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Democracy & Education

Is Group Therapy Democratic? Enduring Consequences of Outward Bound's alignment with the Human Potential Movement

Jayson Seaman (University of New Hampshire)

Abstract

Franklin Vernon provided an example of how programs viewing themselves as “cultural islands” are in fact embedded within historical capitalist relations, through the discourses of *self* that they promote. In this response, I expand on Vernon's argument to situate the quasi-therapeutic practices he identified in the history of the human potential movement, which effectively merged with Outward Bound starting in the 1960s and continues to define outdoor experiential education. Where Vernon sought the structural referents to different models of self, this response seeks their historical origins. The response concludes by linking Vernon's argument with existing critiques and parallel efforts in the literature on youth development and identity formation.

This article is in response to

Vernon, F. (2015). *How to be nice and get what you want: Structural referents of 'self' and 'other' in experiential education as (un)democratic practice*. *Democracy & Education*, 23(2), Article 3. Available at: <http://democracyeducationjournal.org/home/vol23/iss2/3>.

SINCE ITS INCEPTION in Wales in 1941, Outward Bound's relationship with democracy can be described as ambivalent; in his article “How to Be Nice and Get What You Want,” Vernon (2015) has illuminated one of the ways in which this remains the case. The aim of this response is to extend Vernon's analysis by historicizing the practices he featured—emotional disclosure, feedback, and interpersonal communications training—not as indigenous to Outward Bound as such (as Vernon already indicated) but as vestiges of the human potential movement, which is the idea-historical basis of the personal growth ideology Outward Bound adopted during the 1960s and '70s (Freeman, 2011; Vokey, 1987). The problematic models of self that Vernon articulated have their roots in the movement's parent discipline, humanistic psychology, including

the way “experiential” was defined by its chief architect, Abraham Maslow. One purpose of this response is therefore to situate outdoor experiential education more squarely in the tradition of human relations and sensitivity-training workshops, particularly as they were shaped by humanistic psychology's focus on self (see Benne, 1964), which I see as the core ideology Vernon unearthed and critically interrogated in his article.

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Given the degree to which Outward Bound inherited the ideology of these corresponding traditions by way of their aims, models, and practices, it should be no surprise that the social technologies Vernon documented continue to realize problems that have been known to exist since the 1960s. After briefly presenting additional information about Outward Bound's history, I summarize the meaning of "experiential education" as Maslow intended, which is a main, but seriously underrecognized, "current" in the tradition (Roberts, 2011). I then review some of the core characteristics of the human potential movement that spawned many of the conventions and practices taken up within outdoor experiential education. I close by suggesting that Vernon's article serves as an important node of connection between the canonical, yet typically dehistoricized, models and practices of contemporary outdoor experiential education and a long line of critique aimed at humanistic psychology and its expression in quasi-therapeutic group awareness trainings.

Early Outward Bound

Until the mid-1960s, Outward Bound was fashioned after the ideas of its main founder, German educator Kurt Hahn. Hahn was motivated to establish a global "aristocracy of service" possessed of Samaritan ethics (Hahn, 1962/1967). Achieving this in practice meant appealing to the interests and concerns of his benefactors from the British political and economic elite, whose conscience he was also trying to shape. Along with Outward Bound (OB), he founded boarding schools in Germany and Scotland designed to educate world leaders who, once in positions of power, would promote peace abroad while acting with kindness and sympathy toward fellow members of the Platonist society he imagined to be ideal.

Despite Hahn's emphasis on the virtue of compassion and his rhetoric of individual self-discovery, he did not intend his programs to be either outwardly or inwardly democratic (Bueb, 2002/2008). Student governance was hierarchical, and rewards and punishments were used as "indispensable incentives" to "helping young and old to do what they know is right" (Hahn, 1965, p. 3). Sexual urges were dissuaded by peer rebuke, cold showers, and admonishments against "solitary vice"—and "just in case the boys could still find the energy and the opportunity to practice self-abuse, they were put on their honor to confess their faults—an unrivalled method of fostering shame and deceit" (Brendon, 2012, p. 81). Charles, Prince of Wales, famously experienced Hahn's Gordonstoun school as "a purgatory as well as a penitentiary" (Brendon, 2012, p. 84).

Outward Bound had different origins, design, and patrons than Hahn's boarding schools and so did not bear the same public school culture, even if it shared the emphasis on bodily discipline and character. Designed initially as an intervention into the way working-class youth spent leisure time, Outward Bound leveraged Britain's rational holiday tradition and interwar outdoor movement to enlist youth in month-long courses that would train character "through the sea, not for the sea" (Hahn, 1947; see also Taylor, 1992). The aim was to achieve a Jamesian "moral equivalent of war" (vanOord, 2010) through a regimen of

athletics, seafaring, and mountaineering—"masochistic" activities whose ethos of conquest derives from mercantile capitalism and global colonization (Freedgood, 2000; Lynch & Moore, 2004). Hahn was not troubled by these historical associations; indeed they underwrote his concept of "ethical imperialism" (Demm, Stewart, & Weritsch, 1998).

A crucial ingredient in the Outward Bound process then, as now, was an *esprit de corps*; however, this was not intended as a lesson in local democracy but instead as a way to establish a sense of shared suffering and common cause. The small group, or "patrol," would model in microcosm the kind of pride in country and impulse to serve desired in the wider society (Hahn, 1949). Outward Bound in Hahn's era should thus be seen as part of his overall political project and not as a version of democratic education in any kind of contemporary sense.

Outward Bound Comes to America

Where does the notion that Outward Bound has anything explicitly to do with democratic education come from? This is a product of the 1960s when Outward Bound migrated to the United States. Shortly after opening its first school in Colorado in 1962, the organization was challenged from within and without to abandon the militaristic vernacular of "character training" in favor of the more palatable language of "personal growth" (Freeman, 2011; Millikan, 2006). Protestant schools during this period were losing their moral authority more broadly (Armstrong, 1990; Warren, 1998), and Outward Bound followed suit in adopting secular terms to justify and direct its programs; specifically, it appropriated the language of humanistic psychology and the group practices of the human potential movement. As former Outward Bound instructor David Roberts described:

OB got a huge boost toward credibility in the late 1960s from academic reformers and the human potential movement, with their emphasis on experiential education and interpersonal dynamics. And the school seemed willing to modify its objectives to suit the fashions of the times. (1998, p. 116)

The uptake of '60s-era liberal humanism in Outward Bound and similar programs was so thoroughgoing that, by the early 1990s, the idiom of personal growth in a small-group context simply became how outdoor adventure education was understood (see Hopkins & Putnam, 1993; Miles & Priest, 1990). This shift in emphasis began in the late 1960s through direct, open advocacy of the movement's methods and aims (Katz & Kolb, 1968; Peih, in Miner & Boldt, 1981), and also surreptitiously and on a more widespread basis through the adoption of quasi-scientific conceptual models drafted between 1965 and 1984. Kolb's (1984) influential experiential learning cycle, which was modeled after groups used in midcentury human relations trainings (*T Groups*, see pp. 8-12), is still disseminated in staff manuals and textbooks "as basic theory in experiential education" (Smith & Leeming, 2010, p. 175). Tuckman's (1965) stage-model of group development, developed by reviewing the human relations training literature up to that point, is likewise represented as having

“become widely accepted” in outdoor adventure education (Priest & Gass, 2005, p. 66). The schematic Outward Bound Process model (Walsh & Golins, 1976), created as part of the organization’s “mainstreaming” initiative to expand adventure-based education, was often circulated without elaboration (Vokey, 1987) and is still represented as a prototype in contemporary textbooks, websites, and articles. In the original text, Hahn received no mention; instead the authors credited the ideas of Alschuser and May—two influential figures in the human potential movement—as inspirations for the model.

Despite the Hahnian origin story and frequent references to Dewey in its literature (see Quay & Seaman, 2013), it is to humanistic psychology and the human potential movement where one must look to find the supposed justifications for outdoor experiential education as a form of democratic education; it is also there where one can identify the origin of the problems Vernon discussed.

Humanistic Psychology and “Experiential Education”

The extent of the connection between outdoor experiential education and the human potential movement is typically either understated (e.g., Lindblade, 2010) or as in other applied fields, ignored (Weatherbee, 2012). Examining the way “experiential education” was defined within the movement’s parent discipline is instructive to understanding both common ideas and practices as well as the problems with self that persist. Abraham Maslow, one of the main pioneers of humanistic psychology, was especially influential in this regard (Grogan, 2013). Initially trained to study primate behavior, Maslow embarked in the 1950s on the project of creating a “third force” in psychology to argue for the individual’s innate goodness as well as develop a means of studying its practical achievement in society. He came to reject the negative conceptions of human nature upheld within both Freudian psychotherapy and behaviorism, which were dominant at the time. Along with Horney, Fromm, and others, Maslow developed categories including *real self* and *self-actualization* (Daniels, 1982).

Although Maslow was notoriously unsystematic in his humanistic research, his training in behaviorism demanded that the concepts of real self and self-actualization be grounded in empirical reality. He began by listing common characteristics of selected actualizers, including Einstein, Thoreau, and Beethoven. Each of these cases, he observed, stood above culture to pursue idiosyncratic, often unpopular goals to which they were individually committed. In a subsequent study of 300 college students he found only one who might qualify as satisfying the criteria (Daniels, 1982). On this limited empirical basis, Maslow continued throughout the 1950s and 1960s to define exemplary self-actualized individuals and promote ways real selves could be realized, which meant shedding conformist attachments to a “sick” culture. As Daniels (1982) described:

Like Karen Horney . . . Maslow tended to believe that any formative influence of social interaction produces an idealized pseudo-self, a pastiche of roles and performances behind which the real self is hidden or repressed . . . If . . . through defensiveness, individuals forfeit their own subjective experiences of inner signals and adopt

instead the opinions of other people, then growth is prevented. (p. 66, emphasis in original)

Maslow elaborated on self-actualization in his later work on *being* and *peak experiences*. These concepts take on a metaphysical, religious dimension by affording individual insights into preconscious, universal values such as truth, beauty, order, and justice, the pursuit of which are inherently desirable (Daniels, 1982, p. 68). As Maslow’s thinking evolved, he retained his commitments to biological essentialism and empiricism, although less as methodological imperatives and more to continue to anchor self-actualization in lived experience. In *Religions, Values, and Peak Experiences* (1964/1970) he used the term *experiential* to express the relation between preconscious thought and universal *being values* as they are realized phenomenologically.

If self-actualization is the highest end-state of human development, education should be organized to provide peak experiences of the sort Maslow imagined—to facilitate moments of transcendent contact with universal being values. Maslow called the cultivation of these moments “experiential education” (1964, p. 33). Here it is useful to cite him at length:

All (?), or very many, people, including even young children, can in principle be taught in some such experiential way that peak experiences exist, what they are like, when they are apt to come, to whom they are apt to come, what will make them more likely, what their connection is with a good life, with a good man, with good psychological health, etc. . . .

All of this implies another kind of education, i.e., experiential education. But not only this, it also implies another kind of communication, the communication between alonenesses, between encapsulated, isolated egos. What we are implying is that in the kind of experiential teaching which is being discussed here, what is necessary to do first is to change the person and to change his awareness of himself. . . . Until he has become aware of such experience and has this experience as a basis for comparison, he is a non-peaker; and it is useless to try to communicate to him the feel and the nature of peak-experience. But if we can change him, in the sense of making him aware of what is going on inside himself, then he becomes a different kind of communicatee. It is now possible to communicate with him. He now knows what you are talking about when you speak of peak experiences; and it is possible to teach him by reference to his own weak peak-experiences how to improve them, how to enrich them, how to enlarge them, and also how to draw the proper conclusions from these experiences.

. . . If we can teach him that such and such a constellation of preverbal subjective happenings has the label “anxiety,” then thereafter it is possible to communicate with him about anxiety and all the conditions that bring it about, how to increase it, how to decrease it, etc. Until that point is reached at which he has a conscious, objective, detached awareness of the relationship between a particular name or label or word and a particular set of subjective, ineffable experiences, no communication and no teaching are possible; so also for passivity or hostility or yearning for love or whatever. In all of these, we may use the paradigm that the process of education (and of therapy) is helping the

person to become aware of internal, subjective, subverbal experiences, so that these experiences can be brought into the world of abstraction, of conversation, of communication, of naming, etc., with the consequence that it immediately becomes possible for a certain amount of control to be exerted over these hitherto unconscious and uncontrollable processes. (1964, pp. 33–34)

The value of experiential education was, for Maslow, predicated on his view that individuals were essentially autonomous beings in a state of spiritual alienation from universal values; the confounding agent was culture (see Maslow, 1951). Connecting people to being values would be facilitated by providing certain types/moments of corporeal experience, and even if individuals themselves could only glimpse the connection—thereby remaining “non-peakers”—proximity would at least enable interpersonal communication about universal values. Through experiential education, Maslow imagined the realization of a socially transcendent and personally liberatory community achieved by naming universal values into being so they could be psychologized as categories of personal meaning. Maslow’s theory, therefore, had a utopian quality; by continually seeking and achieving this exalted state, “peakers” would bring the whole society to the top of his motivational pyramid (Cooke, Mills, & Kelley, 2005).

In the human potential movement, the term *experiential* meant the practical expression of principles of humanistic psychology derived from frameworks such as Maslow’s. Carl Rogers, another prominent figure in the movement, was similarly influential, especially by propagating ideas and techniques modeled after group psychotherapy (see, e.g., Rogers, 1967). While it is certainly impossible to diagram every influence on experiential education then or now (J. Roberts, 2011), it is important to recognize how crucial Maslow’s theory of self-actualization was to popularizing and legitimizing the group methods that fellow humanists like Rogers were promoting, and that underwrote models of experiential learning and group development that have since been used to guide practices in outdoor experiential education.

“Experiential education” as Group Awareness Trainings

Experiential education in the humanistic mode evolved as a process of connecting individuals with supposedly universal values through what were essentially therapeutic methods of group encounter, during which individuals would shed the constricting “shell” of culture and discover their “real selves.” This process of self-actualization found its expression in methods initially developed at the National Training Laboratory (NTL; Marrow, 1967), namely group awareness trainings—T-groups, encounter groups, sensitivity trainings, marathon groups, and so forth—which became a national phenomenon.

NTL trainings initially began as interventions into racial prejudice and anti-Semitism (Marrow, 1967). As Gottschalk, Pattison, and Schafer (1971) wrote, organizers “grasped the potential for group self-evaluation as a means of teaching the development of effective democratic group processes that could be applied to community group action” (p. 89). The goal of the initial trainings was to develop “a method of teaching American

communities techniques for participatory democracy” (p. 90). As T Groups adopted the language of self-actualization and methods of group psychotherapy in the 1950s, however, “the concern shifted to individual growth, self-knowledge, . . . a heightening of interpersonal skills, a sharpening of interpersonal perception, and increase in self-awareness and ‘authenticity’ of life experience” (Gottschalk et al., 1971, p. 90). Throughout the 1960s, the self remained the focus as the variety of group formats and methods proliferated and expanded into educational, human service, and organizational/corporate settings (Eddy & Lubin, 1971; Gibb, 1970).

Regardless of their various methods, durations, and formats, T-groups all established several common conditions:

A laboratory experience recommends a temporary removal of the participants from their usual living and working environment where any attempts to re-evaluate attitudes or experiment with new behavior patterns might involve risks and possible punishment. It provides a temporary artificial supportive culture . . . in which it is safe for the participants to confront the possible inadequacies of their old attitudes and behavior patterns and to experiment with and practice new ones until they are confident in their ability to them. The assumption of the laboratory method is that skills in human interaction are best learned through participation in events in which the learners, themselves, are involved . . .

. . . Since the primary social learning data for the participants will come from their own involvement . . . the sensitivity group trainer . . . focuses primarily on the “here and now” events and relationships which have been experienced within the life of the group. (Gottschalk et al., 1971, pp. 88–89)

Among the T-group conventions was feedback among members, which was viewed as a crucial source of learning. “If they are attuned to feedback available from other group members, they will be offered a reflection of themselves as they perform in their customary roles” (Gottschalk et al., 1971, p. 91). Feedback “provides a means of sharpening perceptual skills—of recognizing interpersonal perceptual distortions, learning ways to check out interpersonal perceptions, and learning how to correct interpersonal perceptions” (p. 91). Full emotional disclosure was therefore required in order for feedback to be as accurate and informative as possible, otherwise the “real self” would continue to be blockaded by the “facades” of biographical history and distorted by the defensive tendency to approach life through the gauzy haze of intellectual abstraction, as opposed to emotional acuity. As Rogers (1967) described, “in a climate of freedom, group members move toward becoming more spontaneous, flexible, closely related to their feelings, open to their experience, and closer and more expressively intimate in their interpersonal relationships” (p. 275).

Authors did their best to describe training groups as unlike group therapy, but many conceded the difficulty of the task and resorted to calling them “therapy for normals” (Eddy & Lubin, 1971). Advocates like Rogers (1967) unapologetically promoted this likeness since the root problem was, after all, alienation from the real self, which could only be ameliorated through “authentic”

human contact. Plus, trainers and leaders only had so many options available for working with groups once they were assembled, and therapeutic techniques were an unavoidable and attractive resource. “Richness of method” (Gibb, 1970, p. 7) was achieved by drawing liberally from the repertoire of therapeutic techniques, including “nonverbal encounter and expression techniques, instrumented methods, videotape uses, psychodramatic and gestalt approaches, marathons and microlabs, and contributions from music, the fine arts, poetry, drama, and literature” (Shepard, 1970, pp. 265–266). (Some of the techniques used in the early T-groups were initially drawn from Viennese psychotherapy at any rate, so there was little difference between the “psychological education” of humanists like Alschuler and group counselors like Rogers to begin with. See Bradford, Gibb, & Benne, 1964.) Outdoor experiences—specifically Outward Bound—were regarded as a fruitful means of providing structure to group experiences, making their integration into the human potential movement mutually desirable (Alschuler, 1969; Katz, 1973; Lewicki, 1975).

Discussion and Conclusion

My aim here is not to provide a thorough account of the human potential movement but to highlight the overriding emphasis in its ideas and practices on a “real self” that would be uncovered and psychologically connected to presumably universal values through quasi-therapeutic methods of group encounter. The movement didn’t so much leave a legacy of ideas and practices that liberated the real self as it helped to create *self* as a cultural category that is, in part, produced in and through practices like those represented in outdoor experiential education.

It should be fairly obvious at this point how *self* could come to be so heavily idealized and promoted through the methods that Vernon documented in his ethnography of Outward Bound’s diversity program. Emoting is evidence of the “real self” penetrating through sedimented layers of culture; feedback from “the group” is a simultaneous process of bearing witness and directing interpretation of the meaning of those emotions; and communications/assertiveness training is about disciplining the emergent self according to a set of expectations for future conduct, their normative constituents and consequences obstructed by the discourse of *self*, itself.

Vernon was right to sound an alarm, especially when any pedagogies of self proclaim to work democratically; the project might be paradoxical at its core, as extensive critiques of the human potential movement (e.g., Back, 1970; Schur, 1976) and, more recently, outdoor education (Brookes, 2003; Higgins, 2009) have shown. The model of self represented in the human potential ideology and realized through the pedagogic practices Vernon documented finds its historical grounding in Maslow’s biological essentialism as well as the cultural pessimism of the wider movement, foundations that have been occluded by using psychological concepts, methodological individualism, and positivistic epistemology as a means of collective forgetting. The historical/political properties of the human potential movement can be understood in the terms applied by Vernon—the *inherent* and *individuated/isolated* self, which transitions seamlessly into

middle-class ideologies of identity formation to become the *owner/consumer self* (cf. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1996; Campbell, 2005; Curtis, 2005; Matusov & Smith, 2012).

Vernon’s (2015) concern, cited below, therefore provides an important corrective on dehistoricized practices in outdoor experiential education, including research on *self* in related programs:

Outward Bound appears to have historically idealized self as either “hidden-yet-innate” or “autonomous-and-asocial,” which logically situates pedagogy of self outside a sphere of academic interest and an unnecessary reflective concept for many educators, administrators, and researchers within the system. That is, the question of “what type of self do we teach students to have?” may be nonsensical from within the dominant conceptualizations. (p. 4)

Echoes of Vokey’s 1987 thesis can be heard in Vernon’s argument. Concerned that Outward Bound was abandoning its Hahnian foundations, especially the imperative that education be concerned “above all” with compassion and service, Vokey charged the emerging humanistic strain with reducing “problems with personal, interpersonal, social, political, and economic dimensions to individual problems” (p. 33). The increasing focus on psychological self-concept, he argued, “legitimizes the neglect of social, political, and economic dimensions of personal and interpersonal problems” (p. 37); Vokey was especially alert to the problems with *self*.

The diversity program Vernon profiled doesn’t fit exactly in this critique, however. On the one hand, lessons about “getting what you want,” however tritely rehearsed, may be empowering for youth who are persistently disenfranchised by institutions that operate against their interests. At some level, marginalized youth must develop the confidence and the repertoire of skills to “get what they want” in ways members of dominant groups are unlikely even to recognize. Such lessons may therefore be an important part of claiming agency, and if neoliberal models of self are instrumental to the effort, this would be an interesting discovery. On the other hand, reducing this to “behaviors” as an expression of one’s individual “self” locates the experience of discrimination, and means for addressing it, as a personal concern rather than the site of collective struggle that tethers individual biography to history and structure along with elaborated ways of challenging oppression that circulate communally (Seaman & Rheingold, 2013).

And more critically, it is quite unclear if techniques for “getting what you want” that will serve marginalized youth are best promoted through therapeutic conventions: I-statements, sharing your emotions, and offering “appropriate feedback.” Such modes of communication, as well as the models of self they entail, tend to be conjoined to middle-class preoccupations with personal expressiveness, future achievement, identity, and politeness (Gee, 2001, 2006; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2015); how these modes of discourse are harnessed, modified, or abandoned by traditionally marginalized youth as they advance their life projects—or if their efforts are rebuffed by institutions or perhaps their peers—would

certainly make for compelling research. Vokey (1987), however, voiced a starker critique:

The focus on individual concerns, and the corresponding neglect of social issues, plays an ideological function, in the sense of supporting the status quo (James, 1980a, pp. 68-69). For example, taking disadvantaged youth into the wilderness to enhance their self-esteem could be seen as soothing the consciences of the privileged, without threatening the social, economic, and political relationships that maintain their status. (p. 37)

The arguments of Vokey and Vernon turned the human potential ideology against itself; together, they provide lenses for seeing how its continued, uncritical circulation as practices in outdoor experiential education might be complicit in producing *self* in a way that is highly conciliatory—even therapeutic—to dominant class interests.

Aside from appreciating the particulars of Vernon's article, I want to offer two final points for consideration. First, advocates of human relations training programs regarded awareness experiences as “islands” where alternative cultures might be created (Eddy & Lubin, 1971, p. 626; Shepard, 1970). In outdoor experiential education, this notion was codified, propagated in schematic models, reinforced by the Hahnian origin story, and buttressed by the adventure archetype and images of Romantic nature. Vernon made clear this conception is a myth. Instead of imagining context-free liminal spaces in which “authentic” real selves can emerge, it could be fruitful to imagine outdoor and other group settings as carnivalesque performances, always implicated in but never fully determined by social structure and established categories of meaning, which can facilitate spaces for critical awareness (Bakhtin, 1986; Michelson, 1999).

Second, Vernon has indirectly contributed to the literature on youth identity formation. His approach resembles that of scholars examining how “metapragmatic models of identity” circulate in and through discourses and practices that are often organized institutionally (e.g., Blommaert, 2015; Gutiérrez & Larson, 1995; Wortham, 2005). This kind of research is immensely valuable in revealing the developmental trajectories youth are expected to identify with as they navigate settings and define themselves in relation to social practices. In future research, hearing more directly from youth themselves would be beneficial to understanding these processes more clearly, including ways they are advantaged or disadvantaged by them. These kinds of research projects, which Vernon has provided one example of, will help to make outdoor and other settings better able to achieve their democratic potential.

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