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SPECIAL ISSUE PAPER

Taking leisure seriously: new and older considerations about leisure education

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The subject of leisure education has ancient intellectual roots similar to those of leisure itself; and the attention to the subject within the World Leisure establishment dates back to the beginning of that organisation as well. But while the rationale for leisure education (education in, through, and about leisure) has been well developed and its approaches well documented, its *purposes* have not been critically examined. This paper examines flow and serious leisure as important objectives for educational interventions in the context of leisure, but it cautions against an overvaluing of these purposes to the exclusion of others. It asserts the need to educate about other leisure qualities, including relaxation, exploration, appreciation, and sociability that are at least as important to subjective wellbeing and to personal and community development. While discrimination of interest and focus of attention are appropriately addressed in leisure education, resisting an excessive narrowing of leisure repertoires and cultivating a relaxed openness to experience are also consistent with long-held leisure ideals.

Keywords: leisure education; leisure history; flow; serious leisure; relaxation; development

Preface: The multiple meanings of leisure education

The idea of leisure education first came to me as an educational psychology doctoral student in the early 1970s. Leisure struck me at the time as an important context for education, where learning occurred as a function of intrinsic motivation rather than as a result of the usual extrinsic contingencies found in formal education, such as grading and certification. The training of a well-educated populace and workforce may depend to some extent on such contingencies, but informal education is at least as closely linked to personal development and self-actualisation, primarily through its connection to intrinsic motivation. I was persuaded by the literature of that time, as I am still today, that intrinsically-motivated learning is directly related to optimal experience, growth, and wellbeing. Work on intrinsic motivation by Edward Deci (1982, 1992) and Richard Ryan (Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000), by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi on "flow" (1990) and optimal experience (e.g. 1988, 1990, 1993), and by Robert Stebbins on "serious leisure" (1992, 2007) is all consistent with this position. Csikszentmihalyi would also have formal education become more intrinsically involving, even play-like, to achieve optimal experience *and* achievement, while Stebbins would have everyone take leisure activities seriously enough to have them yield most of those benefits. But the message from both is similar: intrinsic motivation is the best basis for learning and human development.

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Intrinsic motivation is generally accepted as being essential to leisure as well. (See Kleiber, Walker, & Mannell, 2011, for a review on this point.) Looking at leisure education as education *in* and *through* leisure, i.e. as informal education, seemed a good way initially to understand it. Thus, for all the years since those graduate student days, I have been interested in leisure education as the learning that takes place on the playground, at recess, after school, and over summers, in camps and other informal leisure settings.

This orientation notwithstanding, I recognise now that the term "leisure education" has been appropriated to mean other things for other purposes around the world. For most, leisure education more clearly positions leisure as the *subject* of education rather than the context, as suggested above. While the context of leisure is also often used for instruction about leisure, as in teaching all about skiing on ski holiday weekends, leisure may also be the subject of formal public education as well (i.e. in a non-leisure context). Thus, children, adolescents, or adults may all be taught *about* leisure wherever there is a need, such as in discussing tourism in fifth grade geography lessons, reviewing time-use options in organisation pre-retirement programmes, or acquainting college students with the nuances of delivering community recreation services.[1]

Taking leisure seriously

Such academic purposes aside, taking leisure seriously is a compelling social need, as has been clear to those who have written textbooks on leisure education (e.g. Bullock, Mahon, & Killingsworth, 2011; Dattilo, 1999; Mundy & Odum, 1979; Ruskin & Sivan, 1995; Sivan & Ruskin, 2000; Stumbo, 2011). Not only is a sober assessment of leisure implicated in the social problems – drug, alcohol and tobacco use and abuse, sexual promiscuity, and other kinds of delinquency – that bedevil youth in their non-school hours throughout the world (see Caldwell, Baldwin, Wallis, & Smith, 2004a, and Caldwell et al., 2004b, for more on this issue), the subject arises with respect to any sudden increase in free time, such as that associated with unemployment and retirement (see Kleiber et al., 2011, for reviews). These concerns and purposes have been central to the development of position statements in leisure-focused associations in the United States (e.g. Pesavento & Ashton, 2011) and elsewhere.

Through the auspices of the World Leisure and Recreation Association, a commission on leisure education (EDCOM) was formed in the 1980s under the direction of Professor Hillel Ruskin of the Cosell Center for Physical Education, Leisure and Health Promotion at Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The commission organised meetings and sought to provide leadership for countries around the world with agencies in search of information on the importance of leisure as a subject for education, and how and to whom instruction might be effectively provided on the subject (Ruskin & Sivan, 1995; Sivan & Ruskin, 2000).

Several position papers were developed and issued by the EDCOM group, and while there is much to be drawn from this work, two contributions are particularly noteworthy: (1) the demonstration of the potential of leisure education for addressing problems of at-risk youth, i.e. those whose impoverished circumstances lead them into health-compromising behaviours; and (2) the potential for serious leisure to be cultivated and used to good advantage developmentally by everyone.

With respect to the second, the commission benefitted from the active participation of Professor Robert Stebbins, University of Calgary, who has conducted important research on the subject of serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992, 1999, 2007). Stebbins regards serious leisure as "the systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer activity that participants find so substantial and interesting that they launch themselves on a career centred on acquiring and expressing its special skills, knowledge and experience" (1999, p. 3). The elements of serious leisure include the participant's willingness to put forth effort and persevere; the sense of having a career-like trajectory for the activity; the quality of a unique subcultural ethos surrounding the activity that contributes – with emerging competence and increased involvement in the activity – to personal and social identity; and the activity's potential to yield enduring benefits such as increases in self-esteem and social integration. As noted earlier, serious leisure is compatible with (perhaps even driven by) the experience of intense involvement or "flow" described in considerable detail elsewhere by Csikszentmihalyi (1990; see also Mannell, 1993, for a similar comparison.) The essential connection of serious leisure to leisure education is that people, particularly children, who learn to take leisure activities seriously, will be likely to avoid some of the problems of leisure (e.g. drug and alcohol abuse) *and* benefit developmentally and socially.

Stebbins and others have contrasted serious leisure with casual leisure – all the rest of leisure – indicating that the latter is essentially hedonic and therefore "needs no instruction." Hence, the argument goes, leisure education should be devoted primarily to serious leisure and to casual leisure only as it gets in the way of serious leisure. Stebbins does acknowledge that the relaxing properties of casual leisure provide some degree of balance to serious leisure in creating an optimal leisure lifestyle, but it is clear that his position, and that adopted by WLRA/EDCOM, was that instruction and intervention should centre on serious leisure, i.e. on taking leisure activities seriously.

Serious leisure involvement would depend on the cultivation of interest and intrinsic motivation as well as the development of qualities of character that would contribute to initiative and perseverance, but the proponents of serious leisure have given little attention to the aetiology of serious leisure other than to say that ultimately activity interest takes the form of "careers." Most of Stebbins' research subjects have been adults, and the empirically-established components of leisure education developed in the US that might lead in the direction of serious involvement were notably absent in the WLRA/EDCOM writings on the subject of leisure education. How the idea of taking an activity seriously enters the imagination, or what experiences lead in that direction, are questions which remain to be seriously considered. But my feeling is that, even if there was a prescribed curriculum for shaping serious leisure, exclusive attention to it would undermine some of the other important tasks and goals of leisure education.

The "casual leisure" argument

Stebbins, Ruskin, and their followers have taken the position that cultivating serious leisure is the most important purpose of leisure education. The rest of leisure, or "casual leisure," may be valuable for providing some sense of balance in life, but it is essentially hedonic, self-indulgent pleasure taking and needs no special instruction.

My objection to this idea, which is shared by others who see this portrayal of leisure as overly limiting, is that there is far more to be cultivated with respect to leisure than just activity competence and devotion, as valuable and important as that goal may be. Learning to appreciate the world at large, learning to relax and be open and curious, learning about one's own interests and possibilities, and responding to the collective activities of others, all require some forbearance on the project of cultivating serious leisure (cf. Hutchinson & Kleiber, 2005). My own feeling is that leisure educators are enamoured of the idea of serious leisure primarily because it may enable them to be taken more seriously by educators who don't know anything or care anything about leisure and who value work, productivity, and achievement. But rather than being the first thing a good leisure education programme addresses, serious leisure might better be the last, even if it is a valued ultimate outcome.

There are at least four reasons *not* to take activities seriously, at least not initially, and these would become other objectives of leisure education.

First, taking an activity seriously requires commitment; other action choices compete with such a commitment. Breadth of experience and exposure to the wider world are easily ignored where commitment is cultivated. While there is ultimately value in making such commitments, it seems ill-advised to align leisure education exclusively or even predominantly with that purpose, especially in its initial stages. It should also be pointed out that commitment can have the effect of putting all of one's eggs in a single basket, and this can be particularly problematic as people age and experience life changes or negative life events that make that particular commitment impossible or simply maladaptive. It becomes intuitively obvious (and well supported by research; see, for example, Dupuis & Smale, 1995; Linville, 1987) that it is having a repertoire of leisure interests that best prepares people to endure changing life circumstances. And while having a repertoire of leisure interests might be most useful if they are serious leisure interests, such a repertoire will be more likely if interests are not prematurely narrowed. This concern is commonly registered by critics of children's elite sport involvement (e.g. Elkind, 1981, 2007).

Second, all sanctioned recreation and leisure provision suffers, in the US anyway, from an activity bias. If there is a corrective needed to which leisure education might address itself – at least in part – it is in affording people the prerogative and the conditions to relax. My view is that for people of industrialised countries, the pace of life has quickened to the point that relaxation is no longer an easy alternative at the end of the day, week, or work year; television, drugs, and alcohol are among the crutches we use to "relax." We (and I may be speaking here about the US case more than others) do not find it easy to pause and wonder, to be open, and to delight easily and comfortably in the world around us. The cultivation of powers of observation and reflection ought to be included in leisure education in ways that at least complement the cultivation of interest and skill. Learning to relax, learning to be comfortably alone, and learning to be peaceful are far more difficult tasks than people realise and may be getting more so all the time.

Third, our appreciative faculties are underdeveloped. Music education and art education have suffered the same indignities as physical education in the face of budgetary austerity – they are the first to be terminated in public schools. Perhaps this has a silver lining for those of us in the field of leisure studies, however, as we may take it as at least a part of *our* mission. But we do not need to *play* a musical instrument or *paint* a painting or *write* a novel to delight in music, art, and fiction.

We only need to have some exposure and perhaps some guidance from others who have made those journeys before us and know how to bring them to life once again. Stebbins would likely argue that a true connoisseur of an art form is indeed practising serious leisure, but for every one of those, there are millions who have the joy and delight that various art forms bring without committing to a serious study of them.

Fourth, while serious leisure involves some shared identification with others in the activity of interest, it builds community in only a limited way and, because of the commitment required, may even isolate participants from other collective purposes. (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton make this point in their book, *Habits of the Heart* (1985), discussing the isolating effects of leisure "lifestyle enclaves.") Cultivating communal leisure interests where community loyalty and responsibility are nurtured seems a worthy goal of leisure education, but it may take a greater openness to accommodating and even surrendering to the interests of others than is characteristic of those seeking to gain expertise in an activity. The wellbeing of the State is an ancient leisure interest, perhaps the first subject of contemplation of those ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle who are generally regarded as the source points of Western leisure ideals (cf. deGrazia, 1962; Hemingway, 1988). To engage in conversation and discussion about ideas and ideals, tempering such with enjoyable self-expression and appreciation of cultural art forms and traditions, seems more a matter of casual social interaction and awareness of freedom and possibility than any serious investment in the limited skill or knowledge domain of a particular activity (cf. Maynard & Kleiber, 2005).

In sum, then, if serious leisure involvement is an ideal outcome of leisure education, it should not be the first or only priority. Exposure is usually necessary to shape the interest that leads to serious attention; or it may just serve to make one better educated about the world around (i.e. well short of taking every particular thing seriously). There is joy to be had simply by taking it all in and surrendering to the present, living in harmony with our surroundings, and appreciating the world as it is. Learning to discriminate, developing taste and understanding, learning to participate voluntarily and effectively in the social world, to celebrating being a part of it all, and seeing oneself as a contributor to the wellbeing of others, are objectives that may be more readily attainable and are at least as worthy of leisure education.

Ultimately, though, the nature of leisure education should depend on its audience. Who needs it, who wants it, and what are their particular tasks and issues? Leisure education for a child with mental retardation will be different from leisure education for a university recreation management student, and it will be different again for someone approaching retirement and a new abundance of free time. It is also worth noting that teaching *about* leisure means taking leisure seriously, at least on the teacher's part, while learning in the context of leisure means that it will be intrinsically motivated and enjoyable, whether or not it is taken seriously enough to generate continuing and enduring involvement in a particular activity.

The need

So who needs leisure education? People with disabilities? People who have experienced dramatic changes in circumstances such as the loss of a job, retirement, serious illness, or loss of a spouse? Students of leisure service provision and management? People who are highly stressed? Victims of coronary heart disease?

People with chemical dependencies? Youth at risk? Abuse victims? All children? Everyone? Certainly there is a wide range of prospects for leisure education, but while children in school, youth with disabilities, and incarcerated adults provide captive audiences for programming, their *interest* in leisure education certainly makes the task of the educator/counsellor easier. And this condition may apply to relatively few, perhaps only to those who are in transition and looking for help in redirecting their lives. Those going through a divorce, facing an empty nest, and/or approaching retirement may have a special interest, as well as those who have experienced some degree of trauma that has darkened their outlook on life.

Leisure education has largely replaced leisure counselling as a focus for professional work, but leisure counselling has roots more firmly established in humanistic psychology and may be of interest to people who want to find less stress and more peace and enjoyment in life. Leisure counselling (or more appropriately "lifestyle counselling") is a subject that physicians, clerics, and other therapists should learn more about. They become educators by virtue of providing information about leisure; they are counsellors to the extent that they try to influence behaviour.

Somewhere in between those for whom leisure education is a required subject or a prescribed therapeutic regimen and those who seek it out as part of a personal transition, are youth whose circumstances put them at risk. Considering the potential for impact, they are arguably the best target of all. They may not be inclined to see the need for leisure education on their own, but once they identify the potential of leisure activities for bringing about excitement, enjoyment, skill development, and close connection to others – factors that, in their impoverished environments, may only have been found previously in deviant activities – they can become eager students (cf. Caldwell et al., 2004a, 2004b). In my view, this is the group for whom leisure education has the greatest potential to bring about significant changes that can benefit both the individual and society. Given the wide range of targets and subjects of leisure education, however, I would suggest a slightly more general agenda for leisure education research and practice.

Directions for research and practice

Consider developmental tasks and issues

It is important to tailor leisure education according to the age and issues of the target population. Different strategies and curricula are called for in most cases. Understanding enjoyment and leisure in the context of development will likely improve the potential of all kinds of leisure education. (For further elaboration of this point, see Kleiber, 2001.) Interventions addressing the leisure needs of people should consider and experiment with strategies and curricula that are consistent with the developmental issues and tasks of the population of interest. Starting with the work of Erik Erikson (1963), Robert Havighurst (1972), and others (e.g. Oerter, 1986), I have tried to make the case that younger children, adolescents, middle-aged and older adults will find different meanings in leisure depending on those issues and tasks (Kleiber, 1999, 2001).

Finding security, becoming capable, establishing an identity, and finding intimacy and integrity are core issues throughout the lifespan, but each becomes particularly salient at different points and in response to different life events. So, in addition to the general intrinsic growth motives (curiosity, autonomy, competence, and related-

ness) that move a person to action, we should also keep life situation-related issues and tasks in mind when designing leisure education programmes. For example, a person at retirement may have concerns about alternative ways to develop and express competence as well as a need to somehow replace the sense of community that the workplace provided. To take another case, sports programmes for pre-adolescents need to be sensitive to the issue of competence that emerges dramatically at that point in the life course while at the same time considering and cultivating the interest of "coaches" in nurturance and generativity as midlife issues. In later life, rather than pushing new activities, we might exercise caution in overexposing people to new possibilities and alternatives when some consolidation of activities is called for in the interest of maintaining integrity and peace of mind. Continuity of experience is important in later life, but wellbeing often requires some degree of disengagement from some activities in favour of optimising involvement in others (cf. Baltes & Baltes, 1990).

Don't sacrifice enjoyment

Environments designed for leisure should be first and foremost structured to bring about enjoyment and wellbeing. If not, they lose their identity as leisure contexts. If they elicit enjoyment and not mere pleasure (cf. Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990), they may still contribute a great deal to personal and social development and self-actualisation. This is the ultimate promise of the passion that comes about in taking one's activities seriously, as Stebbins has established. Freedom may be used for purposes of distraction, hedonic stimulation, and pleasure alone, but if people are relaxed and come to enjoy fully investing their attention in something (an object or activity), there is at least a good chance of a beneficial effect on them and on those with whom they interact. The basic needs associated with intrinsic motivation – competence, autonomy, and relatedness (cf. Deci & Ryan, 1985, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000) – should be served at least as well in conditions of greater freedom as in conditions that are contrived and institutionalised.

The challenge is to understand how to educate for the freedom of leisure, using that freedom where possible while not undermining it, and using the conditions of formal education to teach directly about it. Creating enjoyment in structured situations and structure and discipline in enjoyable situations are two of the more critical problems for both research and practice in leisure education. And while I have argued that there are other sources of enjoyment (and purposes of leisure education) that are neither simply hedonistic nor deeply involving, it is important to reassert the idea that enjoyment and effort are not incompatible and may in fact offer the ideal synthesis for optimal experience. Getting to that point, however, is a process that will require a lot more consideration and research.

Continue to seek in-roads into formal education

As noted earlier, there are already natural links between leisure education and informal education (though the latter has far more currency, at least in the US). Others have written about community education and community centres (e.g. Neal, 1995) as a context for leisure education, particularly as pertains to adult education (see also, Stebbins, 1999, on this point); and summer camps are well known for their

commitment to learning in and about the outdoors (and increasingly about indoor subjects such as music, the arts, computers, and indoor sports). Leisure education in formal education settings, on the other hand, has been largely confined to recreation and leisure studies programmes in universities, special education programmes, and physical education classes, where sports at least are taught, and involve "extra-curricular" activities that, by definition, are outside of the basic public school curriculum. With the exception of a few places, such as Israel, leisure education has not found its way into the mainstream public school classroom. But just as our university students are taught about all manner of outdoor activities, tourism, the arts and entertainment, as well as sports, appropriate curricula can be designed for elementary and secondary schools – possibly in relationship to the study of society and culture (cf. Pesavento & Ashton, 2011). Regular classroom teachers may be persuaded that they have some responsibility to educate students for the worthy use of leisure or expose students to the opportunities that leisure provides for continuing education and personal growth.

Perhaps the greatest impact that classroom teachers could have is in teaching children and adolescents to be critical in their consideration of leisure-related messages on television and computer screens and billboards, for this is where leisure education occurs by default if it is not occurring in the home, in schools, or in other community settings. Helping students decide what their interests are, how society may be manipulating them, and how they can get more control of their interests and cultivate them on their own terms, is a healthy and appropriate agenda for educators. If we can get school and other community settings to take up that challenge, serious leisure involvement will follow of its own accord.

When we move from the subject of leisure back to leisure as a context for education, there is still more about public schools to consider. The normal school day in some countries affords opportunities for leisure education outside the classroom. Recess – breaks of 15 minutes to an hour in some schools – has offered primary school children the opportunity for self-directed play and culture building. Unfortunately, such breaks in the school day have been under attack, in the US, the UK, and Australia (see Evans, 1989; Pellegrini & Smith, 1998). The benefits to the child of play and self-direction and social organisation are lost in favour of arguments for more efficient uses of time (i.e. to pursue more "academic" subjects) and because of the general mistrust of childhood freedom. While leisure education is arguably happening during a school recess (and protected in some ways by the limits of defined time periods and the confines of the school environment), the subject of how recess time is used might be a fitting subject for school teachers and administrators, though any intervention that compromises personal freedom or enjoyment puts that experience at risk.

The after-school period has traditionally been the period for extracurricular involvement on the part of secondary school students who have, in the US anyway, engaged in organised sports and all manner of clubs and organisations sanctioned and supervised by school personnel. This is surely the most well-established domain of leisure education in public schools in the US. It becomes all the more important today, for younger students as well, since parents have come to rely on continued supervision of children by the school as they complete their workdays and relatedly because it is the primary time for health-compromising activities, as was noted earlier. "Latchkey" children, those who are home on their own for lack of school

programmes or lack of interest in such programmes, are among those most at risk in contemporary life of becoming involved with drugs, alcohol, sexual promiscuity, or other delinquent activities. And for those who avoid such high-risk activities, an over-reliance on television in after-school hours often leaves the period virtually void of benefit. In brief, the after-school period is an excellent target for research and development in leisure education of the type that is reflected in the *Time Wise* projects of Linda Caldwell and her colleagues (2004a, 2004b).

Finally, though, it seems important to note that public school teachers are already providing leisure education to the extent that they are educating the whole person, by preparing the student for life at large rather than just narrowly for vocational opportunities. To the extent that creativity, cultural participation, and personal enrichment are of concern to teachers, they are in the business of leisure education. The cross-cultural research of Atara Sivan (1991, 2008; Ruskin & Sivan, 1995; Sivan & Ruskin, 2000) established that teachers are in fact the most common providers of leisure education around the world. Rather than attempting to add a new content area to the curriculum, we need to have our voices heard as advocates of a liberal education that focuses as much on cultivating curiosity, creativity and self-expression, and community participation as on preparation for jobs. Rather than promoting an alternative curriculum, we might well become more effective collaborators with teachers and other educators who embrace liberal education philosophies such as have been around for at least 2000 years. Educators in the US at the turn of the last century identified educating for the worthy use of leisure as one of the cardinal principles of education, but this may not take anything more than the best that any teacher can offer in terms of stimulating the kind of curiosity and intrinsic interest (whether it be about history, science, or the cultures of other countries) that leads to journeys well beyond the confines of the school. A good teacher can provide the spark that ignites a lifetime of interest in a subject, interest that uses leisure as a fertile playground for its cultivation.

Conclusion

It is important to recognise that we are in the business of leisure education on multiple fronts. Besides working with our students in leisure studies programmes in higher education and enhancing the profile of leisure in the curricula and experiences of our public schools, we are also faced with the task of raising public awareness about leisure more generally. The value and potential of leisure experience for personal and social development and wellbeing is missed by those who see it as easy, self-indulgent indolence. This gives us a pretty clear agenda for public education on the subject.

Despite all the various approaches to leisure education, I still prefer to consider leisure as a context for education, where freedom and openness provide the ideal setting for indulging one's curiosity about the world, for communing with nature and/or with other people, and for becoming more of what one might become. Leisure education, in that sense, is not so much about defining a different subject for education, though there is certainly a lot to learn about leisure-related phenomena; it speaks instead to a different orientation to learning, one that sees enjoyment and effort as compatible, that sees the means of learning as being as important as the ends, and one that puts us in touch with our better natures. Taking one's interests

seriously and becoming passionate about an activity or simply delighting in the world around may follow equally from this orientation.

Note

1. These distinctions have also been discussed more recently in Henderson (2007), Sivan and Stebbins (2011), and Pesavento and Ashton (2011).

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