

A picture is worth...capturing meaning and facilitating connections using outdoor education students' photographs

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Abstract

This study concerned itself with ascertaining the meaning of the outdoor education experiences and the role of photography in assisting students to make connections from their outdoor experiences to their everyday lives. Specifically, this exploratory qualitative study utilized photo-elicitation interviews to investigate the inner significance of structured university-based outdoor experiences for participants. Photo-elicitation provided a model for collaborative research in that the researcher became a listener as the subject interpreted the images and their meanings for the researcher.

The meanings that emerged from the data were grouped into three explanatory themes: spiritual connection with the outdoors, connections with others through shared outdoor experiences, and self-discovery and gaining perspectives through outdoor experiences. Additionally, photography proved to be a powerful reflective tool that participants utilized as anchors and triggers for past memories. They used photographs to capture meaningful moments from their outdoor experiences and then used the images to share their experiences more easily with family and friends. This innovative research contributes greatly to both the understanding of outdoor experiences and to the ways in which photography facilitates participants' connections to those experiences and suggests that outdoor educators welcome and support participants' photography during outdoor trips.

Introduction

We must remember that a photograph can hold just as much as we put into it, and no one has ever approached the full possibilities of the medium. *Ansel Adams* (Levitt, Parks & Hosoe, 1998)

Photographer Ansel Adams' quote provides us with insight into how we might think differently about researching the meaning of outdoor experiences. Photographs are containers in which many things can be stored; they can hold details, memories, emotions, and meanings. They allow moments to be captured and stored for later recall and sharing. Photographs can "speak" for us when we cannot find the words.

Nature writers and philosophers have struggled for decades to find the words to adequately describe the meaning of their experiences in the outdoors. Several academic studies have also searched for the meanings of outdoor experiences (for example, Priest, 1990; Ewert, 1989; Quinn, 1990; Kaplan & Talbot, 1983; Pohl, Borrie & Patterson, 2000; Arnould & Price, 1993). The current study is the first to utilize participants' photographs to attempt to answer the

question “what are the meanings of an outdoor experience?” This novel and innovation research approach utilizes photo-elicitation interviews to investigate the research question.

Along with illuminating various meanings of outdoor experiences, the study reveals the immense value of the photographic process for outdoor program participants. Participants depend on their photographs to act as memory triggers, reflective opportunities, connection facilitators, and potent reminders of their experiences. This paper explores the theoretical underpinnings of photo-elicitation, discusses the study methodology, presents results, and then makes recommendations related to both the use of photography in outdoor programs and the further use of this methodology.

Theoretical Considerations

Participants frequently document their outdoor adventure experiences with photography. This study utilized these photographs to establish rapport, to share in the narrative of the experience, and to delve into the meanings of both the photographs and the experience. A photograph preserves a moment in time. Photographers, reflecting a successful advertising campaign, often refer to the act of photography as capturing a “Kodak moment.” Photographs, then, are an emanation of a past reality (Cronin, 1998). Walker and Kimball-Moulton (1989) note that photography is about time in that “the act of photography anticipates the future by ripping the appearance of a moment out of its time, creating a tangible image for the future of what will be the past” (p. 157).

Some people use photographs as protection against time by using them as a “mooring for the evocation of past memories” (Cronin, 1998, p.73). Colson (1979) surmises that “people take up photography at times of rapid change in their lives when photography is most clearly expressive of the wish to hold time still, to have greater opportunity to consolidate the ordinarily fleeting experiences of the moment” (p. 273). Cronin (1996), in a study of lay photographers, found that subjects used photographs to document change and rites of passage in their lives.

Photographs are a reflection of the photographer’s point of view, biases, and knowledge (Becker, 1974). Harper (1998) reminds that “we see and photograph through our own cultural lenses”(p. 34). Both the photographer and the viewer of the photograph construct the meaning in a photograph because both bring their social position, personality and personal history to the photographic act (Harper, 1998). As well, the meaning of a photograph can change when viewed in different contexts (Harper, 1998). In this light, Cronin (1998) suggests that “the function of photographs is the creation and maintenance of meaning, and to this end a hermeneutic approach, [in research] which concentrates on the meaning woven around a photograph, is desirable (p.77).

Collier and Collier (1986) suggest that photographs, when used in interviews, “sharpen the memory and give the interview an immediate character of realistic reconstruction” (p.106) and that “photographs are charged with psychological and highly emotional elements and symbols”(p. 108). This emotional characteristic of photographs allows research participants to express their ethos while exploring the photographs within the photo-elicitation interview (Collier and Collier, 1986). Collier and Collier (1986) also advocate the use of photographs

when interviewing because “the potential range of data enlarges beyond that obtained in the photographs themselves”(p. 99). Additionally, photographs invite research participants to take the leading role in the interview and to make full use of their expertise. Finally, by using photographs within the interview, participants are relieved of the stress of being the ‘research subject’ because the photographs become the focus of the interview (Collier and Collier, 1986).

Harper (1994, p.410) suggests that the “photo-elicitation interview redefines the essential relationships of research.” Photo-elicitation provides a model for collaborative research in that the researcher becomes a listener as the subject interprets the image for the researcher. Collier and Collier (1986, p.105) refer to this as “exploring the photographs together“ with their informants. In some cases, such as the present study, this collaboration occurs at an even higher level when the research subjects make the photographs themselves (van der Does, Edelaar, Gooskens, Liefing & van Mierlo, 1992). This innovative and collaborative approach to the research contributes greatly to the depths of understanding gained in the present study related to the phenomenon of outdoor experience.

Method

Data collection and analysis for this study took place during 2002 and 2003. Data for this qualitative study was gathered using photo-elicitation interviews with 14 participants of a university-based outdoor program.

Sample Selection

A pool of potential interview subjects was generated by contacting outdoor program instructors, putting up posters, and by approaching potential subjects at the end of their outdoor adventure experiences. Interview subjects were selected using “criterion-based sampling” (Patton, 1990, p.176). Potential subjects were asked to fill out a short demographic survey to see if they met the criterion for inclusion: recent participation in a university sponsored outdoor program and having taken photographs during that experience. The sample attempted to provide a cross-sectional representation of university students based on the following criteria: gender, age, year in school, outdoor experience, the type of outdoor activity, and trip length. The nature of qualitative research is emergent and flexible. The number of informants for this study was not set at the outset of data collection but instead, the data collection process stopped once data saturation was reached (Henderson, 1991; Patton, 1990).

Of the 14 students who were interviewed, seven were female and seven were male. They varied in age from 18-21, ranged from first through fourth year students and had participated in backpacking, rockclimbing, whitewater kayaking, or sea kayaking programs. The trips varied in length from a weekend to a week to three weeks.

Data Collection Procedures

The author conducted all of the interviews using a photo-elicitation based interview technique. During the interviews, the subjects and the researcher examined and discussed the photographs that the subjects took during their outdoor trips. The interviewer asked the subjects questions about their outdoor experiences including trip memories, the meaning(s) they ascribed to their

experience, and the value of the photographs in explaining their experience. Due to a shared interest in the outdoors and photography, rapport between the researcher and interviewer was quickly established in each interview. The interviews were approximately 45–75 minutes in length. Ethical research procedures of confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity, and right of withdrawal were followed. Each subject was assigned a pseudonym.

The interviews were audio and video recorded. The video recorder captured both the interview conversation and the photographic images digitally for analysis and the audio recorder recorded the interview conversation. The digitized images were downloaded from the videotapes into two software packages, Adobe Premiere and ACDSee for Mac, for analysis. The audiotapes were transcribed verbatim and downloaded into the software package NUD•IST¹.

Data Analysis Procedures

During and after data collection, an inductive analysis was conducted using both the subject's photographic images and the interview transcriptions. A coding system was generated to initially code the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). During and after initial coding, the process of data analysis was aided by NUD•IST. Of the wide variety of qualitative data analysis programs, NUD•IST was chosen because it matched the researcher's needs in terms of flexibility, computer skills, database management, and anticipated analysis type (Miles and Huberman, 1994).

NUD•IST is an index-based system that allowed the researcher to code data and store memos in a tree-like matrix (Richards and Richards, 1994). Once the data was coded, it was retrieved by a wide variety of Boolean, context, proximity, and sequencing searches. These features of NUD•IST allowed the researcher to shift the analysis to a deeper level and “break the data open” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 75) in order to constantly compare it to what was already known (Merriam, 1988; Strauss & Corbin, 1990; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Utilizing a NUD•IST feature entitled system closure, the researcher was able to code and store the results of such retrievals for further analysis and theory building (Richards and Richards, 1994). Additionally, NUD•IST afforded the researcher great flexibility to shift, change and revise the indexing scheme as the analysis progressed and themes emerged from the data (Richards and Richards, 1991). Finally, NUD•IST created a documented history for each node of the indexing system that assisted the researcher in auditing the research process (Richards and Richards, 1994).

In summary, data analysis began as data collection began; it was a “simultaneous process” (Merriam, 1988, p. 123). There was constant comparison between the data collected, the related literature, and the emerging theory. In order to enhance internal validity in the present study, triangulation of analysis methods and data sources as well as peer review was used. At various points in the data analysis process, two other researchers analyzed randomly chosen interviews to establish the reliability of the coding system, the categories selected, and the interpretation of the data.

¹ NUD•IST is an acronym for Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing, Searching and Theorizing (Richards & Richards, 1991).

Findings

Capturing the Moments

The research participants were asked why they took cameras on their trips. Their answers invariably involved the word “capture.” Most felt a strong need to use photographs as a way to grab hold of a moment. Jenn explained why she took a photo of her group on a mountain summit, “I wanted to capture the moment.” Brian showed several nature pictures and revealed, “what I wanted to do was just capture the beauty of it, the natural beauty.” Jim said “I just wanted to document the trip...so I paddled over there and captured them there in their kayaks.” Brenda found it fascinating to take pictures in order to capture “what was going on” on the trip.

Jim described how he has been developing his photography skills on outdoor trips and how his camera has become “like a prosthetic device.” Similarly, Brian takes many rolls of film whenever he is on an outdoor trip but often feels the photographs are not enough. When asked if there were things he wasn’t able to take pictures of, he responded, “yes-all the time! I wish I had a video camera mounted to my head. I want to capture everything.” Mike lamented the many photographs he wanted to take but couldn’t because of concerns over camera weight, camera fragility and difficulty in waterproofing. Brenda wanted many more photographs of her climbing trip but was constrained by belaying demands and the difficulty of taking a camera on a multi-pitch climb.

Mike used photographs to remember the trip rather than keeping a written journal. Likewise, Kristen “wanted a record of where I’d been and what I saw.” Richard uses his camera to record the people he is adventuring with because he likes to remember them and the times they shared outdoors. There seemed to be a fear that, if a photograph was not taken, the moment could be lost forever. Brian described it this way “what I try to do is to take pictures so that I remember the places I have been so that I won’t forget...so every once in awhile, I look at them so I know I was there and liked being there.”

For many of the participants, the photographs served as a memory trigger or “rubber band” back to the moment. By looking at the photographs, participants were taken back to that time and place. They could relive the feelings, thoughts and sensations of the experience. Jim described his photographs as “serving as a prompting device for things that happened on the trip.” Brenda mentioned “it is nice to have pictures to bring back so you can look back at them and remember what went on.” Graham liked that photographs kept trips separate when memory tended to blend them together and that they held small details about the experience he might otherwise forget.

Often times, participants described taking a larger number of photographs when the outdoor activity of the trip was new to them. Jim put it this way, “I’d never been sea kayaking before and I wanted to document it.” Jenn put pictures of herself whitewater kayaking on her wall because “whitewater kayaking is just so cool I wanted to put it on my wall and say look, I whitewater kayaked.” She also uses them to remind herself of what she has accomplished in the outdoors. After every trip, Mike puts the photographs on his computer desktop and sets them to change every 30 minutes. He draws on these photographs to take him back to the trip whenever he is feeling stressed by school.

Besides preserving memories, the so-called “Kodak moments,” some subjects took pictures for their artistic, esthetic or emotional values. Brian spoke about a deep desire to capture what he called “postcard moments.” He described these as “whenever you take pictures of joy without posing. If I had a point and shoot camera I’d take a picture of you here without you knowing it and I think those are the best pictures. They [postcard moments] spontaneously show energy and happiness.” Jim also described several of his photographs as “postcardish,” because they had a certain quality of light and natural beauty.

Capturing the Meanings

During their interviews, participants chose 3-5 photographs that most represented the meaning of the experience for them. A content analysis of these photographs grouped them into four broad and emergent categories: scenic natural beauty, pictures of friends/group members, pictures of self, and significant personal moments. The subjects, using these photographs as springboards for discussion, ascribed many meanings to their outdoor experiences. For many of the subjects, the outdoors is a place to find stillness, calm and peace. The outdoors is also a place where the participants can connect to a sense of a higher purpose or power. The outdoors inspires a contemplative mindset where they are drawn to ask themselves “larger” questions. Participants frequently drew upon the words ‘awe’, ‘beauty’, and ‘spiritual’ to describe the deeper connection they felt to the divine and the natural world as a result of being on outdoor trips. For some participants, this spiritual connection is the key component in why they go outdoors. At times, the subjects were very articulate about the spiritual meanings of their experiences and at other times, they struggled noticeably to find words to describe such meanings.

Many of the subjects chose to spend time in the outdoors because of the connections they were able to make with others during the experience. They identified the outdoors as a unique container for developing friendships. The outdoor environment invites and requires that people work together and support each other. Having outdoor experiences with friends helped participants develop skills for maintaining their connections over time.

Many of the participants identified outdoor experiences as providing opportunities for self-discovery and gaining perspective. The outdoor environment provided occasions to experiment with different ways of living and being as well as chances to look at life from new vantage points and vistas. For many of the subjects, participating in the outdoors gives them access to a new range of metaphors with which to describe and understand their lives. For some of the participants, there was meaning in a sense of renewal or clarity that came from participating in an outdoor program.

Capturing the Experiences to Take Home

As well as using photographs to capture moments for their own memories, the participants also used photographs to explain and describe their experiences to others who were not there. Given the ineffability of describing outdoor experiences, they relied on the images to “speak” for the experience. Brenda talked about using her climbing pictures to “remember what the place looked like and being able to show others what it looked like. Especially...when people don’t have any conception or perception of what it is like out there.” Liz said, “the pictures are not just for me. They are for the people I know so I can try to share the wealth of stuff that I learned and experienced by showing them pictures of the experience I had.”

Some subjects made photo posters, others made photo CD's or websites. Some participants put the pictures up in their rooms or in frames on their desks. Many piled them up in show boxes or in drawers. Ross talked about his photos this way, "they normally go in a drawer. And then some time if I feel nostalgic I put them on the wall or I give them to friends." Justine liked to turn her photographs into greeting cards and post cards that she sent to friends.

Julie felt her photographs were only visual records because "it is so hard to capture what you are feeling and seeing out there...you get the pictures back and they are nice to look at but the memories are much stronger. I've noticed lately I'm taking less pictures because I want to try just try to take it all in." Rayne said "I took only two disposable cameras because I don't like the idea of living through my camera...because I think that would be very easy for me to do. And I didn't want to capture it all through my camera. I like fully experiencing it for myself. I really just wanted to take pictures of things that really called to me to take pictures."

Ross only takes a camera on outdoor trips about one-third of the time because he fears it will change his memories of the trips. He consciously tries to have "different memories and have the photos complement them rather than having the photos form the memories for me." Rayne shared "I feel like my pictures cannot definitely fully represent the experience I had but I definitely cling to them and use them as a source to walk people through my trip. And like I hold them dearly to myself as well and I love looking back at them." She summarized by saying "as much as I like to pretend that I don't like pictures ... I definitely like having the pictures to remind me because they trigger my memories. When I look at them, it is not just like-oh that is pretty-it is bringing back a whole experience."

Discussion and Implications

For the subjects in this study, outdoor trips provided the opportunity for significant and intense experiences on many levels: personal, relational and spiritual. The meanings ascribed to these experiences were interwoven, multi-faceted, and complex and were not always clear to the subjects until they reflected on their experiences much later in time. As outdoor experiences often take place in a novel environment away from "regular" life, the participants are often primed for introspection and personal growth. It is evident from this study that photography plays a major role in how participants capture, record, share and make sense of their experiences. What some outdoor educators find a nuisance or waste of time is actually a critical reflective tool for some participants.

Photography enables participants to identify peak or significant moments during and after the experience. It aids in the visual and emotional memory of the experience and it captures a greater level of detail than the participants could retain by themselves alone. When an experience is new, participants generally take a greater number of photographs. There is a strong desire to capture every nuance of the excitement, intensity and learning of the new activity or environment. Participants draw on these photographs as proof to themselves and others that they did indeed participate in or succeed at some activity (i.e. climbing a peak, running a rapid, cooking a meal over a fire). They rely on the photographs in times of stress or lowered self-esteem to remind themselves of the powerful and moving times they had while outdoors. Given

the power of photographs to keep the outdoor experience alive long after it has been completed, it is imperative that outdoor educators embrace and facilitate student photography during the outdoor experience. Of course, there are times when photography may be impossible or inappropriate during the experience but importance must be given to this vital tool whenever possible.

Photography gives participants a way to include others who did not participate in the experience to come to an understanding of it. Photographs provide an integral bridge from the field to home. They give participants a key with which to unlock their memories, trigger the emotional state, and vicariously relive their outdoor experiences. This key can assist with the transference of lessons learned from the outdoors to home. For participants, their photographs provide a chronological and phenomenological framework on which to develop their personal, reflective narrative of the experience. Most participants in the study used this anchoring framework when they shared the meaning of their experiences with friends and family members.

Along with their connections to the natural environment, the participants also valued and placed deep meaning in the bonds formed with other people during their outdoor experiences. As a result, photography can become an enabling force in forging connections between participants both during and after the experience. As painful as the proverbial group photo or summit shot can be to sit through, especially nine or ten cameras worth, it provides a crucial link to both the other participants and the experience itself. It also suggests important clues to what the participants find meaningful and want to remember from their trip. Indeed, given the significance of photography found in this study, outdoor educators should have some cause for concern if cameras are not being used on their trips. Participants' desire to photograph signifies that they are having valuable experiences that they deem are worth capturing.

Outdoor experiences and photography are both powerful tools for personal growth, learning, and forging connections. Combining these two together forms an even more powerful synergy that provides opportunities for greater experience recall, deeper reflection, and more significant transference of the outdoor experience home. This study provides eloquent evidence of this synergy and suggests that photography be embraced in outdoor education, rather than being merely tolerated.

In the current study, photo-elicitation proved to be a powerful research tool. The researcher was able to access some of the more profound meanings of the subjects' experiences because participants used photographs to capture moments of intense emotion, connection, and celebration. Each photograph acted as a memory anchor for the subject as he or she recalled the moment of the photograph, its intention, and the affective context surrounding it. Having this anchor set against the passing of time relaxed the subjects and enabled them to try to find the words to embody the meaning of their experiences. Most acknowledged the inadequacy of words alone to convey the essential nature of their experiences so they used photographs to capture and preserve the sense of awe, beauty, solitude, tranquility, growth and connection that their outdoor experience invoked within them. Using these photographs in the research enabled the conversation to proceed to a deeper and more collaborative level of understanding and meaning.

Prosser (1998) notes that the status of image-based research has been disproportionately low relative to word-based research and, therefore, that image-based research has been undervalued and under applied. Harper (1998) echoes this sentiment and suggests that photo-elicitation interviewing is an underutilized methodology with nearly limitless potential. As far as the researcher was able to discern, this was the first study in outdoor experience phenomenology to utilize photo-elicitation during data collection. It proved highly successful in that it produced similar phenomenological results to other studies while at the same time, having several added benefits. Using the subjects' photographs during the interviews aided in building rapport, provided image-based metaphoric reflexive opportunities for subjects, and provided a secondary data source (i.e. the photographs) for data analysis and triangulation. Given the success of photo-elicitation in the present exploratory study to provide another gateway into the understanding of meaning, it is recommended that the methodology receive further use in future studies.

In closing, this innovative research contributes greatly to both the understanding of outdoor experiences and to the ways in which photography facilitates participants' connections to those experiences. The study also suggests that outdoor educators welcome and support participants' photography during outdoor trips.

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