

Matthew Devereux
Community Report
South Africa

Observations and Analysis on the Outward Bound culture and how it affects those that come into contact with it.

I'll be basing my community report off certain extracts out of my blog and journal that I feel accurately represent the experiences I've had during my overseas placement. I've chosen to use blog posts and journal extracts as I feel it'll give the most honest and authentic depiction of the work I've undertaken, the area I've lived in, the things I've seen & discovered, and the people I've met. Working at Outward Bound means I have been cut off from the outside world with the exception of holidays so my community happens to be my work colleagues and my friends all in one.

OBSERVATION

Blog 1: It's already been month!

There's a distinct lack of wifi at Willow Point as the managers seem to have commandeered it for themselves, so excuse the poor consistency of my posts. *Takes a step inside accommodation for the next year* "oh jeez". Minimalist is a word that keeps popping into my mind around here. The full time instructors were quick to tell us that if we want any additional furniture we either make it, scavenge for it or fight for it. So a few days later we did just that, now it feels like home; 2 small desks, two chairs, a double locker, two single beds, a book shelf and ONE plug socket.



ANALYSIS:

My initial feeling of shock was one that I became familiar with as time went on; the minimalist life style that instructors have to adopt is a good reality check as to how much stuff one actually needs. For some people this isn't even a choice; neighbouring townships such as Smutsville have much tougher living conditions to put up with and the additional problem of crime. For example on June 26th 2018 there were some major riots that elevated to law enforcement using rubber bullets and gas. (<http://www.edgecommunitynews.co.za/a-day-no-one-will-forget/>)

In the Outward Bound community there's a huge emphasis on reusing and recycling everything, not only to save money but to leave less of a footprint on the environment like many other businesses forget to do. Our aim was to be aware of our surroundings and try and have as little of an environmental impact as possible whether that be on base making something out of recycled wood or leaving no trace on a campsite. In addition it's parts of OB's mission to spread awareness and teach the students that come on courses to be aware of the effect they're having on their surroundings and even on each other.



OBSERVATION

Fortunately due to the nature of Outward Bound we travel around a lot (also, noticed whilst travelling that everyone waves and is incredibly welcoming towards us) which allows us to take advantage of the more stereotypical African heat and additionally witness some of the most beautiful scenery South Africa has to offer which is interrupted by the odd baboon here and there, truly privileged to be here. The long road trips also give me the opportunity to get to know the other instructors who have taken us volunteers in as part of the family and treat us as such.

ANALYSIS:

The Outward Bound family is very open and accepting to everyone; social class, ethnicity, disability are all irrelevant and you're accepted for whoever you are as long as you're respectful to others. This has to be my main defining characteristic for the community as it benefits not only the participants but the instructors and me as a volunteer. Everyone leaves with something, not always a eureka moment where they've discovered everything about themselves but sometimes just how to treat someone of a different ability to you, how to talk to someone when they're panicking or how to make someone else feel good about themselves and not just focusing on how to make yourself feel good.

OBSERVATION

As part of the project we act as support for the instructors, this can be anything from doing a rock climbing and abseil set up to providing water support for the instructors and their students. So throughout the past few weeks we've been training to become proficient at these kind of skills so we become useful in the smooth running of outward bound courses. One of the things during training which I've been most pleased with is the kayak rolls, within two training sessions I have managed to be able to 180 degree, 360 degree and bomb kayak roll which is where you start with the paddle behind you in completely the wrong starting position. Repetition, repetition. The Outward Bound South Africa motto; you work hard, you play hard, you don't mess with the system. I feel so far I've done just that.



ANALYSIS

The hierarchy in OB on a day to day basis is fairly none existent; there are training managers, Course coordinators, instructors and volunteers. People aren't in their position with the sole purpose of giving out commands or taking them, everyone is there to do a job and we're all part of the 'machine' that allows OB to keep doing what it's doing. The OB culture is one that means you have to take on responsibility for your own progression and if you get something that someone struggles with it was considered the OB way to pay it forward and help those who need helping so they can help the next person and so on. This gave me a fantastic work ethic as I felt independent and the idea was very much, you get out what you put in.

I feel this kind of work ethic can be repressed when the hierarchy is very forceful and it can in fact have adverse effects and de-motivates employees as they feel that they're aren't being treating seriously and professionally.

I put my quick progression in terms of the set ups and water skills down to this work ethic that OB provide, it gives you a sense of this is where I get to prove myself and lays out a self motivating aura.

OBSERVATION

Blog 2: Keeping Busy

I've also been given the fantastic opportunity to start taking part in Department of Social Development courses. The moment I stood in the opening circle of my first course I felt apprehensive as I didn't know how it was all going to go down and I had only heard some rather eyebrow raising stories of previous courses.

As we had virtually zero experience we weren't put with the groups straight away, it's one thing to be put in front of a group of school children but a different angle needs to be taken when interacting with these groups. Similar to the school children, a line of professionalism needs to be drawn in order to ensure they respect your authority and listen to you when things need to be done, yet still be able to be friendly and keep things light hearted. Doing this can be harder with these children as they like to push the boundaries so it takes an instructor with specific skills to be able to draw this line, I hope to be able to gain some throughout this year. From the first course since I've been here there have been a few more courses in which I've been able to have more interaction with the groups which has been an experience to say the least. They speak in Afrikaans so communication is tough as their English is bad and my Afrikaans is even worse. Despite the communication barriers it's evident that they'd just been given a bad hand in life which has forced them into situations that landed them one step away from prison and thus on this reformation programme to set them on the right path to a future that could really bring out their potential. The crimes that these children

are involved in are usually violent or involve theft which reflects their situation or upbringing, for example there could be no role models within the family to provide them with basic morals or there's a lack of income to the household so they are forced to take matters into their own hands to keep their family from going hungry. Not bad children, just bad situations.

ANALYSIS:

Sedgefield is a reasonably well off area which is populated by a majority of white Afrikaans, down the N2 towards Knysna there's a township called Smutsville. Luxury life style and families below the poverty line struggling for secure employment are separated by a few mere kilometres. Over a year I saw every DSD participant that came through Outward Bound and every single one of them came from a township, without fail. The circumstances are almost impossible to escape, they are a product of their surroundings and their surroundings are arduous to say the least. The lack of infrastructure in these areas and the crime rates means that business owners are reluctant to set up therefore barely any cash flow goes through these areas meaning that progress is slow to non-existent. A current OB instructor that has lived around a township stated that even the food delivery companies won't deliver into the township as it's very likely that they'll be robbed as everyone knows they'll have food and money with them which makes them a target.

OB is very beneficial to the DSD children as they've been taken from a toxic environment where they have to be thinking about how they're going to provide for their family or how to escape the reality of it all through drugs & drinking and placed in one where they have the tools and people to facilitate them in unveiling their potential outside that environment, furthermore the aura that OB holds allows them to feel accepted and no judgement that they may otherwise encounter due to their appearance.

The end result shows them that through working together and putting in as much effort as you can possibly put in will result in something positive, the idea is then that this will be transferred into the real world and give them self belief to aim high in school or gain employment through honest means.



OBSERVATION

Journal Extract

'Over the past months I've found that religion is one of the most influential aspects over a majority of the South African population and primarily for the Afrikaans instructors in my case. Their answers are almost always derived from their religious beliefs and it's hard for me to adjust to this as I don't share the same beliefs in any way. In my opinion it closes the mind as you've committed yourself to a certain set of ideals'.

ANALYSIS:

As I said in my journal, religion is one of the main apparatuses of control concerning how people think and choose to act in South African society (and in the world); I'd even say it is one of the more defining characteristics of the country since it is popular belief that religious values should also be incorporated into Government policies.

In terms of belief my views haven't changed, however I feel that it's a necessity for all religious and none religious groups to have their values & beliefs respected within reason, I have grown to appreciate religious followers as it's a concept I feel I'll never be able to trust in and find comfort in, yet so many find happiness and structure by committing themselves to it.

When observing the instructors I found it frustrating when they impose their religious views on the participants. For example, during debrief an instructor put the day's success down to God and that the participants got strength from him.

For a religious believer this will most likely have positive effects as it will enforce their faith, on the other hand there were a number of atheists participating, so this statement could be considered disrespectful in their eyes as it completely overlooks their sense of accomplishment. As an atheist, I pride myself in having strength within myself and not having to get it from anyone or anything. If I had just faced one of my greatest fears I'd feel good within myself and for someone to claim that this strength came from a separate source, which I share no belief in, would frustrate me and make my accomplishment feel trivial.

Note

When crossing paths with some Afrikaans people it has certainly challenged my moral compass as there is an element within the culture of racism, sexism and homophobia. Being faced with these polar opposite views served to confirm my own and make sure I treat everyone as an equal and not discriminate under any circumstances. Additionally it has highlighted even more so the fact that people are product of their surroundings and this subconscious hate has been ingrained and taught to them from a young age. The only way to combat this is to educate and overtime come to a mutual respect for one another.

OBSERVATION

Journal Extract

'My year is coming to a close now, writing every single day for 338 days. I've seen how the culture has affected the participants that have come through here and how the values have rubbed off on them, now I'll be able to see how it has influenced me as a person over this duration'.

ANALYSIS

So, how has it? I guess you could say where I was once ignorant I have become more aware; I acknowledge my surroundings more and don't just take things at face value. The thief isn't just a thief, (for example) it's someone with a family who's trying to provide and they've been pushed into a corner where they see crime as the only viable option as they don't have any other means.

I definitely want to avoid the cliché of being the returned volunteer that's completely well rounded and has a front of false enthusiasm. Instead I want to highlight how I've made progress, and the idea of being the well rounded person or the complete package after one year is unrealistic. Speaking for myself, I can say that the perfect person doesn't exist by my definition nor should you try to be but this year has been an example to me that I can progress in all areas and I'll be an improvement from the previous day.

Finally, I'd like to give thanks to for the entire opportunity and everyone at Outward Bound South Africa for the good and the bad experiences as they're all equally as valuable and to Project Trust for making it all possible.

Cheers.