

OUTWARD BOUND PEACEBUILDING
PRACTICUM ON EXPERIENTIAL PEACEBUILDING (PEP) FOLLOW-UP EVALUATION

**SUMMARY OF PEP '12 & '13
FINDINGS & DISCUSSION OF PROGRAM EVALUATION**

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BACKGROUND

This report emerges from conversations that I had during the last six months with participants in Outward Bound (OB) Peacebuilding's Practicum on Experiential Peacebuilding (PEP). Outward Bound is well-known worldwide for its excellent experience-based leadership programs, and OB Peacebuilding – a member of the global Outward Bound network – offers its experiential methodology as “a transformative tool for building peace,” through expeditionary programs like the PEP.

Launched in 2012, the PEP brings together working professionals and students from all over the world for a ten-day journey in the Costa Rican cloud forest. The PEP integrates conflict resolution and leadership training in a multicultural context, and challenges participants to “take their skills to the next level.” In addition to hiking and camping together, participants experience a homestay with a Costa Rican family, a rappel down a tropical waterfall, a “Solo”, and a joint program with the UN-mandated University for Peace.

This evaluation constitutes a follow-up study of the June 2012 and June 2013 iterations of the PEP. The main objective centered on listening to participant perspectives in order to glean empirical data useful for identifying long-term impacts that correspond to PEP's explicit goals:

- To explore and learn the methodology and philosophy of experiential peacebuilding.
- To cultivate compassionate leadership and cross cultural awareness for sustainable change.
- To learn, practice and apply conflict resolution and peacebuilding skills in an experiential context.
- To join active networks of peacebuilders.

This report can also be considered as a contribution to a broader conversation on peacebuilding programming. Prominent pioneers in the field of peacebuilding promote an increase in programming that is creative [1] and experiential [2]; scholars have called for more research into initiatives that recognize participants as “*whole human beings*” [3] and prepare them to be effective leaders in the field of international peace and conflict [4]. At the same time, emphasis is increasingly placed on effective evaluation of peacebuilding programs to identify what works, how, and why [5]. Top-down, “Track-1” peace processes and traditional “dialogue-as-talk” programs often fail, in part because they do not engage bodies politic—groups of humans—on the deeply human and meaningful level of *experience* [6].

Methodology for this project was rooted in qualitative case study design [7] and inspired by a “humanizing research” framework [8], in which researcher and subject are understood to be co-learners. Data collection consisted of an online questionnaire and in-depth interviews. The questionnaire employed both discrete and open-ended questions. Interviews were semi-structured, conducted via Skype or other online video interface.

The report is organized into two main sections: Evaluation Outcomes and Areas for Further Inquiry. These are followed by a discussion of challenges, implications, and final thoughts on the evaluation process.



SECTION I: EVALUATION OUTCOMES

OVERALL PROGRAM QUALITY

Questionnaire responses and in-depth interviews revealed strong impacts for the PEP. 16 of 17 respondents affirmed that the PEP met or exceeded their expectations. Reflecting on the practicum as a whole, participants praised the experience as “unique”; “absolutely amazing”; “the most challenging and rewarding experience of my life”; and “mind-blowing.” Unlike most traditional professional training programs, PEP has shown to impact participants, to differing degrees, both professionally *and* personally: “It opened my mind a little bit”; “I am a better person for having undertaken the challenge”; “I am forever changed.”

Data suggest that the PEP is indeed an effective tool: 16 of 17 of respondents attested that the experience was “transformative” or that it “enhanced/reinforced” their capacities and commitments to building peace.

Beyond data, participants’ testimonies demonstrated that they had shared something profound -- “deep” and “real” and “awesome” -- which this evaluation will try to put into numbers and words. Case in point: 100% of interviewees, when asked if they would recommend the PEP, stated that they would or already had.

PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES ON PROGRAM ELEMENTS

Participants of PEP ’12 and ’13 highlighted the following aspects as most important to their experience:

- **OB Peacebuilding facilitators**
17 of 17 respondents agreed that the facilitators played a key role in their experience. ‘Facilitator Interaction and Insights’ received the highest overall ranking among program elements.
- **Group element**
17 of 17 respondents agreed that the group element was important: *“The best part was getting to know all of those people”; “[The other participants] were really inspiring, and that just blew away any expectations I had had.”*
- **Experiential methodology**
Participants rated ‘Hiking/Backpacking’ and ‘Conflict Resolution Exercises’ highly on the questionnaire and, significantly, as equally important. One participant summed up the interrelated importance of these two elements: *“I love the tangible learning, and I love the tangible learning outside.”*
- **Place: The Costa Rican cloud forest**
16 of 17 participants agreed or strongly agreed that the outdoor element was important to their PEP experience. And 100% of interviewees remarked that “Nature”, “the Outdoors,” or “the Natural Environment” was an essential element of the program. Furthermore, participants emphasized that being *unplugged* in a natural setting was key to their experience.
- **Challenges: Body and mind**
Participants stressed the integrality of physical and mental challenges to the quality of their experience. The degree to which an element of the PEP was challenging to each participant varied; however, 16 of 17 agreed that the Waterfall Rappel -- regarded by many to be one of the greatest challenges -- was important, describing it as “powerful”; “a struggle...[and] truly wondrous.” Others cited the Solo as the most challenging element.
- **Cultural immersion: Homestay**
When asked “what would you be sure *not* to change about the PEP?” the most prevalent answer was “the homestay” or “[contact] with local inhabitants”, and participants described this element of the program as “eye-opening”; “unique”; a “really great experience”; and “essential.”

N.B. While the order of program elements outlined above reflects a ranking derived from quantitative metrics on the questionnaire, interviews suggest that none of the elements stands alone as paramountly “important” -- rather, it is the way(s) in which OB Peacebuilding unites all of the elements together that creates such strong outcomes and lasting impacts. When asked “what was the best part” of PEP, participants often struggled to name just one, proffering instead: “It was the whole experience.” Indeed, the various elements were interconnected in the embodied experience of PEP participants:

“[Building peace is] a much more active process. Which is what this course does. They make it active: you have to frickin’ move. You literally have to keep going or else that’s it. It’s a physical embodiment of what [building] peace should actually be.”

PROGRAM IMPACTS

Questionnaire responses and in-depth interviews indicate the strongest impacts in the following areas:

1. Reinforced understanding of and commitment to Experiential Peacebuilding
2. Compassionate leadership
3. Cross-cultural communication
4. Self-knowledge and growth

1. REINFORCED UNDERSTANDING OF AND COMMITMENT TO EXPERIENTIAL PEACEBUILDING

- 16 of 17 respondents agreed or strongly agreed that their commitment to and understanding of experiential peacebuilding had been reinforced by the PEP.
- All 16 of those 16 participants professed to using methods or ideas they learned on the PEP in their current work or studies.

“[PEP] helped me know various techniques to reflect with my staff and community I work with. I learnt the power of nature in transforming others’ thought and I am using it since then and IT WORKS!”

- Many participants expressed appreciation for the PEP’s experiential learning methodology, which empowered them to step safely out of their “comfort zone” and to learn by doing: *“It’s a great testing ground.”*

2. COMPASSIONATE LEADERSHIP

- 16 of 17 participants agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “I am a more effective leader now thanks to skills I learned on the PEP experience.”
- 17 of 17 respondents confirmed that the PEP had a positive impact on their acting toward others with compassion.
- None of the participants held views opposed to compassionate leadership before the PEP. However, OB Peacebuilding’s explicit focus on practicing compassion among a group of strangers on a challenging expedition invariably impacted participants:

“Compassion...PEP made me think a lot about this word, until now, keeps me thinking of it.”

&

“The experience of the trip itself, yes, it does and can breed compassion and compassionate leadership...the setting creates all sorts of opportunities for you to experience that, or for you to initiate it.”

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“[PEP] transforms me as a leader that is more compassionate not only for others but also for myself.”

3. CROSS- CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

- Participants asserted that PEP was different from other conflict resolution or professional development workshops they had attended in the past. Working as a group, outdoors, with people from diverse backgrounds provided a unique opportunity:

“I grew as a person in my ability to connect with strangers, communicate with folks without a common verbal language, and it helped me find my empathy.”

&

“It was helpful for developing myself as a person, about the compassion and the communication skills, and getting to know all those different people, different backgrounds also, made me see things and people differently. And that is making me a better person.”

&

“[PEP] transformed my way of meeting new people and being able to communicate and work with them in a cohesive group into a more smooth and quick process.”

- Interviewees cited communication skills as one of the most widely transferable skill sets that they learned and practiced on the PEP -- from work in areas of protracted conflict, to social service organizations in North America, to interpersonal relationships in any geography.

4. SELF-KNOWLEDGE AND GROWTH

- Invariably, in-depth interviews provided evidence that the PEP goes beyond offering discrete, technical skills and impacts participants more holistically. One participant stated: *“It greatly enhanced who I am.”*
- Participants expressed that PEP empowered them to better get to know their professional selves:

“I liked learning about myself and the way I function, in a completely different setting.”

&

“It’s about – the whole physically stretching yourself, mentally stretching yourself, spiritually stretching yourself. And all the stretching is happening at the same time.”

- This self-knowledge seemed to lead not to selfishness, but to a renewed sense of interconnection between oneself and others:

“That’s how I would describe what the program is about. How we empathize and relate to people, regardless of where they’re from...You have something in common with everybody, and when you’re in nature, it’s easier to find what really makes you you and what makes them them, and finding similarities.”

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“My relationship with myself, with the environment, and with the people I live with: Do I live harmoniously with my colleagues? With myself? How am I connected with the environment I am living in? Those are three important parts of transformation in my personal growth.”



SECTION II: AREAS FOR FURTHER INQUIRY

SUMMARY

Participant perspectives on their PEP experience were overwhelmingly positive. However, limitations inherent in discrete questionnaire questions led to unclear outcomes in some cases. When asked if the PEP was a “transformative experience”, for example, one respondent marked “Neutral or Unsure.” Later, in the interview, she was able to elaborate:

“As far as your goals for peace, and your appreciation of cooperation rather than competitive, and talking about effective communication styles to enhance peaceful rather than combative conversation... That’s something that I had already worked with, supported, promoted. So when I went [on the PEP], these were really reinforced, enhanced.”

The above example shows that formulation and contextualization of questions are key. Likewise, participants’ rankings of PEP elements are open to qualification. For example: although 3 participants rated the University of Peace element of the PEP as most important, it was not among the highest-ranked elements in aggregate. By assigning a low ranking to a particular element, a participant may not have intended to indicate that that element was unimportant, but s/he simply “had to rank it somewhere.”

Follow-up interviews allowed for more nuanced conversations, which offered participants the opportunity to share specific ideas about how to improve the PEP. Given 17 different respondents, there were 17 different opinions, which could at times be contradictory or inconclusive. Nonetheless, several themes emerged during the evaluation, and it is worthwhile to explore participants’ suggestions as they relate to the goals and structure of the Practicum in the following areas:

- Networking and follow-up
- Conflict resolution exercises and Course Reader
- Logistics, gear, schedule, and activities
- Accessibility and preparation

1. Networking and follow-up

Participants reported keeping in-touch with one another mostly via email and Facebook. However, not all participants had Facebook accounts, and some felt that social network hubs were inadequate to sustain the “personal, close, intimate kind of communication” they had experienced on the PEP. Maintaining the relationships post-PEP across distance has been a challenge: “We made a list of things we were going to do, and then life happens.” Participants recognized that the onus to keep in touch falls on the participants themselves; however, they offered some ideas for OB Peacebuilding to bolster the network:

- Several participants expressed interesting in expanding their OB Peacebuilding network: *“Introducing participants of different PEP programs to one another and doing joint follow-up activities (even if on-line).”*
- Participants may be more likely to attend an online webinar if it is *“organized around specific relevant content, such a guest speaker or an interactive workshop.”*
- *“More readings after the course, specially about the dynamics/activities/exercises given during the expedition.”*
- *“Survey participants at set intervals after the expeditions (right after, 3 months later, a year later, 5 years).”*
- *“Create a Program/Education Coordinator position responsible for supporting start-ups that use the PEP model.”*
- *“Why not an evolving document, a book full of follow-up experiences, lessons learned, questions?”*
- *“Conduct further study into best practices of organizations that seek to support multinational networks.”*

2. Conflict resolution exercises and Course Reader

Participant perspectives differed on the degree to which the conflict resolution exercises had been “woven” into the course, versus “laid on” at the end of the day. Similarly, questions about the Course Reader met with mixed results in terms of its integration into the course. Some participants expressed a desire for more explicit engagement with pre-course readings. Others admitted to having read little or none of the Course Reader beforehand, but felt that this did not detract from their experience, and they valued the texts as a reference after the PEP. Participant feedback related to these topics includes:

- *“More time to focus on the peacebuilding & conflict resolution exercises during the expedition, and perhaps a small booklet that will be handed at the end (or during) that summarizes these methodologies.”*
- *“Stay longer at one place where you can go to deeper themes.”*
- *Some participants expressed a desire for more direct discussions: “Group tensions were not addressed and we did not discuss any actual conflict the group may be experiencing through the trek”; “I felt that it was a missed opportunity in terms of some of the specific skills.”*
- *On the other hand, one participant stated: “They kind of left conversation up to the participants and let it unfold organically...when someone disagreed it was encouraged”.*
- *Another participant suggested that “addressing specific expectations of participants” or establishing “ground rules” might have been helpful.*
- *“Send fewer readings for focus before, then more readings/resources afterwards.”*
- *“Create an online library in addition to course reader. A liaison with a research institution could facilitate this.”*
- *“More readings that focus in particular on Costa Rica.”*

3. Logistics, timing, and activities

Participants offered some thoughts on pace and duration of the expedition, which may reflect tensions tied to the intentionally challenging nature of the PEP. Others shared suggestions relating to specific activities and equipment:

- *“Consider activities besides hiking/backpacking, such as rafting as a team or more volunteer work.”*
- *Several participants felt that the PEP would be even stronger if it were slightly extended: “I would elongate the course to have an extra 2 days so that the program doesn't feel too compressed and tight for time”; “12 days would be perfect.” They acknowledged, however that “that’s asking a lot of people.”*
- *“We ended up not having time to do the traditional solo exercise. I would definitely make sure that any group has the ability to experience the solo as it's intended (overnight activity vs. a couple of hours of alone time).”*
- *“For my solo, I was so exhausted that I didn't feel it was the deepest experience for me. Instead of reflecting/writing/meditating, I ended up goofing off and resting (sleeping).”*
- *“Avoid late night trainings and group discussions after long hikes.”*
- *“Make it more accommodating to introverts...as an introvert I need time to be quiet and alone to process and I don't feel like I got that time as much as I needed which hindered my learning process.”*
- *One participant stated that OB Peacebuilding had “prepared us well in terms of supplies”, while another claimed to have spent money on gear only to be told to leave some behind at the start of the trip: “In the future it would be helpful to shorten the supply list that is sent to participants.”*

4. Accessibility and preparation

Several participants mentioned the diversity of the group -- in terms of age, background, field of work, gender, ethnicity -- as a strength of the PEP. Others felt it could have been more diverse. All agreed that the PEP was a recommendable program and ought to be made more accessible, offering ideas that include:

- *“More localities with OB programs in other continents/contexts.”*
- *“More diversity (of any kind) is good.”*
- *“Provide more scholarships to increase diversity and decrease expense.”*

- *“Consider designing a PEP course that allows people of different abilities to fully participate, such as those with past injuries or people with different kinds of physical/mental disabilities.”*
- *“Recommend a few months of regular strength training before [the expedition]. Could have prepared people better in terms of physical: ‘hey, walk a couple miles with a backpack every day for a while.’”*



DISCUSSION

ON LENSES AND CHALLENGES: Taking the work of scholar-practitioner John Paul Lederach as a guide, this evaluation sought to listen to participants’ voices, with a focus on outcomes and impacts: “Evaluation methodology needs to be about observing, listening, and more about theories of change than results” [9]. Participant perspectives reveal how and why the PEP worked for them, and they offer potential insights for peacebuilding programs that seek to follow best practices in experiential methodology.

Challenges in the evaluation process include interrelated aspects of scheduling, geography, and technology. Because PEP participants are professionals working in diverse contexts around the world, some found it difficult to find the time for an online questionnaire, and internet access is not always a given. Further, a noon interview in the Eastern time zone of North America is at 9 a.m. on the West Coast, 7 p.m. in Kigali, and 3 a.m. the following day in New Zealand. Skype made these interviews feasible. But the irony was not lost on the interviewer: conversations about a program that is based on being unplugged required us to be plugged in.

ON METRICS: Perhaps the most important aspects of the PEP – or any program – cannot be quantified. The passion with which participants spoke about the PEP one or two years after the expedition cannot be adequately expressed in a numerical ranking, or in black words on a white page. Consider a participant’s response to the question: ‘How do you describe the PEP to people who have not heard of it?’

“An awesome experience where, over ten days, [you] are stretched to your limits in the outdoors, hiking, while learning about conflict resolution and putting it into practice...with people from all over the world, not only in theory but in a very practical sense.”

Perhaps the greatest tribute to the quality and impact of the PEP program is the compelling timbre of the participants’ voices as they recounted still-vivid memories and shared deep insights into their current professional and personal lives relating directly to their OB Peacebuilding experience.

ONWARD: This evaluation project, like a great journey, has left the researcher with more avenues to explore. Here, the focus has been on impacts. Continued follow-up with PEP participants throughout their careers may help gain greater understanding of the program and illuminate ways to grow it.

OB Peacebuilding’s experiential methodology, with its focus on challenging participants to move beyond their comfort zone, may hold particular relevance for the field of strategic peacebuilding: “Strategic peacebuilding is *interdependent*...this often means that we must develop processes that link and relate dissimilar concerns and activities and that forge relationships between people who are not like-minded” [10].

The 2012 and 2013 PEP expeditions created an opportunity for people from diverse contexts with diverse perspectives to walk and work interdependently toward building peace. Perspectives shared in this evaluation suggest that it is challenging, and worth it, and the journey does not end in the Costa Rican cloud forest, but continues.



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