Fighting in the Forests: A Plan for Conflict Resolution in the Backcountry

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I: Introduction

Adventure Education is an emerging pedagogy that encompasses a holistic approach to teaching and learning in the backcountry. Adventure educators, and their professional counterparts, are often required to demonstrate a diversified skill set that includes both technical skills (e.g. rock climbing, paddling or camping skills) and interpersonal skills (e.g. ability to listen, connect with the participants and conflict resolution skills). Specifically, I will be taking a look at how professionals and students in Adventure Education are being trained to handle conflict resolution situations in a backcountry setting.

Purpose Statement:

The purpose of this paper will be to look at how the Adventure Education (AE) department at Fort Lewis College is teaching conflict resolution skills to students in the degree program. As well as how Open Sky, a wilderness therapy program in the greater Durango area, is training their staff in conflict resolution.

The specific research questions are:

1. To what extent does the AE program address conflict resolution?

2. How much does conflict arise in the professional field? How do they prepare their staff to handle it?

3. What steps can be taken to prepare graduates and/or professionals to handle conflict effectively and constructively?

Importance of the Study:

The information in this study will be valuable to groups who are looking to train the next generation of wilderness leaders. It will outline both concrete concepts, as well as shortcomings in how the training of expedition leaders is being conducted. To reiterate an earlier statement, adventure education is a holistic pedagogy and only by administering training for a diversified skill set, can the educators in our field continue to be a valuable asset to the clientele.

Definition of Terms:

Adventure education (AE): A pedagogy which incorporates a holistic approach and aims to better the person as a whole, not just intellectually.

Wilderness expedition: An aspect of a program that involves utilizing the wilderness, often having participants live together and survive for a set duration, to foster a positive learning environment.

Wilderness program: A generic term I will be using to describe any expedition or adventure program that utilizes a wilderness setting.

Outward Bound: One of the giants in the field of wilderness expeditions and adventure education, Outward Bound has been around for almost a century and is considered by many to be a leader in policy, procedures and theory about wilderness programs. Many programs based their personal ideologies off of Outward Bound.

II. Review of the Literature

Most wilderness programs have outlined strategies or resources to help deal with conflicts on their expeditions. These outlines usually take the form of a chapter in a staff manual but some programs implement a verbal or practical module to accompany written material and aid in teaching conflict resolution skills. The two main areas that have documented literature on conflict resolution are the aforementioned staff manuals and text books for adventure education students. This section will outline some highly regarded strategies in the professional field as well as how conflict resolution concepts are being presented in AE textbooks.

Staff Manuals/Professional Training

Traditionally, staff manuals are an instructor's 'backcountry bible' and provide valuable information to a leader when a more knowledgeable staff member is not available. Information will usually take the form of outlined strategies, tips and tricks, or games that an instructor can use to help aid in conflict resolution. This section will outline strategies that have been provided both by major figures in the field of adventure education, as well as how a small program, such as Open Sky, approaches conflict resolution. These following strategies are by no means a comprehensive list but they aim to give you an idea of how conflict resolution has been traditionally approached in a professional setting.

Strategy #1: V.O.M.P.

Created by the shared minds at Outward Bound, V.O.M.P. is an acronym that helps provide a structure for effective communication and ultimately effective conflict resolution. V.O.M.P. aims to aid in situations of "anger, threats, verbal disrespect, etc" (Crane et al. 6-15). Additionally, V.O.M.P. can be used as a teaching device with the hopes of ultimately letting the students orchestrate the mediation. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of what V.O.M.P. means.

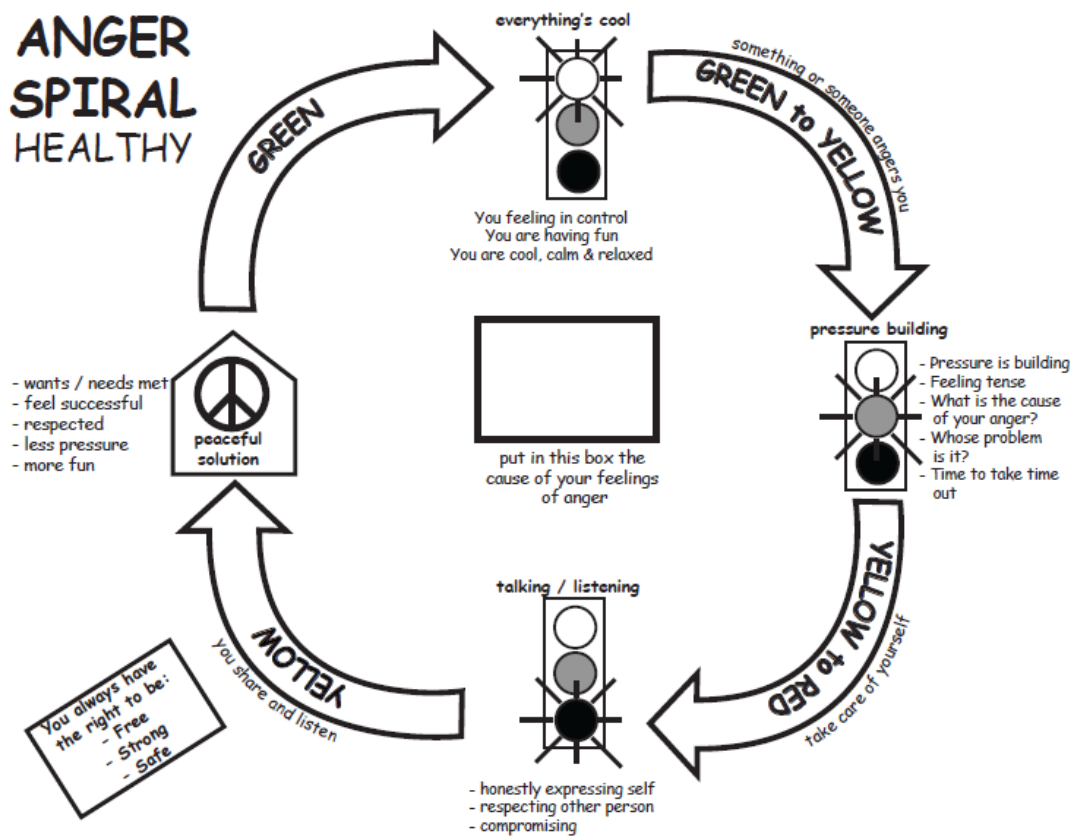| V	V- Voice: each person describes their version of what happened; "I thought you threw my socks in the dirt so I threw your bowl in the woods." Encourage students to use "I" statements.
O	O- Own: each person accepts responsibility for their actions; "I know I shouldn't have thrown your bowl in the woods but I was mad." Try to prevent students from using "but you" statements; "I know I shouldn't have, but you were egging me on."
M	M- Moccasins or Empathy: each person tries to express empathy for the other person; "Yeah, I would have been really mad if I thought someone threw my socks in the dirt."
P	P- Plan: make a plan for how to avoid this problem in the future; "maybe next time I could just ask the group if anyone knows how my socks got on the ground." Or, "Yeah, and maybe the group could just try to be more careful and always pick up stuff whether it's theirs or not."

Figure 1   ©Outward Bound™ Inc. Proprietary Information

V.O.M.P. represents a strategy that is commonly found in wilderness programs, and provides an easily-remembered device for conflict resolution. Furthermore, it is easily printable and can be sent into the field with the instructor for reference.

Strategy #2: Healthy Anger Spiral

Another tool that comes from Outward Bound (Crane et al. 6-20) is the Healthy Anger

Spiral. It is a simple tool based around the green, yellow and red colors of a stoplight. The

Healthy Anger Spiral holds value because it can be used as a preventative tool and allows

students and instructors a chance to step back and address the issues before they get out of hand.

Figure 2 is a diagram of the Healthy Anger Spiral:

Figure 2

The Healthy Anger Spiral represents another branch of thinking in the adventure

education pedagogy which aims to dispel conflict before it becomes too large of an issue.

Strategy #3: Time-outs

This strategy outlines a method for both dealing with and preventing conflict resolution once it arises. Time-outs can be prescribed by an instructor with the hopes of allowing the participant time to re-evaluate and consider their actions and/or words more carefully. Open Sky describes it as "Time-outs are intended… to provide the student with a resource for more effectively handling his or her emotions" (*Open Sky Staff Manual,* 6-32). Time-outs have the additional benefit of allowing ownership of the conflict and Open Sky outlines guidelines for allowing the student to announce the duration, location, and means of resolution.

Textbooks and Educational Approaches to Teaching Conflict Resolution

The current literature that exists in textbooks for Adventure Education seems to place very little emphasis on teaching conflict resolution skills or strategies. However, what the textbooks do provide is a very basic and foundational structure of teaching effective interpersonal skills. Skills such as promoting behavior contracts, teaching good emotional safety skills, how to address group needs and ultimately individual needs, good basic communication skills and a multitude of other skills that ultimately mesh together to form the groundwork for establishing good conflict resolution skills (Prouty et al, 41,55; Priest & Gass, 254).

Conclusion

While most programs have outlines for conflict resolution, they take the form of sections of staff manuals or brief modules of a staff training program. In an academic setting, there aren't a lot of concrete skills or strategies being taught. However, educational programs do a good job

of addressing more foundational skills, such as communication skills, which help provide a solid background and contextual framework from which students can build conflict resolution skills.

III. Methodology

Participants

For this study, I am looking at the differences between how conflict resolution is taught in professional programs and in academic settings. As a result, my participants consisted of professionals from current wilderness therapy programs as well as students and professors of the Adventure Education program at Fort Lewis College. The students participating in the study consisted of declared AE majors, largely sophomores and older.

Materials

In gathering data, I choose to use a variety of data collection instruments. The primary source of data will be in the form of surveys taken by both professionals in the Adventure Education field as well as students who volunteered to take a separate, student-oriented survey. In addition to the data, I also examined literature from both the professional field and staff manuals provided by professional organizations such as Open Sky and Outward Bound. The remainder of this section will provide a brief synopsis of each data collection instrument and describe it's relation to the study.

Data Collection Instrument #1: Interviews with Professional and Institutional Program Leaders

These interviews aim to gather data of a more qualitative nature. I will be interviewing program leaders with Open Sky and the Adventure Education department at Fort Lewis College. My intentions are to gather insight into how a professional organization (Open Sky) looks at conflict resolution, and if it is a relevant concern in their program. Additionally, I will be foraying into whether or not they believe that supplementary training in conflict resolution might be beneficial to their staff. My purpose of interviewing the institutional head of the Adventure Education department is to look into how conflict resolution skills and strategies are taught to those students who are looking for careers in wilderness-related professions. See Appendix A for full list of interview questions.

Data Collection Instrument #2: Survey of Current Adventure Education Majors

This survey will aim to gather numbers, based on quantitative analysis, about how well the Adventure Education department is doing in addressing conflict resolution. I am employing this survey in order to see if students feel they are being taught skills that will be valuable in the professional field post-college. I have spoken to my faculty advisor for the Adventure Education department and he has provided me with a mailing list of currently declared AE majors in order to help distribute my survey. I choose to survey only AE majors because the prerequisites consist of having taken three prior AE specific courses; one introductory class (AE 101) and two skill courses. This will help me gather data from those who have at least a basic understanding of how the AE program functions here at Fort Lewis. Largely though, the majority of declared AE majors are upper classmen who have participated in the 'block semester' (a semester dedicated

entirely to AE studies) where those conflict resolution skills (if any) would have been taught. Therefore, they will have a better grasp of the programs curriculum and whether or not it addresses conflict resolution. See Appendix A for a sample survey.

Data Collection Instrument #3: Survey of Current and Post-Professionals

This survey attempts to see what current professionals, and people who have worked in a professional setting, value as good skills to possess. The survey will help empirically establish what some trends are that have been coming from the field, and how conflict resolution fits into hiring practices and that list of 'desirable' skills. I will administer the survey to members of the professional field that I am able to access. This includes professors in the Adventure Education department and members of the Open Sky staff. [See Appendix A for a sample survey]

Procedures

Procedure for Designing and Administering Surveys

The surveys for this study were designed with the use of the free services provided by www.surveymonkey.com. Users are able to design a survey with up to ten questions and are able to collect up to 100 responses. The limit on questions and responses was not an issue for this study as there are approx. 75 declared AE majors and there was little risk of reaching the 100 response cap. Questions are easily designed and SurveyMonkey offers a variety of pre-programmed templates that only require you to input the text and the website does the rest of the work. After I created the survey I was able to use the e-mailing list provided by my advisor and contacted all the AE majors through the use of electronic communication. The survey was

presented as a voluntary survey and no students were forced to participate. Additionally, no identifiable information was collected and the students were able to remain anonymous by nature. This survey was sent out and no time restriction was placed on when students could answer.

<div align="center">Procedure for Administering Interviews</div>

The interviews were designed by myself and administered in person. I was able to meet with both of my intended interviewees and administer the questions, as well as provide an open forum for other issues that might have come up during the course of the interview. The interviews were conducted and recorded using a computer and responses to the questions were typed into a word processing program.

<div align="center">Analysis</div>

<div align="center">Analysis of Survey Responses</div>

In addition to the templates and designs provided by SurveyMonkey, they also offer free analysis and present the responses in easy-to-read formats such as percentages of answers and text blocks for open ended questions. This data was analyzed for total number of answers as well as where students showed concurrent or split opinions. I was able to perform statistical analysis on the responses and gather concrete figures about how students feel the Adventure Education program is addressing the issue of conflict resolution skills.

Analysis of Interview Questionnaire

The interview questions were analyzed using a process of inductive analysis. I was able to observe how the professionals in the field feel about conflict, and how their programs address conflict resolution. I wasn't able to draw a lot of statistical support from these interview questions but they provide an invaluable insight into some of the more complex issues associated with conflict resolution. This helped in seeing where there might be gaps from the professional field that are not carrying over to the academic field, or vice versa. Another benefit the interviews carried was that the professionals interviewed had numerous years experience with multiple programs and were able to present an interpretation that was highly 'standardized' and demonstrated as a common thought process held by many programs.

Analysis of Existing Literature

The analysis of existing literature was simplified in that most of the literature that was provided for study was in the form of staff manuals and student textbooks. This made it easy to find sections pertaining to conflict resolution and examine what had been published on the issue. Many staff manuals include a 'bag of tricks' that provide various games or strategies and these sections can be easily referenced to see if they contain a game for conflict resolution. If the manual did not have a game, strategy or section entry on conflict resolution, I was able to make some estimates of the quantity of literature available to adventure educators.

IV. Findings

After all the data was gathered and analyzed, I took a look at the data that answered these questions:

1. To what extent does the AE program address conflict resolution?
2. How much does conflict arise in the professional field? How do they prepare their staff to handle it?

Question #1: To what extent does the AE program address conflict resolution?

In the survey, students were asked to rate themselves and their ability to resolve conflict in the backcountry. This helped establish how the students felt about their personal ability regarding conflict resolution skills vs. how much was taught by the AE program. 50% of students rated themselves as "Very confident" in handling minor conflict (disagreements or put-downs) and 40.9% rated themselves "Very confident" at handling medium conflict (verbal fights or hateful comments). However, only 27.3% of students felt "Very confident" in handling major conflict (physical altercations and/or serious verbal harassment). Figure 3 is a graphic representation of those figures:
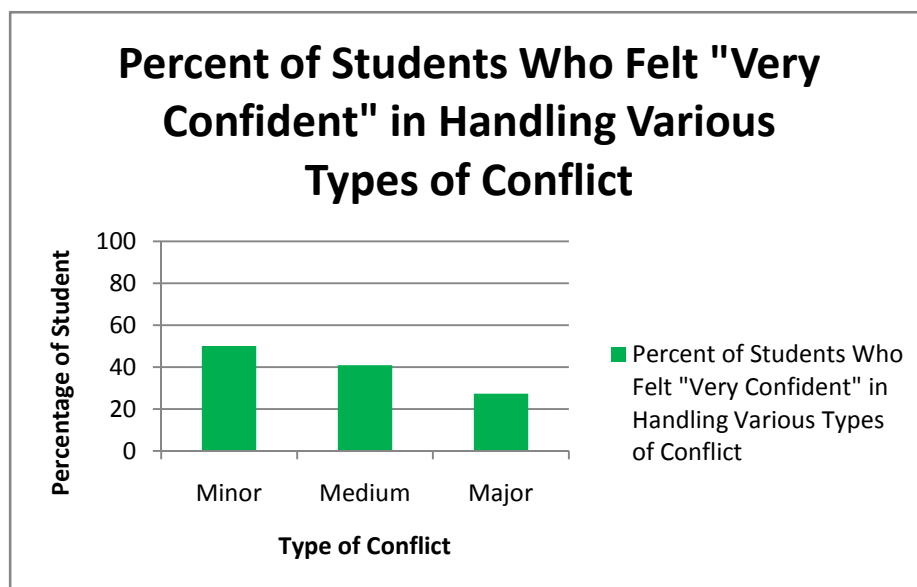

Figure 3

As you can see, the trend indicates that students feel well-equipped to handle minor conflict that may arise, but are not as confident about handling conflict once it escalates. Having established where students feel their personal abilities are, the survey than asked a.) where they learned their conflict resolution skills and b.) if they felt the AE department contributed to that skills set.

The next set of questions in the survey looked at how the AE program specifically has addressed the issue of conflict resolution. Students were asked to evaluate how the program has taught, modeled, and prepared them for a professional setting. They were asked to rate the questions on a scale of one to five with one representing "The AE program has not addressed the issue at all" and five representing "The AE program has done a good job addressing the issue." Figures 4, 5, and 6 serve to illustrate the questions and their respective percentile responses.
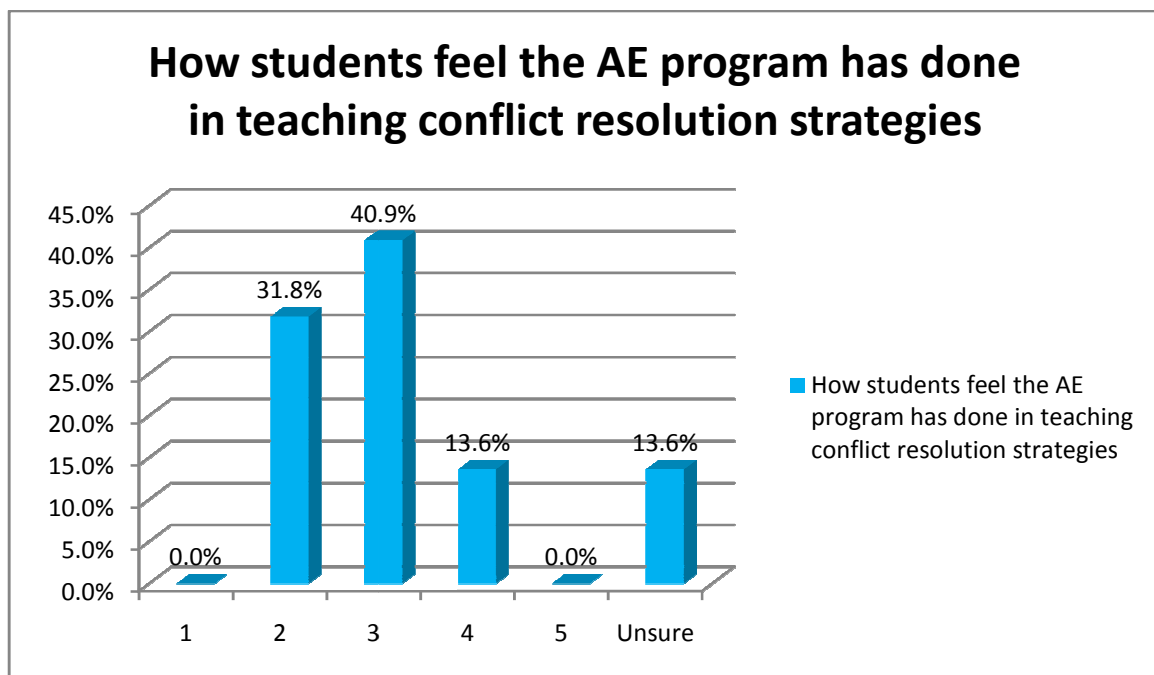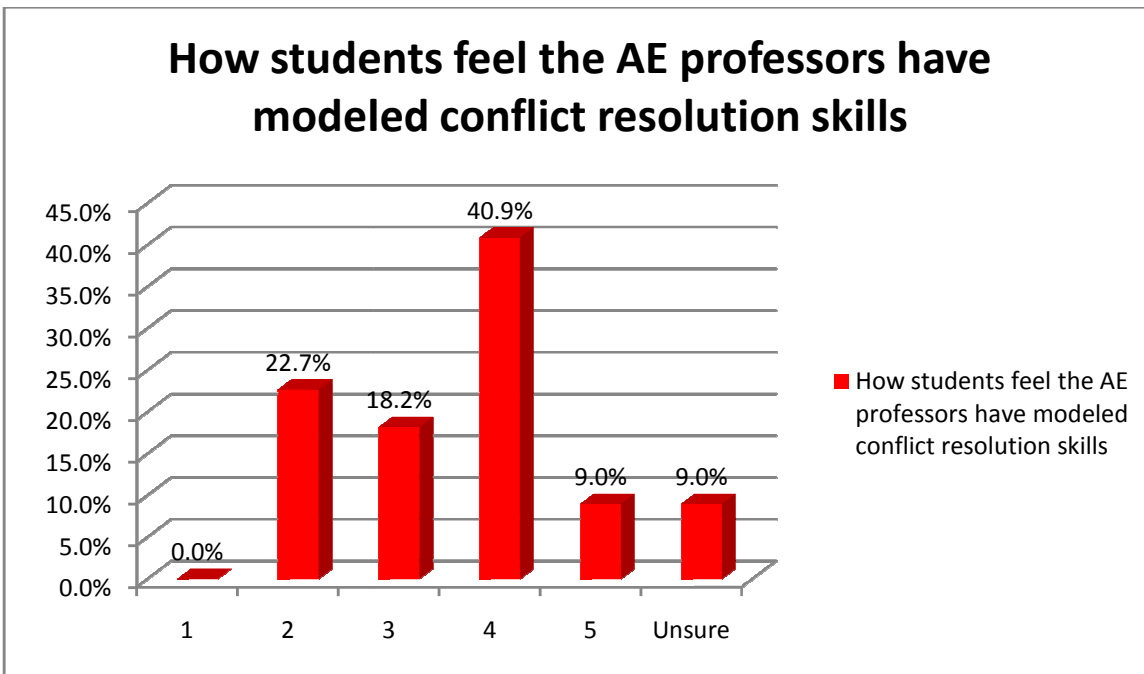

Figure 4

How students feel the AE professors have modeled conflict resolution skills

Figure 5

How students feel the AE program has prepared them to resolve conflict in a professional setting
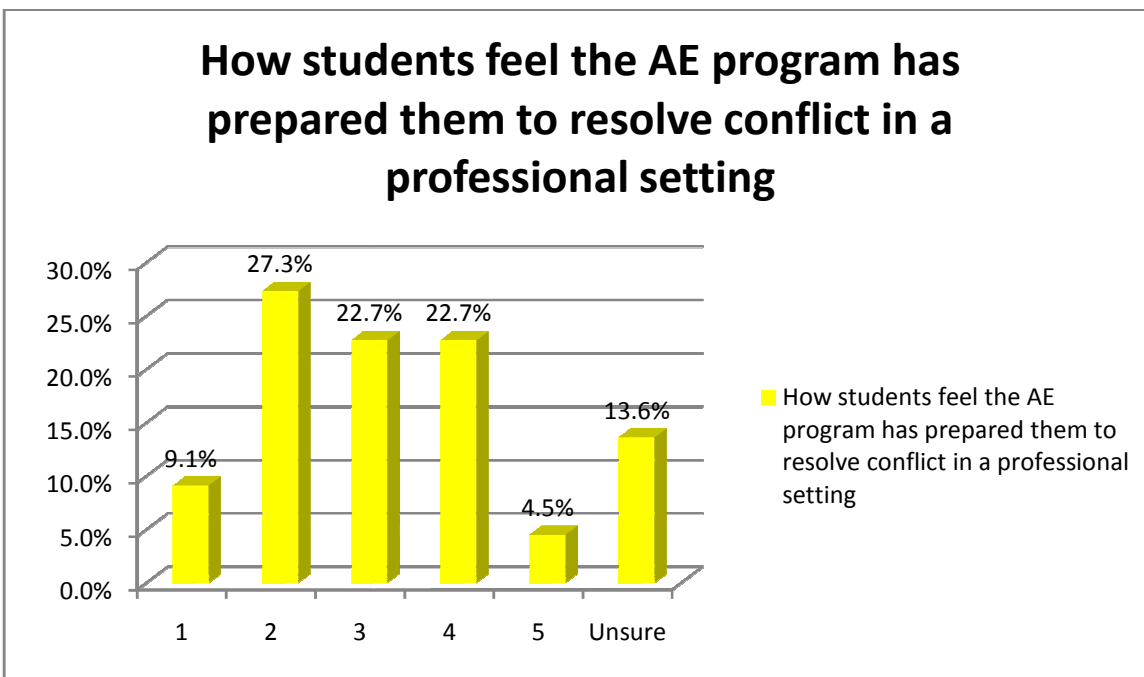

Figure 6

As you can see, the trend indicates that students feel they are getting taught at a

'satisfactory' level and that the professors do a good job of modeling conflict resolution skills;

however, the general trend is that they still do not feel prepared to handle conflict in the professional field.

Students were asked in an open-ended question, "Where did you learn your conflict resolution skills?" and answers were split down the middle. Many students answered with a comment similar to "I learned it doing work for a program or from other experiences outside school." At the same time, a majority of the students felt the AE program has supplemented their previous experience and helped build upon their previous knowledge. In addition, when asked a question about strategies or games for conflict resolution, most answered with activities they learned through the Adventure Education program, only a few students had activities that were not learned through AE.

Question #2: How Does Conflict Arise in a Professional Field? How do they prepare their staff to handle it?

These questions were aimed at current professionals and post-professionals who have chosen to pursue an academic career in teaching Adventure Education. My findings for this section came largely from an interview with a staff member from Open Sky and a professor of the Adventure Education department. During the course of my interviews, an interesting dichotomy arose between Outward Bound-type programming and wilderness therapy programs. My interview with the AE professor, who is a former Outward Bound instructor, revealed that he had encountered very little medium to major conflict over his 25 year tenure in outdoor programs. Conversely, the Open Sky staff member affirmed that medium to major conflict is almost a daily occurrence in their program.

Both interviewees seemed to share the opinion that the largest source of conflict comes from issues with group dynamics. For example, on mixed-gender expeditions, a guy and girl can develop an exclusive relationship and create some tension with other members of the expedition. Additionally, in the case of wilderness therapy, participants often have underlying social issues that can prove to be difficult to work with and create some complex group dynamics.

Having established that group dynamics are the largest contributors to conflict, I asked both of them what staff training is provided to deal with it. Our AE professor (and former Outward Bound instructor) answered that they receive very little 'hands-on' training and most of their conflict resolution information comes in the form of a section in the staff manual. The Open Sky staff member explained to me that their staff undergoes a two day "P.C.S." (Positive Control System) training which deals almost exclusively with conflict-related skills.

V. Discussion

Overview of the Study

The aim of this study was to examine whether or not there is a need to introduce better or more effective conflict resolution strategies to professional and/or academic outdoor programs. Based on the input of students, professors and professionals in the adventure education field, a critical examination of skills being taught was accomplished and the results were analyzed for current trends and strategies in conflict resolution.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study indicate that in the academic field students are getting the foundational knowledge and some good modeling for conflict resolution. Yet concrete and applicable strategies for the professional field are not present in the current curriculum. Students feel the program is addressing some conflict resolution skills but there is still a lack of confidence when it comes to performing in the professional field.

On the professional front in established outdoor programs there is some evidence of conflict resolution training occurring. It would seem that depending on which program you are working for, some will do hands-on training while others may only provide some reference material in a staff manual. Ultimately, conflict resolution training is left up to the program. For some programs, there is a need for training while other programs don't feel it is an area that needs a second thought.

Conclusions

While there is some evidence that increasing the amount of time and energy spent on conflict resolution could benefit a lot of programs, it's difficult to recommend it for all applications. The results of this study indicate professional programs will apply conflict resolution on an as-needed basis for their staff training and academic programs are more focused on developing foundational skills before working on conflict resolution. There seems to be very little opposition to increasing conflict training, but sometimes it can be hard to justify the extra time or costs that could be associated with it.

Recommendations

Students in the Adventure Education program at Fort Lewis College seem to be offered a very basic understanding of conflict resolution. In order to solidify their skills and create a mentality that they *are* capable of conflict resolution and that they *can* perform exceptionally in a professional setting; I recommend implementing additional forays into conflict resolution later in the major. By introducing either a special topic course or even just placing some more emphasis on the subject in upper-division courses, I believe a majority of students can become confident in their conflict resolution abilities. Additionally, increasing the focus on this interpersonal skill can help you build on other skills important to the professional field.

In the professional field, different programs require different degrees of conflict resolution. In a program such as Outward Bound, students are not as prone to communication and group dynamic issues and as a result, not as much conflict is likely to occur. However, in a wilderness therapy program, there are many compounding factors that can contribute to creating tension and ultimately conflict. In the results of this study, I recommend that programs take the initiative to implement a conflict resolution training module into their regular staff training. If nothing else, additional staff training has never been detrimental to a program's ability to run smoothly.

Limitations of the Study

This project proved to be a unique challenge when it came to gathering and recording data. During research, very little previous material could be found on the subject of conflict in wilderness programs and although conflict resolution has a well-documented past, its application to outdoor programs is still somewhat tenuous. Another large issue I encountered was the time constraints of the project only having a few weeks to compile data. Ideally I would be able to spend more time gathering data and have access other AE programs around the country, to see what trends can be observed in their programs. The sample size for AE students was restricted and due to my prerequisite criteria, only a handful of students were eligible for the survey. Ideally I would have longer to market the survey and at least get every AE major to answer; and if time permitted, attempt to poll students from other programs around the country.

During this time of year, access to professionals in the field proves to be somewhat problematic. There are only a few year-round programs in the greater Durango area and even those are usually stretched for staff. Since it was the off-season during the research collection, it was hard to get in contact with a large amount of outdoor program staff and if given more time, I would have liked to poll more of them to get a broader perspective. Additionally, some of Fort Lewis' e-mail access policies proved to hinder distribution of large-scale surveying.

If I had the opportunity to continue pursuing this topic, I would spend more of my time on distributing surveys and sampling a larger population from groups outside the Durango area. Perspectives from around the state or even around the country could prove to dispute or modify my results. I would also enjoy working with community groups or individuals to help develop a

solid backcountry-conflict resolution curriculum that could be distributed to any program

looking to supplement its current staff training.

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Appendix A: Data Collection Instrumentation

Interview Questions:

Fort Lewis College: Adventure Education Professor:

1. How many years have you worked in a leadership role with one or more programs?

2. During your time as a wilderness instructor, did you ever see serious conflict (physical altercations, etc.) arise between members of your expedition group?

3. How did you deal with it? (Examples or strategies)

4. Where did you develop your conflict resolution skills? Where they part of training for programs or just a skill set you've developed over time?

5. Do you think conflict resolution skills or strategies are taught in our AE program here at Fort Lewis?

6. Do you think that our unique position working with clientele in the backcountry warrants a different approach to resolving conflict than might be provided in the frontcountry? i.e. The duration of stay in backcountry with the conflicting party might impact resolution strategies.

7. Have you ever experienced severe conflict between members of an expedition that couldn't be resolved by you or your co-instructor? If so, what happened? e.g. Removal from expedition, etc.

8. Open Dialogue

Open Sky Wilderness Therapy Program Staff Member:

1. Personally, what are your strengths when it comes to being an instructor? As a program?

2. Name the three biggest issues that Deer Hill has to deal with on expeditions. e.g. Medical issues, fighting, unwillingness to participate, etc.

3. Have you experienced or heard of conflict among your expedition groups here at deer hill? If so, what happened?

4. Does your staff receive training into conflict resolution or is it a skill set you assume your employees already possess before working with you?

5. When looking to hire new staff, which is more important to deer hill, technical skills or interpersonal skills?

6. When (if) you've been a wilderness leader, did you receive any training in conflict resolution?

7. If your staff encounters severe conflict on an expedition that cannot be resolved by either the instructors or other members of the group, what is protocol for solving it? i.e. Removal from expedition, etc.?

8. Do you see any benefits or drawbacks to having a 'conflict resolution module' implemented into your staff training?

9. Open Dialogue

Surveys for Adventure Education Students and Professionals

Students:

1. Please rate the following questions on a scale of 1 to 5. 1 = Not confident at all. 5 = Very confident.

	1	2	3	4	5
How would you rate your confidence in being able to resolve minor conflict (e.g. disagreements or put-downs) in the backcountry?	○	○	○	○	○
How would you rate your ability to resolve medium conflict (e.g. verbal fights or hateful comments) in the backcountry?	○	○	○	○	○
How would you rate your ability to resolve severe conflict (e.g. physical altercations and/or serious verbal harrasment) in the backcountry?	○	○	○	○	○

2. How did you learn/develop your conflict resolution skills? Please provide a brief description or put N/A if you feel you don't possess any conflict resolution skills.

[ ]

3. I'd like to get your input on how you think the AE program at Fort Lewis has prepared you to handle conflict resolution. Please rate these questions on a scale of 1 to 5, 1=The AE program hasn't addressed it at all. 5=The AE program has done a good job of addressing the issue.

	1	2	3	4	5
How do you feel the AE program has done in teaching strategies for conflict resolution?	○	○	○	○	○
How do you feel the instructors of AE have done for modeling conflict resolution skills (either during block semester or in another class)?	○	○	○	○	○
How do you feel the AE program has prepared you for resolving conflict in a professional setting?	○	○	○	○	○

4. What are some conflict resolution skills and or strategies you are familiar with? (e.g. The Indian Talking Stick or other little games) Answer N/A if you are not familiar with any skills or strategies.

[ ]

5. Finally for classification I'd like to ask your grade, gender and how many years experience (if any) you've had working with adventure/wilderness programs.

	Grade	Gender	Years of Experience
Please Pick One:	[▾]	[▾]	[▾]

Professionals:

1. Please rate the following qualities you look for most when hiring new staff. 1=Not very important 5=Very Important.

	1	2	3	4	5
Technical ability (i.e. Do they have the skills to complete whatever program they've been assigned?)	○	○	○	○	○
Communication skills	○	○	○	○	○
Ability to work well with the administration	○	○	○	○	○
Teamwork and peer support with other staff	○	○	○	○	○
Interpersonal (emotional) skills with	○	○	○	○	○