



# The Journal of Experiential Education

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# Experiential Education Research: Where Do We Go From Here?

*Nina S. Roberts and Rita Yerkes, Guest Editors*

Experiential education research has been conducted on such topics as risk management, leadership development, gender issues, race and ethnicity, ethics, corporate training, therapeutic populations, adolescent experiences, adventure-based counseling, and experiential learning in the classroom. Critiques of experiential education research have generated more questions than answers. For instance, questions about practical relevance to the field, appropriateness of research designs, barriers to producing meaningful results, ethical issues, facilitation techniques, and both use and need of multimethod and multivariate approaches come up again and again (Bocarro & Richards, 1998; Brown, 1998; Ewert, 1987; Ewert & McAvoy, 1994; Priest, 1998; Priest, Attarian, & Schubert, 1993; Priest, Gass, & Fitzpatrick, 1999; Riggins, 1986; Roberts, 1998; Vogl & Vogl, 1978).

Although we have seen an increase in experiential education research during the past 25 years, both researchers and practitioners continue to be challenged by what kind of research to conduct and how they can work more effectively together in adding to our knowledge base in experiential education. Subsequently, as Ewert expressed thirteen years ago, "Work needs to be done in other arenas such as cross-cultural analysis, traditional education, and other social institutions that

incorporate learning" (1987, p. 6). This work still needs to be done. *So, where do we go from here?*

Just as we ask the "what, so what, now what?" questions in our programs, we must also ask these questions about the quality of our research and the relevance of empirical results to the development and ultimate value of experiential education to our youth and society as a whole. Using our powerful experiential methodology, we have come a long way and informally observed its impact on our clients and students. However, as a profession, we face continued challenges to produce quality research and outcomes assessment of our programs. What role can quality research play in the development of our field and in meeting these challenges? Are we listening to each other? How can we enhance experiential learning in a way that is mutual and shared across the continuum?

As we demand acknowledgement that experiential education is a powerful pedagogy that impacts the lives of our clients—and ultimately society—with positive results, are we also professionals who hunger for scientific and objective research to test what is actually happening in our programs? As professionals, we expect that from other fields; can we expect any less from ourselves?

To that end, the authors encourage practitioners, educators, and researchers to share a common vision and purpose for research in experiential education. We are challenged to create this shared vision and purpose by identifying current issues and problems, and by forming the priorities of our research agenda together. Experiential education research will be improved, for instance, by the extent to which program directors and researchers communicate, and by the level to which they understand and appreciate each other's roles and processes. In addition, embracing and accepting both quantitative and qualitative methodologies is essential. We also need more longitudinal studies and support for multimethod, multivariate, and comparative research approaches. Whether we are trying to explain outcomes

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of our programs or predict future trends and preferences, our arguments are strongest when we are able to bring evidence to the table drawn from more than **one** case.

Furthermore, given the acceleration of changing demographics in the United States and internationally, such comparative studies involving classifications of people from a variety of backgrounds and countries will become more vital when developing research designs in the future. Studies in culture and ethnicity, for example, have surfaced more substantially than ever before. Nonetheless, these topics continue to lag far behind other areas of inquiry. In a race- and class-based global society, our social science discourse must do a better job of reaching across cultures and different class structures in a shared human experience rooted in mutual respect and empowerment. The more knowledge we gain—"for the good of all"—will only advance experiential education well beyond the usual rhetoric regarding the so-called enlightened virtues of research.

Over the years, there have been numerous recommendations for research projects and the priorities that should be established. Although there are definitely high-quality studies that have been completed in experiential education, those doing the majority of this work continue to be a handful of university professionals and field scholars. Therefore, the authors encourage the development of strategies to increase the number and diversity of researchers working with practitioners in the quest to upgrade research quality and enhance the body of knowledge in experiential education. We also encourage the development of strategies for using research that serves to improve experiential and outdoor education programs by creating outcomes assessment evaluation components for our programs.

With respect to methodology as it relates to testing of various concepts in experiential learning, we must continue to search for new ways to make our research and assessment tools more relevant to the practitioner. If we are successful in this pursuit, we can rethink traditional research methodologies and revise them. We can also design and apply new ones with the goal of better data collection and analysis by practitioners and researchers together, with an eye toward assessing client/student behavioral change as a result of experiential education participation.

Furthermore, the increased use of technology is developing into a primary tool for future experiential education research. Even though few experiential education web sites and electronic discussion lists exist, mechanisms are needed to provide information access to resources such as instrument information, research designs, and funding sources for both practitioners and researchers. Processes for sharing and disseminating results, such as centrally located searchable databases

with related links, would help bridge the gap between practitioners and researchers (Priest, 1998). Our use and mastery of technology will enable us to increase the quality and quantity of experiential education research that is valid and respected by not only our own field but others as well.

### **In This Issue**

This issue of *The Journal of Experiential Education* is devoted to research in experiential education and provides a wonderful variety of articles from therapeutic perspectives, social justice, and service learning to wilderness orientation programs, epistemology, and measurement tools. Articles in this issue are divided into two broad categories: research methodology from a "how-to" perspective and research findings from actual studies.

Therefore, this journal is divided into two sections. In the *General Research Section*, Patricia Fredericksen investigates the value of volunteerism among college-age participants and explores what characteristics are associated with students who engage in service-learning projects. Fredericksen applies a shift in analysis in this study to consider performance indicators assessed by the instructor, rather than the typical responses acquired directly from the students.

Shayne Galloway provides insight into both the struggles and successes of performing a comprehensive assessment of fifty-seven wilderness orientation programs in the United States.

In the *Research Methods Section*, Karen Warren and T.A. Loeffler remind us to "set a place at the table" for all people in an effort to be more inclusive. In their article on social justice in outdoor, experiential education research, they challenge traditional research models and, through an inductive process, begin to generate an important grounded theory approach to our work. Together they build upon this metaphor of the banquet table to infuse new, progressive thinking that is founded in generating rather than testing theory.

Peter Allison and Eva Pomeroy bring the study of epistemology to our attention. They argue that traditional approaches to research in experiential education are not, as such, adequate to meet our needs. Through ontology, a branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being, they build a paradigm shift necessary for our future research through a series of solid recommendations.

Jim Sibthorp offers comprehensive suggestions to aid practitioners and scholars in conducting adventure education research and program-specific evaluation on how to select, modify, or create appropriate measurement tools. Consequently, using meteorology and weather as an analogy for our work, Sibthorp both challenges the practical applications of our research and

informs us about possible measurement limitations.

And finally, Alan Ewert and Jim Sibthorp share with us the essential nature of utilizing multivariate analysis techniques and procedures in our research. They discuss several multivariate techniques, including analysis of variance, multiple regression, factor analysis, path analysis, and structural equation modeling. Given the complex nature of these methods, they

provide simple examples of how these five most popular research analyses are performed, what they mean, and how they relate to our work in experiential education.

*So, where do we go from here?* Our research methodology and outcomes-based assessments present us with opportunities and perhaps our greatest challenges for the future of experiential education. Will you join us at the table?

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