

Mind-Body Connection on a High Wire: A Cross Disciplinary Ropes Course Experience for Graduate Students

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Abstract

Two classes from diverse graduate programs merged and melded for a weeklong intensive outdoor experience to learn how to be leaders for an outdoor challenge course. Physical Education graduate students and students in a Counselor Education program together participated in the Challenge Course, co-led by an Exercise Scientist and a Psychologist. The course was intended to teach the Physical Education program graduate students to lead a challenge course for school age children and the Counselor Education students were presented with an alternative mode of therapy. Additionally, the goal was to provide a venue for personal growth and for group members to learn a means to encourage freedom of action and expression of feelings.

The leaders merged the two classes and then divided the whole group into two separate groups, to include members from both disciplines. The groups were reassigned daily for the first three days with attention to placing individuals with particular personality characteristics or skills with a complementary individual in that group. This was a pilot preexperimental study (one group, pretest-posttest) design exploring the outdoor experience regarding students' self perception of self expressiveness and self-discovery. The group, $N = 36$ graduate students with a mean age of 29.5 years rated themselves on the Group Environment Scale (subscales of self-discovery and expressiveness) prior to the outdoor experience and at the conclusion. Expressiveness post experience mean ratings ($M = 54.54$, $SD = 7.95$) were significantly higher than pre experience mean ratings ($M = 46.29$, $SD = 8.21$), $t(34) = -5.16$, $p < .001$. The post experience mean ratings on self-discovery ($M = 52.44$, $SD = 8.98$) were significantly higher than pre experience mean ratings ($M = 47.33$, $SD = 9.44$), $t(35) = -2.82$, $p < .005$. Students reflected in their journals daily, and composed both individual and group goals for the experience. Each member of the class led a group at the conclusion of the week. Participants evaluated each leader and also each participant self-evaluated as a leader and as a group participant.

Keywords: Challenge Course for Graduate Students

Introduction

The overall efficacy of Adventure Based Counseling (ABC) and its relationship to self-esteem has been investigated. Cason and Gillis (1994) conducted a meta-analysis of ABC and reported an overall rate of improvement of 12.2%. Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) looked at self-efficacy, behavioral difficulties and locus of control at both posttest and long term follow up and found that improvements were maintained over time (one and two years). Psychological benefits reported include new confidence in oneself, increased willingness to take risks, improved self-concept, greater reflective thinking and enhanced skills in leadership and logical reasoning (Priest & Gass, 1997). Fletcher and Hinkle (2002) wrote a review of Adventure Based Counseling and discussed the diverse populations in which it has proven to be advantageous in clinically. Some of those populations were the following; youth at risk, families, women, college students, corporations, victims of abuse, trauma, disease and athletes.

Low-element challenge courses are group-oriented programs that help participants learn to share responsibility, develop cooperative problem-solving skills, and increase self-confidence and well-being (Scott & Myers, 2001). A group of high school senior boys ($N = 142$) ages 16-17 years at a private school in the Boston area participated in an adventure experience. The Student Self-Concept Scale, which measures adolescents' self-confidence and their performance expectations regarding behaviors or attributes in the areas of self-image, academic confidence and social-self was significantly improved on the composite self-confidence score (Graham & Robinson, 2007). The outcome confidence scale measures the students' evaluations that their behavior will result in a specific outcome. This dimension increased significantly for academic and social-self but not for self-image (Graham & Robinson, 2007). Counseling students learned adventure counseling as an additional mode of therapy to increase their repertoire of counseling skills (Graham, 2009). For documentation, handouts and procedures see (Graham, 2009).

The Physical Education majors typically approach the course as a means to learn a set of skills and new activities to use in their classes with the students. The Counselor Education students view the course as an extension of a group dynamics course and predominantly focus on the processing aspect. By combining the diverse classes the students had the opportunity to lead a group of participants who exhibited different modes of learning and thinking than their peers in their own discipline. This pushed the students to stretch themselves and observe a different perspective than their own in their area of study. The interdisciplinary approach was tried because Counseling students have a tendency to over analyze and were deficit in leading groups in the physical domain. The Physical Education students lacked processing skills, but excelled in the leadership of the physical skill sets.

This was a pilot preexperimental study (one group, pretest-posttest) design exploring the outdoor experience regarding students' self perception of self expressiveness and self-discovery. The outdoor challenge environment provided a venue for personal growth and for group members to learn a means to encourage freedom of action and expression of feelings.

Method

Participants

There were $N = 36$ participants in the outdoor adventure group. They ranged in age from 22-47 years of age, with a mean age of 29.47 years. There were 12 males and 24 females in the

group. They were all graduate students at a state college in the School of Education in either the Department of Counselor Education or in the Physical Education department.

Instruments

The Group Environment Scale (GES), (subscales of expressiveness and self-discovery) was used to assess expressiveness and self-discovery. The subscale expressiveness is indicative of a relationship dimension and self-discovery represents a dimension of personal growth. Form R of the instrument was used. This form is a self-report ninety question, true/false form requesting the participant rate aspects of the group they are presently a member. The ratings were done anonymously, with the participants identifying their questionnaire by a number they chose such as a telephone number. The subscales of expressiveness and self-discovery were analyzed using the Statistical package SPSS with a paired-sample t-test.

Reliability

Test-retest reliabilities were calculated for 63 members and leaders who completed the form twice with a one month interval between assessments. Expressiveness was 0.67 and self-discovery was 0.83. The stability of the GES profile was determined with stability correlations for 10 staff members at 4, 8, 12 and 24 months. The mean profile stability was 0.92 after 4 months, 0.84 after 12 months, and 0.78 after 24 months.

Validity

Internal consistencies (Cronbach's Alpha) for expressiveness was 0.7 for ($N = 246$) and for self-discovery 0.83. One month retest revealed for expressiveness 0.63 for ($N = 63$) and for self-discovery 0.83. Factor analysis revealed between three and eight dimensions or clusters. Expressiveness subscale is subsumed under the cluster of relationship dimension and self-discovery is under personal growth dimension. Content and construct validity was built into the scales by formulating definitions of specific constructs; preparing items to fit the construct definitions; and selection times that were conceptually related to the dimension. Items were chosen on the basis of empirical criteria such as intercorrelations, item-subscale correlations and internal consistency analyses.

Instrument Sample

Means and standard deviations are provided for four different types of group; task-oriented, social-recreational, psychotherapy and supervision and self-help and mutual support.

Other Measures

Students reflected in their journals daily, and composed both individual and group goals for the experience. Each member of the class led a group at the conclusion of the week. Participants evaluated each leader and also each participant self-evaluated as a leader and as a group participant. Forms for these activities are contained in Graham (2009).

Challenge Course Activities

The five days of activities were initiated with ground activities requiring no permanent elements. The activities progressed, involving some activities that were completed as a group and others were individual initiatives. The difficulty and level of trust involved in participation and completion of the activity progressed as the week evolved. The final days were spent on high

elements such as the high wire and the zip line. Activities engaged in can be found in Project Adventure (1991).

Procedure

The group was administered the Group Environment Scale (subscales of expressiveness and self-discovery) prior to the beginning of the intensive class and at the conclusion of the week long class. This instrument was used to measure changes in the students' perceptions of their ability to express themselves and in new learnings about themselves as a result of the experience. Two classes from diverse graduate programs merged and melded to learn how to be leaders for a ropes course. Physical Education graduate students and students in a Counselor Education program together participated in a weeklong Challenge Course, co-led by an Exercise Scientist and a Psychologist. The course was intended to teach the Physical Education program graduates to lead a challenge course for school age children and the Counselor Education students learn an alternative mode of therapy.

A group of Graduate level adult learners spent one week together in the woods for an intensive outdoor challenge course experience. The day schedule was from 8:30 am-5:00 pm. The leaders merged the two classes and then divided the whole group into two separate groups, to include members from both disciplines. The groups were reassigned daily for the first three days with attention to placing individuals with particular personality characteristics or skills with a complementary individual in that group. Students set both individual and group goals for the week. Students reflected in the form of both journal writing and group debriefing after each element and at the conclusion of the day's instruction and group interaction. Guidelines from Islands of Healing (Schoel & Maizell, 2002) were followed in the design, sequencing, progression of activities and debriefing. Students reflected on their new level of personal insight and how this impacted their interactions with others. The GRABBS System (group goals, readiness both physically and emotionally, affect or feelings of the group, behavior, body both state and physical readiness, setting environmental conditions and stage of the group) provides a means to uniquely tailor the activity chosen to the particular group one is leading. The system requires group evaluation, choosing and sequencing the activities that coincide with the level of the group's development and readiness. For example if one had a group of physically challenged children or medically ill adults, the rules and props for the activity could be adapted.

Results

Expressiveness post experience mean ratings ($M = 54.54$, $SD = 7.95$) were significantly higher than pre experience mean ratings ($M = 46.29$, $SD = 8.21$), $t(34) = -5.16$, $p < .001$. The post experience mean ratings on self-discovery ($M = 52.44$, $SD = 8.98$) were significantly higher than pre experience mean ratings ($M = 47.33$, $SD = 9.44$), $t(35) = -2.82$, $p < .005$ as presented in figure 1. Students reflected in their journals daily, and composed both individual and group goals for the experience. Each member of the class led a group at the conclusion of the week. Participants evaluated each leader and also each participant self-evaluated as a leader and as a group participant.

Student journal reflections revealed self-discovery around personal issues such a personality traits, physical adroitness, and body image impacting the manner in which individual's interacted with the group. The journal reflections also were pertinent to the manner in which this experience provided them with empathy regarding difficulties future group

members they may have in their groups they will lead. The rating sheets provided them with an avenue to reflect on what techniques were effective with groups and which were not. The writings indicated self-discovery in terms of making adaptations in their leadership style.

Discussion

This activity was intended to teach the Physical Education program graduates to lead a challenge course for school age children and Counselor Education students an alternative mode of therapy. Additionally, the goal was to provide a venue for personal growth via self-discovery and for group members to learn a means to encourage freedom of action and expression of feelings. The rationale for combining the diverse classes afforded the students the opportunity to lead a group of participants who exhibited different modes of learning and thinking than their like peers in their own discipline. This pushed the students to stretch themselves and observe a different perspective than their own in their area of study. The heterogeneous group represented a more realistic group that they would be faced with as leaders in their careers.

There has been little to no research focusing on the erudition of the counselor in training or the Physical Educator as leader of a challenge course. The research has focused on the groups that counselors and Physical Educators have led instead of the group leaders. This was a pilot preexperimental study (one group, pretest-posttest) design exploring the outdoor experience regarding students' self perception of self expressiveness and self-discovery. The outdoor challenge environment provided a venue for personal growth and for group members to learn a means to encourage freedom of action and expression of feelings. The data revealed that the graduate students rated their self-discovery and expressiveness higher at the conclusion of the weeklong intensive challenge course than at the beginning. The journal writings and evaluation sheets corroborated the growth in self-awareness and experimentation with greater self-expression.

Journal writings indicated many students focused on how they had anticipated they would be perceived by the group and acted according to this self conscious view. Body images, weight, age, lack of athleticism were examples of this and were of great concern to a number of group members and this became a limiting factor for some participants. The group experience represented a microcosm of the participant in the greater world. Many set goals of challenging themselves to act in a manner incongruous with their norm. Some who were traditionally reserved and quiet set a goal to speak up and offer suggestions to the group. This role reversal led some to introspect and comment on the effect this had on them affectively, cognitively and behaviorally. The experience and reflection also allowed them to gain insight on the purpose the prior role had for them. A counseling graduate might ask a client to take on an "uncomfortable" role. Some became aware that a seemingly innocuous activity such as putting on a harness could bring up the embarrassment and humiliation experienced as a child when chastised by a parent for putting it on incorrectly. The corrective emotional experience allowed the participant to come to realize the power of accepting an individual or group, thus fostering self change.

Group members commented on how they learned the value of debriefing, group process, sequencing and reading your group. Members commented on learning how to foster and build trust within a group. Many wrote about how they would apply the lessons learned to the particular population that they worked with at their various places of employment. As a crescendo to the week, each participant was asked to lead their group through an activity that they had designed. Leaders recounted the anticipatory anxiety and the subsequent sense of

accomplishment and learning they garnered from being a leader and applying the knowledge. They were required to evaluate themselves as both a leader and as a group participant. Each person received subsequent written feedback from the group on their performance as a leader. All members commented in their personal journals regarding the applicability of the activities led by peers and the experience of being a leader.

Limitations

Findings from this study indicate that an intervention as short as an intensive weeklong multimodal experience may have a positive influence on personality change, affective response and behavior. It was a preexperimental (one group, pretest, posttest design). These findings would be greatly strengthened by conducting further study; using an experimental design with a control group. Long term follow up would also help to differentiate the findings as permanent versus a short lived exuberance resulting from the intensive experience. Such a design would allow firmer conclusions to be drawn regarding changes in expressiveness and self-discovery.

Conclusions

There has been little research regarding the impact of a challenge course experience on the training of the counselor in training or the Physical Educator as a leader. Research on challenge courses has predominantly focused on the group members. Graduate education typically involves graduate students in class with a cohort of the same majors. The reality is that these trainees will be leading heterogeneous groups, dissimilar to themselves. This poses a challenge to the Physical education major who is accustomed to be shoulder to shoulder with an adroit athlete. This future leader is unprepared for the group participant who is clumsy, uncoordinated and a cerebral problem solver. What is the response of the counselor, who is faced with a group member who is a behaviorally oriented problem solver and is reticent to verbally process an experience? By combining diverse groups of graduate students into this training experience it provides the students an opportunity to learn how to lead diverse, heterogeneous groups. The experience also provides a venue for the students to engage in self-discovery and experiment with self-expression. The GRABBS system allows the curriculum to be adapted to any skill or developmental level of a group.

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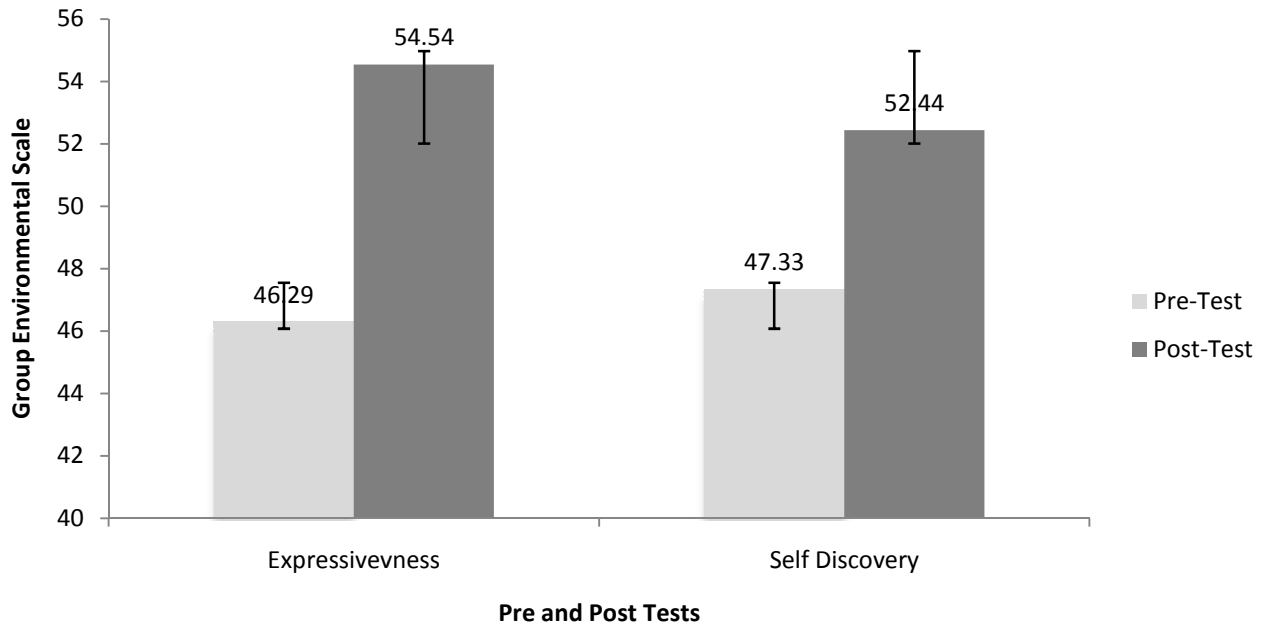


Figure 1. Mean Group Environmental Scale subscales (+SE) for expressiveness (n = 35), and self discovery (n = 36) groups in pre and post test conditions.