

SEER 2005 Opening Address

Publishing to the Choir or Digging Deep: Implications of a Snapshot of Experiential Education Research

Keith C. Russell

I set out to critically examine experiential education (EE) research to determine the type of research being published in the *Journal of Experiential Education (JEE)*. I chose this task because of my interest in several challenges that have been set forth by leaders in the field in past years at this symposium and other conferences. These challenges have asked researchers to employ more quantitative methods, address process variables, and to employ more rigorous research designs. In examining research done in the past year, I am essentially testing to see if research in EE has undertaken these challenges. To do this, I identified refereed articles published in 2004 and 2005 that I then categorized as to: a) research approach; b) whether primary data collection was evident in the manuscript; c) methods employed; d) the research topic and subjects; and e) findings generated from the studies. Also of interest were the occupational backgrounds and academic departmental affiliations of the authors. Finally, using “experiential education” as a keyword, two specific databases were searched (Educational Resource Information Center (ERIC) and PsycINFO) to explore the breadth of EE research in broader psychology and education journals. Implications and subsequent questions generated from this exercise are offered as conclusions for continued discussion.

Research in Experiential Education, 2004–2005

I chose to take a current “snapshot” of refereed articles published in the *JEE* in 2004 and 2005. I identified a total of 14 refereed articles in

volumes 27(1), 27(2), and 28(1) that I reason represent current interest areas and research approaches. It was interesting to note the trends, diversity, and breadth of research being conducted under what is loosely defined as experiential education. Numerous definitions of EE exist in the literature, and it is not the point of this paper to review these. To frame the discussion I will utilize the Association for Experiential Education's (AEE) definition, which is: "Experiential education is a philosophy and methodology in which educators purposefully engage with learners in direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills and clarify values" (AEE, 2005). Therefore, the intent of the *JEE* would be to publish research in this area, and specifically "to present scientific and conceptual inquiries into the study and practice of experiential education and its various subfields" (AEE, 2005). The purpose of this exercise was to explore the previously mentioned challenges, and to also ask those associated with the Symposium on Experiential Education Research (SEER) what are the current scientific and conceptual inquiries in EE, what are we learning from them and how do they relate to practice, and what academic and other backgrounds are represented by the researchers? A limitation and disclaimer to this discussion is that I am not trying to conclude that three issues of a journal define a research paradigm and strategy for a field. Also of note is that the studies will be described in general and not directly cited, as I choose to examine a body of research rather than review each individual article for its merit or findings.

Research Approaches and Methods

In the 14 articles reviewed, qualitative approaches were used in 10 of the 14 articles. Three studies were described as quantitative and one was a mixed design. Digging a little deeper, the methods used in these 14 studies were classified as: a) journal content or qualitative analysis; b) survey assessment; c) literature reviews; and d) recorded transcriptions of group discussions. The predominantly qualitative approach employed by researchers suggests that the exploration of learners in "direct experience and focused reflection," as our definition clarifies for us, deems qualitative methodology more appropriate for this inquiry. Social constructions like experience and reflection situated within complex social and environmental milieus are difficult to define, measure, and interpret. In the qualitative articles reviewed, authors were examining phenomena from a critical theory perspective, inducing meaning from how specific groups were experiencing a variety of environments, and what outcomes were likely to occur from these experiences. Included in this qualitative classification were articles that were in essence literature reviews that referenced no primary data collection (7 of 14 manuscripts). These articles examined deeply held beliefs and assumptions about facilitation, risk, and challenge courses in

experiential education. The authors were directly critiquing these beliefs and assumptions, and offering various challenges to practitioners and researchers, asking them to critically examine their own practice.

Qualitative research is becoming more accepted within academic institutions, with annual international conferences (e.g., International Institute for Qualitative Methodology), and several journals in education and mental health fields solely dedicated to qualitative research (e.g., *Qualitative Health Research*). Though much slower to act, federal agencies are also re-examining the funding of qualitative research, given that complex community and school contexts are not appropriate for randomized controlled studies often required for funding. Researchers in EE may be uniquely situated to begin accessing some of these funding sources. These research approaches also reflect the original intent of the AEE's founding members who are now considered pioneers in their field. That intent was based on a widespread dissatisfaction with the status quo in education and other social services, and a growing awareness of the value of programs like Outward Bound. The goal was to question and ultimately change existing paradigms in how we teach and learn. It seems that our field has firmly trained that critical eye inward, and that researchers are continuing to embrace qualitative paradigms of research.

The review also identified two quantitative and one mixed design study. Each article chose to explore the process (experience and reflection) and its relation to outcome (knowledge, skills, and values), and did so using different methods. The value in this approach is that it can isolate a process variable or two and explore its relationship, either quantitatively or qualitatively, to an outcome variable of interest. In a quantitative study, the difficulty researchers face is that the process variable under question only explains a very small percentage of the variance in outcome (say 10%). In a mixed method design, the difficulty lies in trying to directly link a qualitatively observed process or outcome variable to one that is assessed quantitatively. Research in this area requires quantitative skills in developing and testing models, skills that many in EE research either do not possess or find little value in using. The lack of quantitative research in EE has been noted before (see Gass, SEER 2004 Opening Address), and the current trend doesn't seem to be any different from years past. Though quantitative modeling approaches are more sophisticated and now easier to apply to complex social phenomena (e.g., Hierarchical Linear Modeling and Structural Equation Modeling), there still remains a lack of research interest in this area. Most funding sources require some type of quantitative evaluation and outcome to demonstrate success. Coupled with the evidence-based paradigm of program operation that is now firmly entrenched in the social service lexicon (see National Education Association, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services

Administration, Department of Education), quantitative research will be mandatory for programs to remain viable. This remains a compelling issue for EE research.

Research Topics, Subjects, and Findings

The research topics explored in the 14 studies included nine categorized areas that ranged from music education to wilderness therapy. The research subjects ranged from higher education/post-secondary students to cancer survivors. The authors represented nine specific academic disciplines that ranged from Parks, Recreation and Tourism to Educational Psychology, and seven authors were consultants or practitioners. Though these areas were diverse, there was a common theme in the topics and issues covered in these studies: Each of the seven primary research articles (where data was collected and analyzed) addressed a program or process that was adjunct or in addition to an ongoing program or process. For example, one study examined a trip that grew out of a semester-long educational program, one study examined internships where students were tested on the degree of interest and engagement in these experiences outside their typical learning environments, and one study examined an experience that was in addition to routine care for cancer survivors. Adjunct programs and experiences that are “added on” to mainstream programs seem to be a common thread in research and evaluation published in the *JEE*. This theme also carries with it interesting implications that will be discussed in more depth in the Conclusions. Also, 7 out of 12 articles focused on facilitation and journaling, two key areas that have received a lot of attention over the past several years in EE journals. This shows that researchers are critically examining two core process mechanisms that carry with them several assumptions about practice based largely on historical pragmatism.

When examining the findings from the primary research studies, most if not all reported findings that were positive or beneficial to research subjects. Experiences were valuable, outcomes were gained, and the therapy or treatment worked. This is an age-old issue in the publication of research in journals—that only positive outcome and significant differences get published, and those with insignificant results do not. I find this issue especially interesting because a lot of the research reported in the *JEE* is qualitative, and I wonder if we as researchers are critically examining our programs, or are we looking for that which is positive and ignoring that which we may not want to see.

Conclusions

Using the keywords “experiential education,” I searched the ERIC and PsycINFO databases to determine the volume of research that has

been conducted since 2000. I also tried to exclude the *JEE* articles and limit the searches in other ways to focus the results. In the ERIC database, I narrowed it down to 2,328 studies using EE as a keyword, and 947 articles in PsycINFO. There is a large and growing interest in EE in psychology and education as evidenced by this large body of research. Are we as researchers that publish regularly in the *JEE* aware of this research? Are practitioners aware of this research? Does it inform our research or practice? There is also considerable association activity around the EE field. Organizations like the National Society for Experiential Education have annual conferences and have published several articles and texts. What role or impact do these movements have on EE practice and research?

Most of the research in the *JEE* is qualitative and/or theoretical. Whether that is a good or bad thing is up to researchers and practitioners in EE. Research in these journal issues primarily addressed add-on or adjunct type of programs that are often the first to be cut when financial tightening occurs. The reality of the demands by external constituencies that fund most of the programs is that they want to assess the value of the programs and they want to see quantitative information. This is nothing new to anyone in the field. I ask this question to engage dialogue on the subject: Are we as researchers doing practitioners and the field a disservice by focusing our efforts on qualitative inquiry and theoretical development through literature reviews, or is this information valuable to maintaining and improving practice? Are practitioners reading these theoretical pieces and practicing participatory/action research and implementing some of these ideas, or are researchers simply publishing to the choir? Finally, there is a lot of research done under the guise of EE, and I wonder if we as researchers and practitioners are seeing it or using it. I think some of these questions resonate to a larger issue for the Association for Experiential Education as well as the *Journal of Experiential Education*—what are we, who are we, and where are we going? Though existential in nature, small empirical glances may encourage dialogue and help us address these and other questions about EE and the value it has for our constituencies.

*Keith C. Russell, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor in the School of Kinesiology, Division of Recreation and Sport Studies, at the University of Minnesota.
E-mail: krussell@umn.edu*