Future Trends in Outdoor Education

Sarah Canatsey

Georgia College

December 9, 2010
The rise of modern science, beginning several hundred years ago, brought with it a new
determination. For centuries philosophy has offered solutions to the mystery of how people
think. As modern science began to make discoveries about the natural world there was an
attempt to take these same methods and apply them to people. There were many who disagreed
with applying the scientific method to people. Fyodor Dostoevsky was one such dissenter. His
work, *Notes from Underground*, is a good reminder to those in the outdoor education industry
today that human behavior is ultimately unpredictable and influenced by multiple factors. Why
is this piece of history important to the future of outdoor education? It is a reminder of past
enthusiasm that needed caution. Today there is a general trend toward more research in the
industry to secure funding and defend the methods used (Thomas, Potter, & Allison, 2009). This
research looks to prove the effectiveness of our programs on producing positive results in our
participants. Moving forward with this trend is encouraging, but needs a word of caution
(Harper, 2010). Outdoor education needs to identify the specific role research plays in the
industry and how it interacts with the larger research community. It also needs to maintain its
unique contributions and pedagogy while tackling relevant issues in the society at large.

Thomas, Potter, and Allison (2009) looked at three prominent outdoor education journals to
determine change. One that was across the board was an increase in research
articles. Having more research in the field is needed. The research allows organizations to
gauge not only themselves, but grade themselves in comparison to others. It also helps raise
questions of “what are we doing”, “why are we doing it”, and “are the outcomes what was
intended”? Instead of operating just out of the heresies of “learning by doing” and “reforming by
doing” the industry is placing a mirror to itself in order to become more effective (Wichmann,
1995). Thomas, Potter, and Allison (2009) noted that “previous criticisms have suggested that
the literature in the fields of outdoor education, experiential learning and adventure education is
fragmented, disparate, weak, easily criticized and in need of alternate approaches.” This is
perhaps because the range of topics within those fields is extremely varied and there are not
many well-read journals that concentrate on a small spectrum of the larger outdoor education
field. The hope is that because of the emphasis on research, the industry will produce stronger
research “with clear purposes and appropriate methodologies” (Thomas, Potter, & Allison,
2009). The question becomes what are those “clear purposes and appropriate methodologies?”

A clear trend toward more research needs to come with caution. Is the purpose to merely
produce evidence-based research in order to secure funding? What are the appropriate
methodologies for the outdoor education industry? The industry needs to find its own voice in
research and not merely borrow from other academic professions. This trend toward more
research should bring with it voices of dissent and caution. Just like the philosophical dissenter
in the time of Dostoevsky, the outdoor education industry should pay attention to the voices of
cautions. Voices like Nevin Harper will hopefully become more prevalent. The outdoor industry
may go through growing pains as researchers and practitioners work together to produce the best
methodologies for this industry. Harper (2010) is cautious about the recent increase in the use of
evidence-based practice. While this method is used widely in the natural sciences, its
appropriateness within outdoor education is questioned. The direct benefits of this type of
research are the ease in communicating results for political or financial reasons.

“Heavy-handed responses to it have surfaced across many fields of practice, including social
work, nursing, substance abuse prevention, and psychology, and warnings have been offered
for some time. Commentators have expressed concern that EBP ignores alternative
knowledge claims, that it reduces/removes the role of clinical and practitioner judgment, and
that it dislodges humanistic approaches and replaces them with scientific ones” (Harper, 2010).

These criticisms are important to examine in the future as the outdoor industry works to find a methodology that expresses the results needed for explaining the industry to the larger society, while also staying true to the most useful methodologies for practitioners and participants.

Another trend mentioned in the “futures” readings dealt again with the idea of the individual and change. The Hales (2006) article dealt with current trends in Australia such as the society risk theory. The idea behind society risk theory is that there are so many huge risks in the world people feel helpless to do anything about them and therefore contend to become more individualistic since they can deal with those problems. The issues of society become far removed from their control. Issues such as terrorism and political change. In essence, we have a whole society beginning to suffer from alienation. How will the outdoor education industry deal with this massive case of alienation? In this case perhaps a focus on communication, trust, teamwork, and the other traditional areas of change are not appropriate. This may be where the area of social justice work comes to play. It is no longer just an issue of improving the self, but working to heal the separation that has occurred, as seen in the society risk theory, due to advances in technology. Again, what methods are most useful for the outdoor education industry to continue to impact society, and how does the research look to support these outcomes? These questions will need to be answered in the next decade.

Thomas, Potter, and Allison bring up one more trend dealing with research and the outdoor industry. The versatility of outdoor education to remain relevant is one of the industries largest strengths. Because of this strength it should be easy for programs to impact current issues. These current issues include health and well being, social justice, and environmental sustainability (Thomas, Potter, & Allison, 2009). Along with these areas, research within outdoor education has the ability to make substantial contributions to other areas including “schools and curriculum, youth justice, probations and rehabilitative practices, religion and spirituality, knowledge development, and personal and social values” (Thomas, Potter, & Allison, 2009). Research in these fields will also help expose more people to the influence of outdoor education in the larger community because these articles could be published in journals for other fields.

The main trends covered in this paper dealt with the area of research. There already appears to be a trend towards an increase in research within the outdoor education industry. This increase will bring with it a need to be more critical of the research methods used and the strength of the methodologies. These criticisms should help to shape stronger and more applicable sets of methodologies specific to the outdoor education industry. Communicating with other industries through our research will require a stronger emphasis on talking across disciplines. No longer can we continue to rehash previous theories with new words and definitions in order to publish another article. There will be a continual need to sharpen definitions within the industry so our research becomes more consistent and the ability to build upon previous research is easier to accomplish. Outdoor education deals with humans, their behaviors and emotions. Because of this important fact, research must not only rely on methods in natural sciences, but also must create and defend methodologies pertinent to this industry. Along with stronger research will come a need to disseminate results into other disciplines in order to share knowledge and impact their futures as well. The future holds great opportunities for outdoor education to grow as an industry and impact other disciplines.
I. Intro
II. Role of research
III. OE working to heal community
IV. Being timely and relevant
V. Conclusion