

Lived experience of emotional highs in experiential learning

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINAL AUTHORSHIP

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Student

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ABSTRACT

Despite knowing that positive emotional experiences tend to be beneficial for learning, our incomplete understanding of the emotional system rarely allows us to incorporate emotion adequately in real learning situations. The experience of emotional highs, as observed in experiential learning courses, has been selected as the phenomenon of the study.

This thesis is concerned with developing a more sophisticated understanding of the phenomenon by studying the lived experience of emotional highs. Hermeneutic phenomenology has been selected as a suitable approach. This approach examines not only the perceived end-state of emotional highs that at times is considered as the whole emotion, but also recognises the events and processes that trigger this state. Understanding the interrelationship between triggers that gradually *co-create* the emotional high may help in understanding emotion not only as a 'reaction' or 'end-state', but highlight its interactive and constantly changing structure.

The lived experiences of 21 Australian adult learners were examined. Learners participated in one of four 2–8 day experiential learning courses; three of which, including Outward Bound Australia courses, were partly held outdoors. Learners reflected and made sense of their lived experience through surveys and semi-structured interviews.

As a result, 14 themes emerged to illuminate learners' experiences. Based on these themes, three patterns: 'Sense of clarity', 'Sense of balance' and 'Learning as a therapy', were mapped to illustrate the particularities of emotional highs. The themes and patterns underpinned the reconsideration and development of a definition of emotional highs.

Facilitators, educators, practitioners and scholars may find this study particularly useful for two main reasons. Firstly, emotional highs are seen as significant learning experiences. They may not work only as avenues to engage the learner to the learning process but also change the scope of the learning by making it more meaningful. Secondly, this study highlights the lived experiences of learners that at times can be taken for granted or become lost among the stakeholders involved in experiential learning.