

## Transformative Leadership: The Camp Counselor Experience

**Stephanie Femrite**

University of Missouri Extension  
[femrites@missouri.edu](mailto:femrites@missouri.edu)

**Jenny Flatt**

University of Missouri Extension

**Abstract:** A study, utilizing focus groups, was conducted with teens serving as camp counselors at the North Central 4-H camp in Missouri. High school students, 14-18 years old, served as camp counselors during a four-day residential camp the summer of 2014. Each counselor was a current 4-H member and had served as a 4-H camp counselor in Missouri for at least one year, some serving as many as five years. Comparing two training models, evidence was found that intentional training sessions are crucial for the empowerment that leads to transformation.

### Introduction

Camp is often regarded for 4-H youth as an opportunity to experience fun and freedom from their typical schedule while in a safe environment. The role of the camp counselor during a camping experience varies quite a bit from camp to camp and state to state. However, we often undervalue the opportunity for camp to transform the lives of these youth. While we understand the importance of youth leadership in the camp counselor setting, we often discount the internal shift camp counselors experience as a result of engaging with the camping scenario.

Garst & Bruce (2003) indicated that camp affords an opportunity for youth to practice important life skills such as self-esteem, responsibility, independence, and teamwork. This practice assumes that youth come in predisposed to particular thought processes that may undergo duress and subsequent shifts in their ultimate perspectives about the world around them. These

shifts are known as transformative learning experiences in which the learner infuses previous beliefs with new ideas based upon challenges that ultimately changes the learner perspective (Cranton, 2006).

Van Horn, Flanagan, & Thomson (1998) noted that camp helps to build leadership skills and team building with a peer group that exists outside of the norm of their experiences. When adding the component of caring for another human being, this responsibility becomes even more challenging. Youth are tasked with caring for campers which can be outside of their traditional life experiences. This creates a challenge in their thinking, calling to question previous viewpoints, and scripts for dealing with similar situations.

4-H camping programs provide teens serving as camp counselors a challenging experience through which they can experiment with assumptions in a safe, learning environment. The camp counselor is allowed an environment where they can question their beliefs about the world around them in a safe way as they experience challenges. Thus, struggles that the camp counselor might encounter can shift their perspective on that situation resulting in shifting viewpoints to situations outside of camp.

The role of the camp counselor during a camping experience varies quite a bit from camp to camp and state to state. One of the major responsibilities of a camp counselor is to oversee and provide positive experiences for youth as they camp. Some camps offer additional opportunities for the camp counselor which encourages and ignites more leadership approaches. The transformative leadership model affords the camp counselor the opportunity to lead workshop sessions in addition to choosing camp themes and planning and leading other activity components at camp. The counselor designs, plans, and implements these sessions based upon activities they derive from resources provided by Extension staff and from the counselor's experience and imagination.

Each county in Missouri and each state Extension program approaches camping differently, this article focuses on two models outlined within Missouri 4-H. Missouri 4-H has engaged in camping for a significant period of time. There have been some attempts at understanding the camping experience through the eyes of the camp counselor. However, there is a need to understand the important shifts that camp counselors make developmentally from their engagement in camp with a nod to the justification of camp for producing competent citizens for the future. 4-H provides long-term opportunities for youth to grow, develop, and shift their thinking as they become adults. This program allows for future application with the intent of growing competent adults. Capitalizing on the shift in structure that one camping program had, this study examined the development of a transformation of the camp counselor through the lens of varying camping models to understand their differences.

### **Purpose and Research Questions**

The reported study was undertaken to understand the differences between two camp counselor models in Missouri 4-H. The transformative leadership model includes an opportunity for teens (14-18 years old) to engage more fully in their camp counselor experience. Their responsibilities include planning and leading workshops, facilitating experiences during campfire programs, and during recreation periods. Most teens will participate in over 20 hours of training and planning prior to the start of camp. In contrast, the program guide model affords the youth a more limited leadership experience. Their camp experience is defined by watching over campers as

they engage in a staff (often college-aged students) led set of workshops. The program guide counselors, often over only a few hours, are given the opportunity to plan unique experiences for campfire and evening recreation but these are done on a more limited basis with less leadership opportunities provided. Often, after providing input for the activities only a few counselors, or the camp staff, carry out the activities, providing an uneven opportunity for teens to serve in a leadership role. Using the theoretical construct of transformative learning, the models were examined to understand the following research questions:

1. How is transformational learning impacted by the camp counselor experience?
2. How does the camp counselor experience relate to leadership and life skill development?

## Literature Review

Leadership opportunities for youth abound in the 4-H program. Anderson, Bruce, and Mouton (2010) found that 4-H experiences contributed to leadership and life skill development. As a result of these experiences, 4-H alumni were more likely to continue their connection to 4-H. Skill development is relevant for 4-H members both for their future development and their present experiences.

4-H provides a variety of settings through which youth have an opportunity to expand their life skills and leadership experiences. Miller (1976) explained life skills broadly as decision making, relationships, learning, management, group processes, communications, and understanding the self. The camp program is one of these experiences.

Youth at a particular age (typically 14 and over) are given the responsibility and choose whether or not they participate as a camp counselor. The camping experience is a setting during which experiential learning activities result in the positive acquisition of leadership life skill development (Garton, Miltenberger, & Pruett, 2007). Work force skill growth has been a noted phenomenon as a result of the camp counselor experience (Ferrari & McNeely, 2007). These gains have been indicated in the areas of interpersonal skills, interactions, communication, problem solving, and leadership (Duerden, et al., 2014). These authors noted for growth, the experience of the camp counselor must include: intrinsic motivation, being forced out of one's comfort zone, participating in the camp community, and hearing positive feedback.

Thus, the camp counselor must find within themselves a "spark" to help motivate them toward the task at hand. Often, working at camp is a physically and mentally tasking experience. Feeling an internal sense of ambition allows camp counselors to push through these potential barriers affording them a level of success with their campers. This often requires the young adult to move outside of their comfort zone. The feeling of discomfort felt by the camp counselor quickly lends itself to a growth experience if given the appropriate amount of scaffolding from an adult or even another counselor. This scaffolding typically comes from the community feeling that is developed among those in leadership positions at camp (Garst & Johnson, 2005). The positive feedback that is elicited from the camping community of leaders helps to promote a growth model among camp counselors.

Experiences such as camp counseling have been shown not only to develop life and work force skills, but to transform the thinking and experiences of the camp counselor. Cranton (2006) indicated that transformative learning is a process during which assimilated assumptions,

beliefs, and perspectives are questioned and either strengthened or shifted. Taylor (1997) noted transformative learning occurs in three steps. The first step is a realization of personal assumption limitation about perceived understanding of the world. The second step is a modification of these understandings to alter current perspectives and create new inclusive understandings. The third step is adaptation of behavior as a result of the shift in perspective. Often in order to encourage transformative learning, an individual must have an experience that significantly affects them, to cause a shift in thinking. The camp counselor experience is generally the precursor to this major shift in thinking. The experience alone of taking on additional responsibilities for young campers takes counselors outside of their comfort zones. This helps them to call into question their beliefs about leading young campers and about responsibility. Their assumptions about the world around them are often challenged through the process of counseling. The counselors shift the way in which they view the world and how they take actions within it. The following understandings of their behavior allow them to change the way that they think about the world.

Camp counseling provides just enough pressure to make the young adults experience the cycle of transformative learning. Leff, Retallick, and Franz (2015) found that personal transformation from the camp counseling experience occurred when the counselor was allowed to be a role model, had opportunities for leadership, and developed camp traditions.

Being a role model affords the camp counselor an opportunity to observe their own actions and the impact that these actions have on the youth around them. Fulfilling expectations that they set for themselves and those that are set by others in leadership positions help to mediate previous forms of thought with new stimuli that help shape cognition and behavior. When given an opportunity to develop the environment around them, youth remain present to the task and push themselves outside of their comfort zones to procure additional roles and expand their thinking about the world around them.

4-H produces leaders who are present and ready for the challenges that surround them. While their individual experiences within 4-H develop leadership and life skills, their collective experiences as camp counselors call into question traditionally held belief systems. This questioning process provides an opportunity for young leaders to shift their thinking from old beliefs to new understandings thus transforming their leadership capabilities and helping them grow into productive citizens in the community.

While there have been many studies referencing the camp counselor experience and some specifically referencing transformative learning, none have utilized a qualitative method to achieve these results. This reported study is relevant to fleshing out some of the concepts discovered in the quantitative research methodologies in other camp counselor studies. The findings from this study while applicable to Missouri 4-H, can be translated to other states.

## **Methods**

To capture the difference between the two camp counselor models during this transition, content analysis method was used. Data collection was organized into two parts, a survey of all camp counselors at the North Central Camp the summer of 2014. Focus groups were also conducted with a sample of the participating counselors in the fall of 2014.

A survey instrument, originally developed by Nicholson and Klem (2007) to assess the value of being a camp counselor in Missouri 4-H was used. The survey tool includes the Youth Experience Survey (YES) 2.0 (2005) developed by Larson and Hansen; University of Illinois.

Additional questions, developed by the Missouri research team were added to the instrument to gather information such as prior experience, involvement, training, expectations, counselors' important at camp, and the perceived value of camp counseling to them personally.

Due to a transition of camping models, this was an ideal time to capitalize on the teens experience from the program guide model to the transformative leadership model. The camping models only have 15-18 counselors serving in a given year. During the transition year, only four camp counselors had experienced both camping and training models. Therefore, given the structure of the camping programs in Missouri 4-H the participation population was small, a total of 19 youth participated in the survey. Of those participating youth, 15 participated in the focus group.

The target population was camp counselors at the North Central 4-H camp in Missouri. The counselors are high school students 14-18 years old, average age was 16, and served as camp counselors during a four-day camp the summer of 2014. Each counselor was a current 4-H member and had served as a 4-H camp counselor in Missouri for at least one year, some serving as many as five years.

The focus groups were used to capture that qualitative data. One focus group consisted of camp counselors that had experienced both training models, the second group consisted of counselors that had only experienced the transformative model. Focus group questions included asking the counselors to define their role as a camp counselor, to tell about how the experience affected their ability to work as a team; the skills they utilized most, the impact the training had on their attitudes (in general) and about themselves.

## Results

Ten teen counselors (14-18 years old) participated in the focus group, five females and five males. On average, the teens had served three years as a 4-H camp counselor. The first research question aimed to understand how transformational learning is impacted by the camp counselor experience. The second research question was to understand the camp counselor experience related to leadership and life skills development. Content analysis was performed using the transcripts from two focus groups, see table 1. One focus group was from the transformative leadership model and the other focus group was from the program guide model.

**Table 1**

Content Analysis of Focus Group Responses

<b>Key Words:</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>%</b>
Leadership	29	32
Different	16	18
Plan	15	16
New	13	14
Responsibility	12	13
Change	6	7

The first research question was constructed to understand how the camp counselor experience transformed the counselors. Camp counselors indicated how the camp counselor experience led to personal transformations in their leadership development:

"It has definitely helped me become a better leader than I was already and it has helped me add on to my responsibility that I feel like I gained leadership and responsibility more than I already had. Like stepping up and doing things, like at my job I step up and do things without being asked because I know it has to be done so I might as well do it. I take the leadership role and actually go and do it because I like to."

In addition to the leadership development, some camp counselors built a realization and understanding about themselves in the process of fulfilling their role:

"I think one of my biggest things is change, I don't like change and I have had a lot of issues with change so I think having that too, it is just another thing that was different than what it was."

Other camp counselors experienced a shift in their thinking about the way they envisioned camp being and the way that camp actually manifested:

"Camp challenged my assumptions in the way things were run, you know you want to do something and you had your traditions for campfire and you know that you have campfire at the new camp and you will just have to use what you have the new camp to adjust and do that change."

Several counselors indicated that their assumptions about life were altered based upon the way in which the camp counselor experience affected them and how it contributed to their future goals:

"Camp makes you a lot more self-conscious of how a child thinks and about the impact you are going to have on the children with just body language even."

"Camp really prepares you for life lessons. You need to be able to read the kids and know what they are thinking and taking care of them."

"I feel I have a jump start for college when I go to be a teacher. I feel I have a solid foundation being a 4-H camp counselor."

The second research question was posed to understand the leadership and life skills development of camp counselors. Several counselors pointed to the way in which training affected their ability to work as a team:

"I think if you work with a team you see a different point of view. When you work with someone of opposite gender they see it in a different way, I think it helps."

When asked what specific skills camp counselors used most at camp, leadership, creativity, responsibility, and time management emerged as major tenets learned.

“And responsibility because you are in charge of them the whole time even though there are adults.”

“I think organization too because you have to make sure you have your stuff ready and having your kids where they need to be and I think the schedule was very helpful for that.”

“Time management, I felt that was a big one being able to manage your time and always focus on when you had to go do something or when the kids had to be somewhere.”

Some of the counselors indicated how their life skills learned intersected with the transformation they experienced. These counselors noted that the skills they learned really pushed them outside of their comfort zone:

“There is pressure in making sure the kids are having fun and you want to make them have fun and have a smile on their face, making sure that they get out of it what you want them to.”

“Yeah leadership for me too, because we are in charge of stuff, like we took responsibility of doing things.”

There is evidence that teen camp counselors experienced a transformation in their thinking as a result of their time at camp. These experiences were mediated through the process of learning leadership and life skills.

Four of the counselors have had the opportunity to experience camp counseling through both the transformational learning model and the program guide model. They drew comparison having experienced the program guide model and moving to a transformational learning model. Awareness that with more responsibility, came more work, and sometime more stress, there was recognition that through the transformational model, they developed and used heightened skills in leadership, communication, organization, time management, and responsibility.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

In general, 4-H youth camp counselors in Missouri experience transformative learning and leadership/life skill development as camp counselors. Even with a significantly small sample size, there is evidence that youth experience a shift in thinking from the way that things have always been done to the change that they experienced both internally and externally at camp. Many counselors indicated that their experiences as a camp counselor transformed their thinking about themselves into a leader. This leadership came with a caveat however, that they would have to make personal changes as well. These personal changes were not always comfortable in the shifting dynamic of the camp experience.

Leadership and life skill development was also an important facet that camp counselors experienced. Team management skills were developed to push individuals to learn collectively in an effort to teach collaboratively. Specific themes of organization, time management, and responsibility were indicated as skills that were developed as a result of camp. Leadership and

life skill development however, was not always an easy transition to make. There were obvious challenges for counselors in their development process. This arena is where personal transformations occur, as camp counselors are attempting to expand their leadership and life skill development, they are pushed outside of their comfort zones with the intent to grow and develop.

According to the data collected, there is strong evidence to suggest that there are personal transformations taking place at camp. However, a level of intentionality must be pursued to both cause young people to seek this personal transformation and to recognize that it occurred. The training component of the camp counselor program is essential to create this intentionality. Built in structures for understanding personal change lead to the realization that change occurred. Reflection strategies before, during, and after camp allow young people to realize that any personal transformation occurs.

Thus, the training series that the transformative learning model used in this study led to an increased understanding of tenets of being a camp counselor. Counselors were provided training that included basic characteristics of youth development, communication, and planning. Through this skill development, the opportunity to plan, execute, and reflect on workshops and activities at camp by teens provides the opportunity for skill performance and development. At times, these experiences led to the discomfort necessary for personal transformation.

The implications for intentional training sessions are crucial for the empowerment that leads to transformation. Allowing young people to take the helm of a workshop, challenges their assumptions about their own abilities and stretches their limits on teamwork, leadership, communication, and other important life skills. However, the importance of the manifestation of these life skills cannot be understated. Training and the ability to take on the workshop leads to the ability to understand that these skills have been developed.

For future teen leadership programs, it is suggested that trainings and programs be designed for cooperative learning that allows youth to help develop their learning and their experience. Understanding that there is often specific content that needs to be presented or that youth need to know, set aside a portion of the curriculum or program to allow youth to develop and share ideas about what they would like to learn through the experience. Utilizing a combination of formal cooperative learning groups, i.e. science workshop team, that have an objective that could last from one session to months, as well as informal cooperative groups that form spontaneously to reflect on content, create a cooperative learning environment that allows learners to be active participants in the construction of knowledge. A cooperative learning environment creates a personal transaction between the learner, their peers, and the instructor that maximizes their learning and the learning of others (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2006; Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 2013;).

## References

Anderson, J., Bruce, J., & Mouton, L. (2010). 4-H made me a leader: A college-level alumni perspective of leadership life skill development. *Journal of Leadership Education, 9*(2), 35-48.

- Cranton, P. (2006). *Understanding and promoting transformative learning: A guide for educators of adults* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Duerden, M.D., Witt, P., Garst, B., Bialeschki, D., Schwarzlose, T., & Norton, K. (2014). The impact of camp employment on the workforce development of emerging adults. *Journal of Park and Recreation Administration*, 32(1), 26-44.
- Ferrari, T.M., & McNeely, N.N. (2007). Positive youth development: What's camp counseling got to do with it? Findings from a study of Ohio 4-H camp counselors. *Journal of Extension*, 45(2).
- Garst, B.A., & Bruce, F.A. (2003). Identifying 4-H camping outcomes using a standardized evaluation process across multiple 4-H educational centers. *Journal of Extension*, 41(3).
- Garst, B.A., & Johnson, J.J. (2005). Adolescent leadership skill development through residential 4-H camp counseling. *Journal of Extension*, 43(5).
- Garton, M.S., Miltenberger, M., & Pruett, B. (2007). Does 4-H camp influence life skill and leadership development? *Journal of Extension*, 45(4).
- Johnson, D., Johnson, R., & Smith, K. (2006) *Active Learning: Cooperation in the college classroom*. Interaction Book Company, Edina, MN.
- Johnson, D., Johnson, R., & Smith, K. (2013) Cooperative learning: Improving university instruction by basing practice on validated theory. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 25(4)
- Larson, R., & Hansen, D.M. (2005) The youth experience survey 2.0: Instrument revisions and validity testing. Retrieved March 1, 2014 from [http://youthdev.illinois.edu/?page\\_id=189](http://youthdev.illinois.edu/?page_id=189).
- Leff, D.M., Retallick, M.S., & Franz, N.K. (2015). Transformative learning and the 4-H camp counselor experience in Minnesota. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 3(3), 1-17.
- Miller, R.A. (1976). *Leader/agent's guide: Leadership life skills*. Stillwater, OK: Oklahoma State University.
- Nicholson, D. & Klem, M. (2007). *The value of being a Missouri 4-H camp counselor*. Missouri 4-H Center for Youth Development: University of Missouri.
- Taylor, E.W. (1997). Building upon the theoretical debate: A critical review of the empirical studies of Mezirow's transformative learning theory. *Adult Education Quarterly*, 48(1), 34-59.
- Van Horn, B.E., Flanagan, C.A., & Thomson, J.S. (1998). The first fifty years of the 4-H program. *Journal of Extension*, 36(6).