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Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder:
Student Perceptions of Transfer in Experiential Education

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Abstract

Underpinning the notions of experiential learning and transfer are a complex series of assumptions about the way people relate and use understandings across a broad range of life settings. This thesis presents a study into student perceptions of the nature and transferability of understandings developed through their involvement in an outdoor education programme. The thesis describes the approach and techniques used to collect data about participant's perceptions prior, during and after participation in the programme.

The thesis considers the advantages of planning for transfer before a programme begins to assist students to buy into the goals of the programme and also contribute to the learning objectives. The use of metaphor as a cognitive link to transfer understanding within the programme found some acceptance with students, however, the use of metaphor to assist transfer of learning beyond the programme was limited. As such, the research clearly showed that transfer is much more likely to occur when students create the cognitive frameworks and reasons why learning might transfer from one domain to another. Transfer that did occur within and beyond the programme was interwoven with, and somewhat dependent upon emotional responses and personal relationships.

The strong personal bonds that developed between participants through the focus group research approach resulted in a feeling of trust and sharing of understandings. As such, the thesis considers the Focus group approach as a useful educative tool to focus student learning and transfer prior, during activities, and after experiential programmes.

Emotional terms of reference used by participants to accord meaning to experiences provided significant insight to the ways people transferred learning. In addition, transfer of understandings beyond adventuresome activities is more likely when the experience is shared and discussed with others, and may be highly dependent on personal relationships. Replication and modelling of personal relationships beyond the immediacy of experiential learning settings may contribute much to the ways people successfully identify common factors when participating and using existing understandings in new domains.

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