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Busy doing nothing: researching the phenomenon of "quiet time" in a challenge-based wilderness therapy program

Valerie E. Nicholls
University of Wollongong

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**BUSY DOING NOTHING: RESEARCHING THE PHENOMENON
OF “QUIET TIME” IN A CHALLENGE-BASED WILDERNESS
THERAPY PROGRAM**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the
degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

from

THE UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

VALERIE E. NICHOLLS

L.C.S.T. (Kingdon-Ward, London)
BFA (Hons) (University of Tasmania)

Faculty of Education
2008

DECLARATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being submitted for any degree.

I certify that any help in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged.

Signed

Date

VALERIE E. NICHOLLS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

It seems appropriate that the theme of this thesis is one of solitude. Alone but not lonely, I have spent much of the last few years sitting in silence. This been both a privilege and a torture. That there is now an enormous sense of satisfaction and accomplishment is largely due to the people who have propped me up with their support, enthusiasm and good will.

I would like to acknowledge the input of my parents, Tom and Jane. In my early years reading and spelling were not my forte. I thank them for their encouragement and instilling in me the notion that education equalled freedom. I realise now that they trained me to be an independent student, to sink or swim according to my own merit. What a strength that has been during the course of this project.

I am indebted to the participants in this study and to the staff at Project Hahn. Particular thanks goes to Rob Sveen. Without his irrepressible enthusiasm and vision I may never seen that there was a place for me in the world of research. Thanks Rob.

Especial thanks goes to my supervisors Dr Tonia Gray and Associate Professor Dr Garry Hoban. They brought complementary skills and perspective to the task of getting me over the academic line. Thanks Tonia for your enthusiasm, belief, eye for editorial detail, friendship and hospitality. Thanks Garry for your encouragement and faith in my ability. You have truly mastered the art of constructive criticism, thank you.

Over the last couple of years writing this thesis has been one of a number of significant life challenges that have demanded my attention. My social life has been neglected in the extreme. That I have any friends at all is nothing short of a miracle. But a miracle it is and I acknowledge the love, patience and good humour of every one of them. Especial thanks goes to Dyan and Haydn Perndt. Angels.

To my family, Pete, Nick and Emma I say a heartfelt thank you. United in their belief in my capacity and respectful of my passion, each in their own way has contributed to

keeping this thesis 'afloat'. Thanks Em' for your delight in my achievement, the sushi eraser, the pencils, and all the stationery gizmos that have made sitting at this desk more fun. Thanks Nick for your support across the miles and giving me the strength of the pounamou. Dear Pete, I so often take your support, patience, unfaltering love and belief in me utterly for granted. Thank you. Thank you. Time to balance solitude with noise and action - lets get out and have some raucous adventure!

In closing, I would like to dedicate this thesis to my dear pal Kate. In life she inspired me to embark on this journey and in death she inspired me to bring it to completion. Thank you Kate, you are in every page.

ABSTRACT

Wilderness therapy programs are increasingly regarded as an effective alternative to more traditional forms of therapy for people identified as ‘at risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ (Gass, 1993). Despite substantial evidence to support the use of wilderness and adventure experiences to promote attitudinal and behavioural change, much remains unknown about the process of change and the experiences of participants.

The purpose of the research was to generate a grounded theory about participants’ experiences of *Quiet Time* within a challenge-based wilderness therapy program. The central question to be addressed was: What is the phenomenon of *Quiet Time* from the participants’ point of view and how do they use this phenomenon in a challenge-based wilderness therapy program?

A grounded theory design (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) was chosen as a methodology to guide the collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Sixteen male and two female participants from four Mountain Challenge wilderness therapy programs scheduled between February 2002 and February 2005 participated in the study. All but one of the participants came to the Mountain Challenge as part of ongoing therapy for drug and/or alcohol addiction. This triggered significant and particular ethical concerns that impacted on the design of the study. The exception was a female trainee facilitator who participated as all other participants and had no facilitative responsibilities. Data were collected in the form of interviews, photographs, journals, field notes and standard program documentation. An analytical framework using inductive and deductive categories was selected to analyse the data.

Based on the findings a theoretical model of the phenomenon of *Quiet Time* was deduced and a number of propositions for practice and research advanced. The research findings identify *Quiet Time* as a ‘sense’ of solitude that, contrary to understandings of solitude as an objective and external condition, is defined by the four co-occurring subjective and internal conditions: a sense of being alone; a positive mind frame; a personal time perspective and focussed attention. Further analysis led to an

understanding that *Quiet Time* was typically brief, participant initiated, and inclusive of experiences of “being alone together.” Participants utilised *Quiet Time* as an opportunity to focus on nature, reflect, and to engage in authentic and heartfelt conversation. The outcomes of *Quiet Time* were found to impact positively on participants’ immediate experience and processing of the wilderness therapy program. The study also indicates that the incidence and use of *Quiet Time* may be facilitated or constrained by a number of conditions including environmental factors, leadership styles, levels of group development and the individual needs, strengths and limitations of the participant. Among a number of outcomes found to extend beyond the duration of the program was, for some, the taking up of a habit of *Quiet Time* as a deliberate self-help and life enhancing strategy. Unexpected findings included the potential for *Quiet Time* to arouse feelings that may overwhelm and confuse participants.

One of the major contributions of the study is that it identifies *Quiet Time* as a commonly occurring, and predominately participant initiated phenomenon that has, despite its capacity to impact positively on participants’ attitudes and behaviours, been largely over looked by the wilderness therapy literature. *Quiet Time* was found to differ from traditional concepts of solitude in wilderness programs in terms of its duration, how it is defined and how it is initiated. Despite its brevity the outcomes of *Quiet Time* parallel positive outcomes documented elsewhere. The main implication from this research is that the therapeutic potential of challenge-based wilderness therapy programs can be enhanced by promoting the opportunity for participant initiated *Quiet Time* through the adoption of an unhurried and process oriented approach to the wilderness adventure.

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