

A Qualitative Analysis of Participant Learning and Growth Using a New Outward Bound Outcomes Instrument

Andrew J. Bobilya
Western Carolina University

Betsy R. Lindley
Utah Valley University

W. Brad Faircloth
Montreat College

Tom Holman
Southeast Missouri State University

Evidence-based programming and the importance of research has gained attention among outdoor and adventure-based programs in recent years (Sibthorp, 2009) regardless of the challenges that often accompany this type of investigation (Bialeschki, Henderson, Hickerson, & Browne, 2012). Programs must often develop their own evaluation instruments, utilize existing tools, or partner with researchers to demonstrate the efficacy of their programs (Bobilya, Holman, Lindley, & McAvoy, 2010). Within Outward Bound, Luo (2011) established construct validity and outcome model validation for a new Outward Bound Outcomes Instrument (OBOI). The North Carolina Outward Bound School (NCOBS) adapted the previous OBOI to assess its educational outcomes and created the NCOBS Course Impression Survey (NCOBSCIS) to measure differences in participants' Character Development, Leadership, and Environmental Service. Similar to Luo, Faircloth and Bobilya (2013) demonstrated that the NCOBSCIS is a valid and reliable measure through a psychometric analysis. Based on the previous study (Bobilya, Faircloth, & Montgomery, 2013), NCOBS revised its data collection schedule in 2013 to require that pretests be completed prior to program participation. The quantitative portion of the current study assessed change in participants' scores following completion of an NCOBS course (Faircloth, Bobilya, & Montgomery, 2014). However, questions emerged in the quantitative data that could be better explained by following a concurrent embedded mixed-methods approach whereby the qualitative data could be used to further explain the quantitative inquiry (Creswell, 2014). Therefore, this qualitative study focused first on participants' perceptions of their learning and growth following participation in a NCOBS course. In addition, the following secondary questions guided additional qualitative analysis: (a) Are there differences in the data based on gender? (b) Are there differences based on course length? (c) What similarities in this 2013 data

are there with the original OBOI factor definitions? In other words, do participants use similar terminology to describe their NCOBS experience as was originally defined in the OBOI?

Method

This study followed a mixed-methods design with the quantitative questions as the dominant method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). The sample for the study was taken from NCOBS participants who completed an open-enrollment wilderness course of 4 days or longer during June–August 2013, provided consent, and completed both the pre- and postsurveys ($n = 189$). NCOBS enrolled 572 participants and ran 52 courses in that time frame. The sample for this study included participants from 4-day (4 courses, $n = 12$), 7-day (1 course, $n = 4$), 8-day (5 courses, $n = 20$), 9-day (16 courses, $n = 86$), 14-day (9 courses, $n = 36$), 22-day (5 courses, $n = 26$), and 28-day (1 course, $n = 5$) courses. Participants were asked to provide consent and complete the presurvey along with other paperwork prior to arrival at NCOBS. The postsurvey was completed on the last day of their courses. The open-ended survey questions included the following: (a) Describe your proudest accomplishment on course. (b) What did you learn about yourself as a result of your course? (c) How will your course impact you at school or in your career? (d) What will you tell other people about your course when you go home? The qualitative responses were typed, coded by two independent researchers, and categorized using a combination of open and axial coding processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Emergent themes were then constructed and refined using the constant comparative method (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). An additional researcher coded 20% of the responses, establishing intercoder reliability. Finally, representative participant comments were selected to illustrate each theme.

Results

Participants' responses to their proudest accomplishment while on the course included the following themes: *outdoor skill development* (30%), *finishing* (30%), *personal growth* (23%), and *expedition behavior and interpersonal skills* (11%). When asked what they learned about themselves, the following themes emerged: *increased self-confidence* (36%), *expedition behavior and interpersonal skills* (16%), *resilience* (16%), *ability to set goals* (16%) and a *change in perspective* (9%). Students' comments about how their experience might affect their school or work indicated *increased self-confidence and self-reliance* (22%), *development of expedition behavior and interpersonal skills* (16%), *resilience* (14%), and a *change in perspective* (7%). Finally, when asked what they would tell others about their experience, students shared the course was *awesome* (27%), *hard but good* (19%), *an opportunity for personal growth* (13%), and *challenging* (11%). The secondary analysis focused on whether there were differences in the qualitative data based on gender or course length. In addition, the researchers investigated whether similarities in this 2013 data are present when compared with the original OBOI factor definitions. Considering differences in response by gender, females reported 11% higher in the theme of *Self-Confidence* when asked how their experience will affect them at their school or in their career. Additionally, the males' comments indicated 8% higher in the theme of *Work Ethic* when asked the same question. There were no additional observable differences worth noting when comparing the other qualitative results by gender or course length. The following similarities were found in the way these participants described their learning, compared to the original language used in the OBOI factor descriptions: self-confidence, resilience, problem solving, and group collaboration.

Discussion

These results confirm earlier quantitative findings from the same data indicating that participants showed significant change in Character Development following participation in an NCOBS course (Bobilya et al., 2013). In addition, the themes that emerged in this qualitative

study were most similar to the descriptions of the Character Development factor in the original OBOI instrument. These results also highlight one particular difference when comparing males and females: the focus of increased *Self-Confidence* in females and increased *Work Ethic* in males. This difference in the way in which male and female participants describe their growth may be instructive for programs as they customize course design for particular participant demographics. These findings also confirm earlier quantitative results (Bobilya et al., 2013) indicating that males and females seem to benefit equally in the ways they report their own Character Development following an NCOBS course. In addition, no major differences were noted in this qualitative data when comparing results by course length—a subject that continues to be of interest within outdoor and adventure programming. This study enhances our understanding of the potential influence of program participation on a person's leadership, character development, and environmental service by asking participants to provide qualitative responses further describing their own learning and growth. Finally, the results of this pre/post study support findings from a study conducted at the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS; Sibthorp, Furman, Paisley, Gookin, & Shumann, 2011) and a previous NCOBS study (Bobilya, Kalisch, Daniel, & Coulson, 2015) in which the following participant outcomes emerged: (a) changes in life perspective, (b) self-confidence, and (c) ability to work as a team member. These results may be beneficial to other outdoor adventure programs while they develop their own mixed-methods, outcomes-based assessment tools and seek to understand the influences of their programming on their participants.

References

- Bialeschki, M., Henderson, K. A., Hickerson, B. D., & Browne, L. (2012). Challenges to field-based outdoor research: Pitfalls and possibilities. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 4, 74–83. <https://doi.org/10.7768/1948-5123.1094>
- Bobilya, A. J., Faircloth, W. B., & Montgomery, W. H. (2013, November). *Exploring course outcomes utilizing a new Outward Bound outcomes instrument*. Paper presented at the Association for Experiential Education International Conference: Symposium on Experiential Education Research (SEER), Denver, CO.
- Bobilya, A. J., Holman, T., Lindley, B., & McAvoy, L. H. (2010). Developing trends and issues in U.S. outdoor and adventure-based programming. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 2, 301–321. <https://doi.org/10.7768/1948-5123.1038>
- Bobilya, A. J., Kalisch, K. R., Daniel, B., & Coulson, E. (2015). An investigation of participant's intended and actual transfer of learning following an Outward Bound wilderness experience. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 7, 93–111. <https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2015-V7-12-7006>
- Creswell, J. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Creswell, J. W., & Plano Clark, V. L. (2007). *Designing and conducting mixed methods research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Faircloth, B., & Bobilya, A. J. (2013). A psychometric investigation of the North Carolina Outward Bound Student Course Impression Scale. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 5, 115–118. <https://doi.org/10.7768/1948-5123.1207>
- Faircloth, W. B., Bobilya, A. J., & Montgomery, W. H. (2014, October). *A confirmatory assessment of a new Outward Bound outcomes instrument*. Paper presented at the Association for Experiential Education International Conference: Symposium on Experiential Education Research (SEER), Chattanooga, TN.
- Glasser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory strategy for qualitative research*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine.

-
- Luo, Y. C. (2011). *Outward Bound outcome model validation and multilevel modeling* (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from ProQuest database. (3491492)
- Sibthorp, J. (2009). Making a difference with experiential education research: Quality and focus. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 31, 456–459. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105382590803100320>
- Sibthorp, J., Furman, N., Paisley, K., Gookin, J., & Shumann, S. (2011). Mechanisms of learning transfer in adventure education: Qualitative results from the NOLS transfer survey. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 34, 109–126. <https://doi.org/10.5193/JEE34.2.109>
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of qualitative research techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory* (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.