"What a person may learn about himself in an intensive outdoor experience is frequently indicative of how he lives the rest of his life" - Frederick W. Medrick
Confronting Passive Behavior Through Outdoor Experience: A TA Approach to Experiential Learning

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ABSTRACT. The concepts and techniques of transactional analysis (TA) can usefully be applied to outdoor challenge programs aimed at facilitating personal growth, developing responsibility, and teaching cooperative behavior. Passive behavior results from discounting of the self and others; four levels of it have been identified, and TA offers various means of preventing or confronting it. A no-discount contract and individual growth or learning contracts are prerequisite to responsible behavior. Both structural analysis (identifying ego states) and script analysis are valuable tools for detecting and analyzing the causes of ineffectual behavior. Permission, protection, and potency are essential for effective facilitation of outdoor growth experiences.

THE MOST EFFECTIVE learning, whether from an educational or therapeutic standpoint, occurs in situations where what is learned can be put immediately into practice and the learner can receive instant feedback and reinforcement. The outdoor environment is particularly effective in encouraging such learning and supporting individuals who are incorporating new ways of acting and responding into their daily lives.

I would like to share some theories and experiences which I have found helpful in crystallizing my position. I will draw upon my training in the use of transactional analysis (TA), as developed by Dr. Eric Berne, and my work with Outward Bound and similar wilderness experience programs. Incorporating the approaches developed by transactional analysis into experiences in the outdoors enhances the potential of these experiences for developing new awareness and effecting substantial change in a person's way of functioning.

The experiences I find most susceptible to TA approaches are those outdoor activities—such as backpacking, rock climbing, mountaineering, ski touring, and river rafting—where the environment is totally new and there is a certain amount of objective danger, entailing substantial stress and requiring cooperative functioning to insure the safe and successful completion of the experience. Some of the learning in these situations is very directive (rock climbing) while other learning is carefully supervised but largely experiential (camping and wilderness navigation).

The most essential component of such intensified learning is a person's decision to achieve some particular behavioral goal during the course of an experience. This goal may be as broad as developing the ability to assimilate more data, learning a particular skill, changing one's way of relating to others, or crediting (and getting support for confronting) the anxiety one has about unfamiliar and physically demanding activities.

The means I have found most effective for stimulating such learning is the therapeutic contract developed by transactional analysis. This entails a clear statement by an individual of why he is engaging in a particular experience,
what he wants to get out of it, how he is going to accomplish this, and what evidence will demonstrate that he has achieved this goal.

The important part of the contract is the doing part and, in a group experience like most outdoor pursuits, it is important for a person to identify what he needs or wants from others to support his growth. This support may range from verbal acknowledgement and praise to strong confrontation and refusal by others to support (respond to) negative behaviors. The contract is a means of monitoring a person's individual performance during an experience and using the support of others to reinforce a personal commitment to attaining new awareness or changing behavior.

Encouraging and monitoring such growth takes leaders trained and experienced in individual and group counseling. The most difficult stage in the process seems to be the beginning, when participants are helped to identify what they may have to gain from an outdoor experience and to risk committing themselves to utilizing the opportunity at hand to gain it. This requires a very careful introduction for the uninitiated to the whole notion of growth (as actualizing one's inherent potential) and how it may be approached through outdoor activities.

Essentially, this introduction is a statement that everyone is engaged in growth and movement of some sort and that part of the process of self-actualization (Maslow 1962) entails movement toward some goal or ideal that a person chooses for himself. I find that it helps to get people to share the aspirations they have for themselves—for the impending experience and for their lives as a whole—and there is a wide variety of techniques available in the growth movement to aid in this. It is even useful to have people write down certain growth goals to refer back to as the experience proceeds.

The next stage in the contract process has to do with how these goals may be pursued. This is something that needs to be focused upon during the early stages of an experience, since most persons have only vague notions of what they are going to encounter. At the outset, a fairly general statement may be sufficient for some, while others may wish to be very specific. As the experience evolves, it is important to review the appropriateness of each goal and to clarify or modify it if necessary. This is a basic part of the kind of self-definition that people appear to go through as they engage in something totally new.

The next stage is to identify the progress being made in meeting a particular part or the whole of the learning contract. This is most effectively done after some significant experience has taken place, such as getting lost, crossing a rushing stream, climbing a peak, or negotiating a challenging rapid. Usually, reviewing the experience and sharing success or failure is foremost in a group's mind at such a time. Progress on the personal contract is secondary to what has by then become the development of a group contract: to function well enough together to ensure the success of group endeavor. Each person's personal contract undergoes some change as a group identity begins to emerge.

The personal contract, then, is aided by the assessment of each person's role in achieving the group goal. It is important to stimulate exchange and feedback, both positive and critical, within a group so that the effects of an individual's actions, whether constructive or disruptive, are more immediately apparent. There is a very natural feedback that comes from determining whether events went according to plan, what preparations were made, and whether and how modifications were made in the original plan to adjust it for unexpected factors.

The effectiveness of any experience in contributing to the personal growth of an individual depends on his degree of participation in it. To evaluate the effectiveness of an experience, specific questions can be directed to each person's role and what he got from his participation. When a person has not felt particularly effective, it can be helpful to explore what may be getting in his way and how it might be changed. This can be the basis for a new "mini" contract.

Finally, it is important during the concluding phase of an experience to review both the expectations and the success of the personal contract. There is learning to be had in becoming aware that a particular contract did not work and that there were factors that interfered with its fulfillment. Even more helpful is for a person to see what he personally may be doing to get in the way of his own growth, and for him to credit the resistance to change he may have.
Facilitating these awarenesses takes a good deal of perceptiveness and counseling skill.

The contract structure establishes this self-assessment process as a norm for the experience, and can have valuable carryover into other parts of a person's life. What a person may learn about himself in an intensive outdoor experience is frequently indicative of how he lives the rest of his life. By becoming aware of this and trying some new ways of acting, a person may be able to initiate a new "program" for himself that brings him more satisfaction and clearer ways of getting his personal needs met.

This notion is supported and extended in the TA theory of scripts (Berne 1972). Eric Berne's observation is that each person lives his life according to a certain plan or program that is determined early in his life by parental and cultural influences (injunctions and counterinjunctions). These influences program and regulate all his subsequent actions and choices.

The program generally manifests itself through certain "predictable" ways of responding to stress situations. A person trained to detect such patterns of behavior and response can anticipate and even head off destructive or dysfunctional behaviors. By observing the way a person approaches a challenge such as a rock-climb or initiative problem, one can often recognize the predominant approach or frame of reference from which a person responds to stimuli, analyzes problems, and makes decisions.

Another concept that is helpful in understanding behavior is the TA notion of ego states. An ego state is a pattern of behaviors and/or statements that represent personality structures incorporated by the individual to enable him to function as a "whole" person within his world. The classic TA labels of Parent, Adult, and Child refer to those aspects of one's personality that serve, respectively, to provide rules for behavior and guidelines for protection, process information and make decisions, and experience feelings and act in ways calculated to get personal needs met. These concepts are explained in detail in most TA literature (Berne 1961, 1964, 1972).

Knowledge of these ego states and of the signs that indicate when an individual is functioning from one position or another indicates how a person can be expected to function. When information is communicated, particularly that pertaining to personal safety, it is extremely important that the recipient's Adult ego state be available to assimilate and apply the information.

Similarly, it is important to engage a person's Parent in helping him to incorporate and utilize the safety information that is given. Then the impulses of the Child will have some kind of internal monitor and compliance will be assured. Frequently it is necessary for an instructor to provide "parenting" in the form of permission to try a new activity or alter a self-destructive behavior.

Finally, it is essential that the kind of energy and excitement available to most children, the curiosity and the urge to experiment and discover, be stimulated in a person who is taking part in a new experience. This applies also to the process of getting individuals to work together as a group.

One particular TA theory that helps us comprehend and modify inadequate learning processes in the outdoors is the theory of passivity developed by the Schiff family at the Cathexis Institute in California (Schiff and Schiff 1971). Essentially, the theory is that when there is incomplete separation from the major parental figures in one's life, much of one's energy is given over to re-establishing the kind of symbiotic attachment that was essential to survival in infancy but is inappropriate in an autonomous adult. Such a person tries, usually in subtle ways identified in TA as games or rackets, to get others to do what he is capable of but unwilling to do for himself—whether expressing feelings, taking care of his needs, or fulfilling his commitments or responsibilities. Instead of asking directly for what he wants, an individual may develop a variety of manipulative techniques to get his needs met.

The passivity material has particular application to outdoor experiences because the results of indirect and manipulative behavior are almost immediately evident in these circumstances; sometimes they critically affect safety and survival. For example, when a person is not being active in taking care of his survival needs, such as food, warmth, and shelter, it becomes evident very quickly in diminished performance or increased survival risk, such as by hypothermia, exhaustion, or illness.

Four levels of passive behavior are identified by the Schiffs: withdrawal, overadaptation,
agitation, and incapacitation or violence. Withdrawal is usually manifested by a person doing nothing and getting recognition and reinforcement (strokes) by having others do for him.Withdrawn people usually defer to others on decisions and actions that have to do with getting needs met, such as cooking, setting up camp, navigating, or initiating other tasks. Such a person waits for someone else to ask first instead of taking initiative. In more extreme instances, a withdrawn person does not act at all but only receives the benefit of others’ actions. This is the form of passive behavior that I have witnessed most often in outdoor situations. Such withdrawal isolates the individual from the group and makes it even more difficult for him to influence his experience, have an impact on others, and get something for himself through his own actions. Hence, such passivity tends to be self-reinforcing.

Overadaptation is shown when a person does just what is asked or expected of him in a situation and little more. It usually looks as though such a person is cooperating and taking responsibility for his actions, but the responsibility for the outcome of his actions is usually left to his peers or the leader. For example, a person may do everything he is told to perfectly in preparing for a rock-climb. However, on the climb he requires constant coaching and specific directions from the instructors and other climbers, instead of solving problems and making decisions on his own. He may finish the climb, but he gains little sense of accomplishment from doing so.

Frequently, when a person is uncomfortable (fearful, angry, overly excited) with an experience or a situation, he tends to dissipate a good deal of energy in preparation or in activity that doesn’t lead directly to accomplishing the task at hand. This is known as discounting, or non-productive activity. A person may do a great deal of moving around and shifting of equipment in preparing a meal, but not actually make any progress in preparing it. Instead of asking for information or directions, he dissipates his energy in fruitless activity.

The ultimate expression of passive behavior occurs when a person is actually incapacitated or resorts to violence to get his way or get taken care of. I have witnessed this particularly in urban youth who are out of their “territory” and don’t know how to get their needs met. The motive in this level of passive behavior, however subtle, seems to be to get attention, get taken care of, or make a point that the person was not effective in making more directly (“I told you I couldn’t carry such a heavy pack”). A lower level of this same type of behavior is shown by the person who consistently complains either about the physical hardship, his own incapacity, or the fact that the program isn’t working out the way he expected.

The basic factor in all the forms of passive behavior that I have been discussing is what is called discounting; it is a decision on the part of a person not to use the information or skills he has to get his needs met, because he believes either that he cannot get his needs met at all, or that he cannot get them met in any way other than the one he is using. Discounting is not discounting that one has the means to get most of one’s needs and wants met in direct and responsible ways.

In the outdoors, such discounting may have several causes. A person, for example, may either be unaware of or refuse to acknowledge the dangers in a particular situation. Threatened by bad weather and wind, he may not take precautions to avoid hypothermia, such as putting on extra clothing or drinking a cup of hot tea or chocolate. Or, a person may actually claim that he is fine when in fact he has goosebumps and is shivering. These two approaches are known as discounting the situation and discounting the importance (or danger) of the situation. In both instances, the person is waiting around to be told what is happening or what to do, instead of taking responsibility for himself.

Another form of discounting occurs when, being appraised of a situation, a person decides there is nothing he can do about it. An example of this is when a student is told that a shelter he has constructed is inadequate to provide protection in an impending storm and he decides there is nothing that can be done to make it better, and so goes to sleep, only to awaken wet and cold during the night.

This feeling is frequently personalized; a person decides that he is personally unable to do anything to take better care of himself. This is usually evidenced by an “I can’t” attitude toward such tasks as making it to a destination when the going is rough or attempting a rock-climb that others have been successful in. Such a passive person may eventually respond to a great deal of urging from his peers or the leader,
but he is essentially unwilling to make the decision and commitment for himself.

All these forms of discounting promote a "taking care of" atmosphere in which the individual seeks and obtains reinforcement for being passive about meeting his needs. Some of my most frustrating wilderness experiences have been when every member of a group chose this mode of functioning. The obvious goal of such behavior is to make another person feel uncomfortable enough with what he is witnessing and experiencing the effects of that he, instead of the person being passive, will take action and responsibility. This puts particular pressure on the leader, who is responsible for seeing that something does happen. In each of these instances, however, taking over instead of confronting can be seen as a rescue of the other person. It is a way of supporting his maintenance of a personally dysfunctional pattern of behavior.

The format that I have found most useful for dealing with ineffectual performance during outdoor learning experiences is the passivity confrontation contract. This is an agreement among the participants to work together to achieve both the individual goals and the groups that have been identified, as they have evolved during the experience the group has been sharing. Each person agrees to be confronted when his behavior does not match the behavior he identified as a goal. Similarly, he agrees to confront others when their behavior does not match what they identified as goals. Such confrontation may range from pointing out some neglect or avoidance to, in extreme circumstances, very strong objection and some form of consequence for behavior that is discounting. It is important, particularly where physical safety is an issue, that each person agree in some verbal fashion to abide by the guidelines laid down for an activity. It is equally important that each individual be involved in establishing and working with those guidelines that are less critical but equally important to the success of the experience. These include how the basic tasks of the day are to be accomplished as well as how the most important decisions are to be made.

Claude Steiner, in his book Scripts People Live (1974), identifies three criteria which, I believe, define effective leadership in implementing the growth approaches I have described: potency, permission, and protection. Potency results from the personal competence of the leader in outdoor skills and whatever counseling ability he brings to the situation. It is a product of the willingness of the leader to risk stating his own expectations clearly and providing a role model for others.

Permission is the support a leader provides for a person who is ready to experiment with new behavior and tune into what he needs to do to get his needs met. This frequently means countermanding rules and messages that were established early and are deeply ingrained.

Protection means assuring a person, both by the structure of the course (goals, procedures, rules, guidelines, etc.) and by the precautions taken for his safety, that he will be both physically and emotionally safe. In short, he will be credited for whatever position he comes from, given space to explore his interaction with others on whatever level he needs to, and asked to be responsible for himself and his actions for the duration of the experience. In accordance with the passivity confrontation contract (no discount contract), he will be confronted for discounting and expected to alter his behavior in a way that aids cooperation and is consistent with the physical circumstances.

In summary, the effectiveness of any outdoor activity as a growth experience depends on the nature, structure, and, most importantly, the communicated intent of the program. The contract procedure of TA and its understanding of passivity provide an effective vehicle for identifying and acting on how a person functions. The ego state concept and script theory provide a conceptual framework for understanding how behavior originates and is expressed. Combined with the natural encounter that occurs during intensive outdoor experiences, these approaches provide support for participants to examine their old ways of acting and develop new structures and means for validating and modifying what they do and how they do it. Some of the approaches provided by TA enhance the total impact of outdoor programs and increase their potential for carry-over of significant learning into the rest of a person's life.
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“It is imperative that those who design the environments in which children must live and learn, and those who design the programs that use these environments, understand the special problems of handicapped children” — Dennis A. Vinton and Donald E. Hawkins