

## **Brief Evaluation of the Mystery Adventure experience**

James T. Neill  
University of New Hampshire  
Unpublished Report  
Draft 2, 3 March, 2002

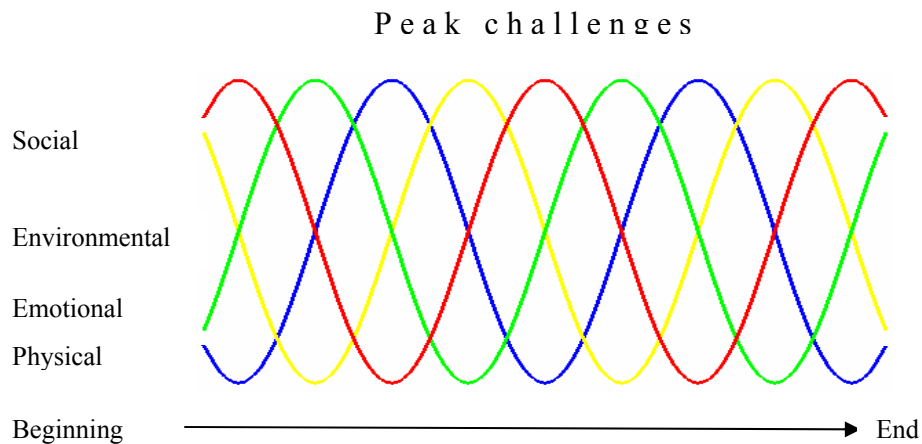
### **Abstract**

An undergraduate class of 37 American outdoor education students were involved in a one-day “Mystery Adventure”. The program design was based on a holistic ‘wave theory’ model, as described by Martin (2001) in the context of Outward Bound program design in the Czech Republic. The one-day Mystery Adventure was based in a small, rural town and involved students in small groups selecting their own level of engagement in approximately nine social, environmental, physical and emotional challenges. An example of a social challenge was, as a group, to get the life story from someone who was over the age of 55 years old. Other challenges included writing your own eulogy (emotional), 50 successive Frisbee throw-and-catches (physical), and spending 15 minutes alone in the woods (environmental). Participants completed the short version of the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (LEQ-H) before and after the Mystery Adventure and a program evaluation sheet at the end of the experience which asked for ratings of the challenge level and value of each activity and of the overall experience. Results suggested that the Mystery Adventure was a reasonably successful application of the Wave Theory of experiential education. Some particular activities (e.g., Solo) were highlighted as being more effective than others, warranting further investigation. One of the most consistent comments from participants was a desire for the Mystery Adventure to take place in a novel location and there was a sense from the comments that participants would have liked to have a higher level of challenge, particularly physical challenge in the activities.

## Introduction

The Mystery Adventure involved groups of three to five students traveling by foot through different parts of Durham, their local town, engaged in a series of experiential challenges. The aim was to provide students with a diverse range of self-guided experiential activities to allow them to explore their own personal and group development and the development. Groups were asked to identify three group values prior to the experience which were to be established and reviewed by the group during the day. Examples of values were ‘exploration of self, connection to others, enjoyment, and support’.

The design of the Mystery Adventure was based on the ‘Wave Theory’ of experiential education which was described by Martin (2001) through his examination of the program design process used at the Outward Bound school in the Czech Republic. Wave Theory suggests that by intertwining social, physical, emotional and environmental peak challenges, along with group-guided reflections, a holistic developmental experience can be created for motivated individuals (see Figure 1).



*Figure 1.* The Wave Theory of Experiential Education (reproduced from Martin, 2001)

Groups were instructed to use the transition between activities to engage in group-guided reflection, particularly focusing on how the group went during the activity with regard to their group values. The reflection model in Figure 2 was presented to students and included in their information booklet to help guide this process during the day.



Figure 2. Group-guided reflection model

The overall challenge which was presented to groups was to complete at least one challenge from each of four domains within 5 hours – emotional, social, physical and environmental. The elite challenge was to complete two challenges from each of these domains.

The challenges were as follows:

1. Emotional Challenge:
  - a. Write your own eulogy in a church or the Memorial Room in the MUB and share it with your group. “Imagine you died today, write what would you like to have read out at your funeral about your life”
  - b. Write a letter to someone who you want to improve your relationship with and post it. Envelope and postage stamp provided.
  - c. Share answers to the 10 “Everything You Wanted to Know About One Another” questions for each person in your group.
2. Social Challenge:
  - a. Help someone who is over 55 years old (as a group)
  - b. Get the life story from someone is over 55 years old (as a group)
  - c. As a group, complete the Human Bingo sheet with at least one signature per box from a stranger.
3. Physical challenge
  - a. Each person to shoot 10 baskets from the line marked on the Forest Park basketball courts. Court is west side of Forest Park. Balls are behind the apple tree.
  - b. Each person to tie a Monkey’s Fist (equipment supplied)
  - c. Group to complete 50 successive throw-and-catches (throws of 15 yards plus) with a Frisbee. Frisbee can be found buried by leaves at base of the tree where we have KIN 550 classes.
4. Environmental challenge
  - a. Solo: Each person to spend 15 minutes alone, off the trail in College Woods, doing one of the following:
    - i. Sitting in silence
    - ii. Writing a poem
    - iii. Drawing a picture

Neill, J. T. (2002). *Brief evaluation of the Mystery Adventure experience*. Unpublished report. University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH.

- b. Leaf Rainbow: Create a leaf rainbow on a trail in College Woods. A leaf rainbow is a picture on the ground made of leaf and which blends from one range of the color spectrum to another (as a group)
- c. Get within 150 ft of a swan OR see a woodchuck OR get within 2 ft of a Squirrel (whole group)
- d. Get each group members' bare feet wet in Littlehale Creek OR Oyster River OR in both of College Brook and Reservoir Brook

## **Method**

### *Participants*

The 37 participants were students from a sophomore outdoor education class called "Outdoor Education Philosophy and Methods" at the University of New Hampshire. The average age of participants was 20.8 years with 16 females and 21 males.

### *Materials and Design*

A short version of the Life Effectiveness Questionnaire (Neill, Marsh, & Richards, 1997) containing nine items was administered before and after the Mystery Adventure in order to assess short-term enhancements of participants' perceptions of their personal effectiveness<sup>1</sup>. At the end of the experience, a one page evaluation of the experience was also given to participants (see Appendix), to assess the level of challenge and the perceived value of each activity, the overall quality of the experience, and an open-ended space for comments.

## **Results**

### *Life Effectiveness Questionnaire*

The overall results indicated a positive short-term enhancement of participants' perceptions of their personal effectiveness, with an initial mean of 6.72 ( $SD = .42$ ) and a post-test mean of 6.97 ( $SD = .61$ ), with higher scores indicating more positive self-perceptions on a Likert scale ranging from 1 to 8. This is equivalent to a standardized mean difference effect size of .60 (based on the pre-test  $SD$ ), indicating a moderately high amount of change and substantially higher than the effect size of .34 reported for 99 studies of outdoor education programs (Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997). Further analysis could identify the relative amount of change in specific areas of personal effectiveness.

### *Mystery Adventure Evaluation*

---

<sup>1</sup> Note: Due to an administrative error, the Time Management item was not included, hence only 8 items were used to assess overall life effectiveness.

Neill, J. T. (2002). *Brief evaluation of the Mystery Adventure experience*. Unpublished report. University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH.

The overall ratings of the Mystery Adventure experience were made on a scale from 1 = no value, 2 = OK, 3 = Very good, 4 = Great. All participants rated the experience as 2.5 (good) or higher, with 9% rating it as ‘good’, 50% as ‘very good’ and 41% as ‘great’.

The average value rating for the activities was 2.71 ( $SD = .36$ ) on a scale as follows:

1	2	3	4
No value	Some value	Good value	Great value

This would seem to suggest that overall students reported reasonable value from the activities.

The average challenge rating for the activities was 2.39 ( $SD = .30$ ) on a scale as follows:

1	2	3	4
Not challenging	Some challenge	Quite challenging	Highly challenging

This would seem to suggest that overall students found the activities had a low to medium level of challenge.

The breakdown for the value and challenge ratings for each of the activities is shown in Table 1. Of particular note may be the four activities which had average ratings over 3 ‘good value’ – solo in the woods, 10 personal questions, letter to someone who want to improve your relationship with, and write your own eulogy. Whilst all activities were on average rated as having at least ‘some value’, the three activities which rated lowest could be examined to see how they could be improved – creek dipping, animal encounter, and 10 basketball baskets.

Table 1.  
*Ratings of the Value and Challenge for the Mystery Adventure Activities.*

	Value			Challenge		
	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Solo in woods	22	3.55	.80	22	1.73	1.03
10 Personal questions	33	3.33	.74	33	2.09	.72
Letter to someone	21	3.19	.81	21	2.71	1.01
Write your own Eulogy	13	3.15	.80	13	3.38	.77
Get life story from someone	23	2.96	.88	23	2.65	1.03
o/55						
Leaf Rainbow	33	2.79	.86	32	1.66	.60
Frisbee group catch	33	2.52	.71	32	2.34	.74
Help someone	22	2.50	.91	22	2.59	.96
o/55						
Monkeys Fist Knot	29	2.45	.87	30	3.23	.77

Neill, J. T. (2002). *Brief evaluation of the Mystery Adventure experience*. Unpublished report. University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH.

Human Bingo	33	2.39	.66	33	2.64	.82
Creek Dipping	28	2.18	.61	28	1.46	.69
Animal Encounter	17	2.18	.95	20	3.00	1.12
Basketball 10 baskets	21	2.00	.89	21	2.29	1.15

The open-ended comments made by participants give a valuable sense of the nature of the experience and suggest areas for improvement for program design (see Table 2).

Table 2.  
Comments made by Mystery Adventure participants.

Comments
A good time. Good ideas for challenges. Even more extreme challenges would be good options. Although value come out of all/most of these.
Activity was fun and educational, just could have been better off campus or somewhere else than Durham, as we spend all of our time here. Challenges such as the life story and helping were difficult.
At first group was wondering what we were supposed to be learning. I expressed that it seemed like the goal was to be more open, to trust people, and don't be afraid to express your feelings.
Being in Durham made it easier than if we were in an unfamiliar environment. I wouldn't call it an adventure. I wanted it to be more physical. I thought maybe a scavenger hunt in an entirely unfamiliar environment.
Challenging my less skilled areas activities were great and the more skilled challenges were rewarding and confidence boosting as well. Great challenges. Great day. Good for me and incredibly fun. Group setting also rewarding.
Good experience. Important part was to incorporate our set goals. Otherwise events seemed lacking the educative aspect. To make it excellent use a different environment. Events weren't connected, each should directly relate to previous one.
I had a lot of fun. Thanks!
I had fun and learned about some people but overall it wasn't much of a challenge but took stuff out of it.
I like the freedom of the day. Even though we had tasks we made up our own pace and decisions. Maybe riddle or clue chase would present a new aspect of challenge.
I really enjoyed the day and found the interaction with people and nature very restorative and increased my self-confidence and self-esteem from the beginning of the day.
I really enjoyed the small groups and activities that allowed us to get to know each other better. I also felt that writing a letter and solo time was greatly beneficial to clear my head. Physical challenges weren't that challenging - ropes or skills?
I really had a lot of fun. I got to know my group members more and experience more people in Durham. The weather had a lot to do with the good experience. More than 10 questions on everybody. Have a rainy day back-up plan because no-one would be out.

Neill, J. T. (2002). *Brief evaluation of the Mystery Adventure experience*. Unpublished report. University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH.

I think many of the challenges were not quite challenging enough and may have been able to include some valuable questions to go along with them.

I thought the best part of today was our group discussion about the 10 questions. It was challenging to share personal things but I definitely felt supported by the group and enjoyed the discussion. Not quite what I expected but certainly valuable.

I was having mixed feelings about this at first, but I really had a great time.

It was fun.

It was relaxing, with good people and good food. It was a really nice way to spend a beautiful Sunday. I thought it was really good bonding time (especially the ultimate frisbee!)

Maybe having specific challenges set up somewhere and the group has to finish one and move to the next.

Shorter time can accomplish most things or later in day. Great experience. Should do it again when snow on ground.

Some people we encountered were cool, some were not.

This was a wonderful experience. The responses of people around campus were awesome. We met a lot of people who want to be in this class.

Thought it would be better to go somewhere besides Durham.

To change the setting of where the adventure is taking place. It should be in a place no one is familiar with.

Today's activities were very thorough and thought out. I enjoyed today, however a different location would have made the experience more challenging and a totally new experience.

---

## **Conclusion**

Overall, the Mystery Adventure demonstrates a reasonably successful potential application of the Wave Theory of experiential. Participants generally reported a positive learning experience and a sizable short-term enhancement of participants' self-perceptions was evident, although a followup assessment would be desirable. Some particular activities are highlighted as being particularly effective and these should be examined in more detail and be considered for application in other experiential education programs. Some activities could be improved for the future or alternative activities developed. One of the most consistent comments from participants was a desire for the Mystery Adventure to take place in a novel location and there was a sense from the comments that participants would have liked to have a higher level of challenge, particularly physical challenge in the activities.

## **References**

Hattie, J. A., Marsh, H.W., Neill, J.T., & Richards, G.E. (1997). Adventure Education and Outward Bound: Out-of-class experiences that have a lasting effect. *Review of Educational Research*, 67, 43-87.

Martin, A. J. (2001). *Towards the next generation of experiential education programmes: A case study of Outward Bound*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Massey University, Palmerston North, New Zealand.

Neill, J. T. (2002). *Brief evaluation of the Mystery Adventure experience*. Unpublished report. University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH.

Neill, J. T., Marsh, H. W., & Richards, G. E. (2001). *The Life Effectiveness Questionnaire: Development and Psychometrics*. University of Western Sydney, Australia.

## Appendix

<b>Mystery Adventure Evaluation</b>
-------------------------------------

Your Name:

Please rate the overall value of the challenges for your personal and group development. Leave the ones you didn't complete blank.

RATING	1	2	3	4
CHALLENGE	Not challenging	Some challenge	Quite challenging	Highly challenging
VALUE	No value	Some value	Good value	Great value

Activity	Challenge Rating	Value Rating
Eulogy		
Letter to someone		
10 Questions		
Help someone		
Life story		
Human Bingo		
Basketball		
Monkey's Fist		
Frisbee		
Solo		
Leaf Rainbow		
Animal Encounter		
Creek Encounter		

How would you rate the overall quality of your Mystery Adventure experience today?

1	2	3	4
Poor	OK	Very good	Great

COMMENTS: Please feel free to give us any feedback (positive or constructive) on any aspect of your Mystery Adventure experience today.

Thankyou for your participation!