How are we to Educate People about Leisure? An Extended Book Review and Critique of Leisure Education


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At the beginning of 1983 I arrived in America to undertake a Masters degree in Leisure Studies at the University of Oregon. One of my first classes was a History of Leisure subject taught by a talented and ambitious professor called Chris Edginton. I recall being impressed by my teacher’s capacity to synthesise ideas from a range of historians, philosophers, and social commentators, and to weave their ideas into an accessible and erudite story that traced the genesis of leisure from the past to the future. Complementing his strong narrative delivery style was a passionate belief in the power of leisure as a source of transformation. This was exemplified through references to early social reformers and their use of leisure to emancipate the disadvantaged from the squalor of crowded cities or the factory floor and to the more recent creative classes and their use of leisure to unlock human potential. From the perspective of a student who would go on to teach others about leisure, the subject allowed me to expand my understanding and develop a deeper appreciation of the value of leisure.
Like many things American, the History of Leisure class was neatly packaged, easily digested and cognitively nutritious – American universities can do education as a service in ways universities in other parts of the world are still to comprehend.

In the middle of 1985 with my Masters completed and half way through a PhD, I took a class in Military Recreation and became a member of Operation Adventure. Led by Edginton, whom we affectionately dubbed our ‘Commander in Chief’, our mission was to improve the moral and welfare of children from families of the US Eighth Army stationed in South Korea. I remember thinking of the children as a form of collateral damage as many experienced the difficulties of growing up in a highly militarised and dislocated expatriate lifestyle. Our team subsequently designed and conducted an eight week summer camp that I and my two other program writers infused with opportunities for fun and distraction along with activities designed to teach cooperation or that gently encouraged children to reflect about their circumstances and express their feelings through creative arts and storytelling. I can still see myself leading children in a trust fall activity, while in the background, a platoon of soldiers - perhaps some were their fathers - marched in chemical warfare suits past a line of battle ready Abram tanks. It was one of those moments in my professional development as a teacher that caused me to ponder the paradoxes of human experience and what role leisure and leisure education might play in helping individuals understand and cope with such situations. Without doubt, Operation Adventure actualised Edginton’s (and my) belief in the power of leisure as an experiential medium of transformation. As a testament to this belief Edginton expanded the program into an international leisure education business called Camp Adventure Youth Services. At last count the business runs in 27 countries, serves 750,000 individuals each year, trains and employs hundreds of university students as camp staff, offers an expanded range of programs, and has generated tens of millions of dollars in government and corporate income.
These events are recounted by way of introducing two related texts on the topic of leisure education before considering a number of issues as to how we might teach people about leisure. The first text, *Leisure as Transformation*, is written by Edginton from the University of Northern Iowa and his colleague Peter Chen from the Chinese Culture University in Taiwan. The second text: *The Pivotal Role of Leisure Education: Finding Personal Fulfilment in this (twenty-first) Century* is co-edited by Elie Cohen-Gewerc from Ramot-Tel Aviv University in Israel and Robert Stebbins for the University of Calgary in Canada. Both texts, while differing in their terminology and scope, argue the need for teaching people about leisure and describe how this can be achieved.

*Leisure as Transformation* is aimed at the “newly engaged leisure service provider,” although it might usefully appeal to a broader readership including students and teachers who often find themselves challenged about why they are studying or teaching a phenomenon apparently as superficial and self-explanatory as leisure. The text contains 11 chapters that discuss the emergence of a leisure oriented society; what transformation is and how it works; perspectives on personal, community and national transformation; and ideas about individual, service provider and organisational transformation. The last chapter on Transformation: Creating Hope offers the idea that a “central focus of the leisure service profession” is to develop a sense of hope and through hope; individuals “build the confidence for fulfilling one’s anticipated desires for the future.” When combined with the claim the book offers a “universal perspective of transformation” by blending Western and Eastern perspectives, it is not hard to imagine the text also represents an opportunity for Edginton to promulgate a world vision for leisure in his role as Secretary General of World Leisure Organisation. From university teacher, to international leisure service provider, to a global organiser and advocate for leisure – that is a transformational achievement of considerable magnitude.
The rational for the text is based on the “desire to better understand how leisure promotes, facilities and enables transformation.” The author’s justification for this purpose is captured by their assertion that: “Today, without question, the world we live in is in a state of constant transformation. The ability of individuals and leisure service professionals to proactively address the changes faced on a daily basis may very well be related to one’s future success, prosperity and perhaps even survival.” Stated with a biblical resonance, the author’s belief in the necessity to embrace change is magnified by their use of the prescription that: “There is no sin punished more implacably by nature than the sin of resistance to change.” The thesis of the book within this urgent and uncompromising context is that leisure represents a source of personal growth and self-fulfilment via individuals learning to engage in new forms of leisure that improve their well-being or alternatively that allows them to escape from the un-wanted ravages of change. This thesis is extended to the idea that personal change instigates community and national change through ushering in new forms of productive social, cultural and economic activity that increase living standards and quality of life, which in turn create additional demands and opportunity for leisure.

Having an interest in leisure education and learning theory, I was particularly interested to know how the authors conceptualised personal transformation, how transformation operates, how they understand the role of the leisure service provider as educator and their explanation for how leisure works as a source of transformation. This set of questions can be collapsed into two fundamental questions: how do people gain knowledge or learn about leisure and the reciprocal question; how do people define or understand what leisure is? These questions by their a priori nature are significant for leisure scholars as they provide a logical starting point from which learning, teaching and researching about leisure can develop. Moreover the questions are not easily answered given the range of theories used to explain the nature of learning and leisure.
Edginton and Chen describe transformation as a process of “changing, altering or converting oneself,” with the focus of change being directed toward “improved quality of life and well being.” These outcomes are expanded through “a partial list of 150 leisure benefits” for individuals, case studies of communities and nations building more liveable communities and playful work environments, and by examples of public policies promoting access to leisure services. Two explanations are offered for how transformation operates. First, individuals can transform themselves by reflecting on areas of life they “hope to improve, enhance and make over” and then by changing how they think and act toward those things. Second, leisure service providers can encourage transformation by helping individuals understand the benefits of leisure activities, encouraging them to seek these benefits and provide opportunities to reflect on their experiences. In this latter context, the leisure service provider as educator, functions as an inspirational role model, motivating individuals toward un-realised experiences and outcomes. And finally, leisure defined using the “state of mind” conception is argued to be linked to transformation through individuals experiencing the antecedent properties of leisure: perceived freedom, personal control or competence and intrinsic motivation. In simple terms, the authors suggest that to “be free to explore, to test or to remake one self” and to gain competence from doing so “lends itself to transformation.” Thus transformation through leisure is claimed to occur via the essential act of asserting one’s individual agency, resulting in a different state of mind than was hitherto known to the individual.

Whereas Edginton and Chen use an expository approach to discuss transformation, Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins adopt a more theoretically and empirically informed perspective in their presentation of leisure education. This is achieved through references to learning philosophy, research into the outcomes of leisure education and from insights offered by contributing authors including Chris Rojek, Atara Sivan, Ian Patterson and Karla Henderson.
among others. Given the extra depth and breadth afforded by this approach, the text is aimed at audiences within, but also outside the leisure studies field, including a broader range of educators and the general public.

The text comprises an introduction and nine chapters. Focus here will be directed toward the introduction, the first three chapters and a summation of empirical research as these sources provide the core contributions regarding questions about the nature and effectiveness of leisure education. The introduction notes the aim of the book is to “weave together, on a world scale, the main strands of a manifesto on leisure education.” This manifesto is predicated on the claim of “sinking era of work and the rising era of leisure,” characterised for many people by increasing free time, disenchantment with work and unpleasant non-work obligations, and a corresponding belief that individuals often lack the capacity to make responsible choices when confronted by a “growing allure” of “chaotic” and “hedonistic” forms of casual leisure. Within this context according to the authors, “a major challenge facing those who hope to better the lot of humankind, both Western and Non-Western, is to find a way to acquaint people with the many interesting, exciting and personally enriching leisure activities that are realistically available to them and to help those people define their own criteria for taking up some of the ones they find appealing.”

Chapter one promotes Stebbins’ concept of serious leisure as the appropriate content of leisure education programs. The justification being that forms of serious leisure such as amateur, hobby or volunteer activity, encourage the development of enduring positive psychological outcomes including personal enrichment, self-actualisation and fulfilment, and feelings of belonging and accomplishment that come from group involvement. In turn these benefits, according to the authors, are important when combined with “judicious amounts” of casual leisure such as relaxing, engaging in sociable conversations or more active pastimes; for achieving a “well-balanced and optimal leisure lifestyle.”
The second chapter by Rojek establishes a further context for leisure education based on a critique of ‘Neat Capitalism’ concerning the role played by corporations in leisure provision. The essence of the critique is that in the process of having largely taken over responsibility for the delivery of leisure services from government and non-profit organisations, corporations have fashionably re-positioned themselves as socially responsible global citizens. In doing so, Rojek argues corporations maintain a double standard by connecting their involvement in ethical forms of leisure such as sponsoring international rock concert disaster appeals, protecting the environment using low polluting motor fuels, promoting healthy lifestyles via responsible drinking initiatives; but with the intention that consumers actually purchase more music products, drive more for pleasure or drink more alcohol. The end result of this ‘neat transformation’ is to increase consumption in often negative and casual forms of leisure, which in turn, creates the need for leisure educators to “become more political” in order “to expose and elucidate” the manipulative standards of corporations.

Chapter three provides the theoretical core of the text, describing an approach to leisure education that draws from social and education philosophers; particularly the liberationist pedagogy of Frederick Nietzsche and the Argentinean educator Gonzales-Pecotche. This approach aims to teach individuals how to think in order to empower their capacity for “the conscious process of self-improvement,” and to engage in their “own metamorphosis.” Justifying the approach is a belief that traditional forms of education emphasising the transmission of knowledge and preparing students for instrumental occupations, are redundant in a world where the content and methods of communicating knowledge change rapidly, where the coercive power of the free markets are becoming more dominant, and where free choice alternatives appear to be ever expanding. What is being argued for is a “new vision” of education that teaches people how to think more critically and to exercise
their freedom with a sense of responsibility, which the authors refer to as “education for freedom.”

Similar to the questions posed of the first text, how do the authors conceive of learning; the mechanisms for teaching students to achieve an optimal, critically informed and responsible lifestyle; and how do they understand the role of the teacher and the nature of leisure? Learning is defined as an existential process of “personal becoming,” where individuals embark on a “personal journey” of progressively “discovering their inner selves.” The mechanism through which the inner self becomes more autonomous is described in terms of two processes. The first is for the learner to become knowledgeable about the advantages and disadvantages of serious and casual leisure choices and to be instructed where necessary in how to engage in serious leisure. The second process is to be taught the skills of observation and critical reflection in order to develop the capability for making responsible decisions about their choices. Distinguishing between superficial forms of seeing and more deeply considered forms of observation, the authors propose that: “first we see, then we look, which gives us something to contemplate and through contemplation we find new things to see.”

In this approach, teachers adopt the role of “masters” who “assume the mission of guiding another person toward self-realisation as a human being toward a sort of ‘Promised Land’ found in a person’s internal world.” It is further noted that masters must first have learned themselves before they can teach, which suggests their missionary like role is tempered by worldly and pragmatic experience. Finally, leisure when conceptualised as “the emanation of a state of mind” during a period of free time, is positioned a space for existential action through engagement in serious forms of leisure.

So does leisure education work? Both texts suggest this to be the case. Edginton and Chen provide observational evidence of individuals in Tanzania, Trinidad and Brazil;
Christchurch in New Zealand and Chuncheon City in South Korea; and Finland and China who have been successful or are in the process of using leisure as a source of transformation. Several contributing authors in Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins’ text provide empirical evidence that leisure education can make meaningful improvements in peoples’ lives. Studies conducted in Israeli and US school settings for instance, demonstrate children and teenagers can be taught to understand their free time options, judge the consequence of their choices, and develop resilience and lifelong coping skills that facilitate transition to responsible and autonomous adulthood. More impressive outcomes are evident for older individuals and people with physical or mental disabilities. Experimental studies using therapeutic interventions to teach people how to understand, access and engage in leisure, report a range of positive psychological and social outcomes including decreased boredom and increased self-esteem, and improved life skills and friendship networks. Given the available evidence it is surprising neither text fully expands on the reasons why leisure education is not more widely practiced. A telling anecdote in the Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins’ text suggests a possible reason by noting that one national Board of Education supported a leisure education program on the grounds of the “desire to keep the curriculum fresh, by implementing a few new ideas each year.” By this account and despite its effectiveness, leisure education remains a novel and discretionary area of study within the broader realm of education.

In summary, both texts offer a thorough and thought provoking assessment of the need and approaches to leisure education. Common threads reinforce their contributions: the emergence of a society of increasing leisure and need to better prepare people to maximise the opportunities or cope with leisure, a conception of leisure based on the state of mind definition, a universal or world manifesto for leisure education, and a variety of effective strategies for how this can be achieved. Despite these contributions, the texts raise a number of issues for leisure educators.
Claims about the existence of a “leisure oriented society” or a “new Era of Leisure” underpinning the need for leisure education programs appear questionable. For example, Tony Veal’s meta-analysis of 68 literature sources on the topic of the leisure society spanning the late nineteenth century to the beginning of the twenty first century provides a counter claim. Titled: *The Elusive Leisure Society*, Veal suggests “many of the commentators would have used the word *illusory*, arguing the whole idea is an illusion,” and at the end of the text that “empirical evidence (of reductions in work time or increases in leisure time) is unclear and open to multiple interpretations.” Data from the Australia Institute suggest the illusion is factually based and that evidence about Australians propensity for work rather than leisure is relatively clear. Australians now work the longest week in the western world at 44 hours, magnanimously donate 2.14 billion hours of un-paid work time to their employers which is equivalent to $72 billion in foregone wages or 1.16 million full-time jobs, and have fewer paid holidays than most advanced European countries. The Tourism Australia website currently trumpets industry research showing Australian workers have accrued 123 million days of un-taken annual leave. As a corollary to these indicators, it is interesting to observe international events such as the global financial crisis and climate change are being responded to by policies designed to increase economic output and material consumption, extend the working lives of older workers or compete for foreign workers; along with accompanying commentaries about the need for greater control of personal, public and commercial life - all of which support a more work driven and less leisure oriented future for many of the world’s citizens.

Perhaps the idea of a leisure society may have reached its use-by-date as an effective source of justification for leisure education programs. Yet more recent and complementary arguments using evidence based outcomes that highlight the ability of leisure education to deliver improved physical and mental health may not resonate with some audiences. In the
final chapter of Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins’ text, the authors recount that a seminar given to a Canadian Institute of Preventative Medicine on the benefits of serious leisure, failed to “transform (the) thinking” of its members. While it is not suggested here that leisure educators should stop using these justifications, perhaps the underlying issue is that more attention needs to be given to how education, health, and other decision makers think about the idea of leisure education and how their thinking can be transformed to give greater priority to leisure education.

A second issue is the authors’ respective intentions to offer a global perspective on leisure education using a definition of leisure rooted in the western ideology of individual agency and well-being. An obvious question arises with this intention. Is the state of mind conception relevant for people living in cultural contexts where individual interests are subjugated to the will of external deity as occurs in Islamic or Shamanic societies or to the discipline of the family and group as in many Asian or African societies or where one’s privileges are proscribed by a social system that regulates life on the basis of heredity such in the Indian cast system? Most of the world’s population live in ‘we’ rather than ‘me’ cultures and do not abide by the ideology of free choice or self-fulfilment as the desired focus of human existence. This does not mean people living in these cultures do not make, or seek to increasingly make, self-fulfilling choices of their own, or that western ideals are un-worthy of broader application. However reifying western thinking about leisure may conjure an undesirable extension of western cultural hegemony in some readers’ minds. History, both past and current, is replete with the disastrous consequences of imperialist thinking.

A further issue with the state of mind conception is its inability to provide descriptions of ‘desirable states of mind’. Leisure scholars such as Charles Sylvester, John Hemingway and Chris Rojek argue the conception promotes moral relativism; for instance, where anything that is freely chosen, demonstrates personal control and is intrinsically motivated,
can be constituted as a leisure state of mind. Culturally insensitive, socially repugnant, economically exploitative and ecologically unsustainable forms of leisure could logically be treated as having the same moral or valuational equivalence as the 150 benefits listed by Edginton and Chen or the positive outcomes of serious leisure described by Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins; if they are legitimately held to be freely chosen. As Socrates is said to have observed, relativism is intellectually intolerable because it leads to a confusion of thought and is morally reprehensible because it provides no sense of direction as to what constitutes acceptable or useful ways of acting.

From an epistemological perspective, the state of mind definition is problematic for the pedagogy of leisure education. This is because it emphasises knowledge about predeterminate conditions of leisure which are explicitly objective and unchangeable, rather than knowledge about the peoples’ actual experiential meanings of leisure which are inherently subjective and therefore potentially changeable. Thus, while both texts make clear their views about the desirable end meaning of leisure taught through leisure education (e.g., a fulfilling optimal lifestyle derived from freely chosen, competently performed and intrinsically motivated activity), preceding or intermediary stages of knowing about leisure that may be required to achieve this end state are absent in their discussions. In effect, the direction of transformation presented by Edginton and Chen, and the Promised Land of the individual’s inner world expressed by Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins could be argued to lack a sufficiently detailed road map – learners might readily comprehend and desire the destination, but how does this relate to their personal and current understandings of leisure and how might they get from where they are now to where they might travel to?

The essence of the challenge raised by these issues is not about the validity of exhorting individuals to give themselves a good makeover or adopting the role of masters who guide their pupils into the light of autonomy and responsibility. Rather it is concerned with
understanding how to change people’s thinking about the idea of leisure (or about the need for leisure education) that is culturally, valuationally and epistemologically relevant to their experience. With the intention of adding to Edginton and Chen, and Cohen-Gewerc and Stebbins’ ideas, a complementary approach to teaching about leisure is suggested to address these challenges.

Most leisure curricula emphasise teaching people how to engage in leisure or what is referred to as *education for leisure*. In contrast, *education about leisure* or what leisure means or can mean to people, while recognised, is often accorded lower priority. However, if the assumption that peoples’ leisure behaviours are governed to a significant degree by their meanings of leisure is correct, then the goal of knowing how people understand leisure should represent a necessary and preliminary step toward helping them transform their meanings and ultimately their behaviour.

One approach for achieving this goal is found in the work of Ference Marton and his colleagues at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. Their work recognises contextual or relational differences among learners’ experiences of phenomena and using these experiences as the basis of teaching. Experiences are conceptualised as relationships formed between learners and phenomena and are synonymous with learners’ overall meanings or understandings of phenomena. Meanings of individual elements or dimensions comprising the content of experiences vary according to learners’ personal and social situations and are therefore culturally relevant. Moreover when experiences are compared against valuational criteria; for instance where they are judged in terms of their complexity for understanding phenomena or their implications for physical and mental well-being or political awareness of the role of neat capitalism; then experiences can be represented as a continuum of less or more desirable or developed understandings. This does not infer less developed understandings are of lower value, but rather, they are better viewed as prerequisite stages for
learning more developed understandings. Learning in this approach is based on the idea of gaining knowledge about different experiences and acquiring the capability for changing from partial to more developed understandings of experience. Teaching learners to acquire more developed understandings subsequently entails: (1) asking individuals (e.g., students, teachers and others) how they constitute their experiences of phenomena, (2) identifying key dimensions of experiences and their respective meanings, (3) evaluating experiences against selected criteria to suggest how they sit in juxtaposition as less or more developed ways of understanding phenomena, and (4) employing a variety of teaching methods that cause students to discern an increasing number of ways of experiencing phenomena. In so far as the experiences, dimensions and criteria are generated within the learner’s realm of understanding and interest, and learners are open to change; the relational approach offers an epistemologically relevant method for teaching people to how to understand their worlds in different and more enlightened ways. It also offers an alternative to the state of mind conception for defining the nature of leisure where people’s subjective experiences are of central interest and where a more philosophically defensible justification is required to study leisure.

My own research has begun to examine the utility of the approach in leisure education though investigating peoples’ experiences of leisure, recreation instructors’ meanings of activity leadership and tourism operators’ practices of business relationships. Using leisure as an example, studies with university students and general populations reveal four multidimensional categories or ways of experiencing leisure: passing time, exercising choice, escaping pressure and achieving fulfilment. Dimensions of experiences illustrate variation in how individuals relate to their time, motives, behaviours, emotions and satisfactions with leisure. People experiencing leisure as passing time for instance, define time as being left over or spare in between other more important aspects of life, their intention is to fill or pass
their time by engaging in sedentary activity that is typically non-serious, fun or physically relaxing, and that prevents boredom or keeps them entertained. In other experiences, the same dimensions are apparent but accorded different meanings. Thus where left over time characterises the temporal relation in the experience of leisure as passing time; in exercising choice, time means to be free of others’ obligations or personal responsibilities; in escaping pressure, time is related to finding or making time for oneself; and in achieving fulfilment, time for leisure is understood as timeless absorption – time as a discrete entity fades in consciousness. The emotional element of enjoyment defined in passing time as non-serious fun; is related in exercising choice to personal satisfaction; in escaping pressure enjoyment is understood as a source pleasurable release; and in achieving fulfilment, enjoyment denotes a deep feeling of happiness and contentment with oneself and with others.

Experience can be interpreted in terms of increasing complexity of understanding and is evident as meanings change from passing time to exercising choice to escaping pressure and to achieving fulfilment. Leisure changes from (1) a restricted to inclusive understanding as the meanings of dimensions expand in their depth and breadth, and where preceding understandings are ‘unlearned’ or incorporated into awareness along with subsequent understandings, (2) what constitutes an experience of leisure changes from a concrete to relative and ephemeral understanding, and (3) understanding the relevance of leisure in everyday life changes from a separate and less important aspect to an integrated and essential aspect of existence. Unpublished results from an eight year longitudinal study support this interpretation, showing that individuals with less developed understandings change to more developed understandings, individuals with more developed understandings more fully express less developed understandings, and individuals with less developed understandings have yet to fully comprehend more developed understandings. Although not tested using a controlled experimental design, reflection and debate in response to descriptions of leisure
and in particular, practical experiences of leisure in different settings and with different people, and other methods that vary the learner’s awareness of dimensional meanings, along with increasing life experiences, are the most powerful stimuli for people changing their understandings of leisure.

Equipped with an experiential map of different understandings, a framework of dimensions accounting for difference in understandings, and criteria for evaluating understandings; the relational approach offers an additional perspective for teaching about and defining the nature of leisure. But it remains precisely that, another perspective, albeit one that provides an arguably richer source of knowledge – culturally, valuationally and epistemologically - about how people currently experience leisure and how they might learn to experience and understand leisure in more desirable ways.

As a prologue to the paper, I note the passing of Jean Mundy, a long time advocate, teacher and researcher of leisure education. Although I never had the privilege of meeting Jean, but knew of her through her writing, I imagine she would have been interested and supportive of the contributions made by the two texts reviewed in this paper and by further scholarship on the topic of leisure education.

* Note that an abbreviated version of this review was published in the Annals of Leisure Research, (2009), Vol.12(2) pp.261-268

References


