

Experiential Learning Activities for Teaching About Leisure and Spirituality

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Introduction

Interest in Leisure and Spirituality

The topic of leisure and spirituality is becoming increasingly popular in the recreation and leisure studies field. In Driver, Peterson and Brown's (1991) book titled *The Benefits of Leisure*, McDonald and Schreyer wrote a chapter on the Spiritual Benefits of Leisure where they outlined possible spiritual benefits of leisure participation and leisure settings. Subsequently Driver, Dustin, Baltic, Elsner, and Peterson (1996) co-edited a book titled *Nature and the Human Spirit* where managers of natural areas and parks were encouraged to plan for the provision of opportunities for experiencing the spiritual benefits of outdoor recreation along with other recreation benefits. Research updates have also appeared in *Parks and Recreation* on the topic of leisure and spirituality (Heintzman & Van Andel, 1995; Zueffle, 1999).

Leisure and Spirituality Course

Within this contemporary context, a course on leisure and spirituality provides the opportunity to address this increasingly popular topic in the recreation and leisure studies field. The author developed and implemented a course on leisure and spirituality with the following course description:

This course will include: an historical overview of leisure and spirituality; the understanding of leisure within various religious and spiritual traditions; the role of spirituality in different sub-fields of recreation and leisure (e.g., outdoor recreation, therapeutic recreation); and the social scientific study of the topic.

Book of Readings

As a textbook does not exist specifically on the topic of leisure and spirituality, a course readings book was developed for this new course. The book of readings covers the following topics:

Spirituality and Religion (Definitions and Understandings)
The Scientific Study of Spirituality

Introductory Articles on Leisure and Spirituality
Leisure and Spirituality in the Western Tradition
Judaism and Leisure
Christianity and Leisure
Islam and Leisure
Eastern Religions and Leisure (e.g., Taoism, Hinduism, Zen)
Leisure, Health and Spirituality
Tourism and Spirituality
Leisure, Nature and the Human Spirit
Camping and Spirituality
Outdoor Education and Spirituality
Adventure/Experiential Education and Spirituality
Social Scientific Research on Leisure and Spirituality
Approaches and Issues in the Social Scientific Study of Leisure and Spirituality
Bibliography

There are 51 different articles in the Book of Readings that totals 380 pages.

Experiential Learning Activities

The course readings book facilitates an approach to learning where the student becomes an active participant in the learning process. With the course readings book as a resource, there is little reliance on lecturing in this course, and the book of readings is the foundation for a variety of experiential learning activities. Space does not allow all of the experiential learning activities that are used with the book of readings to be described in this article. Six examples of the learning activities are described below.

1. Definition of Spirituality.

During the first or second class, students are given a few minutes to write down their own understanding and definition of spirituality. Then each student has the opportunity to share their understanding of spirituality with their peers. As this is done the instructor writes down key words from the students' definitions of spirituality on the blackboard. Then the instructor facilitates a discussion to see whether the class can come up with the key components of spirituality. Next the students are instructed to look up the following reading in their book of readings: Elkins, D.N., Hedstrom, L.J., Hughes, L.L., Leaf, J.A., & Sanders, C. (1988). Toward a humanistic-phenomenological spirituality: Definition, description, and measurement. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, 28(4), 5-18.

According to Elkins et al. there are nine components of spirituality. Depending on the number of students in the class, students either on their own or in a group are assigned one of the nine components to read and then explain to the rest of the class. Each student or group is also to explain whether or not they agree that the component of spirituality that they have been assigned from the reading is actually a component of spirituality.

2. Diagramming the Classical View of Leisure as found in Aristotle and Monasticism

Early in the course the classical view of leisure is reviewed since it has historically been associated with a spiritual understanding of leisure in Western Society. Aristotle associated leisure with contemplation and then later, Christian theologians such as Augustine and Aquinas Christianized this understanding of leisure. In this exercise, students are given a homework assignment to read the following article on Aristotle's view of leisure: Owens, J. (1981, December). Aristotle on leisure. *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 16, 713-724.

Since it is often easier for students to understand Aristotle's view of leisure through the use of a visual diagram, students are asked to graphically diagram Aristotle's view of leisure in relation to such concepts as work, drudgery, toil, relaxation, entertainment, amusement, education, leisure, intellectual life etc. The students then share their diagrams with each other and this leads into a discussion and clarification of Aristotle's view of leisure. For the next class the students are asked to read the following article: Leclercq, J. (1984). Otium monasticum as a context for artistic creativity. In T.G. Verdun (Ed), *Monasticism and the arts* (pp. 63-69). Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.

At the following class students complete an exercise similar to the previous class where they come up with a diagram to explain the various dimensions of the monastic understanding of leisure (manual work, intellectual work, contemplation, reading and writing, otium or leisure, repose of spirit, interior silence, asceticism, life in the cloister, etc.). Students then explain their diagrams to the rest of the class leading into a discussion of the relationship between leisure and spirituality in monasticism.

3. Leisure and Various Religious and Spiritual Traditions.

This section of the book of readings has numerous readings on the relationship of leisure and spirituality in the following religious and spiritual traditions: Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Taoism, Japanese religious festivals, Hinduism, and Zen. Students have the opportunity to choose the religious or spiritual tradition that they are interested in. For the next class they then read the article and prepare a presentation on what they learned. Students are asked to include discussion questions in their presentation in order to facilitate class discussion. Most students present what they have learned via power point presentations.

4. Leisure, Health and Spirituality

This section of the book of readings contains articles on therapeutic recreation from different perspectives: New Age consciousness, Christian, and generic spirituality. Students are put into groups according to their interest and each group prepares a presentation for the next class of a summary of their article.

5. Leisure, Nature and the Human Spirit

To introduce this section of the course, the students are invited to the professor's house which is located on two and half acres of forest on the side of a lake. Students are instructed to find a spot on the property that appeals to them and then to be silent for a while in that spot. Next they are to journal write about their experience or about a previous experience they have had related to leisure and spirituality in a natural setting. When the group gathers together again, the students are given the opportunity to share their experiences and their journal writings. This sharing leads to a facilitated discussion of leisure and spirituality in natural settings. The class is concluded with a meal together.

6. Social Scientific Research on Leisure and Spirituality

One of the last sections of the book of readings includes most of the empirical research studies related to leisure and spirituality. Students chose an empirical study that they are interested in. For the next class they are to summarize the research study under the following headings: Research Question; Methodology; Results; Conclusions and Implications. This summary is to be one page in length. The students are to submit the summaries to the professor in advance of the class via e-mail. The professor then makes copies for all of the students. In class the students, using their summaries, briefly give an overview of the study they have chosen for the rest of the students.

Outcomes of the Learning Activities

The desired outcomes from the experiential learning activities associated with the book of readings on leisure and spirituality are as follows:

1. To become familiar with the terminology used in the scientific study of religion, spirituality, and leisure.
2. To understand the issues involved in the scientific study of religion and spirituality.
3. To understand the historical relationship of leisure and spirituality in Western society.

4. To become familiar with the understanding of leisure within some of the world's religious and spiritual traditions.
5. To understand the relationship between leisure and spirituality within various sub-fields or recreation.
6. To become familiar with the perspectives, research and issues in the current social scientific study of leisure and spirituality.

The instructor has observed a number of benefits of the experiential learning activities. First, by giving students opportunity to share their understanding and definition of spirituality before they are assigned readings on the concept of spirituality, the importance of the students' own views is reinforced. Second, some activities (e.g., drawing diagrams of Aristotelian and Monastic views of leisure) help students learn about and understand an abstract concept. Third, by giving students choice in some units of the course (e.g., different religious and spiritual traditions; leisure, health and spirituality) students are able to explore those areas that they are most interested in. Fourth, opportunities to work in small groups exploring topics of interest allows students to get to know each other better. Fifth, the journal writing experience in nature followed by discussion of readings related to nature and spirituality gives the students an opportunity to interact with the natural world, to reflect on past experiences, and to make connections between their own experiences and theory on this topic.

Recommendations

As a result of this approach to learning, students are encouraged to explore this topic, rather than being taught the content. It is important that the book of readings cover a broad spectrum of readings on leisure and spirituality both in terms of different spiritual perspectives and spirituality within the various sub-fields of recreation and leisure, in order that the students are exposed to a diversity of spiritual perspectives, and that they learn how pervasive and relevant spirituality is within the recreation and leisure studies field. Since a variety of spiritual perspectives exist and since spirituality is often a personal matter, it is important to give students choices in experiential learning activities, so that they can learn within their own comfort level. Hopefully such an approach will enable students to expand their horizons and increase their knowledge in the area of leisure and spirituality.

References

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