

## Outdoor Adventure Education: Learning by Sharing Cultural Differences

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The following text has been prepared by members of the Board of the European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning. Much of it is drawn from the 'Statement of Intent'<sup>2</sup> of the European Institute. It describes a variety of approaches to outdoor adventure education and suggests that these have much in common. Cultural and geographical influences are explored.

### The Vision

Outdoor adventure education is both a means of educating holistically through the use of the outdoors as a medium and a common response to disassociation within society. European collaboration will enrich our practice in addressing these issues to the benefit of all.

The European Institute promotes the exchange of knowledge, experience and techniques appropriate to the development of outdoor adventure education, and intends, through collaboration to develop initiatives and projects, to enhance provision across the community.

In the UK the National Association for Outdoor Education (NAOE) has for many years adopted a similar approach but within a national rather than international framework. This is mirrored in other nations.

### Outdoor Adventure Education - Many Dimensions

For most people who read this there will be an extensive list of reasons to educate out of doors. Outdoor educators generally believe in the value of direct experience as the most effective form of learning. As the 'real world' exists outside the classroom then the case for education out-of-doors is, of course, already made! The term

'experiential education' is often applied to this form of education and has for a long time been accepted as a valid approach to learning. For a review of its long history, its protagonists and antagonists, from Aristotle to recent times see Kraft (1984). There have been a number of important proponents this century (eg Friere, Montessori, Rogers) but perhaps the most influential has been Dewey (1963).

Experiential educators believe that it is this process of learning to learn without attenuation which leads to the development in the individual of a mature view of education. In the end all of us must take responsibility for our own learning. If we do not do so, forms of behaviour become embedded and we become reluctant to change, despite what new information coming our way tells us. This leads to pre-judging situations. Literally prejudice. We lose confidence to adapt to new situations and instead fall back on our preconceptions.

Amongst many working in the field there will be agreement that a good outdoor educational experience will provide a wide variety of learning opportunities. At times one form of development may find more emphasis than at others, but there is often the potential for intellectual, physical, emotional, aesthetic and spiritual development to take place (eg see Higgins, 1997; Smythe, 1998). The mix will vary from individual to individual and from time to time (eg see Crowther, 1988).

Early in the development of outdoor adventure education the possibility of educational outcomes beyond physical recreation and health were recognised. Though these remain important, the value of outdoor adventure education for personal and social development has become a major justification (for example see a recent review of literature by Hattie et al, 1997).

<sup>1</sup>Third European congress for outdoor adventure education and experiential learning

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Philosophies, issues, government support, funding arrangements and social, cultural and educational circumstances all vary as do the words we use to describe our work. Nonetheless it is important that we do work together to achieve our aims. Indeed this is one of the key messages we hope those we work with in our day to day programmes will learn and adopt. In moving forward it will be vitally important that we are prepared to take a very broad and sympathetic view of the approaches taken by our colleagues from the many nations of Europe.

### Notes

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confidence in their own judgment and ability to direct their lives.

- The role of individual or guided reflection on these experiences is now considered to be of great importance. Whilst there have been a number of recent proponents (eg Priest, Greenaway) we would direct the reader to two recent reviews which assess the research and emphasise the case (see Barrett and Greenaway, 1995 and Hattie et al, 1997)

This approach is applied to a broad range of client groups. For example, a school may use a residential outdoor experience to encourage students to draw together a wide range of academic disciplines, whereas a therapeutic worker may focus on developing self-esteem through increased responsibility in a small group.

In educational terms the issue is whether a modern, primarily intellectual form of education is adequate for proper development of the individual, or whether some direct form of educational experience which encourages awareness of self, others and the environment is more appropriate. In therapeutic terms the issue is whether outdoor educational and adventure experiences can address some of the personal and social difficulties encountered in modern society.

The following represents the three main areas within which outdoor educational activities take place:

### **Outdoor Activities**

In a sense the development of outdoor education may be seen as a consequence of those who took part in adventurous activities themselves appreciating the potential for personal and social development, and both formal and informal education (eg Loynes et al, 1997). In all the discussion surrounding educational value, curricular links etc, it is worth remembering the uncomplicated joy to be found in

simply taking part in the activities, and participating in an 'adventure'.

The traditional activities which seem to be used most for educational purposes are hillwalking, rock climbing, canoeing, kayaking, orienteering, sailing and windsurfing. However, activities such as gorge walking and abseiling seem to be even more popular. The degree to which activities are discussed and reviewed to enhance educational outcomes may be very variable (see Barrett and Greenaway, 1995 and Hattie et al, 1997).

### **The Social Context**

Societal change appears to be ever more rapid and many individuals experience a sense of increasing disconnection from society. There is a widespread feeling of a loss of control and lack of influence; themes noted with concern by psychologists such as Freud and Jung. Outdoor adventure education has the unique ability to address many of these issues, engaging people with place and community in a lasting way.

Additionally there is increasing evidence of social dissatisfaction, particularly amongst many young people. The tension is generated by a mismatch between the demanding nature of our complex consumer society and our ability to cope with and find fulfilment within it. In today's society there appears to be little acknowledgement of the importance of physical activity and the desire to face 'testing' or 'risk' situations. In some young people this tension is expressed in various forms of behaviour which cause great anguish for many individuals in our society.

Outdoor educators and therapeutic workers use the outdoors to bring their clients back to an involvement with adventure and the natural world and through this process seek to effect some attitudinal and behavioural change (eg Hopkins and Putnam, 1993 ; Barrett and Greenaway, 1995).

## **The Environmental Context**

For many 'the environment' seems to be detached from their own personal experience, simply something which environmentalists and politicians argue about. Environmental issues are however of increasing importance in the political agenda, and due recognition has been given through Local Agenda 21 commitments made subsequent to the Rio Summit. Unfortunately the international significance and immediacy of this agreement may be obscured in its name: 'Local' is intended to imply each nation, and '21' means for the century beginning in less than two years!

The trend towards urbanisation and a form of living which is not connected to the land nor the natural world leaves us with an inability to experience the elements which support life on Earth. Outdoor educational experiences can provide opportunities for direct contact with the natural world, leading to reacquaintance with these processes in an experiential manner not possible in the classroom or home. Without the opportunity to draw upon such experiences our opinions and values are formed in isolation and our attitudes and actions may be only partially informed. In this area outdoor education has strong links with environmental education and the developing field of 'multiple intelligences' (Goleman, 1997). These links could be developed to the benefit of all.

In addition the outdoors seems to be used increasingly for specific purposes such as 'outdoor management development', 'adventure therapy' and 'intervention for those with criminal tendencies'. Although these have not been formally addressed in the preceding analysis the principles remain the same. The use of the outdoors, frequently for challenging adventurous activities forms part of many such programmes. In a sense these can be considered as specific forms of 'personal and social development' and thus conform to the model described above.

## **Cultural Differences**

It may be a function of cultural differences that this term appears to have many different meanings! Perhaps the most conventional use of the term would imply differences between nations. However within nations and across national boundaries cascade cultural differences between those who speak different languages or live in different regions. Religious or other ideologies, ethnic origin, gender etc can and are all considered as cultural differences. All such 'differences' imply variety and thereby add to the richness of experience we can all learn from. This theme is explored in more detail in the chapter by Humberstone et al (1998).

## **Cultural and Geographical Influences**

The proliferation of terms used to describe our work is symptomatic of cultural and geographical influences. Space does not permit the provision of an extensive list of terms, their definitions and 'translations' into other languages. Rather it seems appropriate to explore several of the key terms as examples.

### **Outdoor Education**

This is the term most used in the UK and reflects a primarily educational focus. It may also be due in part to a desire amongst practitioners to assert the value of the subject within the school curriculum. This is reflected in the fact that (although provision has declined in recent years, primarily as a result of tighter financial budgets) a number of schools throughout the UK have employed outdoor education teachers and many schoolchildren have some experience of outdoor education at a residential outdoor centre. Whilst programmes vary in their content there is usually some focus on 'adventurous' outdoor activities and/or some programme of environmental education or field studies. Many of these justify themselves on the perceived personal and social developmental outcomes which result from the experiences.

Substantial efforts have been made to link these into the wide range of educational curricula.

### **Erlebnispädagogik**

This term is widely used in German speaking nations to describe an approach to education in the outdoors. According to Stähler (1998) writing in this publication, there are very strong similarities with outdoor education. Whilst there is no direct translation, Stähler states that the term implies education (Pädagogic); occurrence, experience or adventure (erlebnis); and life/vitality (leben).

### **Friluftsliv**

This is a concept which is essentially Norwegian. The term implies 'feeling at home in nature' (Repp, 1996) and is very familiar to most people in Scandinavia, the majority of whom will also take part in some form of activity such as skiing or orienteering. It seeks, through an experiential approach to a simple way of living, to help people rediscover the natural world as the true home of our cultures. As such it is well rooted in what is essentially an environmentally focussed awareness of the landscape. For further elaboration of the concept and what it can offer outdoor education see Repp (1996) and Tellnes (1992).

There are a number of agencies which operate across national boundaries and which have involvement in the field. The most obvious of these is 'Outward Bound'. This is a trademark for an organisation which has commercial interests in a number of countries throughout the world and which uses the outdoors primarily for forms of personal and social development.

The 'Scout and Guide Movement' also operates in many countries and makes extensive use of the outdoors in the development of qualities in young people which lead to a 'service to the community' approach.

In America the Association for Experiential Education has a particularly strong influence on the approach taken. Whilst the organisation is a national association for the development of outdoor adventure education it has substantial international influence.

Whilst these and others operate within the field, they are organisations and are therefore less likely to offer a basis for philosophical development of an understanding of the nature of outdoor adventure education than an exploration of the terms 'outdoor education', 'erlebnis' and 'friluftsliv'.

### **Limitations**

The organisation of a conference on the theme of 'sharing cultural differences' reflects the fact that a wide variety of approaches exist across Europe. Furthermore it is implicit that the wide diversity of philosophies and methods of providers within each nation will derive their own approaches from national tendencies to favour one approach or another, and from work they may be aware of from international journals, magazines and fellow professionals throughout the world.

The European Institute is a very young organisation (founded in 1996) and board members make their contribution on a purely voluntary and unpaid basis. The network of contacts is, quite naturally limited by the present composition of 'the board' and their contacts. Consequently there are at present few members from Eastern and Southern Europe.

### **This Congress**

The arguments in favour of this congress are clear. Any progress in the harmonisation of views on the nature of the subject area, research which might be of value, the development of collaborative projects and recognition and funding by the European Union will take place over years or even decades. This is to be

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