



**Investigation of Wilderness Therapy,
Adventure Therapy
and Experiential Education Practices
in Europe, UK and USA**

**Report by Paul Stolz for
Churchill Fellowship 2000**

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Introduction

The Churchill Fellowship I undertook was in the field of Wilderness and Adventure Therapy and its application to a number of client groups in high need. I was able to journey through three continents, Europe, UK and the USA, to experience very different approaches to the field. The Fellowship was taken in two parts. The first trip was to the 2nd International Adventure Therapy Conference in Augsburg, Germany, whilst the second part was a month long trip through the above mentioned continents. Whilst the second part of the Fellowship was only a month in duration I felt the compression of time allowed me to gain a perspective that may not have been the same had the trip been more extended.

I would like to acknowledge the generosity of the Winston Churchill Memorial Trust for making this invaluable learning experience possible. I would also like to acknowledge the generosity of my hosts who assisted me in organising my itinerary in the various countries and provided me with accommodation and transport whilst I stayed with them. These people include Rudiger Guilsdorf in Bad Kreuznach, Germany; Kaye Richards and Mark Richards in the UK; Rod Nadeau and Ray and Joanne Handley in Maine; Lee and Jude Gillis in Georgia, and Robert Cooley in Oregon. Without their generous hospitality the trip would have been a much less enjoyable experience.

Executive Summary

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Project Investigation of Wilderness Therapy and Experiential Education in Europe, UK and USA

Places and People Visited

Augsburg: 2nd International Adventure Therapy Conference March 17th –28th

Bad Kreuznach: Nepal Experiential Education Conference and Workshop Presentation

Feldkirch, Austria: Martina Gasser and the Youth Intensive Program

Brathay Centre, Birmingham University, UK: Kaye Richards

Portland, Maine, USA, Ray Handley and the REAL School, Will White and Summit Achievement

Macon, Georgia: Lee Gillis, Georgia State University and Project Adventure

Portland, Oregon: Robert Cooley and The Katherine Freer Wilderness Program.

Major Learning Experiences

One of the major lessons learned from my observation of overseas was the effectiveness of the style of intervention in a number of different areas, including education, therapy, drug and alcohol prevention and early intervention for a range of issues around homelessness and youth suicide.

The trip also served to emphasise the complexity and depth of the programming in Australia particularly that derived from the work and programming of Ray Handley. The only other program that I observed that integrated all the elements of the systems of client relations so completely was the Youth intensive Program in Austria.

In the USA Adventure Therapy is an accepted form of intervention and funding for such interventions is relatively easy to acquire from Government and non-government sources. This is a critical area to be addressed for the future of the field in Australia

Descriptions of the styles of intervention utilized were also very useful, these ranging from clinical through educational to metaphoric. There were some very interesting conversations had throughout the trip regarding this area of the field. Whilst this is largely theoretical it does affect the style and type of intervention undertaken.

Dissemination of the information and experiences acquired on the fellowship will occur through the teaching I am about to do at Victoria University of Technology, the program I am setting up for my new employer, Regional Extended Family Services, through public and conference workshops and through contact with the Department of Family and Community services who have so far approved and expression of interest for funding for a Reconnect Program, a program for early for early intervention in the prevention of homelessness.

Report for Winston Churchill Memorial Trust on the Churchill Fellowship of Paul Stolz, 2000 Fellow

1 2nd International Adventure Therapy Conference

The Churchill Fellowship that I fortunate enough to experience in 2000 was divided into two separate journeys. The first was undertaken in March 2000 where I attended the 2nd International Adventure Therapy Conference in Augsburg Germany from the 18th to the 21st. The Conference was attended by a great number of international visitors. The notable thing however that because it was held in Europe it meant that a stronger European influence was felt than if it had been held on the North American Continent. This also meant that a different flavour was brought to the conference and some of the problems peculiar to Europe and the UK could be highlighted in relation to countries like Australia.

During the Conference significant differences emerged in approaches from participating countries, many driven simply by geography of the different continents. Australia finds itself in a unique position for the development of further Wilderness or Adventure Therapy because it still has vast tracts of land that are remote and provide isolated, wilderness areas essential to the type of therapy some programs undertake.

Much discussion was centered on metaphors, which are an essential part of Experiential Education and Wilderness/Adventure Therapy. One excellent description of Adventure Therapy offered was that 'Adventure Therapy is a process of experiential enquiry into the metaphors we live by.'

Simon Priest and Lee Gillis, well-known contributors to the Adventure Therapy field in the North American context attempted to give a summary at the first plenary session of the conference of the history of The Adventure and Wilderness Therapy movement. This was somewhat less than warmly embraced by many of the delegates who felt there was too much emphasis placed on the development of the field in the USA.

Workshops attended included Relational Counseling in a wilderness context, Research Methodology for Adventure Programming and Spirituality in the Wilderness. I also presented a workshop on Narrative Therapy and the use of Power in Wilderness Therapy.

An interesting Plenary Address was given by Rudiger Guilsdorf on the way forward for the field. This presentation was both experiential as well as verbal. It proved to be highly entertaining and informative. Another interesting Plenary Address was given on the topic of Dance Therapy, which was also experiential and based on African dance rhythms used in treating sexually abused girls.

Another asset of being able to travel to this conference was that I made some important contacts that would give me better direction in constructing my itinerary for the second part of my Fellowship in October and November

2. Nepal Confernece

On the 18th of October I departed Australia for Bad Kreuznach in Germany where I was to attend and deliver a workshop at the Nepal Conference on Erlebnis Paedogische (Experiential Education). The Nepal Conference is a regional European Network set up to encourage the use of experiential education in school curricula. I was a guest at the conference at the invitation of one of the Conference organizers, Rudiger Guilsdorf.

The Conference began with an active and colourful presentation by the participants demonstrating different elements of experiential education. There was also number of experiential presentations at the conference to underscore how experiential education might be employed in different settings. Despite the language difficulty (my German is fairly basic), communication proved no great problem and indeed served as the catalyst for much searching of meaning and clarity as well as much laughter.

Johan Hovlynick, a soon to be PhD, presented a paper on the process of emphasising crucial events in the adventure experience. These crucial events may be very small in nature but by punctuating them with recognition the trainer/therapist gives them a weight and emphasis that produces an interpretive moment that will live beyond the initial recognition.

Martin Arzberger gave a plenary address on the theory of archetypal recognition in the outdoor experience. This archetypal recognition, he suggested, is set in the archetypes of human psychology as described by Jung. Construction of artificial challenges such as ropes across gorges or climbing walls negate or stifle the production of the archetypal recognitions that nature encourages. It must be said that while this theory has a great deal of merit it still seeks to bring to the moment, experience or journey a meta-narrative that would, at least to a degree, prevent the construction of a metaphor of the participant/clients own making.

My workshop presentation proved thought provoking and generated much discussion by participants both in the workshop and after in casual conversations.

Whilst this conference was devoted essentially to experiential education rather than Wilderness or Adventure Therapy there are some clear overlaps in the field and the conversations I was able to have both in workshops and informally were a great highlight of my time away. Friends and interpreters Johan, Jac, Maurice and Rudiger overcame any language problems. At conference end many people expressed their pleasure at having someone in attendance from such an obviously different cultural background and with so much to offer from a creative and insightful position. It was high flattery indeed. On the other hand I benefited greatly form the opportunity of sharing ideas in overlapping fields whilst learning much about the German School system. The hospitality of Rudiger Guilsdorf was warm and overflowing and generous to a fault.

3. Workshop at Schloss Dauhn

After the three-day conference I gave an in-depth two-day workshop to interested people. Six people were in attendance and it was conducted at the picturesque Schloss Dauhn, a 12th Century renovated Castle outside of Bad Kreuznach, located high on a hill overlooking the surrounding countryside for 360 degrees. This workshop also was a highlight of my time away since the interaction was intense and close friendships developed as well as deep learning experiences. Those in attendance were from very different fields of employment and included a Principal of a TAFE equivalent College, a Church youth leader, two corporate Trainers and a Regional School Psychologist. The style of dealing with adolescents that I brought from my experience proved challenging and at times confronting but all enjoyed the interaction immensely. One extremely deep and personal moment came when the workshop participants and I shared an evening meal at a local restaurant. The people began sharing in the conversation their understandings and perceptions of the German and European people regarding the Second World War. To hear a perspective and personal stories from the side of the vanquished was a deeply moving moment and one I will cherish for a long time. Friendships were made during this time that will prove, I have no doubt, the basis for further cross-cultural exchange.

4. Youth Intensive Program, Feldkirch, Austria

This program, situated in the picturesque village of Feldkirch, is run by Martina Gasser. The similarities between the Youth Intensive program and the program I run in Australia are numerous. However, the client group is a little older taken from young people aged 16 and above who are homeless. One major difference is the level of funding the program receives from the local region and the length of time this allows the program staff to work with the clients. The state provides \$45,000AUD per six months/client. This allows the program to send the young people overseas or to a remote country in Europe where they encounter the necessary disorientation and challenge to effect change. The length of time spent on the trek component is three weeks and another seven weeks is spent in that same country undertaking work with a community organisation. This period of work is designed to teach the young people the discipline of work as well as an understanding of service.

Whilst the young people are on the trek and work part of the program, other staff work using Family Therapy with the parents and siblings. Upon return the family is reunited with their son or daughter in an attempt to overcome the problems that have initiated the homeless cycle. The family and young person are supported for another three months to assist in the reconciliation process. Where reconciliation appears difficult, if not impossible, supported accommodation is found for the young person.

An interesting difference in the client demographics between this program and the Australian scene is that whilst the clients I deal with are largely from a lower socio-economic demographic, in Austria the majority of clients come from the middle to upper middle classes. This raised the question of equity. Since the Austrian Government was

prepared to fund so generously those who in many cases may have been capable of a user-pays service, it would appear that a reevaluation of the way we structure our support for young people may be in order. Quite often government-funded programs are funded for failure rather than success because the level of funding is barely adequate to establish the service, let alone run it successfully. The requirements to satisfy the selection criteria sometimes are impossible to match with the level of funding obtained.

The Youth Intensive Program is an excellent intervention aimed at all the relational systems of the client, using a very effective adventure therapy component. The outcomes are outstanding, as one would expect from such a holistic and well-constructed approach. The telling argument to come from this program is that the government recognizes that if the program succeeds in family reconciliation and homelessness is overcome, the cost of the intervention to the state in the long run is much cheaper than if little or nothing is undertaken.

5. Brathay Training Centre, The Lakes District, UK

In the UK I was invited by my host Kaye Richards to give a two-day workshop on the Adventure Therapy approach I employ in Australia. A great number of representatives from a number of outdoor programs and Associations were present at this workshop, thus providing an opportunity for wide ranging discussions around Adventure Therapy. Once again a significant difference was discernible due to the different geographical possibilities afforded in Australia and the UK. Since remoteness is a scarce commodity in such a populated country the style of intervention is markedly different. The people present, whilst interested in descriptions of therapy, found themselves using the word 'developmental' rather than 'therapeutic' to define the difference in their approaches. This was coloured, to a degree, by the fact that many of the people present were engaged in corporate training, and the word developmental applied much more readily in that field. Few programs were engaged in deliberate Adventure or Wilderness Therapy intervention. Some of the dynamics that were used in the workshop could not be undertaken in the UK because of legislation that was prohibitive and over-protective. Again the freedom afforded Australian programming in this regard contributed to the enormous possibilities of change that characterizes the Australian scene.

6. Birmingham University

At Birmingham University I was invited by Kaye Richards to address a class of First Year Outdoor education students on the possibilities that existed for the use of the outdoors as a therapeutic tool. Whilst it was interesting to talk to a group of students about their perceptions of Outdoor Education in a different country it did not afford an extension of my understanding of the field.

Of greater interest was the time taken talking to staff and a PhD student in the Outdoor Education Department. Conversation centered on the background to the philosophy of Outdoor Education, particularly in the phenomenological and postmodernist schools, and what impact these schools of thought might have on the construction of narratives and the

use of power in the field of Outdoor “Education. Whilst this may sound somewhat esoteric it is important in defining what type of program might be constructed and what shape the intervention may take in a therapeutic context. More work needs to be done in this area of the field of Outdoor Education, since it remains strongly rooted in Romantic Philosophy without a great deal of questioning as to these origins.

7. The Real School and Summit Achievement, USA

From the UK I flew to Maine in the USA to talk with a great friend and exponent of the Wilderness Therapy, Ray Handley. Ray is an expatriate Australian who is now the Principal of what is termed the REAL School (Regional Experiential Adventure Learning). Whilst in Australia Ray was responsible for the initiation of the wilderness-based therapeutic intervention that was commonly called the Wilderness Enhanced Model. This was the same model that I utilised in Gippsland and am now seeking to create for a wider intervention across Victoria.

The REAL School struggles with a number of issues to make this dynamic effective. One of the difficulties faced is that there is a high turnover of teachers and thus there is a constant need to train them in the process of experiential learning that goes beyond the obvious and takes great skill and a certain level of intuitiveness to implement. Another challenge is the environment, since finding suitable geographic locations that would provide a remote component is a struggle in a populated area such as Maine. As with many alternative education schools over the past decade, the type of student had changed from the original intake. Initially, the school had targeted under-achieving students from Secondary Schools in the Region, but the intake of student had changed to much more behaviourally and emotionally difficult student. This also has an impact on staff recruitment, since teachers are often reluctant to undertake such a challenge. There is also a shortage of teachers in the USA and hence teachers often go where pay and conditions are better. This situation makes one appreciate the Australian system, where pay levels are at least consistent across individual states and additional salary is offered for special skills or duties.

Whilst I was in Maine Ray took me to visit an Adventure Therapy program in the north of the state that was run privately for fee-paying clients. This program was part owned and run by Will White, a Family Therapist and Chairman of the Adventure Therapists Association affiliated with the American Experiential Education Association. Whilst this program offered educational, therapeutic and outdoor components, its failure to integrate them into a coordinated whole appeared to be a weakness. Another observation gleaned from this visit was that the structure of achievement was reflective of the social context that the clients came from. Thus, achievement was coupled with success in climbing the heights to group leader. Once one was a group leader he/she could be readmitted to the exclusive private school system from which they had come. Since this was a fee-for-service private program, most, if not all the clients came from very privileged backgrounds. The program served, from my observation, to reinforce the social structure of the privileged few, who could afford to pay, an interesting contrast to the Austrian and Australian context.

In addition, the clients acceptance of and ability to articulate the therapeutic process was foreign to the clients I had worked with in Australia. The clients that I work with can be described as at the pre-cognitive stage of intervention and a very different approach is needed to assist them to initiate the change process that would allow them some access to and success in social and educational systems.

8. Georgia State University, Macon, Georgia

My next visit was with Lee and Jude Gillis, who were my hosts for the two days I spent in Georgia. Lee is lecturer in Psychology at Georgia State University while Jude Lectures in Outdoor Education. Lee has played a significant role in the Adventure Therapy field in the USA, whilst Jude teaches experiential education within the Outdoor Education field at the University. Whilst the visit was brief, I was fortunate enough to have the undivided attention of Lee for most of one day, since he drove me out to visit Project Adventure, about an hour and a half drive from Macon.

Our conversation centered around the qualifications necessary to undertake wilderness or Adventure Therapy, not just in the US but across the world. One of the fundamental understandings that needs to be addressed is that while it is possible to provide a therapeutic experience for people in a normal outdoor program, simply because of the nature of the experience, it is important to remain within the limits of what the program claims to achieve. Thus if I am providing an educational experience, the skills and qualifications I need for this experience need to match. If, on the other hand I am providing a therapeutic intervention I must be able to justify why I do what I do within a therapeutic framework.

Directions and differences within the Adventure or Wilderness Therapy field were also discussed. A fundamental difference emerged between the North American and the programming approaches with which I am familiar . Whilst this programming tends to work more with the process that is created by the outdoor a journey experience, the North American approach, without wishing to generalise, is more focused on case management. This means that the diagnostic emphasis is greater, whilst in the narrative and journey focused approach what the client determines for him/herself receives more stress.

As mentioned, Lee was generous with his time and took me out to visit Project Adventure, a center that is known worldwide for the production of experiential education courses that are marketed in several countries including Australia. Project Adventure also provides Adventure Therapy intervention for local clients in Georgia State. These clients include young people involved in drug related crime, sexual abuse victims and young people engaged in sexual abuse. There was an education component coupled with adventure activities to provide a well-rounded intervention. However, since the adventure activities were limited in their scope, and because of the lack of geographic isolation, no journey component was included. There was some discussion by staff about how effective the intervention could be, given this limitation. The staff I talked with were very interested in the approach I took in Australia. Family Therapy emerged from

the trip, and was reinforced during this visit, as a tool that has come to be regularly used in the development of adventure and wilderness-based therapeutic interventions.

Later in the afternoon Jude invited me to give two lectures to classes of Outdoor Education students. This was a stimulating opportunity that raised many questions in the students' minds as to the direction they might take with their careers and provided some new information to them as to how they might utilise some of the skills they were developing.

9. Katherine Freer Wilderness Therapeutic Expeditions.

Katherine Freer Expeditions was the last program I visited before returning home. Located in the state of Oregon, just south of the capital Portland, Freer was one program I visited that did provide a 28 day expedition-style intervention. The program had approximately 30 people working for it, many employed on a sessional basis, to undertake the expedition with the clients. Clients were adolescents displaying emotional difficulty across a broad range of behaviours. This program was again privately owned and run and the clients were of a similar type to the ones I encountered in Summit Achievement. Whilst it is possible for some clients to obtain health insurance to cover the cost of the program, largely the user-pays system has the effect of screening many from the program due to the financial commitment needed. As at Summit Achievement the clients were very articulate and undertook therapy with a certain cheerful acceptance that is not common in Australia. This is, I am sure, a significant cultural difference that I observed in the programs I visited. Whilst working with these clients is not easy, it is easier than working with those who are resistant to change or have little sense of the need for change.

The Freer Program had good outcomes, although a weakness they admitted was the lack of a follow-up component after the expedition. Staff at Freer were interested in the approach I took with extremely difficult adolescents as well as the alternative curriculum approach I have developed for young people disengaging from the education system in the transition years 8 and 9 of Secondary School.

Family Therapy was again a significant component of the therapeutic intervention. Less known and little employed was the Narrative Therapy approach utilized by myself and some other interventions in Australia.

10. Conclusion

The Fellowship provided a significant opportunity to appreciate and learn further about the related fields of Adventure Therapy, Wilderness Therapy and Experiential Education. The cultural differences that were observed in the programming across three very different cultures were extremely valuable. The observations gave me new information with which to compare the programming at the local level as well as what I construct in programming intervention.

Dissemination of the information and experience acquired will take a number of paths. One of the more important areas that needs to be influenced in Australia is at the government level. There seems to be a certain suspicion of innovative interventions in this field without due regard to the therapeutic philosophy or quality of service that might be delivered. This is in part due to the reputation that some interventions have developed reflecting what is described as a 'cowboy' mentality and thus ethically suspect. However, it will be important to stress to government departments, particularly those involved with funding interventions for clients whose needs this field addresses, that this is, in the main, a legitimate and ethical therapeutic intervention with exceptional outcomes if undertaken in a careful and considered manner. It is important to note that I have been involved in submitting for a wilderness based therapeutic intervention for much of Victoria and some of the material acquired on the fellowship has been utilised in this submission. The Reconnect Program, aimed at providing early and innovative intervention to prevent homelessness, has approved an Expression of Interest from the Regional Extended Family Services (my employer) for wilderness programming. We are at the present time involved in developing the final Submission. If this is approved I believe it will be a big breakthrough in progressing the field to Federal funding level.

I have also been invited to teach Wilderness Therapy at Victoria University and much of the information I acquired overseas will add greater depth to my teaching. In addition I am a member of the Victorian Outdoor Education Association and regularly present workshops at this organisation's annual State Conference, and the National Conference of the Australian Outdoor Education Association. The learning acquired on the Fellowship will prove invaluable in all these fields.

The Fellowship was exciting and informative and I thank the Trust for making such a valuable contribution to my work and to this field in Australia.

11. Recommendations.

My one recommendation for the field in Australia is that it becomes vertically integrated from a University Degree or Diploma level through to the practice of people developing and working programs in the field. This vertical integration will offer a number of benefits to the field. In my opinion these are:

- Better-trained people who understand the issues and can apply therapeutic theory in a number of contexts.
- A greater recognition of the field from theoretical and practical aspects
- A career path for people working in the field
- Better ethical practice
- Lobbying potential from the field to funding agencies both government and private
- Better research capacity to demonstrate the outcomes of the intervention in a number of areas of client need.