

## *Empowerment and Experiential Education A State of Knowledge Paper*

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### **Introduction**

Shellman's article aims to summarize the state of knowledge with regard to experiential education and empowerment. Experiential education is defined by the Association for Experiential Education as "... direct experience and focused reflection in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and **develop people's capacity to contribute to their communities** (20)." The potential for experiential education programs to empower individuals and increase their capacity to contribute to their community is examined critically in the paper.

Central to the concept of empowerment is the development of non-cognitive or character skills that Tough (2012) argues to be more important than intelligence for a person's future success. Tough lists some of these skills as resilience, having confidence, handling stress, and perseverance. People who have more developed non-cognitive skills are more likely to be empowered and contribute positively to their community. Experiential education is a useful tool to develop these skills.

### **What is Empowerment?**

An overarching theme of empowerment includes feeling control. Someone who feels that they can make and act on decisions that impact their life or community is an empowered person. These feelings of empowerment cannot simply be bestowed upon someone, their development is a process that must be facilitated. This facilitation requires numerous opportunities, constructive feedback, and must happen in a supportive social dynamic.

Empowerment is defined by Chamberlin (1977) as having options and making decisions, as well as learning skills relevant to the individual. Mainly, "effecting change in one's life and community" and knowing that your actions can result in change. Deci and Ryan (1985) relate empowerment to Self-Determination Theory, where competence, autonomy, and relatedness are necessary. Key to autonomy is support, not control. Experiential education is designed to support autonomy with core values such as challenge by choice. The social dynamic created in this supportive environment also plays to the relatedness aspect of self-determination.

## Empowerment Through Experiential Education

Experiential education is a useful medium through which non-cognitive skills can be developed. Having many opportunities to practice is necessary for developing these skills. For example, Angell (1994) gives credit to the solo portion of some expeditions. This type of challenge gives students the opportunity to practice **relying on the self through challenge**. Similarly, Andrews (1999), Zimmerman and Warschausky (1998) point to the benefit of expedition format experiential education programs. Giving students the space to really **understand their socio-political environment** and even **show agency for control** in that environment creates a useful low risk space to practice non-cognitive skills. Again, this agency is enabled by that supportive team environment. Leadership opportunities are highlighted by Sibthorp (2003, 2004, 2007) as being beneficial. For example, **having decision making abilities and influence** on a group as well as **taking ownership** are opportunities that are often present in experiential education.

Using experiential education as a vehicle toward self-knowledge in order to contribute to a healthy society is consistent with Kurt Hahn's philosophy. Hahn professed that self-knowledge was gained by overcoming challenges. These challenges can come in the physical form, such as climbing a mountain; they can also come in a psychological or emotional form, such as facing a fear of heights. Lastly, self-knowledge can be gained from finding voice in a group. With plenty of opportunities to overcome challenge and practice non-cognitive skills, experiential education is a useful means to develop self-knowledge and therefore empower individuals to positively effect change in civic society.

### Implications for Research

While many have argued that empowerment is an outcome of experiential education, gaps in the research exist. One area still unexplored is how long feelings of empowerment last. Further, the idea of perceived empowerment could be explored. For example, if someone leaves an experiential education program feeling empowered only to return to an environment where they feel powerless, then these feelings may have been more perceived than actual. Finally, the transfer of skills is another area where there is an opportunity for future research. This transfer of non-cognitive skills from a program to an individual's daily life is key to the Kurt Hahn philosophy. If there is transfer, is there a way to quantify it?

### Implications for Practice

Key to the development of empowerment is the idea that it is a process. It cannot simply be gifted, it must be facilitated well. To facilitate an empowering program, opportunities are key. Opportunities to practice leadership, decision making, and active citizenship must be present and numerous. They also must be guided and supported with lots of constructive feedback. For outdoor educators, being invested and active in this process is key to the development of the student.

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