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## **Perceived Life Significance of a University Winter Outdoor Education Course**

### **A Qualitative Study**

Jennifer Wigglesworth  
Paul Heintzman

### **Abstract**

This qualitative study explored the life significance of a winter, bilingual (French/English), outdoor education (OE) course offered by a Canadian university. The current investigation involved 16 in-depth interviews with alumni who had taken one of the university's winter OE courses more than 20 years earlier. Interpretive analysis of interview data found the following significant life impacts: development of interpersonal/social skills; self-discovery; environmental awareness; leisure style change; transfer to others; and increased outdoor knowledge/skills. The researcher used “how and why” questions to probe for processes that linked the course experiences and activities with significant life impacts. The processes identified included: personal growth opportunities; group experience; new or different experience; and toughness of climate/weather.

**Keywords:** significant life experience, outdoor education, winter

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This qualitative study, part of a larger project (Wigglesworth, 2012), investigated the life significance of a winter, bilingual (French/English), Outdoor Education (OE) course offered by the physical education/human kinetics school of a Canadian university. The researchers explored whether this course had significant long-term effects on participants, and if so, the course processes that contributed to a significant life experience (SLE). Sixteen university alumni who participated in this course between 1976 and 1992 were interviewed.

This paper begins with a brief literature review, the study's significance and aims, and the methods employed. Results, including participant characteristics, outcome and process themes and the course as a confirmatory experience, are presented and discussed. The conclusion explores the findings, limitations and implications.

Daniel's (2007) research on the life-significance of a university wilderness expedition frames this study. The research is retrospective and takes "a life-span perspective, seeking to understand how experiences that may have occurred 20 or 30 years ago continue to influence people's feelings or behavior" (Chawla, 2006, p. 361). The project's theoretical framework is Significant Life Experience (SLE) research where participants are asked to recount experiences of their own choosing (Tanner, 1980). SLE seeks to understand the long-term value of earlier life experiences by sampling autobiographical memories. SLE research asks to what extent lessons are transported into other life contexts and whether these changes are long-lasting or short-lived.

Daniel's (2003) study identified six characteristics of SLEs that make them significant. First, it mentally, spiritually, physically, emotionally, and/or socially changes the participant in some way (i.e., perspective, behavior or belief). Second, it constitutes a new or extraordinary experience beyond normal routine. Third, it provides something useful for the participant in the future, such as a reference point or a life lesson. Fourth, specific meaning is derived from or attributed to it. Fifth, one considers it to have been caused by something other than chance—God, a guiding force, or a higher power. Sixth, due to its nature, magnitude, or timing, it moves the individual beyond routine into the exceptional. Daniel's characteristics derive from *Webster's New International Dictionary's* (1981, Vol. III) definition of significant: "standing as a sign; suggesting or containing some concealed, disguised or special meaning; having or likely to have influence or effect; characterized by conveyance of an idea, thought or feeling" (p. 2116) and he drew upon writings on religious or spiritual experience (Loder, 1989), transformative experiences (Brown, 1989), and mystical and transcendent experiences (James, 1902; Maslow, 1964).

OE program outcomes are often categorized into intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental impacts. Intrapersonal relationships consist of how an individual gets along with oneself. Some examples include self-concept, spirituality, confidence and self-efficacy (Priest, 1999). Interpersonal relationships consist of how people get along with two or more people and involve communication, cooperation, trust, problem solving, conflict resolution, and leadership influence (Priest, 1999). Environmental relationships refer to the interactions between human society and the environment's natural resources, such as how people influence environmental quality negatively by polluting or positively through recycling. According to Priest's (1988) OE model, environmental relationships can be ecosystemic, i.e., the interdependence of living organisms in an ecological macroclimate, or ekistic, i.e., interactions between human society and natural resources. This study pertains to ekistic relationships in regards to environmental impacts.

Although there has been considerable exploration of the learning outcomes that students experience in OE courses, there is a need for understanding *how* these outcomes are achieved. There is increasing interest to move beyond simply focusing on program-specific outcomes to developing more evidence-based models that analyze the influence of specific mechanisms of change (Ewert & Sibthorp, 2009; McKenzie, 2003; Sibthorp et al., 2007). For example, Sibthorp et al. (2007) and Ewert and Sibthorp (2009) have sought to establish links between OE course components and outcomes.

The current study used a qualitative methodology to study both course outcomes and processes. In this investigation, outcomes were defined as the significant life impacts that participants perceived from partaking in the course, and processes are defined as the dimensions that linked participation in the course with outcomes and a SLE. Results were divided into outcome and process themes. Outcome themes address the question of *what were the significant impacts of the course* and process themes address the question of *what about the course* led to significant life impacts. Some processes include: achieving success, having fun, learning new skills and being responsible for yourself, peacefulness, a novel or unfamiliar setting, physical challenge, emotional challenge, and co-operative behavior and decision-making (McKenzie, 2000; Baldwin et al., 2004).

OE research on winter experiences is underdeveloped. Svoboda and colleagues' (2015) interviews with 12 participants on a winter experiential education course in the Czech Republic found four main themes representing participants' experience of the course: inner self-experience and reflecting on life; relationships with others; nature; and embodied phys-

ical demands. Jirásek and Jirásková's (2014) exploration of a two-week snowshoeing course in Slovakia and Poland discovered several themes: thinking and searching for one's self and for the purpose of life; stopping and calming; experiencing difficult situations in regards to basic needs; and apprehension of overcoming natural elements, such as the fear of the cold. The current study contributes to this discussion by exploring the role of the winter landscape in participants' perceptions of an OE course as a SLE.

This study is significant for several reasons. First, scholars have called for more research on the long-term effects of wilderness experiences through retrospective and longitudinal studies (Daniel, 2003; Kellert, 1998) as there is currently relatively little research on the life significance of university OE courses. Second, although this study stemmed from research by Daniel (2003), his research examined the life significance of an outdoor wilderness expedition, while the current research explored the life significance of an OE course. Third, the current study's findings will add to the SLE literature with respect to the winter climate in which the course was completed. Fourth, while other studies have identified similar processes, the current study investigates whether these processes can have long-term significant life impacts 20 years after program participation. Fifth, this study examines a bilingual (French/English) OE course. Sixth, this research seeks to establish relationships among course components and impacts by investigating *why* the participants found the OE experience to be significant and what aspects of the course led to this discovery. Research on the *processes* that link an OE course with a SLE is still very much in its infancy. Seventh, the current research may also advance the learning theory of experiential education.

The purpose of this study was to discover if a winter OE course is perceived to have lasting impacts and whether the course is perceived as a SLE. Subsidiary research purposes entailed developing an understanding of: long-term influences that OE courses have on participants' intrapersonal, interpersonal and environmental relationships and processes that lead to these influences.

## Methods

A qualitative methodology was best suited for this study. In-depth, semi-structured interviews offered the advantages of prompting participants, establishing and maintaining rapport, clarifying questions, and gathering unexpected information (Henderson & Bialeschki, 2002). The authors ob-

tained ethical clearance for the project from the university they were affiliated with at the time of the study.

The research project examined a 12-day winter OE course offered by a Canadian university since 1975 (the course was subsequently abolished in 2010). Over this period of time, the course outline, location and duration changed and evolved, but the course purpose and objectives remained the same. Originally, the course was based at the university camp, but when the camp was sold in the early 1990s, the course was held in other locations or in the context of a trip (however, all 16 participants took the winter course at the university camp). The course was offered during the university's February study break, in addition to a complete weekend (Friday night to Sunday) two weeks prior. Students received four credits, rather than three credits, for the course; therefore, students obtained substantial credits for a two week course. The 1979/1980 course calendar description read: "Introduction to social, organizational, technical, environmental and educational topics associated with group living, ecology and winter camping skills, conducted in an appropriate setting." The 1979/1980 course outline stated that the course purpose was "the discovery of the educational potential of life in a group atmosphere of a winter camp," where the emphasis was upon "learning to use and to teach the use of the environment in the winter season." The 1979/1980 course was designed "to help everyone discover and develop their personal fundamental values." Course content included units on social integration, orienteering, expedition, camp craft workshops, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, the snow house, the trio, and projects (service, snow sculpture, reading). The 1998 course purpose and the objectives were almost identical to the 1979–80 course outline although the course location was different.

The sample was selected through a combination of purposive and theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Patton, 1990). Purposive sampling is used in exploratory research to select people who are especially informative for the research question under study (Patton, 1990). As the study focused on the significant life effect of the course, participants were selected from those who had taken the course over 20 years ago (i.e., between 1976 and 1992). The sampling strategy recruited participants in the following order: the university's alumni directory, a notice in the alumni newsletter of the faculty that offered the course, former course instructors, and the snowball technique. Theoretical sampling determined a final sample size of 16 participants. Data collection stopped once the researcher attained theoretical saturation (i.e., no new conceptual insights were being generated from the interviews) (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

An interview schedule patterned upon Daniel's (2005) six open-ended questions about life significance was used for consistency across studies (Shooter, 2010). "How and why" questions were used to probe for processes linking the course experiences and activities with significant life impacts.

The interviews, 45 minutes to an hour in length, were conducted in-person and in English (two French participants completed their interviews in English, which was their second language). The interviews were audio-taped with the participants' consent. The first author manually transcribed and coded the interviews. Interpretive analysis was used to inductively analyze the data using the constant comparative method (Corbin & Strauss, 1990), whereby the transcripts were carefully read, reread and coded to determine recurring themes and patterns (Patton, 1990). While a theme represented at least half of the participants' shared perceptions, a sub-theme represented only a few of the participants' shared perceptions. To ensure that the interpretation of data was valid, the second author reviewed the transcripts and themes while member checking involved providing participants with a copy of their own interview transcript as well as a summary of the themes to review.

## Results

### Participants

The majority of the participants took the winter course at 21 or 22 years of age; however, one was 27 years. There were nine females and seven males. Most stated that they had not participated in a winter OE program before taking the university course; however, a few had extensive prior outdoor experience. At the time of the interview, six were elementary or high school teachers, two were university professors, and two were senior managers of a recreational park or conservation area. One participant was retired. Other occupations included a wellness company employee, a business analyst, a real estate agent, an athletic performance consultant, and a bike/ski shop owner. Participants practised a range of outdoor activities and exhibited a variety of outdoor skills. Most participants shared they were active in the outdoors; however, a few mentioned they were no longer very active. Motivations for enrolling in the course were interest in the outdoors, to experience fun, to spend time with friends, and to gain knowledge of outdoor techniques and survival. Several participants mentioned taking the course for "quick and easy credits." Thirteen of the 16 participants took a summer OE course offered by the same university, and thus the results

sometimes include comparisons participants made between the winter and summer courses. All participants have pseudonyms.

### Outcome Themes

Most participants discussed the positive role of the winter course in their lives. None felt that the course was an overall negative experience. Only after being specifically asked or probed by the researcher did a few speak of negative events during the course. However, most often these negatives were viewed as challenges that contributed to an overall positive, learning experience. Data analysis discovered the following outcome themes as significant life impacts: development of interpersonal/social skills; self-discovery; greater environmental appreciation; transfers to others; and increased outdoor knowledge/skills. One outcome sub-theme that emerged was leisure style change. The themes will be presented along with relevant literature.

**Development of interpersonal/social skills.** Barbara spoke of a negative group experience in the course that helped her see the challenges of interpersonal relationships:

In my winter experience I saw a totally dysfunctional group. . . . I think it made a difference in my . . . life development. . . . It was another group experience that showed me the challenges and the beauty of . . . trying to pull together a group . . . of people. . . . Coming from a group of people to a real team.

Likewise, Quentin mentioned how the course was conducive to developing trust and learning to rely on other people. Quentin recalled his “rookie mistake” of wearing a cotton turtleneck for winter activities. Fortunately, a woman on the trip had an extra polypropylene undergarment that he borrowed and didn’t take off for the entire course. When asked to identify a long-term impact of the course on his ability to relate to other people, Quentin responded, “Those who don’t know how to work amongst others, they’re brought to the forefront very quickly . . . it was a great course . . . because it reinforced a lot of life skills and made you realize the importance of pitching in.” Isabelle discussed how the course contributed to learning how to “adapt to people’s strengths.”

Participants’ friendships and work settings were often influenced by the course. When asked if he would recommend the course to a current student, Peter explained: “I would suggest it because . . . you draw on some



real life experiences . . . and it challenges you . . . to function well within a group and I think that, for most people, that would be a part of their work environment.”

**Self-discovery.** Several respondents mentioned how the course allowed them to discover something about their selves that they had not known before. Moreover, several indicated that this self-discovery was a significant life impact that they carried with them for the rest of their lives. Peter discussed how he came to realize that he was claustrophobic during the quinzee building activity where a cave is dug in a pile of snow, which left a lasting impression: “[The course] is a really good way to sort of test yourself. . . . I never knew that I was claustrophobic and that was a big discovery on my part. . . . You learn some things about yourself . . . certainly when you’re thrown into that type of environment.” Elaine spoke of how the winter trio experience made a difference in her life and gave her the self-confidence needed to move to Western Canada:

We were three girls, just the three of us . . . no tent, nothing. We . . . had to make our own shelter and . . . we just made it. . . . It was icy rain all night . . . but we still managed to start the fire . . . and we laughed a lot. . . . It *made a difference in my life* because after university I taught three years in high school and I was . . . back into normal society in some ways, and I was, like, no, that’s not what I’m looking for, so . . . it gave me the self confidence that I would be able to do it. I had done a lot of winter camping before but . . . not in a rained-on shelter, so I . . . moved out West. I bought myself a van and I lived in my van for six years.

In terms of the long term impact on her self-understanding, Barbara replied: “What it confirmed is that I like to be outside, that I need fresh air, and I need those moments of quiet, and the nurturing effect of nature.” The above quotations indicate several participants viewed self-discovery as a lasting impact of the course.

**Environmental appreciation.** Several participants commented on how the course brought about a perceived change in their appreciation for the environment, nature and the outdoors. For example, Aaron spoke of how the course changed his perspective and gave him a “positive outlook on winter” that continues to influence how he perceives cold weather today. Randy remarked: “The winter camping in particular, really challenged me to think of the winter as an opportunity rather than as a liability. . . . I had a much deeper appreciation for the environment after that.” Quentin recalled being awakened on his trio by a white-tailed deer in his campsite.

He described the encounter as one that gave him an appreciation for how hard animals work to survive in nature. Quentin went on to explain that nature is “something you really need to learn to respect and appreciate and kind of be in awe of.” For him, this experience and others, such as finding a deer carcass that had been attacked by wolves and completing an “environmental assessment” of his group’s waste, made a lasting life impression with respect to environmental appreciation. Likewise, Peter spoke of how the course inspired a type of environmental appreciation:

I think your environment plays a big part of your experience. It’s front and centre. . . . You’re working within the environment and . . . when you’re not . . . doing activities and you just got some down time, you’re still very much connected to the environment. . . . In that camp setting . . . it wasn’t always group settings and tasks being done. It was just that down time where it was just you and you were out there in the elements and . . . there’s a great connection there that we don’t have often. Those moments are very rare now. As a matter of fact, that’s what I remember from the camp, and . . . it seems like a big void between then and now. . . . I don’t put myself in those situations where there’s that connection anymore.

In summary, participants spoke of environmental impacts of the course as significant across one’s life. Compared to research on the life significance of a summer OE course offered by the same university (Wigglesworth, 2012), the winter course participants explained environmental impacts in terms of their environmental appreciation, whereas the summer course participants explained environmental impacts in terms of their environmental behaviors.

Our finding of increased environmental appreciation as a significant life impact confirms the complex nature of the relationship between outdoor experiences and subsequent environmental attitudes and behaviours. Much OE research on the environmental outcomes of outdoor excursions has found mixed results. In contrast to Haluza-Delay (2001) who found that teenage participants in a 12-day Canadian wilderness program did not translate their environmental concern into action at home, the present investigation demonstrated that a university OE experience can lead to a significant life impact on one’s environmental appreciation. This long-term impact was consistent with the course objectives from the 1978 OE course syllabus such as “to develop an appreciation of nature’s aesthetic qualities and adopt an appropriate attitude.” Since the course was designed with these objectives in mind, it is reasonable that the theme of increased

environmental appreciation emerged. This increased environmental appreciation theme supports Martin's (2004) suggestion that outdoor adventure activities shape one's connectedness to the environment, and his results that adventure within OE can be a very powerful tool for developing a sense of appreciation for the natural environment.

**Transfer to others.** Another outcome theme was the transmission of knowledge and skills from the course to the participants' family, children and friends. Those who were teachers indicated transfer to their students. For example, Liam, a teacher, shared that much of the course experience was something he could give back to his students. Gabrielle, stated that she tells her daughters and her students about the skills she learned while on the course with her partner and husband: "The skills that we learned, just using them when we camp with the family. . . . There's always things you go back to, 'Oh yeah, I remember when we did this at camp' and telling the kids that . . . we learned some of this stuff when . . . Daddy and I went to winter camp." Gabrielle went on to explain the course's influence on her desire to convey outdoor knowledge and appreciation to her daughters. Gabrielle and her husband go cross-country skiing and snowshoeing with their daughters in the hopes of transmitting the importance of the "whole idea of togetherness of camping, and the tranquility, and respecting nature" that she purports were reinforced through the course. Quentin stated:

The course reinforced new skills that I learnt to teach my kids to use when we're camping, building fires, and appreciating nature. . . . Outdoor recreation is a big part of what we do every year. . . . We do snowshoeing. We do cross-country skiing. . . . We instilled that at a very young age.

Randy perceived that his experience in the winter course allowed him to feel confident in taking his friends camping in colder climates: "An interesting thing that I hadn't even thought of was by having done this I actually introduced other friends . . . because I had felt experienced, and I felt competent, and I felt safe."

None of the course objectives listed in the 1978 course syllabus mentioned sharing the outdoor skills and knowledge gained with other people after the course was completed, and yet this theme of transfer to others, including children, friends and students emerged. Not much research explores how outdoor skills and knowledge can be transferred to others outside of an OE course, and the possible ripple effects of such actions.

**Increased outdoor knowledge/skills.** For Isabelle, the experience of the snow was indelible:

It's also the experience of the snow; how to dig a hole and survive by sleeping in it. . . . How you can also build an igloo [quinzee] and sleep in it and be very warm actually. It also shows you how to adapt to Canadian outdoor living. Also . . . learning how to run with snowshoes, and run backwards with snowshoes. . . . Even though it's been decades, literally decades since I took it, I continue to . . . do outdoor activities. . . . I know how to organize myself, get dressed, what to bring, and how to think about it, and how to help others.

Quentin explained that the course gave him the confidence to survive in a winter environment due to the skills that he learnt:

Skills that you have and that the group provides to you are actually life saving skills. And knowing you can survive and you rely on each person in the group to make that survival happen, because . . . when you're out, it's minus 26. It's about survival then. When you're three days in the bush with ten people, you fall through the ice . . . you're soaking wet to the skin, you're going to get hypothermia, you're going to die. So, you need to be careful. You need to be smart about what you do. You need to know how to use your equipment properly. Bring the right equipment with you. So the knowledge they gave you to . . . bring the right stuff and to do things the right way was pretty cool. . . . You can carry that on into the rest of your life with confidence.

Therefore, it is clear that participants viewed the winter course as having a significant life impact on their outdoor knowledge and skills.

**Leisure style change.** The winter course influenced participants' leisure style; however, unlike participants in the summer OE course, there was no consensus. Therefore, this was only a sub-theme and not as significant a life impact. Leisure style refers to "overall patterns of leisure activity engagement and time usage" (Mannell & Kleiber, 1997, p. 59) and "those elements of a person's lifestyle which are perceived as leisure" (Heintzman, 1999, p. 48). Interestingly, a couple participants noted that the course helped them realize they liked to be alone in the outdoors. Because Fiona had some difficult group experiences during the course, she learnt that she was more a "loner" when it came to outdoor experiences; she enjoyed the outdoors but without "hoards of people." Isabelle reflected on how the course influenced her ability to participate in outdoor activities by herself: "It has influenced my view on outdoors, even though I used to camp, and I would camp prior to that . . . the camps just reinforced that I can do any activity regardless of the weather. . . . I learned, both the summer and the winter camps, that

I can be left alone. I don't care." In addition, Katie mentioned that the course affected her recreational pursuits as she continued to cross-country ski and snowshoe after the course. Katie explained how the course made a difference "from a lifestyle standpoint" in that it encouraged her to spend a lot of time outdoors with her family, including winter camping: "I spend a lot of time outside [with] my family. When I had my kids, they were all outside. We camped. . . . They . . . really embrace nature, and I think a lot of it is because I really enjoyed that experience [course]."

### Process Themes

During the interviews, "how" and "why" questions were asked to probe for processes that linked specific course experiences and activities to significant life impacts. Four process themes were identified: personal growth opportunities; group experience; new or different experience; and toughness of climate/weather. While these processes overlapped with processes identified in the part of the larger study that focused on a summer university OE course (Wigglesworth, 2012), the last two processes were unique to the winter course.

**Personal growth opportunities.** Half the participants commented on how opportunities for personal growth in the course brought about a significant life impact through sub-themes of *personal challenge and/or accomplishment*, *personal reflection*, or *being pushed outside one's comfort zone*. Participants discussed how course challenges, along with the feelings of accomplishment, contributed to the course as a SLE. Quentin stated, "that winter course was a challenge, physically and mentally. If you want to prove you can do something and learn new skills for survival, it was great." Likewise, Liam viewed the winter course as a challenging but positive experience. Peter suggested the course was a "hardship" and a "character builder," but upon reflecting on the course now, he viewed it as a positive experience. Katie noted, "with winter camp, at the end . . . I had this real sense of accomplishment because that was tough." Therefore, the notion that course challenges often led to a sense of accomplishment was voiced by several participants.

A second personal growth sub-theme was personal reflection; however, there was less of a consensus that personal reflection contributed to long-term impacts compared to the summer course findings. Even still, one participant, Peter, clearly illustrated how "time to really think about things" was a memorable component of the winter course.

A third personal growth sub-theme was being pushed outside one's comfort zone. Gabrielle described her experience of the course in the following

way: “It challenged me a lot more, because there was a lot of stuff in the winter camping . . . really forcing me to go outside my safety zone, my comfort zone. . . . Things like . . . building the quinzee one weekend . . . then snowshoeing with a backpack for three days.” Aaron mentioned how the design of the course by the instructors pushed participants outside of their comfort zone:

Part of the philosophy I think of the course was to try something different. So that was challenging in itself . . . At that age you have a tendency to do what everyone else does, and to step outside and do your own thing is stepping outside of your comfort zone. So, that, everything you did in that course was putting you . . . out of your comfort zone in some ways.

In summary, participants’ felt personal growth opportunities led to significant life impacts.

**Group experience.** With respect to the second process theme, participants discussed the importance of conflict resolution, teamwork, communication, as well as how the bilingual nature of the course had a bearing on their outdoor experience. For example, Peter suggested that the group experience offered opportunities for team building: “The group dynamic was very good and . . . I don’t think it was just my group. . . . The weather was a letdown and yet it didn’t bring everybody down. . . . It was . . . really good team building.” Peter discussed the benefits of “interacting with people,” and how “learning to make concessions” would not have been the case had it been “a regular class setting.” Liam remembered a scenario in which he was in a group of 12 and one woman couldn’t keep pace in the heavy snow conditions; he recalled telling some of the members that they should slow down so that she would feel encouraged walking with the group. Liam explained how this experience of learning to work as a team was applicable to his job as a teacher:

I realized that even if I was . . . maybe stronger than the other girl, that being a group made a difference for her. . . . At the end of that camp . . . they mentioned her efforts, because she had struggled but she had worked hard and she got, like us, from Point A to Point B. . . . At that point I realized that when you do stuff as a group . . . when you work together, it’s much easier. It’s much faster. . . . I applied that when I teach, especially when I find that some students have a harder time. . . . That moment was very important for me.

It is evident that the group experience facilitated significant life impacts.

Participants alluded to how the bilingual nature of the course contributed to a SLE, and this was categorized as a sub-theme under the group experience process theme. One Anglophone participant who could also speak French, felt that the course offered great “leadership opportunities” in her second language. Another noted how she enjoyed the use of French during the course and continues to practice it today. One Francophone participant, Elaine, observed that the bilingual make-up of the course encouraged the long-term impact of effective team work skills. Another claimed the course’s bilingualism impacted her lifestyle, career and cultural awareness. Randy, one of two Anglophones on his course, discussed the cultural significance of the bilingual character of the course. For him, it was a “phenomenal cultural experience” that encouraged his eventual move to Quebec where he continues to live. Therefore, the bilingual setting of the course was influential.

This finding of group experience as a process theme supports previous research (Conrad & Hedin, 1981; Goldenberg, McAvoy & Klenosky, 2005; McKenzie, 2000, 2003; Witman, 1995). A review of adventure education program outcomes identified the mutual exchange that evolves within a group as an important factor in the personal growth of group members (McKenzie, 2000). Likewise, in the current study, as participants progressed through the winter course, they realized they were dependent on their fellow students, and consequently, they learned to cooperate and capitalize on the strengths of each group member.

**New or different experience.** Several participants described the course as an unfamiliar experience that stood out in their lives. Sometimes participants connected this feeling of experiencing something unknown with being outside of their comfort zone. Therefore, this new experience theme was linked and an extension of the “being pushed outside one’s comfort zone” theme. Gabrielle observed, “I’d *never winter camped before*, where I’d summer camped a lot.” This made her feel like she was forced outside her comfort zone. In regards to the winter snow activities, Gabrielle noted, “just something I’d never done. . . . I’d done the odd couple hours here, couple hours there, but never like that . . . so that was huge for me to do that stuff.” Similarly Katie explained, “winter camping was a really neat experience. It was very different. . . . You’re outside, and you’re with the elements . . . so it’s neat.”

Respondents who participated in both summer and winter courses were asked to compare the life impact of each course. Heather answered: “The winter one was more significant because I *hadn’t done that before*.” Likewise, Isabelle identified the uniqueness of the winter course as a rea-

son why it was perceived as having a “bigger impact” than the summer course:

How many people will just go out and camp in the snow versus camping in the summer? I think everyone probably at one time in their life pitched a tent . . . or built a fire and had marshmallows . . . or sat by a lake. But during the winter, how many people literally will spend the night outside? And not in a cabin. I think that is probably the biggest gift, to know what you can do with our conditions. . . . It takes more coordination, but I was able to enjoy afterwards any evening snowshoeing or cross-country skiing or downhill skiing or skating regardless of the weather.

This perceived novelty was one of two process themes unique to the winter course as compared to the summer course. The finding that participants perceived the novelty of the course as contributing to significant life impacts substantiates Daniel’s (2005) suggestion that a new or extraordinary event enhances the significance of the event. Life experiences can be significant because they are outside the bounds of the normal routine. With respect to Daniel’s (2003) classification of what makes a life experience significant, an event that is “outside the bounds of normal routine” (p. 73) was listed as one of the top factors enhancing a participant’s perception of life significance. This study’s finding of a new or different experience as a process contributing to a SLE is also consistent with Duerden, Taniguchi, and Widmer’s (2011) discovery that the novelty of setting and activities contributed to observable identity development gains in a youth adventure program, McKenzie’s (2003) finding that the unfamiliarity of the environment influenced course outcomes, and Hastie’s (1995) observation that 14 and 15-year-old adventure program participants were most likely to select activities they considered *novel*, fun or exciting.

**Toughness of climate/weather.** Another process theme was that the winter course was *tough* with respect to weather and climate. When asked if she thought the life significance of the winter course would be similar or different than the summer course, Heather replied: “It’s harder, because of the weather. . . . It was very cold. I think that respect you get for nature and for how you have to be smart about it or . . . you’re not going to be around. . . . I think that was much more evident in the winter course. . . . You had to take better care of yourself. You had to prepare better. You had to think more.” Peter also thought the winter course was a greater challenge: “I think on the winter course . . . the weather . . . made it a little tougher.” Barbara echoed: “You get cold, you’re wet, and we had bad weather for the



winter camp. . . . In the summer it was an easy ride.” For Fiona “toughing it out” gave the opportunity to learn a “lifelong lesson” about herself. When asked, “would you say that the life impact for you was similar or different than the summer course,” Fiona answered:

More, a lot more because it’s much, much tougher. . . . In the summer, you’re not going to freeze to death. It could be raining but we’re still not going to get sick. . . . It could be unpleasant, uncomfortable, but . . . the winter was a lot more uncomfortable, a lot more of the extreme, so you learn a lot more about yourself and *toughing it out*. And then being around people in these extreme situations when. . . . someone is near the edge—how do you bring them back? That was certainly a more *lifelong lesson about yourself* and about being in a group and how tough you can be or not tough.

The winter course was also viewed as more dangerous. Derek mentioned that any “omission in your planning or any mistake” led to a “higher level of discomfort” in the winter course. He insisted that “there’s a higher price to pay if you make a mistake in winter camping. . . . Poor planning was costlier in the winter.”

The finding of toughness of climate/weather, the second process theme to be unique to the winter course, reflected Daniel’s (2003) suggestion that a life experience is significant due to its nature or magnitude. Placing someone in a stressful situation can change one’s perception of his/herself. Svoboda et al. (2015) discovered that the winter landscape of an experiential education course encouraged participants to work hard to survive and to learn to be in harmony with their bodies. This theme also aligns well with Jirásek and Jirásková’s (2014) discovery of their respondents’ perceived fear of overcoming natural elements; their participants repeatedly articulated their apprehension in regards to whether they would be able to cross the mountains. With regard to self, Bandura’s self-efficacy theory (1977) suggests that mastering difficult tasks increases the participant’s confidence that he or she can accomplish other meaningful tasks successfully. McKenzie (2003) observed that pleasant weather can lead to increases in students’ self confidence and indirectly affect course outcomes by affecting students’ motivation while on their course. Bearing in mind the aforementioned investigations, it is reasonable to presume that the toughness of the climate/weather was an obstacle in the winter course that influenced participants’ perception of significant life impacts.

### The Course as Confirmation or Reinforcement

Beyond the outcome and process themes, another sub-theme was that the winter course reinforced already-held beliefs about the outdoors. Barbara mentioned how she was already impervious to the winter environment because she grew up in a northern town in Quebec. She understood herself as accustomed to winter activities. Fiona stated that she was familiar with winter activities upon enrolling in the course; therefore, for her, the course was more about surviving the cold weather. When asked if the course influenced his leisure and recreation practices, Quentin answered:

It would influence by *reinforcing*. . . . I was already doing it, so it just made me want to continue. . . . It's just a matter of here's the right gear to wear, and here's the right equipment, and this is how you protect yourself with what you wear. . . . Again, I think *reinforcing* is probably the biggest thing. Because my whole lifestyle was pretty much that way already, and that's . . . one of the reasons . . . which led me to take the course.

For Quentin, the course was not a new experience: "I was brought up that way with my parents. The course reinforced new skills that I learnt to teach my kids to use when we're camping, building fires, and appreciating nature, and all that stuff." Therefore, the course was not a SLE for all participants. Although a majority of participants did express that the course was a SLE, it seems that for a few experienced outdoors people, the course confirmed their views about their recreational activities, outdoor skills and overall lifestyle.

The notion of the course as a reinforcement reflects Ewert and Sibthorp's (2009) idea of confounding variables. Confounding variables can potentially affect *what* and *how* participants learn from an OE program, and *how* they report what they learned from the program. For participants who spoke of their extensive previous outdoor experiences before enrolling in the course, it is possible that their pre-experience may have affected how they constructed the meaning of the course, and more importantly, how this course was understood with reference to their entire lives.

## Conclusion

There are a few limitations to this study. First, there is the possibility that participants' memories of the winter course have been distorted during the intervening years (Kellert, 1998). Second, the participants that came forward all had an overall positive experience of the winter course, and the results may have differed if they had perceived a more negative experience. Third, this research was situated within a specific population and time period, which has consequences for the generalizability of the results. Finally, the current investigation relied upon self-report in the semi-structured interviews, and for some researchers and practitioners, participants' subjective experiences are seen as less informative than objective measures.

More research is needed to understand the dynamics of the life significance of OE programs. Future research could explore different age groups, programs and climates across the outdoor spectrum, as this study focused on one university program offered in a winter setting. By analyzing different groups' perceptions, future research may conclude that learning environments must be adapted to diverse groups. More research still needs to be conducted on the *processes* that link an OE course to a SLE, as this area of research is still in its infancy. Finally, the OE field warrants more research on how the winter landscape influences one's perception of a SLE. The opportunities that a novel and tough winter OE course may offer participants for self-discovery, environmental appreciation and social skills require more exploration.

The most important implications arising from this study relate to OE programming. The research results suggest the benefits of OE in university settings and the value of the cold, wintry outdoors as a classroom; however, the notion of the toughness of climate is influenced by individuals' prior outdoor experience and their perceived comfort zone. By isolating the processes and conditions that enhance the impacts of outdoor experiences, the current study adds to the knowledge base for prescribing conditions and program activities that more effectively promote these long-term impacts. For example, the evidence provokes discussion of how to transfer knowledge to participants' lives and careers, how to foster interpersonal development through group initiative activities, and how to cultivate personal growth through instances of challenge and reflection in tough winter landscapes. OE professionals have a role to play in educating people to understand the life-significance of a university OE course.

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