

Gaining a Better Understanding of How Outward Bound Western Canada
Course Outcomes are Achieved: A Research Study

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Abstract

This study examined how Outward Bound Western Canada (OBWC) course outcomes are achieved by exploring the relationships among course components, students' characteristics, and course outcomes. OBWC is a wilderness-based adventure education organization that helps students achieve outcomes such as increased self-awareness, self-confidence, motivation, interpersonal skills, concern for others, and concern for the environment. This study explored the ways in which the various components of courses and the characteristics of students contribute to determining the outcomes students experience as a result of their courses. The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how OBWC course outcomes are achieved in order to strengthen adventure education theory, enhance practice at OBWC and other adventure education organizations, and provide a foundation for further research on this topic.

As an interpretive case study, this study sought to describe how OBWC course outcomes are achieved and to provide interpretations of the research findings. Data was gathered from OBWC students and instructors using the quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques of questionnaire, interview, and observation. Data collected from 98 participants ensured a considerable breadth to the study, while interviews with a number of participants also enabled the collection of in-depth data. Analysis and triangulation of the data from the various sources allowed discernment of the research findings.

A comprehensive and detailed picture of how course outcomes are achieved emerged from the findings. Twenty-nine course components were found to influence

course outcomes, including various aspects of course activities, the physical environment, instructors, and the group. The findings indicated that certain course components were most influential in determining increases to students' self-awareness, self-confidence, self-reliance, self-esteem, self-concept, motivation, self-responsibility, interpersonal skills, concern for others, and concern for the environment. A number of course components were found to indirectly contribute to positive course outcomes by helping maximize the effectiveness of other components, by increasing students' motivation while on course, or by facilitating the processing and transference of new information. The findings also suggested that several course components either directly or indirectly affected course outcomes in negative ways. In addition, the gender, age, population, and expectations of students were found to play a role in determining the course outcomes they experienced and in determining which course components caused those outcomes.

Interpretation of the findings resulted in the generation of research-based theory. The main theoretical argument derived from the results of the study was that course outcomes are influenced by a combination of course components and characteristics of students. More specifically, the theory generated by the study indicated that five groupings of factors contribute to course outcomes, including course activities, the physical environment, instructors, the group, and students' characteristics. The study was considered in relation to existing adventure education literature and larger theoretical issues. The generated theory and research findings were then used to develop suggestions for improving practice at OBWC and other adventure education organizations, as well as for enhancing future research studies.