwardly wondered how her viewpoint or story limited her interpretation of the apparent success. They asked her questions about: (a) how she got herself ready to complete the event, (b) the statements that was she saying to herself when she was standing in the tree, (c) how this success fits into her future aspirations, and (d) what difference does it make now that she knew she could overcome personal fears? The questions and the genuine concern of the group helped cast doubt on her old story" and co-created an alternative story for Mary to entertain.