

Student Learning in Outdoor Education: A Case Study From the National Outdoor Leadership School

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While much attention has been paid to what students learn in outdoor education settings, little has been paid to the process through which that learning occurs. The purpose of this study was to identify the mechanisms through which students report learning one of six targeted objectives on courses offered by the National Outdoor Leadership School. Results suggested five broad domains through which learning occurs: structure-oriented mechanisms; instructor-oriented mechanisms; student-oriented mechanisms; student- and instructor-oriented mechanisms; and mechanisms that are a result of environmental qualities. The relative importance of each of these domains is discussed, as are recommendations for practice.

Keywords: Adventure Education, Instructional Techniques, Wilderness Education, NOLS

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How do students actually learn in outdoor education settings? While this question has been the focus of much discussion (e.g., Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, 1997; Henderson & Fox, 1994), we still have not moved very far from “describing the product to understanding the process” (Klint, 1999, p. 163). Only when we understand the mechanisms through which learning and development occur in outdoor education can we move beyond “black box” programming—where there is no specific accounting for what happens—to real intentionality. It is with this intentionality that we may begin to see and document even more potent outcomes.

In an attempt to better understand how to intentionally structure programs to achieve outcomes, we began to investigate the process of participant development at the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) by focusing on both *what* students learn and *how* they learn it. With respect to content, regardless of course type or length, NOLS targets six learning objectives for its students: communication skills, leadership skills, small-group behavior, judgment in the outdoors, outdoor skills, and environmental awareness (Gookin, 2006). Communication skills are defined as communicating effectively in a small-group setting and include discussion leading, feedback provision, and expressing ideas. Leadership involves taking initiative, responsibility, and decision-making roles. Small-group behavior is defined as being a positive and productive group member. Judgment in the outdoors is the ability to recognize potential hazards and make good decisions in the backcountry. Outdoor skills are competencies for backcountry travel and living. Environmental awareness is defined as a combination of perceived knowledge of environmental stewardship practices and regulations and an appreciation for the environment. With respect to *what* students learn, when data from a recent study were analyzed (Sibthorp, Paisley, & Gookin, 2007), it revealed that students showed significant perceived gains in all six of these areas as a result of participation in NOLS courses. This is consistent with the multitude of studies on adventure and outdoor education program outcomes (e.g., Hattie et al., 1997; Propst & Koessler, 1998). However, more recent studies have been interested in the processes and mechanisms that help experiential educators to understand how students learn during these programs. For example, McKenzie (2003) posited that course activities, physical environment, instructors, and the group are all critical to development on adventure courses, and Martin & Leberman (2005) found that the group,

the instructors, the physical activities, reviews, and the solo were all critical to learning.

In a more general sense, learning theories, widely articulated and used in classroom settings, can also provide a guide to how participants might learn on adventure programs. Some of the more common learning theories and models include social learning theory, schema theory, information processing, and constructivism (Slavin, 1997). Many of these models include aspects that are highly relevant to outdoor and adventure programs. For example, social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) places a premium on learning through modeling and observation of role models—a common theme in outdoor leadership. Other approaches, like constructivism, embrace the idea of mentoring and participant construction of meaning (e.g., Vygotsky, 1978). However, some of the mechanisms embedded in these models, for example mnemonic devices, are not commonly discussed in outdoor education, but might be relevant to specific program goals.

While each of these approaches is potentially applicable to some of the learning that occurs in classrooms and outdoor settings, there remains no universally accepted theory or model of learning. How people learn seems to depend greatly on the complex interactions between participants, leaders, program elements, program goals, educational settings, and contexts. While these factors vary substantially within traditional educational settings, learning in outdoor and adventure settings adds even more factors into the mix, creating a significant gap between the setting in which these theories were developed and the settings in which outdoor and adventure education take place. For example, environmental factors, such as difficult terrain and tempestuous weather conditions, introduce tremendous variability into the outdoor “classroom.” Furthermore, outdoor classes are often longer in duration and involve smaller groups than those in traditional classroom settings, creating a new and sometimes intense social milieu. Also contrary to traditional educational settings, which tend to be individualistic in nature, outdoor education goals are commonly accomplished collectively. Motivations for participation in outdoor education are varied and, within the small-group environment, individuals must accommodate the distinct and separate aspirations of others on their expeditions. Given these factors, we believe that traditional theories and models of learning may not be fully applicable in outdoor education settings and that a grounded theory approach would be most useful to discover the mechanisms through which students learn in such contexts. Simply defined, “grounded theory is an iterative process by which the analyst becomes more and more ‘grounded’ in the data and develops increasingly richer concepts and models of how the phenomenon being studied really works” (Ryan & Bernard, 2003, p. 279). Thus, while utilizing a grounded theory approach, the purpose of this study was to explore

the mechanisms through which student learning occurs at the National Outdoor Leadership School.

Methodology

Participants and Procedures

All study participants were enrolled in NOLS courses between May and August of 2005. Students were sampled from six different NOLS branches and represented a wide variety of course types and lengths. Upon course completion and as part of the standard course debrief, students completed a questionnaire that assessed their learning of the NOLS targeted outcomes (communication, leadership, small-group behavior, judgment in the outdoors, outdoor skills, and environmental awareness) and captured demographic information and course characteristics (see Sibthorp, Paisley, Gookin, & Ward, 2005). On the final portion of the questionnaires, students were asked to indicate which of the six NOLS outcomes they learned the most about. Following this was an open-ended question asking students, "Out of all the ways you learned about this objective, which was the most effective and why?" The qualitative data generated through this final question were the focus of this study. During May through August, 508 students responded to the open-ended question and, of these, 441 were usable answers. Approximately 1,200 students did not respond to the question, perhaps partly due to paperwork fatigue as there are multiple evaluations completed at the end of each course. The sample was 59% male and 38% female (3% chose not to identify their sex), with an average age of 24.9 years (ranging from 14 to 56 years). All responses were anonymous, were collected at NOLS branches, and were sent back to NOLS headquarters.

Data Analysis

Data were transcribed verbatim and were analyzed manually. Because this study is a case study approach of NOLS, specifically, ethnomethodologies advocated by Spradley (1979) were considered appropriate. After reading through the data, two researchers independently identified mechanisms of student learning (similar to McKenzie's [2003] "course components" that emerged through constant comparison), meaning that, as previously unidentified, *emic* (expressed in the students' words) modes of learning were discovered in the data, and new *etic* (expressed or summarized in researchers' words) mechanisms were labeled. The researchers then discussed the classification of student responses and determined the best fit for the few cases of disagreement. These mechanisms of learning were then grouped with other like mechanisms in what Spradley calls a taxonomic analysis. The broad headings for the related

groups of mechanisms, called domains or themes, were also labeled, for the sake of consistency, in etic terms.

These domains represented general sets of “ways of learning.” Inclusion of specific mechanisms in each domain was verified through the use of structural questions (Spradley, 1979, p. 116). The specific semantic relationship used to verify placement of mechanisms into domain was strict inclusion (X is a type of Y). Spradley’s componential analysis revealed that the value of contrast between domains was the *source* of the learning (e.g., instructor, environment, peers).

Next, using each student’s entire response as the unit of analysis, data were then enumerated into learning mechanisms by the researchers. Thus, if a student mentioned more than one mechanism in his or her response, it was coded only once into the mechanisms of best fit. Coding each student’s response in only one category allows for the presentation of percentages included in Tables 1 through 6 which, in turn, allows for comparison of relative magnitude.

Results

The purpose of this study was to identify the means through which NOLS students learned on their courses. First, students were asked to select the one of NOLS’ *a priori* six learning objectives about which they learned the most, with the results as follows: outdoor skills ($n = 160$); leadership ($n = 114$); judgment in the outdoors ($n = 59$); small-group behavior ($n = 52$); communication ($n = 39$); and environmental awareness ($n = 17$). Students were then asked, “Out of all the ways you learned about this objective, which was the most effective and why?” Results are described in two parts: a description of five domains that emerged from the data representing methods of student learning and then a description of learning within each of NOLS’ six objectives.

Domains

Data analysis revealed five domains that foster student learning of NOLS learning objectives. These etically labeled domains include structure-oriented mechanisms; instructor-oriented mechanisms; student-oriented mechanisms; student- and instructor-oriented mechanisms; and mechanisms that are a result of environmental qualities (both physical and social). Consistent with grounded theory, though named by the researchers, these domains were based on the students’ responses.

Structure-oriented mechanisms are built into the course design by program supervisors or curriculum managers. They are relatively consistent components of a NOLS course. Examples include Independent Student Group Travel (ISGT), where students travel without instructors, and Leader of the Day (LOD) responsibilities, where students take turns leading

peers throughout a day. These two components provide opportunities for students to practice leadership roles on courses.

Instructor-oriented mechanisms are techniques, skills, and practices implemented by the instructors to specifically teach learning objectives. These mechanisms are characterized by instructors directing how course content is delivered and reinforced. Examples of instructor-oriented mechanisms include: (a) coaching, where instructors work with students one-on-one or in small groups; (b) debriefing, where instructors lead the group in an exercise to reflect on events; and (c) formal classes, where instructors teach a topic to a larger group of students for a time period ranging from 15 minutes to two hours.

Student-oriented mechanisms are created by autonomous student acts that are largely independent of instructors. These may be achieved through skill rehearsal, interaction with other group members, or interaction with the physical environment. Learning from student-oriented mechanisms may be the result of a specific, powerful instance or may be due to a sum of experiences common to outdoor education courses. Furthermore, this learning may occur when the student is alone or when participating in a group activity. In either case, the learning is highly individualized and free from direct instructor control.

Student- and instructor-oriented mechanisms are those that can occur as a result of actions of both parties, rather than being specific to one set of actors, such as role modeling and the feedback process. Data suggested that these interactions, and their resulting influence, occur in a one-on-one interpersonal manner rather than as a result of any group-oriented setting. This domain includes instances where the source or model could be either a peer or an instructor, suggesting that the *actor* was not as critical as the *action* itself.

The final mechanism, qualities of the environment, describes the learning that students achieve directly from immersion in and interaction with the natural *and* social environments on their courses. For instance, dealing with inclement weather conditions or difficult terrain led to learning for some students. For others, participation with or observation of the group was reported as the principal means through which they learned an objective.

Results by Learning Objective

These five thematic mechanisms, derived from students' responses, describe modes of student learning within each of the six a priori NOLS learning objectives. Some of them, such as instructor-oriented and student-oriented mechanisms, occur within each learning objective. Others, such as qualities of the environment, explain student learning in fewer categories. A description of the relationship between learning mechanisms and each learning objective follows. These results are presented based on

the results of the enumeration (number of students who cited the outcome as the one about which they learned the most): outdoor skills ($n = 160$); leadership ($n = 114$); judgment in the outdoors ($n = 59$); small-group behavior ($n = 52$); communication ($n = 39$); and environmental awareness ($n = 17$). As the unit of analysis was the entire response, it becomes possible to report the percentage of respondents who mentioned each objective for ease of comparison of magnitude.

Overall, students identified outdoor skills as the NOLS learning objective about which they gained the most knowledge during their NOLS courses (36.3% of responses). Examples of outdoor skills included how to navigate using a map and compass, belay a rock climber correctly, or perform an Eskimo roll in a kayak. For this objective, learning was accomplished primarily through instructor-oriented and student-oriented mechanisms. (Table 1 summarizes methods through which students learned outdoor skills.)

Learning leadership, another NOLS objective, mainly was accomplished by structure-oriented mechanisms like Independent Student Group Travel and Leader of the Day. Student-oriented mechanisms, such as day-to-day course experience, and instructor-oriented mechanisms, such as formal classes, played a lesser role. Leadership curriculum at NOLS may include theoretical and historical foundations of leadership theory, hands-on activities and seminars, and experience leading small groups of peers. (Refer to Table 2 for further detail.)

At NOLS, judgment in the outdoors is often taught by examining case studies, incident/accident analysis, teaching decision-making tactics, and by making use of teachable moments. Consistent with these *teaching* efforts, students' *learning* was most often reported as a function of instructor-oriented mechanisms, such as classes or coaching. Student-oriented mechanisms, such as day-to-day course experience and acting autonomously, were reported frequently as well. (Table 3 summarizes student learning of this objective.)

As would be expected, students most frequently learned about small-group behavior, what NOLS calls "expedition behavior," through student-oriented means such as learning from social dynamics. Tolerance and consideration for others, a sense of selflessness, and humility are characteristics of "good" small-group behavior. A greater degree of variation in learning mechanisms was found in regards to this objective than with other objectives. (Table 4 provides an account of student learning in this area.)

Learning the NOLS objective of communication was accomplished primarily through instructor-oriented mechanisms. Coaching, receiving feedback from instructors, debriefing, and formal classes were all methods through which students learned communication. Conflict resolution, stages of group development, and the relevance of communication on an expedition are examples of communication curriculum often covered on

Table 1
Mechanisms of Student Learning of Outdoor Skills (n = 160)

Mechanism Title	Domain Category	Domain Description: Learning Through...	# of Responses	% of Total	Representative Quote
Course Experience	Student-Oriented	Experience(s) provided by student participation in course activities	63	39%	"Map reading taught me to figure out where I was, where I was going to go, and what route I should take to get there. Experience was the best teacher after learning the basics."
Practice	Student-Oriented	Skill rehearsal without instructors	30	19%	"Practice; we were out there a long time. I got used to reading maps and other skills."
Classes	Instructor-Oriented	Formal, semi-formal, or spontaneous aspects of the teaching process	19	12%	"I learned the most about outdoor skills through classes taught by the instructors at camp and on the trail."
Autonomous Student Action	Student-Oriented	Independent student behaviors	11	7%	"During SGE [Student Group Expedition] it was like taking the training wheels off and putting ourselves to the test. I was extremely satisfied with myself as a result."
Demonstration	Instructor-Oriented	A learning event deliberately acted out	11	7%	"By having instructors show me how to do outdoor skills, rather than just tell me, it was easier for me to learn how to do them."
Role Modeling	Instructor-Oriented	Observing instructors' appropriate behaviors	8	5%	"The instructors' modeling was highly effective."
Feedback	Instructor-Oriented	Receiving targeted comments on behavior from instructors	8	5%	"Feedback from the I-team [instructor team] because they know what they are doing."
Relevance	Qualities of the Environment	Identifying the significance of the objective	7	4%	"Being placed into a 'sink or swim' position. For example, being lowered into a crevasse and learning to use a foot prussic to get out."
Wilderness as Teacher	Qualities of the Environment	Being exposed to wilderness	3	2%	"Wilderness seems to teach its own lessons."

Table 2
Mechanisms of Student Learning of Leadership (n = 114)

Mechanism Title	Domain Category	Domain Description: Learning Through...	# of Responses	% of Total	Representative Quote
Experience: Leadership Opportunities other than LOD or ISGT	Structure-Oriented	Opportunity to step into a general leadership role	27	24%	"I felt I learned the most about leadership because I really found opportunities to practice these skills and figure out how what we learned fit into everyday actions."
Course Experience	Student-Oriented	Experience(s) provided by student participation in course activities	19	17%	"When interacting with the group and being able to use the skills we learned to help on- and off-trail."
Experience: Leader of the Day or Independent Student Group Travel	Structure-Oriented	Specifically Leader of the Day or Independent Student Group Travel experience (not Small-Group Expedition)	18	16%	"Being an LOD [Leader of the Day] was really useful because it forced me to interact positively and effectively with all kinds of peers."
Classes	Instructor-Oriented	Formal, semi-formal, or spontaneous aspects of the teaching process	16	14%	"The class on leadership styles because it broke it down and put it into perspective."
Experience: Small-Group Expedition	Structure-Oriented	Small-Group Expedition	10	9%	"Being set loose for small groups really allowed me to act as a leader in conjunction with the rest of my group."
Coaching	Instructor-Oriented	Low student-to-instructor ratio instruction	10	9%	"Being coached by the instructors because they are very experienced leaders."
Role Modeling	Student- and Instructor-Oriented	Observing other appropriate behaviors	8	7%	"My peers were all experienced leaders and I learned a lot from them and my instructors. The various leadership styles were great to learn from."
Feedback	Instructor-Oriented	Receiving targeted comments on behavior from instructors	6	5%	"My teaching and instructing skills improved from experience and constructive feedback."

Table 3
Mechanisms of Student Learning of Judgment in the Outdoors (n = 59)

Mechanism Title	Domain Category	Domain Description: Learning Through...	# of Responses	% of Total	Representative Quote
Course Experience	Student-Oriented	Experience(s) provided by student participation in course activities	20	34%	"Participating in the daily activities, making decisions, seeing consequences, and reflecting upon them."
Classes	Instructor-Oriented	Formal, semi-formal, or spontaneous aspects of the teaching process	9	15%	"Using the 'Possibilities versus Consequences chart [a risk management concept often taught at NOLS]."
Coaching	Instructor-Oriented	Low student-to-instructor ratio instruction	7	12%	"Coaching during a given activity."
Autonomous Student Action	Student-Oriented	Independent student behaviors	5	9%	"Small groups were the most effective because there were lots of risks and I was on the spot to react to them."
Role Modeling	Instructor-Oriented	Observing instructors' appropriate behaviors	5	9%	"Role modeling because the instructors talked through all the risk management decisions."
Scenarios	Instructor-Oriented	A learning event acted out by participants in anticipation of a real-life event	2	3%	"It was pretty effective to have gone through injury scenarios and get a feel for how we would respond as well as lecture on how to assess the situation."
Debriefing	Instructor-Oriented	Process-oriented reflection on an event or events	1	2%	"Debrief, debrief, and debrief. Debriefing potentially risky situations helped me solidify my risk management skills (or at least improve them significantly). Also simply talking about choices and probabilities as we came to potentially risky situations got me thinking critically."

Table 4
Mechanisms of Student Learning of Small-Group Behavior (n = 52)

Mechanism Title	Domain Category	Domain Description: Learning Through...	# of Responses	% of Total	Representative Quote
Course Experience	Student-Oriented	Experience(s) provided by student participation in course activities	19	37%	"Just experiencing both good and bad expedition behavior."
Social Dynamics	Student-Oriented	Social interactions between course participants	11	21%	"Working within a group and dealing with problems that arose"
Classes	Instructor-Oriented	Formal, semi-formal, or spontaneous aspects of the teaching process	9	17%	"The classes we had on it."
Relevance	Qualities of the Environment	Identifying the significance of the objective	9	17%	"Expedition behavior was a huge and important factor on this course—it got us up the mountain."
Role Modeling	Instructor- and Student-Oriented	Observing others' appropriate behaviors	2	4%	"Role modeling from instructors and peers."
Feedback	Instructor- and Student-Oriented	Receiving targeted comments on behavior from instructors or students	2	4%	"Daily interaction with my fellow campers and structured cook group feedback sessions. I was able to listen and learn about how others see me."

NOLS courses. (Student learning of communication on NOLS courses is summarized in Table 5.)

Finally, environmental awareness was learned via a combination of instructor-oriented and student-oriented mechanisms. Practice, classes, encounters with impacts, and Leave No Trace were all ways students reported learning this objective. Developing an understanding of land management issues, Leave No Trace traveling and camping techniques, and understanding how to serve as a steward of the wilderness are curricula often covered on many NOLS courses. Table 6 discusses how students learned environmental ethics.

Table 5
Mechanisms of Student Learning of Communication (n = 39)

Mechanism Title	Domain Category	Domain Description: Learning Through...	# of Responses	% of Total	Representative Quote
Course Experience	Student-Oriented	Experience(s) provided by student participation in course activities	15	38%	“Actually communicating. Having a problem and solving it is the best way to get better with communication.”
Classes	Instructor-Oriented	Formal, semi-formal, or spontaneous aspects of the teaching process	8	21%	“Thanks to my instructors, classes which included very effective examples, graphics, and visual methods, I was able to fully understand what decision-making and leadership styles are.”
Coaching	Instructor-Oriented	Low student-to-instructor ratio instruction	6	15%	“One-on-one coaching with the instructors.”
Feedback	Instructor-Oriented	Receiving targeted comments on behavior from instructors	5	13%	“Feedback was a key part of the curriculum. Communication is everything.”
Debriefing	Instructor-Oriented	Process-oriented reflection on an event or events	3	8%	“Debrief sessions talk about what happened throughout the day and re-enact everything.”
Role Modeling	Student- and Instructor-Oriented	Observing others’ appropriate behaviors	2	5%	“Instructors modeling communication methods between themselves and with students.”

Discussion and Integration With the Literature

In general, our findings are consistent with existing literature of outdoor education pedagogy. When fit is difficult to establish, however, perhaps it is due to the focus of existing literature on how information is *taught* rather than how it is *learned* (Drury, Bonney, Berman, & Wagstaff, 2005; Gookin, 2003). Our field is rich with curricula to teach students, yet there is a lack of understanding about how students actually learn the material. The skills that outdoor educators seek to teach are often divided into technical skills (“hard” skills; specifically outdoor skills, risk management, and environmental ethics in this study) and interpersonal skills (“soft” skills; also called conceptual skills [Swiderski, 1987];

Table 6
Mechanisms of Student Learning of Environmental Awareness (n = 17)

Mechanism Title	Domain Category	Domain Description: Learning Through...	# of Responses	% of Total	Representative Quote
Classes	Instructor-Oriented	Formal or semi-formal aspects of the teaching process	5	29%	"Formal classes because they generated great discussions among the group of knowledgeable and passionate people."
Leave No Trace*	Instructor-Oriented	LNT curriculum	4	24%	"Just having to practice Leave No Trace principles for the entire month out, and being shown why they made a difference."
Encounter With Impacts	Student-Oriented	Being confronted with environmental impacts	3	18%	"The classes were good. Having the library helped, too. But mostly I think being in places and seeing things like the dams and bolts and being a person; those things immediately effected me and had a huge impact."
Practice	Student-Oriented	Skill rehearsal without instructors	3	18%	"Setting up our campsites in small groups forced me to practice LNT [Leave No Trace] and learn about ways to reduce my impact on the environment."
Course Experience	Student-Oriented	Experience(s) provided by student participation in course activities	2	12%	"Learning through experience."

* This study is primarily concerned with reporting mechanisms of learning, not content of learning. Leave No Trace (LNT) is a subject of learning, not a method. However, students reported learning environmental awareness by way of LNT so often that it seemed misleading not to include it as its own category.

leadership, expedition behavior, and communication in this study).

McKenzie (2003) identified specific techniques reported by Outward Bound students with respect to course outcomes of motivation and interpersonal skills. She suggested a reconceptualization of Walsh and Golins' (1976) Outward Bound process that included the following interactive course components: physical environment, social environment, course activities, service, and instructors. Despite her specific focus on interpersonal skills, these course components closely parallel the domains

identified in this study. A major difference in this study, however, lies in the distinction between students' reported methods of learning technical vs. interpersonal skills.

Acknowledging, though not accounting for, the likely impact of individual learning styles, there are patterns of differences in the way students learned technical skills and interpersonal skills, which supports the existence of these as separate sets of skills. Most often, students reported learning technical skills by means of student-oriented or instructor-oriented techniques. Interpersonal skills, however, were typically learned through a wider range of means. (Figure 1 contains a graphic representation of the types of mechanisms through which students learned these two sets of skills.)

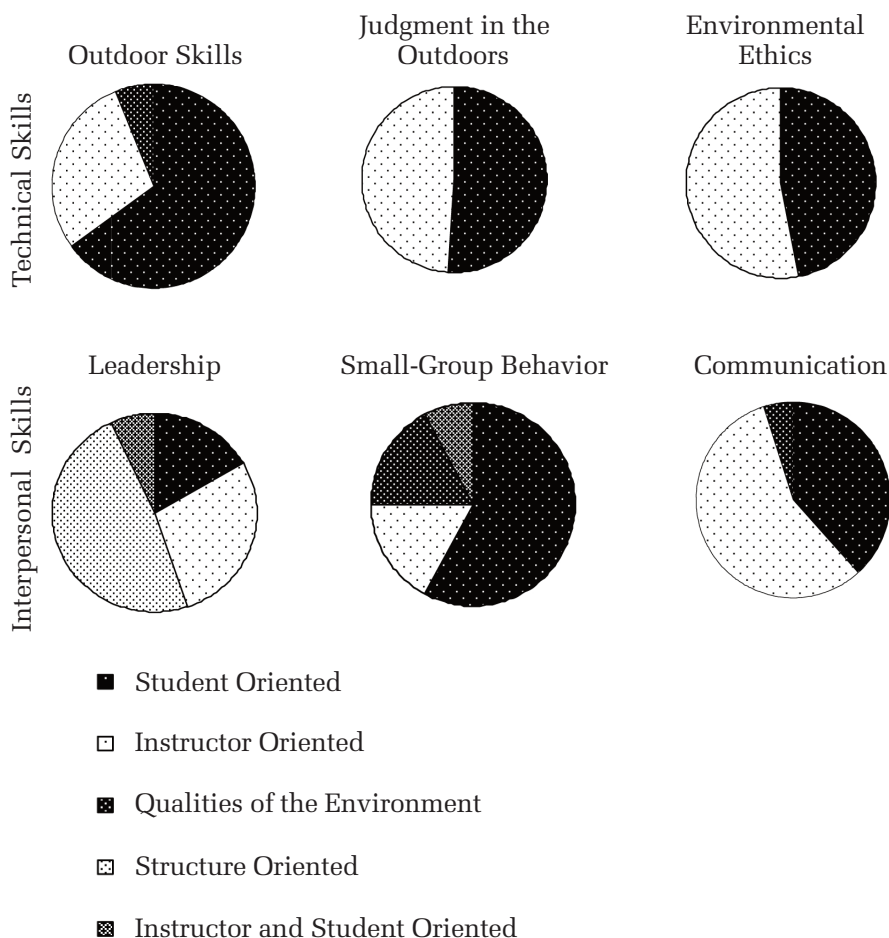


Figure 1. Learning mechanisms by NOLS outcome.

Learning of Technical Skills

Outdoor Skills

Our findings suggest that practice and experience will both teach and hone outdoor skills. Recalling that the unit of analysis for the enumeration of the data was the entire response, 58% of the students who responded attributed learning outdoor skills to one of these processes. For instance, one student said she learned by “actively practicing my outdoor skills, therefore gaining familiarity with them.” Another said, “The most effective way I learn is by doing, and the NOLS way of teaching works well with my learning style.” Literature supports the concept that outdoor skills are learned by practice and experience (Curtis, 1998; Hutchinson, 1999; Long, 2003; Luebben, 2004; Wells, 2005). For instance, Martin, Cashel, Wagstaff, and Breunig (2006) claim that “technical proficiency in outdoor activities can only be gained through experience. The more experience individuals gain, the more competent they generally become” (p. xix).

Judgment in the Outdoors

Students noted that they learned judgment in the outdoors largely through general course experience (34%), a student-oriented mechanism. For instance, one student reported, “Experience is the best teacher. So by continuing to improve through practice, my assessment of risk improved.” Similarly, another student noted that “crossing hazardous terrain ... puts the theory into practice.” Literature suggests gaining experience is seen as an important part of risk management (Cain & McAvooy, 1990; Petzoldt, 1984; Swiderski, 1987), as it leads to better hazard evaluation and decision-making.

Formal classes (15%) were another way in which students learned about judgment in the outdoors. One student said, “We had a class on how to make good decisions based on good judgment.” This method of teaching risk management policy and procedures has precedence in the literature. “It is important to have a formal learning experience before students go on any small group adventures without staff” (Drury, Bonney, Berman, & Wagstaff, 2005, p. 449).

A small percentage (3%) of students reported learning from scenarios. One student said, “Scenarios were important because I could see how I would act if in a bad situation.” Many resources on risk management make use of case studies and scenario analysis to teach field-based risk management (Drury et al., 2005; Kosseff, 2003; Leemon, 2006; Leemon & Schimelpfenig, 2005; Martin et al., 2006). Several publications, including *Accidents in North American Mountaineering* (an annual put out by the American Alpine Club), exist primarily to report accidents and provide context for learning from them.

Although a good deal of material has been written on the importance of risk management, very little addresses how to teach it to students. Most often, it seems risk management curricula are left for training the staff of outdoor education programs and do not directly result in explicit information offered to students. Perhaps this is due to the idea that risk management is inherently paired with decision-making, and decision-making is traditionally coupled with leadership. In addition, increasing good judgment depends largely on increasing experience, which links it to outdoor skills (Cain & McAvoy, 1990). Because of these factors, it is possible that a risk management curriculum often becomes embedded in other learning objectives. As such, students may, in fact, be learning risk management skills, but not necessarily be aware of them as such.

Environmental Awareness

Twenty-four percent of students who reported that they learned the most about environmental ethics said they learned it by practicing Leave No Trace (LNT) techniques. For instance, one student said, "Practicing good LNT practices was important; I learned why they are so important." Another student said, "Leave No Trace, because it is critical in wilderness preservation."

Certainly, LNT has become a dominant theme in outdoor education and backcountry travel. Many outdoor education resources discuss its significance (Drury et al., 2005; Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006; Harvey, 1999; Kosseff, 2003; Martin et al., 2006; Priest & Gass, 1997). Its significance may, in part, explain a departure from the norm established for this research. Except in this instance, findings are reported as *how students learn*. In this case, LNT is *what students learned*. Regardless, we chose to include LNT as a "mechanism" because of how often students reported learning environmental ethics by means of LNT. Perhaps the time devoted to it on NOLS courses, the mastery students gain practicing it for weeks at a time, and the immediate relevance of the subject to everyday backcountry living blurs the line of *what I learned* and *how I learned it*. This may be reasonable because LNT principles are a form of outdoor ethics; by inference they could be interpreted as environmental ethics.

A recent curriculum for teaching environmental ethics is presented by Drury et al. (2005). Their model includes: (a) helping students observe and recognize conservation behavior; (b) applying and analyzing evidence of environmental behaviors; and (c) using discussions, scenario analysis, and Leave No Trace performances. Here, again, we find congruence with using LNT to either teach or provide context for environmental ethics. We also find similarity with our findings insofar as "encounter with impacts" (the third most commonly reported way in which students reported learning environmental ethics) is related to Drury et al.'s "analyzing evidence of environmental behaviors."

Learning of Interpersonal Skills

Small-Group Behavior

What NOLS refers to as “expedition behavior” might be more fully described as applied group dynamics in which individuals show as much consideration for their companions as they do for themselves. The term was coined by Paul Petzoldt, the founder of NOLS and the Wilderness Education Association, to describe behaviors that led to positive outcomes on wilderness expeditions (Drury, Bonney, Berman, & Wagstaff, 2005). Twenty-one percent of the students reported learning small-group behavior as a function of participating in social dynamics. One student said he or she learned expedition behavior “through taking care of the entire group—especially hiking groups that would arrive much later. We would give them a hand.” Another said that learning occurred by “observing my peers’ good and bad expedition behavior. It really made me think about how I act around others.” This type of learning was also prominent in the work of Martin and Leberman (2005), whose study suggested that “most of the learning came from being in a group environment” (p. 55).

Students reported that by working within a group they were able to see the benefits of “good expedition behavior.” For instance, one student reported, “Seeing how my fellow students interacted made it clear why good expedition behavior is important.” Another noted he learned by “...seeing how folks learn to trust and care for absolute strangers after only a week in the backcountry; simple things like this make or break an expedition.” This finds support in the literature; Dowd and Tierney (2005) state that an effective way to teach social skills is by utilizing group settings.

Within the small body of literature that specifically addresses expedition behavior, most sources (Drury et al., 2005; Harvey, 1999; Kosseff, 2003; Petzoldt, 1984) contend that learning expedition behavior is a function of instructor-oriented mechanisms. Our findings, however, suggest that student-oriented mechanisms are responsible for 58% of the learning. “I learned good expedition behavior by watching those around me,” reported one student. Another added, “When I was able to see how little annoyances added up in the group, I was able to see why expedition behavior was important.”

The degree to which students saw expedition behavior as having relevance played a role in the learning. For instance, one student noted:

Being in an environment that often presented adverse situations forced me to work harder towards reaching group goals rather than personal goals to increase efficiency, productivity, and my comfort level. Through this process,

I became much more focused on group-oriented goals, becoming more self-less and increasing my expedition behavior.

Hattie et al. (1997) might agree. They described the acquisition of interpersonal skills as being acquired through “forming small groups and making the groups face a set of increasingly more challenging tasks that necessitate group interactions to achieve goals with real consequences” (p. 69), such as ascending a cliff face or landing a sea kayak in rough water. This suggests that the more students perceived that small-group behavior was relevant, the more they learned about it.

Communication

Communication curriculum at NOLS includes instruction on conflict management, stages of group development, and increasing awareness of communication issues and strategies. Fifty-nine percent of the time, students reported learning communication primarily through either course experience or formal classes. For instance, one student noted she learned communication by “... working as a group every day. We were coached by instructors in basic methods to improve communication, but it was seeing the group put the lessons into action that was convincing.” Another added, “My communication skills increased because I was able to learn from the classes and then apply what I learned.”

There is little support in the literature for our findings about the way students learn communication on outdoor education courses. Explanation for this is perhaps twofold. First, there is an abundance of valuable literature on the role of communication in outdoor education and what should be *taught* to students (Kosseff, 2003; Martin et al., 2006; Phipps & Swiderski, 1990; Raiola, 2003), yet little to support how students *learn* communication skills. Second, it is possible that exercising good communication is most often considered a competency of being a good outdoor leader and less commonly an objective to teach students.

Implications

There is a clear distinction between the way students learned technical skills and interpersonal skills. Technical skills (outdoor skills, judgment in the outdoors, and environmental ethics) were learned largely through instructor-oriented and student-oriented mechanisms. Interpersonal skills, in contrast, were learned through a larger variety of ways. More often, students reported learning interpersonal skills from their interactions with the environment, from other students, or from the structure of the course. It has been reported by research (Green, 1990; Phipps & Swiderski, 1990; Priest & Gass, 1997; Swiderski, 1987) that interpersonal skills are more difficult to teach. Considering both this literature

and our findings, it may be that it takes a wider range of instructor techniques or group experiences for interpersonal skill learning to occur.

Leadership learning was primarily accomplished through course structures such as Independent Student Group Travel and Leader of the Day. Outdoor education programs can benefit from implementing course structures that facilitate leadership development. Although it could be argued that, within each of these course structures, learning is a function of autonomous student action, the course structure is established a priori and directly functions to allow for these opportunities.

Formal classes are responsible for a portion of the learning in all of the six objectives. In outdoor education, formal classes are not necessarily delivered in a lecture-based, didactic fashion. It is common for these classes to incorporate discussions, role-playing, debates, activities, and more. Many outdoor education programs hold the “act of doing” in the highest regard, which is, perhaps, counter to the process of formal instruction. It may be, however, that formal classes form the backbone for future autonomous student action, providing a safety net, and a standard from which students can measure their progress. Considering that it may be undesirable or impossible to add a greater quantity of formal classes to a curriculum, outdoor education programs will benefit by making their formal classes of the highest quality.

Course experience is also represented in each of the six NOLS learning objectives. This student-oriented mechanism is characterized by students acting autonomously, honing recently learned skills, and assessing choices and decisions. One student said he learned “through being placed in situations where the knowledge they were giving us was being tested through our actions.” Another added, “Living outdoors for so long, interacting with hazards and each other, it’s hard to identify exactly what made me learn it [judgment in the outdoors].... It was just the whole experience.” Other students echoed the sentiments expressed in these passages time and again. It becomes evident that student-led, autonomous behavior is a fundamental part of learning in outdoor education. Including more opportunities for these processes would benefit outdoor education programs.

Coaching was another process that was reported to lead to learning across objectives. It should be no surprise that one-on-one instruction is powerful. By training instructors in the art of effective coaching and then encouraging them to make time for coaching, outdoor education programs will be able to maximize the effectiveness of this important learning technique. In contrast to the findings of Martin and Leberman (2005), however, the debriefing/feedback/review process did not play a major role in learning for NOLS students—although it did appear.

It is important to note that students only reported how they *perceived* they learned, which may be different than how they *actually* learned. It

could be that there are learning processes occurring of which they are not cognizant. In addition, students can only report methods of learning that are possible on a given course. Although a NOLS course utilizes many different ways of teaching (the inference being that students have multiple ways to learn), the course cannot present all ways of teaching or provide for all modes of learning. This needs to be taken into consideration when comparing our findings to existing literature; it is certain other potential ways of learning exist yet are unreported in our findings.

With regard to the several major learning theories/models introduced at the outset of this paper, it is clear that each can explain some of the learning accomplished by NOLS students. This explanation varies by specific technique, however, rather than by overall mechanism. For instance, the specific technique of coaching might be best explained by Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development, in which learners acquire skills and abilities by having a knowledgeable other in close range to guide performance and provide feedback. The specific technique of practice, in contrast, is best explained by the cognitive theories of learning in which rehearsal is a key element. Social learning theory may explain parts of the learning achieved as well. The technique of role modeling, in particular, is a key element of Bandura's model and contributed significantly to student learning. Our findings suggest that no single theory of learning can encapsulate the varied mechanisms that contribute to student learning, but, rather, that each can shed light on different aspects of them.

Conclusion

Inquiry into student learning in outdoor education must move forward if we are to understand how the process works best. This study sought to report ways though which students learned course content and can serve as a departure point for future work. Understanding the multitude of ways that students reported learning and the specific instructional techniques from which they learned will help programs hone their curricula and maximize outcomes. While the idea of "learning by doing," for example, is certainly not new to the field of outdoor education, the specificity of what that experience is and when it is most influential can better inform efforts toward intentionality. Success in being able to aptly describe the learning process will help define and develop the field of outdoor education.

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