

# **Their words / their voices: Student's perspectives of the Camp Mallana outdoor education experience.**

*David Johnson & Brian Wattchow*

## **Abstract**

This paper is based on research completed into student perspectives' of the impact, transfer and longevity of learning that occurred as a result of an eight-day outdoor education program. Data was collected via observation and a series of interviews (pre, during, in group debrief, at closure of the program, 1-month after and 1-year after) with adolescent students. The program experience included the development of aquatic based skills and knowledge and a student-centred five-day expedition. The Camp Mallana "journey" has aims common to many outdoor education programs of improving personal, social and environmental skills, knowledge and relations. Through a combination of case study methodology and grounded theory analysis this research presents findings that specifically illuminate, directly through the voices of the participants, student perceptions of their outdoor education experience.

## **Introduction**

This study examines differences between the reality and the rhetoric of an outdoor education camp experience. It does this by investigating not the 'theoretical' or teacher perspectives, but rather the student perspectives of the impact, transfer and longevity of learning resulting from student participation on an outdoor education camp.

The Wesley College (Melbourne, Victoria), Year Ten Camp Mallana eight-day program, provided the setting for this research. Camp Mallana, on the Gippsland Lakes, like many outdoor education programs, aims to develop skills and knowledge, improve social and teamwork skills and build an appreciation and awareness of the environment, through the successful completion of an expedition (Mallana Staff Manual 2000).

Currently there is considerable professional literature in the area of the impact and outcomes of outdoor education programs (Harris 2000; McKenzie 2000; Martin 1996; Nichols 1994; Neil and Richards 1998) but little has been written with the emphasis on the students' perspective (Davidson 1998). Meta analysis completed by Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards (1997), Hans (1997) and Cason and Gillis (1994) highlighted the fact that whilst outdoor education programs can have a small to medium impact on outcomes, more research into the process, transfer and longevity of this impact needed to be conducted.

## **Research overview**

This research focused on examining the outdoor education camp experience from the students' perspective, specifically to gain an insight into student perceptions, and to determine if the program was successful in achieving its student centred aims. In addition it was considered important to examine student claims about transfer of learning from an outdoor education camp to school/normal life and the longevity of learning that the students perceived resulted from the experience.

This study differs from much previous research in that it provides a more detailed inquiry into the student perspective and explores whether or not students view the camp experience as relevant in their education and development. As educators we must constantly challenge, examine and ask ourselves if we are providing meaningful and appropriate learning experiences to the students in our care.

Much of the literature from the last decade is outcome based and has aimed to promote and justify the inclusion of outdoor education in our school curricula (Richards 1997; Gray 1995; Neill 1997; Davidson 1998). More recently, within curriculum theorizing into Australian secondary school outdoor education the emphasis has shifted beyond justification to the finer points of content and pedagogy. In particular, analysis of whether program objectives should reflect an adventure and personal/social development approach, or a more environmental/community based outlook (Lugg 1999; Lugg & Martin 2001).

Research is one means of establishing credibility, within educational circles, for experiential and outdoor education. In an article on experiential research Bocarro and Richards (1998, p. 102) state that 'The importance of quality research should not be underestimated as it can help legitimise and convince people from outside the field that experiential education is an effective medium to learn and affect positive behavioural change'. More rigorous, systematic and relevant research will improve the theory and knowledge base for a subject such as outdoor education, which will, in turn, lead to better pedagogical practices and performance of all those involved in this field

## **Methodology overview**

As a case study, qualitative methods were selected utilising a multi-method approach that incorporated grounded theory for data analysis and interpretation. Case study methodology has often been used within the diverse subject area of outdoor education. Researchers such as Miller (2001), Bramwell, Forrester, Houle, Larocque, Villeneuve and Priest (1997) and Gordon, Harcourt-Smith, Hay and Priest (1996) have all used the case study in a variety of experiential settings as it provides the opportunity for participants to express their unique position and outlook on the experience. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000, p. 182) support this type of in-depth analysis; 'Case studies strive to portray "what it is like" to be in a particular situation, to catch the close up

reality and “thick description” of participants’ lived experiences of, thoughts about and feelings for a situation’.

The case study method has been chosen as it offers a more ‘holistic perspective’ which is well matched to the aims of this research project. This method allows exploration of the research questions in great depth and with a humanistic approach. Case studies are accessible and ‘reader friendly’ they appeal to a wide audience, are considered realistic, ‘down to earth’, and allow the reader to draw their own conclusions and generalisations (Burns 1997).

Reliability and validity may be seen as a weakness of the case study method of research. In order to achieve reliability and validity this research project aimed to be thorough and precise in its work and minimise the opportunities for bias through the use of reflexivity, peer review and the use of triangulation. This research project used two types of triangulation; data triangulation by using multiple data sources such as semi-structured interviews, participant observation and a facilitated de-brief; and, methods triangulation by using elements of both the case study and grounded theory methodology. Burns (1997, p. 374) states that ‘The use of multiple sources is the major strength of the case study approach.... Multiple sources allow for triangulation through converging lines of inquiry, improving the reliability and validity of the data and findings’.

The emphasis throughout the research process maintained a focus on student perspectives of ‘their’ outdoor education experience that occurred at, and as a result of, Camp Mallana. It would be wrong to widely generalise the results from this study to other areas. As Richards (1997, p. 249) states ‘...small numbers of subjects, studied by qualitative methods such as case studies may provide very deep and rich insights into those particular participants, although it may be dangerous to extrapolate these insights too far to others’. Even so, it is possible for other researchers and practitioners to interpret findings from case studies for the contexts that they work within. What is critical here is that the research descriptions and findings provide a rich and deep source of material that allows the reader to recognise familiar phenomena, themes and patterns in their own situation.

## **Data collection**

This research was been designed to fit as closely as possible within the normal program at Camp Mallana in order to produce realistic and valid findings. Data gathering tools such as semi-structured interviews, researcher observation notes and a facilitated de-brief were used to collect relevant data. Six students from within a secondary school class attending the camp were randomly selected and profiled. This was done via four sets of semi-structured interviews; pre- camp, during camp, late camp and post-camp/quasi-longitudinal, as is shown in, *Figure 1: Student involvement in research at Camp Mallana*. The interview responses were audio-taped, transcribed, and analysed using coding and grounded theory techniques. Although it was outside the scope of this study to conduct follow up interviews one-year post-camp with the same six participants profiled during

the camp, a quasi-longitudinal sample group (again randomly selected) from a class that completed a very similar program twelve months earlier was utilised. This was considered possible as the camp program has remained remarkably stable in terms of staffing, curriculum, venues and activities over this time period.

The researcher in this situation was also the teacher in charge of the camp. During the normal course of the camp he observed and took notes on student behaviour. A facilitated de-brief was conducted with the entire class after the students return from their five-day expedition and also used to gather data. The interview questions, de-brief and participant observation became a form of triangulation which validated the results of this study.

**Figure 1: Student involvement in research at Camp Mallana**

Pre-Camp	During Camp	Late Camp	One Month	One Year
Six interviews of randomly sampled students	Researcher/participant observation notes.	Recorded de-brief of whole group	Sample group interviewed	Six interviews of quasi-longitudinal group
	Sample group interviewed twice	Sample group interviewed		

### Analysis of data

One of the major challenges of this study was collating and making sense of the variety of data. As Jimenez and Bergin (1998, p. 5) state; ‘In order to promote credibility to the research, an accepted method of analysis within the qualitative paradigm is a necessity’. For this study the most suitable approach to achieve this credibility was grounded theory.

The grounded theory approach is a qualitative research method that was originally developed by Glasser and Strauss in the 1960’s. In grounded theory the researcher begins with a wide area of study and through their systematic data collection, and use of a coding system, what is relevant to that area is allowed to emerge (Corbin and Strauss 1990). Hernandez-Gantes et al. (cited in Jimenez and Bergin 1998, p. 5) view grounded theory as ‘an appropriate framework for understanding student voices and experiences’. The grounded theory approach involves several main stages of analysis; open coding, axial coding and selective coding. The axial coding stage of this study, that involved categories being defined by their properties and dimensions is presented in *Table 1: Properties and dimensions of coding categories*.

## **Findings**

The contents of the findings was divided into four organizational sections that emerged from the literature review as the commonly claimed outcomes of outdoor education programs; skills knowledge and recreation, teamwork and social skills, personal development and environmental learning. In addition to this another section has been included in this paper to provide statements about the practical implications of this study. These recommendations may be used to improve the Camp Mallana program that this study researched but have been left reasonably speculative so readers can interpret to their own specific situations.

### ***Skills, knowledge and recreation***

This outcome was seen to be of minor importance to the students in this study. This result is in direct contrast with outdoor education literature from 15 years ago when teachers assessed skills and fitness as one of the most important outcomes (McRae 1990). The students enjoyed learning new skills and knowledge and took most interest in those areas that were directly related to the successful completion of their sailing and kayaking journey. Davidson's (1998) study found that in the outdoors, where learning 'really matters', that participants see the outcomes as imminent and real. This research supports the findings of Davidson's (1998) study.

Male participants appeared to be more interested in the area of activity skills and knowledge than females who appeared to have greater interest in the social aspects of the camp as observed and recorded via their actions and discussions. When the students perceived there to be a challenge, that involved some kind of risk, their level of engagement and enthusiasm increased. Similarly, when students were given more responsibility, leadership and ownership of the activity being undertaken, they became more actively involved and learned more from the experience.

When examining transfer and longevity post-camp it was found that the students generally believed that they still had the knowledge and skills they had acquired at the camp, but that they had limited opportunity to put them into practice. Responses indicated that the senior years of schooling that followed the camp restricted the students' leisure time and opportunities to use any skills they may have developed on camp.

Several students in the quasi-longitudinal study had made practical use of the skills they learned at camp. Further longitudinal studies over five to ten years post-camp, would be required to ascertain if more students would have had the opportunity to use their camp skills and knowledge, particularly post secondary schooling.

Practical implications:

- Outdoor education programs should include activities that students perceive as having 'real' consequences.
- Student perception of risk increases effective learning during an outdoor education experience.

- Students claim that greater responsibility and leadership given to them results in more effective learning.
- Activities that have limited 'realistic' opportunities for students to follow-up are seen by participants to have minimal transfer and longevity of any learning that occurred during the experience.

### ***Teamwork and social skills***

The results indicated that the area of socialisation, the human-human relationships, was the most important aspect of the students' camp experience. The students really enjoyed the chance to mix with their classmates out of their 'normal' school environment. As well as getting to know other members of the class better, they believed they were able to see a new side of their friends and also enjoyed interacting with the staff and their homeroom teacher in a non-classroom situation. The camp experience provided the opportunity for students to get to know members of the class they would not normally interact with.

One of the most notable changes in attitude that occurred whilst on the camp involved the staff's random selection of student groups. Initially the students were quite upset at the idea of being separated from their friends but by the conclusion of the camp most believed it had been a good idea. The opportunity of functioning in different sized groups and during a variety of tasks increased the students' understanding and appreciation of the different roles necessary in a functioning team.

Through the time and experiences they shared, the students felt they developed a special bond with their expedition group. It is interesting to note that the two expedition groups often developed a quite different cohesion. The students believed that there was a definite transfer of their social and teamwork learning back to the school environment. Most believed that the friendships developed at camp continued when they returned to school. However, it was acknowledged that these relationships had decreased from the level that they had attained whilst at camp. When considering if the teamwork learned at Camp Mallana transferred to the classroom situation, most students believed that the experience had been beneficial. On returning to school, they felt they knew more about their classmates and had an increased understanding of how they were likely to respond to certain situations. They claimed that this helped them later on during class and group work activities.

The timing of the camp was an important issue in the longevity of these teamwork and social skills. The students believed that having camp earlier in the year gave the class a better chance to consolidate and take advantage of the socialisation that was an integral part of their camp experience.

Practical implications:

- Students perceived increased opportunities for socialisation when they were randomly assigned to camp groups.
- Outdoor education experiences that include a wide variety of group sizes and tasks increase the students' understanding of teamwork.

- Camps that run early in the school year improve the opportunity for transfer of student socialisation skills back to their classroom environment.
- Bonding is seen to occur by participants during outdoor education programs when groups are presented with, and overcome challenges, together.

### *Personal development*

Through completion of the journey and overcoming the challenges the camp presented, the students felt they had improved their self-concept. For some students there were also isolated experiences when the challenge became too much. This had a negative impact on their confidence. By the completion of the camp all students believed it to have been a positive and worthwhile experience.

One common perception in this category was that they saw the camp as an ‘escape’ from their normal lives. They really enjoyed any opportunities for ‘time out’, to be contemplative, and to gain a sense of perspective on what was occurring in their lives. Students claimed that this reflective state generally occurred during unstructured time on the camp when they felt that they could be ‘free’ with their thoughts without the pressure of immediate decisions or action. The results suggest that for these students this type of reflective opportunity might be missing or limited in their daily lives.

During the camp many students enjoyed the chance to consider and reflect on their beliefs and values. On returning home, they claimed not to have adopted any life changing philosophies, finding instead that the camp experience had positively re-affirmed their established beliefs. Students claimed to have felt better about themselves after the camp experience, and that it led to an improved self-concept. This came from the feelings of success provided by a program that facilitated students achieving their goals and successfully completing a journey. In the comparison of student responses before and after the experience, the end of program de-brief indicated that the facilitation process assisted students in considering and consolidating the personal development learning that had occurred during camp.

Camp Mallana provided the chance for the students to interact with their classmates in a new environment with less restrictive boundaries and expectations. In this situation many students discovered or displayed a new side to their personalities. The students believed this was a positive thing. However there was little evidence of it transferring on return to their normal lives.

The quasi-longitudinal group believed camp was an important part of their Year Ten experience, but noted that it was only one of several experiences that helped shape their growth and development for that year. The students could still recall reflecting upon their values during camp and saw it as a part of their personal development and an opportunity that provided them with an ‘escape’ from their Year Ten routines.

Practical implications:

- Outdoor education programs should allow for unstructured time. This time is perceived by students to be of significant personal value, part of which might be considered as ‘escapist’ from the routines of school.
- Students perceived that, as result of establishing boundaries that were considered different to the classroom environment, camps often allowed students to reveal new sides of their personality.
- Students felt that the de-briefing process assisted them in the consolidation of the learning that occurred during the camp experience.

### ***Environmental learning***

The results highlighted the fact that during their camp experience, students became more aware of environmental issues. On the expedition students mentioned becoming more appreciative of their natural surroundings such as the weather and flora and fauna, and felt that the Gippsland Lakes environment had a natural beauty. They were happy to partake in new minimal impact behaviours and make an active effort to ‘improve’ the environment they temporarily inhabited (by actively cleaning up sites etc.). Students showed a concern for the environment and felt that today’s living standards and wider lack of environmental concern were not sustainable.

The most noticeable finding in this area was the student perspective that the bush and the city are entirely different places. The students saw these two places as totally unrelated and as having completely different rules and expectations. They saw the bush as a peaceful, inspiring place that was worthwhile conserving whereas the city was a busy, functional place. They felt little connection to or willingness to become involved in, environmental projects upon return to the city.

The students felt a sense of hopelessness and were overwhelmed by the extent of environmental damage being done when they returned to the city after their camp experience. They felt ‘lost’ and that the environmental problems were so huge that there was nothing they could do about it, and therefore left it for someone else. This was a big contrast to being on camp when the students felt like they were directly responsible for the preservation of the environment and could clearly see the results of their actions.

The students’ belief that the bush and the city are entirely different restricted the transfer of any environmental learning. The students could still recall the positive impact they had on the environment whilst on camp but didn’t believe this had any relevance to their lives in the city. The student responses indicated that if they returned to a ‘bush’ environment in the future, they would recall and use the minimal impact skills and knowledge they had learned whilst at camp, but that there had been limited opportunity to do so since they had left camp. Several students mentioned they initially had made more of an effort in areas such as water usage, and recycling, but that, after a short period of time, they had returned to their old habits.

The findings of this study indicate that for any environmental learning to transfer to the home environment, teachers and leaders in the outdoors need to find new ways to link the environments used for outdoor education programs with the standard living environments of the students. Follow up lessons or activities post-camp that concentrate on highlighting these links and relationships between the natural and human environments, could also assist with transfer and longevity in this area.

Practical implications:

- Involvement in ‘hands on’ minimal impact practices and pro-active ‘clean-up’ activities help to increase student awareness and appreciation of the environment.
- During outdoor education programs teachers and leaders need to consider ways to make more direct links between the outdoors and the participants’ school/home environments.
- After a program or camp, follow up activities should be introduced emphasising connections between these environments and highlighting practical and achievable ways the students can make a difference.

## The student voice

This study has produced a number of findings that make a re-interpretation and re-theorization of outdoor education experience possible. As noted early in this paper, it is largely up to each reader to re-contextualise this discussion for his or her own situations. *Table 2: Summary of findings into student perspectives of their Camp Mallana experience* presents ‘food for thought’ for fellow researchers and practitioners. However, the final words in this study belong to the students who openly shared their perspectives of the Camp Mallana experience. The following quotations provide a student-centered reflection based upon the balance of student responses given during this study. The quotes have been arranged in a chronological manner to provide a representation of the students’ journey and give an indication of what Camp Mallana meant to them.

Pre-camp:

Oh it will be good to go away with a few of my mates on camp.... Just have fun really I haven’t thought about what I will learn but obviously the sailing and the kayaking and the camping out and stuff (Jon, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 19).

First day kayaking:

The first day of kayaking probably from breakfast to lunch when we did those 12 kms. I swapped partners within the group so I probably had to work a little harder and yeah, physically it was a bit of a challenge, I felt a bit tired at times and stuff, yeah. That would probably have been the biggest challenge so far that I have had (Paul, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 31).

Finding camp:

We paddled all together and the leaders were behind and we had to find camp ourselves, so we actually got to see what to do just for ourselves. Well we struggled at first because there was a few misunderstandings and stuff but then instead of getting all angry with each other we started to talk, like working through it just sorting it out. We got there in the end (Jon, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 89).

### Ninety-mile beach:

And we saw the beach and it was just unbelievable, it was hot, sunny and we were dripping wet the sand was all soft and it was like yellowy white and the waves light blue they just belted in and jumped back out. That was an awesome day (Tess, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 99).

### The rewards:

Yes it was really rewarding like you go to bed at the end of the day and in the back of your mind you know you have achieved something and that you had a task and done it all well and clean. It is just a really good feeling. Like you feel really successful and you have done what you needed to do. And you can sort of just feel a lot better within yourself (Paul, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 66).

### The bush:

Learning about kangaroos and lizards and birds and sunsets and sunrises, it is beautiful in the bush you just need to get out of the city (De-brief transcripts 2002, p. 84).

### Environmental awareness:

Yeah you expand your views on all other things and you learn stuff about the environment as well. You are just expanding your way of thinking and just becoming more open minded from learning little things about the environment. The recycling and all those kind of things you learn the process and what happens and that.... It is out here that you can see what effect the city has on the country, so it is once you come out here and you actually know this, you see rubbish around it makes you want to do something about it (Paul, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 67).

### Sailing in the rain:

I thought sailing was the worst experience of my life today. I don't know something needs to be thought out-there people were just so cold, and it made it a really unhappy experience for everyone. People were just so cold they didn't want to do anything. People were just so wet, like the wet weather gear just didn't do anything and that's a major problem... some people could handle it, but a lot of people were like, why are we doing this, why aren't we stopping or going straight back to Mallana? We were not happy (Rhonda, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 45).

### Escape:

Getting away from the city, nice weather, sailing just learning new stuff that I don't know about.... (camp) just feels like it is away from all the roads and everything, so it is fairly quiet. When you are out there you don't feel like you are in the city at all, so it is good to get away from it once in a while (Paul, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 10).

### Bonding:

We have been with our class the whole year and this is the first time we have ever been away in a group together. And like I'm talking to people and kind of bonding a bit with people I never even thought I'd speak to. And just everyone's getting on well, no one cares about all the big things, we're just having a good time together, I think that's really important (Rhonda, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 63).

### Just do it:

I don't think you (leaders) need to ask any more to make a human chain to carry all the stuff out to the boat. People just knuckle down and do it because they know it's got to be done, so they just do it (Jon, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 41).

### Sailing home:

Probably when we sailed home, we were out in front and it was just a really good feeling. We weren't really trying hard to sail but we were and it was just a really good feeling (Jon, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 69).

### Special time:

It might be a little bit hard to calm everyone down Monday, everyone is still going to be in camp mode. But otherwise I think it's very important that everyone bonded together, because when we are back at school everyone is going to go back to their little groups, but we will all know that we had that special little time together (Rhonda, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 64).

### Strong and gutsy:

I've just thought that at camp it's made me feel a lot stronger for the future like in my future life. The whole thing like being away from your home and the comfort zone, it's like you are setting a mould for the rest of your life. I'm still young and so this has kind of like helped set a mould and I've got a lot out of it, I feel much stronger and gutsy (Rhonda, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 63).

### Perspective:

Yeah it was just a nice experience, you just need to do it, just to get a perspective on life. You see people who are worried about exams or if they have troubles about family members, about where they stand in life, just trying to find out who they are. It's a good chance to see, to sort of step back and have a look to be out of the city and to be completely nowhere and look as an outsider you can see all the things that it doesn't matter (Tess, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 59).

### Just perfect:

And I said 'oh it's amazing' and it just brought back a really good memory. It's like you've got the lake on one side and the ocean on the other and it's just perfect, and she's (sister) just like wow, and that made me feel perfectly happy to have actually been there and experienced it (Rhonda, Interview transcripts 2002, p. 106).

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