

## **Busy doing nothing: the relationship of stillness to an activity orientated wilderness therapy program**

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### **Abstract**

This paper explores the motivation, methods and emerging data of a research study into participant experiences of stillness within a challenged based wilderness program.

Welcome. I am looking forward to hearing myself speak. I am not sure that 3 or 4 years ago I would have turned up to listen to a Phd student. I think I would have probably thought 'I Hmm, interesting topic but bound to be a dry, dusty and boring presentation.' However since, by a surprising set of circumstances, I now find myself intimately associated with those 3 loaded letters I find I am having to revise, rather rapidly, my negative assumptions about doctoral studies and students into something more positive and sustaining.

So the aim of this session is threefold.

Firstly, it is to provide me with some personal therapy. To address my need to begin to articulate what I am doing and to help myself grow into the challenge I have taken on.

Secondly it is to share that which I am finding to be an exciting and interesting experience in the hope that it may provoke some reflection about your own experience and practise,

And thirdly, to blow away some myths and be of encouragement to any would be researchers in this audience.

Since I am not sure how many of you are familiar with Wilderness/ Adventure Therapy I would like to set the scene a little and give you something of a picture of where and how I work.

I work in the mountains, on the water, in the caves and off the cliffs of Tasmania as a senior facilitator for Project Hahn. P.H. a not for profit community organisation whose motto is "Personal Growth Through Challenge and Adventure." It is based in Hobart but runs programs throughout Tasmania.

Project Hahn participants vary in age from approximately 14yrs old to participants in their early 50's. Most participants are considered 'At Risk' in some respect either by themselves or others and come to the program with an understanding that Project Hahn is about personal growth through challenge and adventure. Participants may refer themselves to a six day Standard Course program but most are referred by teachers, counsellors, social workers or concerned others. Four day Specialist Programs are run for specific Agencies such as the Vietnam Veterans Children's Education Service and a Salvation Army residential drug and alcohol rehabilitation program. All participants who have successfully completed a Standard or Specialist course may refer themselves to a four-day Follow Up program. Program locations vary but the basic structure and underlying philosophy of the camp remains the same.

Adventure activities are used as a vehicle or metaphor for dealing with issues participants are facing and for accelerating positive attitudinal and behavioural change. The trip provides a window of opportunity for participants. They go away with 9 people they do not know, and who have no preconceived ideas about one another. Participants are encouraged to set goals, try out new behaviours, explore their strengths, deal with issues, learn some new skills, and have fun.

A couple of key components in the program are that facilitators adopt a stance of positive unconditional regard and a non directive leadership style that encourages participants to take responsibility and make decisions. For many this alone makes the experience quite unique.

‘If you guys as leaders had pointed out where we were going, it would have taken all the adventure and mystery out of it and probably to a great degree a sense of accomplishment.’

‘If there had been any inkling or sense of being judged or, you know, more being expected of me than I was prepared to let go of and give then the whole thing wouldn’t have worked. I wouldn’t have been able to light the fire for fear of not being able to light the fire instead of having a go at lighting the fire.’

‘But what I did find interesting is that you guys didn’t give me the answers, I came up with them myself...pretty proud, I’ve got to say, pretty proud.’

The impetus for this study came after my working for Project Hahn for about 4 yrs. It was easy to see the overt changes and learning that were directly related to the adventure activities. For example;

At the end of a challenging 3 day walk. " I can do big things if I break it into steps."

After dealing with an abseil take off "What I say to myself makes a difference,"

Campfire sharing - "It was really great to share and get things off my chest"

"I didn't realise that other people felt the same as me."

But there seemed to me to be something else going on, some other sort of learning that was deeper and more spontaneous. It seemed to be associated with 'nothing going on.'

Two incidents particularly struck me:

- We are steaming along the track, 4 teenage boys and me. My co - facilitator and trainee are accompanying 3 participants back to the city. Darren had been under a lot of peer pressure to do likewise. He stops, turns to me, beanie, as usual, pulled down around his tight face and says, “You know I just feel like crying.” “How come?” “For once I’ve made a decision that was good for *me*, I didn’t just go with the cool group. It feels really good.” Later at camp participants are invited to sit alone on a cliff top for 15mins before walking silently back to our camp. Everyone comes, and when I get back to the tents Darren has his hat off, his hair is wild, his face animated, he leaps and dances. ‘I feel like I’ve found the real me!’ “What’s the real you like?” “He’s happy and fun.” Darren ran the debrief that night. The beanie never returned, he

talked more, his face got softer, his body relaxed. On the last night he slept on top of the troupe carrier under the stars and we heard him singing and laughing into the small hours. I wondered what would be his memories of our camp? Making a positive decision, how he felt at the cliff, leaping around the tents? One cognitive one somatic? Are they equally important?

- I was talking with a 47yr old participant three months after he had completed a Specialist Project Hahn trip. We'll call him Doug. At the time of the trip Doug was in the last few weeks of a 4month Salvation Army drug and alcohol residential rehabilitation program. Doug said that the absolute best part of what had been an emotional and challenging Project Hahn trip was when we were quietly walking through a forest of huge and ancient ferns on our last day. He was walking by himself, a little behind the rest of the group, he looked up and noticed that sunlight was just catching on the leaves and at that moment, he said, he felt totally at peace, totally happy with himself and who he was. That was, he said, the first time he had felt like that in many years. He also told me that he often went back to that memory to support himself. The other day he had bumped in to an old pal who invited him to join him at the local pub. Doug said "It was hard but I said no and as I walked away I thought of those fern trees and I felt proud."

Whether it was the bliss of a quiet sit on a mountain top or the frozen 'stuckness' of indecision it seemed to me that a space had been created that was a potent force for insight and deep understanding of self. It was also clear that quietness and the opportunity for reflective space could also be frightening and overwhelming and was often the time a participant might create a drama of some kind or run away from the camp.

I decided it was time for me to Walk my own Talk, and take a step into the unknown, to find out more about the processes at work within wilderness therapy.

I looked first for a TAFE course and found nothing suitable. I looked at a counselling diploma at Uni. of Tas, but that didn't seem to be quite what I was looking for either. After much deliberation I applied to U.O.W. to do a Masters degree. I received a phone call inviting me to change my application to that of a PhD. My initial reaction was shock and horror, "Nice girls like me don't do things like that!" It was mentioned that no fees were attached to the PhD. I listened again, but this time to myself and all the very negative beliefs I had about people who study at that level; impractical, dusty, dry academics, not "At the coal face people" like me. However, when I stopped preening those self righteous "Oh so practical me" feathers and challenged myself to forget the P, the H, and the D and consider instead how it might be to study at depth for 4 years or so, the answer was clearly 'yes, please.' But how could I do PhD with no Masters degree? I had a degree in Speech Pathology from the early 1970's, a Cert IV in outdoor leadership, an Auswim teaching certificate and B.F.A. Honours in Ceramics and kiln building! "No worries" was the University's reply. I realise now, 2 years down the track that they were absolutely right. In my years as an art student and later as a practitioner, I had developed skills that would be essential to my longevity as a doctoral student. I had learned to be self motivated, self disciplined, self critical, to develop a self esteem that was not entirely dependent on public approval and to be prepared to stick my neck out, take risks in the

name of discovery and expression of self. So far I have to admit that I am finding the research exciting, scary, challenging, boring, and strangely satisfying. It's just like walking the Western Arthurs in the mist. I look at a big learning curve and think " How on earth am I going to get up there?" Get to the top, feel smug, chill out for a bit and then look at the next bit and think 'How in earth am I going to get down there.'" And off I go again, only ever be able to see 10m ahead of myself, carrying some essential gear in my back pack and lots of humour and sheer faith that I will get to the end. I share this saga with you as an expression of encouragement to anyone here who may be considering a similar journey of any sort. Pre planning and choice of suitable route is essential, get that right and off you go.

Back to the main plot.

Trying to find a word or way of getting to what I could feel rather than articulate was tricky. Busy Doing Nothing easily came to mind, and was catchy as a title that could help keep me focused but I needed to get narrower, to isolate what it was I was going to study. I opted for the word Stillness and decided that in the research it would be used broadly to encompass the nuance of interpretation suggested by the Macquarie Thesaurus. Stillness as 'free from bubbles', 'at rest', 'stuck', 'silence', brewing, 'no movement.' In essence, those brief or longer periods of time when activity is suspended or relinquished, when there is no apparent movement out of the comfort zone, when there is 'nothing going on'.

So I had my broad idea of Stillness to start with, but why bother, why pick up my pack and start walking with what, I was beginning to realise, was going to be an enormous load.

Wilderness therapy has its roots in Outward Bound and is now used with a broad range of populations throughout Europe, Australasia and USA. Research into the therapeutic use of the wilderness began in the 1950's. In the 1960's some researchers began to focus on the personal and social benefits of outdoor adventure activities. That interest in evaluation of outcomes has continued. However affirmation of efficacy has come at a price.

Wilderness therapy is no longer an untried, undocumented, and experimental approach; rather, there is persuasive evidence that it is an effective and powerful method of treating troubled youth.

Gass 1993

The nature, extent and conditions under which positive outcomes occur remains largely unknown.

Mulvey, Arthur & Repucci. 1993

Wilderness-adventure therapy aims to work with people who often have poor coping skills or who may be especially vulnerable or prone to extreme risk taking behaviour. "There is a significant ethical responsibility to know what we are doing and what the outcomes are most likely to be" (Crisp,1996; p.12)

I decided the journey would be worth it.

Having enrolled with University of Wollongong I conducted informal interviews with 4 adult males from a Mountain Challenge Bridge program 4 months earlier. I needed to test out my idea that Stillness, Doing Nothing was a significant process within a program.

From their replies it seemed that Stillness had the potential to foster a deep seated sense of self, to promote change and may also be a gauge of group energy and focus.

"Time out was a spiritual thing"

"I felt like I was just me and that's all I had to be, here for the here and now."

"Just after (the quiet sit) the penny just dropped. I knew inside myself basically where I stood, which is basically the same place I knew I was, but I felt at ease with it, a change of attitude."

"I still do, I still do take my 10minutes every night. It's definitely one of the most important tools I've picked up. Just to take time, just to take time for me."

"I've taken the quiet times home...it's a really useful tool."

Despite the potency for change contained within these typical statements focus in the literature and research sits comfortably on the 'mechanistic' components (Powch 1994) of programming, the 'Doing' of wilderness therapy that is generally associated with first-order change e.g. sequencing of activities, the use of narrative, the use of metaphor, non directive leadership styles, debriefing or not debriefing and so on. The 'Being' of wilderness therapy associated with stillness, silence, ruminative thinking, spontaneous, and intuitive learning is acknowledged but not generally recognised as alternate and valid ways of knowing despite recent research findings in the cognitive sciences.

We know that the brain is built to linger as well as to rush, and that slow knowing sometimes leads to better answers. We know that knowledge makes itself known through sensations, images, feelings and inklings as well as through clear conscious thoughts... To be able to meet the uncertain challenges of the contemporary world, we need to heed the message of this research, and to expand our repertoire of ways of learning and knowing to reclaim the full gamut of cognitive possibilities.' (Claxton, 1997, p.201)

Encouraged by the pilot study and Claxton I embarked on a steep and rugged learning curve, The Research Plan.

Step One was to determine what it is I wanted to ask. Easy! It took me a year to write my first sentence.

At this point I feel vulnerable, like an artist again, at the opening of a solo exhibition. I will flick up on the screen my picture of questions and most of you will decide within a minute or less whether you like the questions or not. But for me this slide represents hours and hours of sifting, sorting, getting stuck, and sitting with myself long enough to get some clarity. Even so this neat, orderly, 'oh so PhD'ish list of questions can surely only ever be at best a depiction of commitment to a work forever "in progress."

The study and especially the data gathering process will be guided by the following questions:

- What do participants identify as experiences of Stillness within a challenge based Wilderness Therapy program?
- How do participants describe these experiences?
- What are the characteristics of these experiences?
- What are the causal conditions of these experiences?
- What meaning do participants attach to the varying experiences of Stillness?
- How do participants attach value to the stillness experience?
- What factors influence the nature of Stillness experiences?
- How do participants describe the consequences of the experience in the short and long term?

These general research questions will be refocussed and refined as the study unfolds. That first sentence I mentioned earlier was:

The aim of this research is to use grounded theory methodology to both describe and explain the impact of one aspect of a wilderness therapy experience, *stillness*.

Grounded theory is not a theory at all. It is an overall strategy, or method for doing research, and as such has an explanation about its own particular set of techniques and procedures. The method provides for both thick description of participant experiences and a set of concepts and linking propositions that will provide theory and explanation about the research phenomena. (May 1986, p.178). 'Grounded' infers that theory will generate from, and therefore be grounded in the data. (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Securing that grounding is achieved in part by the engagements of participants as critical members of the research team. Throughout data analysis participants engage in verifying data and emerging theory. This role of participant as co-researcher sits comfortably with the mutual respect and neutral power relations engendered in wilderness therapy programs. The methodology dictates that data collection and data analysis continue in alternating sequences through out the study. A sort of zig zag process of going out into the 'field' to gather data, coming back to the desk to analyse the information and back out into the field again to gather more, so on. In this study data gathering methods include semi structured interviews, the use of photographic and written diaries, field observations and document analysis.

The population for this research is drawn from the 400 anticipated participants in Project Hahn wilderness therapy programs between January and December 2003. One of my concerns about the study and the interview process was that it was heavily dependent on verbal language. A communication skill that many P. H. participants struggle with. Wanting to facilitate a rich exchange I heeded the advice and guidelines set out by Tuckwell & King (1980) " The willingness to report completely and accurately is predicated on the rapport that is established between the researcher and the subject. Rapport characterised by the acronym CARE, that is, communicated authenticity, positive regard for the other person and empathy" (p. 6). So far, I have been impressed by the enthusiasm of participants to share their thoughts and feelings.

"It's really nice to know that someone is interested in my experience."

A central feature of the research design was to use Stimulated Recall methodology (Tuckwell & King, 1980; Marland, 1977) and Photo Elicitation techniques (Bogdan & Biklen 1992). Bloom (1953) the pioneer of stimulated recall describes the basic idea of stimulated recall as one in which,

A subject may be enabled to relive an original situation with vividness and accuracy if he is presented with a large number of cues that occurred during the original situation. (Bloom, 1953, p.161)

In this case those cues would be largely photographic.

I have just returned from my first foray out into the 'field'. This initial sample group was made up of four participants and two P.H. facilitators on a four-day Project Hahn Mountain Challenge program run specifically for a local Salvation Army drug and alcohol residential rehabilitation program. The nature of the Mountain Challenge is such that there is ample opportunity for a range of Stillness experiences.

Participants were invited to make a visual and written, or drawn, diary of their experience. They were each given a disposable camera for their private use and access to the Project Hahn camera for more general snaps. One of the facilitators also created a detailed photographic journal of the trip.

An interview was conducted within 10 days of completion of the program. The semi-structured format of the interview was based on Stimulated Recall methodology and Photo Elicitation techniques. Participants were invited to relive the program by viewing photographs of the experience. The participants were encouraged to select photographs that connected with their personal experiences of the program and talk aloud about the thoughts, feelings, reactions and perceptions that the photographs evoked. With the participants permission the interview was tape recorded and later transcribed for analysis.

In my initial proposal I noted that some controversy exists over the effect of a camera on rapport between subject and researcher (Bogdan and Biklen 1992, p.143). On Project Hahn programs Facilitators and participants are encouraged to maximise the use of the Project Hahn camera and that from personal experience this shared use of the camera adds to rather than detracts from rapport with participants. My experience so far has been that participants have been extraordinarily interested in the project and excited about viewing and securing copies of the photographs especially those taken by the facilitator. The facilitator was a talented photographer and took 80 pictures over the 4 days. Comments from the participants included;

"That's it, he's got it right there, that says it all."

"That's not me in the photograph but that's exactly how I felt..."

"Just looking at it now brings it all back, makes me tingle."

"That one says it all, I can't put it into words but that says it all."

Since I have only just completed my first round of interviews I have not yet begun the business of analysis. In fact analytic procedure is just out there in the mist. When this

conference over I will have to proceed so that the next '10 metres' reveals itself. Until then however it is a delight to look at the view. Following are extracts from these initial and pilot interviews.

‘Yes I went down on the rocks...I didn’t come up with any answers, not any answers at all, but, it was clear thinking and after coming away from there I knew inside myself, basically, where I stood, which is basically the same place I knew I was but I felt at ease with it, if that makes any sense....a change my attitude and the way I see the problem....to get relief in that, like I said, was part of the emotional side of the journey for me and its probably one of the most brilliant things I have ever experienced in my life, relief in knowing, knowing inside myself not just thinking actually knowing inside myself that that is the way it is. Just to accept it. It’s just the way it is.’

‘I was just me and that’s all I had to be....no one expected anything different of me, no one wanted anything different of me and it just actually felt good. Basically I didn’t let me hair down as such but I didn’t put walls up neither. Basically, like you said, there for the here and now, and I took it all in two hands and loved every bit of it.’

‘Just to be who you are and not J. the addict, J. the person is what it's all about. If I’d had any inkling of being judged in any way I would have gone.’

‘If you guys had come in heavy handed I would have shut up like a clam. I would still have enjoyed the trip, don’t get me wrong. I still would have had a ball, absolute ball, but it would have been a lot different and I don’t think I would have got a 10<sup>th</sup> of what I got out of it. I don’t think anyone else in the group would have neither.

"The fun made the time pass, and some things not so hard to do’.

‘Having fun was one of the things I had forgotten, fun without the piss and the drugs and everything else that goes with it and one more of the wonderful things of the trip was waking up and remembering it.’

‘....we were trusting that we weren’t gunna get lost, trusting each other to cook, trusting each other with the blindfolds walk...’

‘.....once again it was seeing people achieve and seeing that sense of joy in their face I guess it just lifted the whole group up to another level..... I got a bit of compassion back, which you tend to loose in addiction, compassion for others, compassion for yourself’

‘I watched her do it and I was pleased for her but it didn't make any difference to me I was still terrified."’

‘....and I could see that you two were working well together by the simple fact that your communication was very open to each other.....and that was very important to me.....(it had) a great effect on me. Just the feeling of mutual respect and it put me a lot at ease, like I felt so at ease with you guys that um, I was on common ground basically, there was no I’m up here and you’re down there."

‘...to see others go into detail and things like that I think I actually learnt not so much how to do it, I know how to do it, but the fact that is alright.’

‘If you guys as leaders had pointed out where we were going, it would have taken all the adventure and mystery out of it and probably to a great degree a sense of accomplishment.’

I am at the top of a huge funnel, right now I want information about everything, my next move will be narrower,

What have I learned so far?

I've learnt what a privilege it is to sit and listen to participants stories. I've learned how hard it is to listen openly. I'm learning how hard it is to restrain myself, I want to rush in and elicit connections, theories and solutions. But, like being in the Arthurs the steady plod will get me there and leave me breath to look around for depth, detail, and nuance, the extraordinary in the ordinary.

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**Biography**

Val Nicholls is a PhD student with University of Wollongong and facilitator for a Tasmanian wilderness therapy program called Project Hahn whose motto is "Personal growth through challenge and adventure."