

THE EFFECTS OF AN OUTDOOR EXPERIENTIAL PROGRAMME ON SOCIAL IDENTIFICATION

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Context

The effects of outdoor experiential learning activities have long been debated, yet evidence supporting their effectiveness is equivocal (Burke and Collins, 2004). This study explores the effects of an experiential learning programme on the participants' social identity, specifically to determine whether such a programme may enhance an individual's sense of social identification.

Social identity was defined by Tajfel (1972: 31) as "the individual's knowledge that he/she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him/her of the group membership". Social identification has been shown to be a key moderator of commitment and performance in various contexts, for example in sport (Wann and Branscombe, 1990), and education (Jones and Burke, 2004), in that people with greater social identification are more likely to:

- Demonstrate greater social commitment to the group
- Demonstrate positive attitudes towards the group
- Be less likely to withdraw from the group
- Be more likely to overcome obstacles to continue their membership of the group
- Be more likely to spend time and effort in achieving the group's aims, and to
- Demonstrate increased cohesion with the group.

Thus, the importance of social identification seems clear. What is less clear, however, are the processes by which it is developed and, to a lesser extent, sustained over time. Therefore an understanding of the mechanisms by which social identification can be developed is of importance to a range of individuals, for example sports coaches wishing to strengthen the cohesion of a team, sport administrators wishing to maximise attendances, and – the focus of this paper – sport educators wishing to maximise the performance and engagement of students. The study explores the use of one specific strategy – an outdoor experiential programme and its role in developing a meaningful social identity.

The aims of the investigation were thus to:

1. explore whether identification was a meaningful moderator of performance and engagement, and to
2. investigate the effects of an experiential induction programme on the identification level of participants.

A preliminary study (phase one) was undertaken to confirm the idea of identification as a moderator of performance and engagement. This was followed by a second study (phase two), that explored the effects of an experiential learning intervention on the perceived identification levels of 275 first year undergraduate students. Additionally, the questionnaire contained areas pertaining to students' perceived leadership and teamworking skills.

Methods

In Phase One 65 questionnaires were administered to a sample of undergraduate students at levels one, two and three. It measured four variables: perceived identification levels, perception of being part of a 'learning community', their commitment to and their performance on the programme of study.

In Phase Two an experimental research design was used to measure the effects of a half-day experiential learning intervention on the perceived identification levels of first year undergraduate students. The experiential activity was part of the student's induction programme (carried out before the students had a chance to develop any meaningful social identity). Students were required to complete questionnaires before and after the activity. Questionnaires (n = 275) measured perceived

identification levels, membership of a learning community, and perceived teamworking and leadership skills and were completed immediately prior to, and following the intervention.

Results

Phase One's results indicated there were clear positive relationships between perceived identification levels, membership of 'learning community', and commitment to and performance on their programme of study, thus supporting the hypothesis that social identification is positively related to a number of desirable outcomes.

Phase Two's results indicated no significant differences between the pre- and post-intervention in terms of perceived identification levels, although there were significant ($p < 0.001$) increases in perceived leadership and teamworking skills, thus suggesting that the intervention strategy had no immediate effect on identification levels, although there was a significant effect on leadership and teamworking.

Discussion/Implications

The results from phase one supported the hypothesis that identification is positively correlated with performance and commitment, thus supporting the importance of identification as a concept to be investigated. Phase two explored a learning intervention that was hypothesised to positively influence identification. The hypothesis, however, was not supported. Notably, however, the results revealed perceived increases in students' teamworking and leadership abilities.

The lack of effect of the intervention may be attributed to either its timing or length. As the intervention was part of the students' induction programme, it may well be the case that other variables confounded the results. It may also be the case that a half-day activity is insufficient to affect perceived identification levels in this case and that a longer intervention would be needed to see a significant difference.

Further longitudinal work is necessary to ascertain differences in identification levels over time. Therefore work is ongoing to track students' over their three years of study, and preliminary results will be reported.

References

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