

WHY EDUCATE OUT OF DOORS ?

by Peter Higgins

Introduction

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 already made. Obvious! Perhaps the reason we do not succeed in driving home our case and convincing others of the value of this form of education is that it is so obvious to us. However, others may not be so easily persuaded and we must find convincing arguments.

For simplicity I have pursued this debate on the basis of the validity of Outdoor Education for young people and in schools. This is obviously not the only role for Outdoor Education and similar arguments apply to other types of 'client'. There seem to be two issues to consider. Why do it at all? And assuming we can find a justification for it, how do we win the argument?

Education through Direct Experience

Before we argue that education out of doors is essential we should first examine the arguments surrounding the educational value of direct experience. We should bear in mind that Outdoor Education is simply one aspect of direct educational experience and that for example a student in a chemistry practical is engaged in an equally valid and quite similar process. 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 proponents and antagonists, from Aristotle to the present day see Kraft (1984).

Much of the confusion seems to arise when we mix up learning and teaching. There is a feeling that the former may not be undertaken without input from the teacher. I am not suggesting that the teacher does not have role to play in the process, merely that this role may not be as crucial as is often thought to be the case.

It is clear that we all learn through direct experience and experimentation, otherwise none of us would be able to walk or talk, and we would frequently burn ourselves on hot objects etc. It is clearly not possible to have direct experience of all things and so to learn we have to find a way of generalising from previous experiences to the new one we are involved in at the time.

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 either take responsibility for our own learning or we will cease to learn at all. If we do not do so, forms of behaviour become embedded and we become reluctant to change, despite what the 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. Our opinions will become fixed and completely impervious to any new facts!

It is perhaps wrong to assume a lead role for the educator in the education of a student as there are so many other influences from family, friends, society, the world of advertising etc. At times some or all of these will promote a valid view of the real world, at other times they may not. Where the teacher does have a central role I believe is in encouraging the student to have a questioning outlook and to trust her or his own judgment.

What seems to be clear is that there are a number of parts to a full experiential learning process. These can be described as follow:

- a) Having the experience;
- b) Reflecting on the experience;
- c) Applying the new knowledge to this and to new situations;
- d) Generalising the principles so they can be applied to future situations;
- e) Considering the value of the whole process as a way of learning.

There have been a number of worthy models developed to explain this process. The simplest seems to be that of Kolb (1984) who described the first three of these as a learning cycle. This view has been extended by others who see the process as a spiral rather than a cycle, with experimentation in new situations being a vital development.

Some authors have suggested that the process becomes more effective if it is reviewed afterwards and/or front loaded' so that the student has some existing framework within which to set the experience. This 'front loading' may take the form of a direct or indirect prompt to encourage a certain form of behaviour; or a direct comparison between the activity and some aspect of personal or work life (see Priest, 1996 for a review). This gives a role for the facilitator/teacher who otherwise seems left without much to do! In fact he/she can make valuable input at all stages by prompting and facilitating the process. Furthermore, learning by experimentation may for many be a fairly unsettling process, and in

some situations (eg outdoor activities) potentially hazardous. The facilitator/teacher has a clear role here too. One important post-script is that the nature of these inputs must be adapted to different groups and different situations. We have to constantly remind ourselves to ask the question 'why are these people here?' Whilst there may well be common situations, the skill of the teacher/facilitator is in responding to the needs of the group and the individual.

I believe the whole process becomes particularly valuable when stage (e) is addressed. At this point it becomes possible not just to generalise the lessons learnt in the recent experiences, but also to extend this to the process of learning itself. Here the student can, usually with some assistance from the facilitator, develop confidence in the process and thereby in their ability to take responsibility for their own learning. In other words, the learner becomes more self confident and independent. This adventurous learning process becomes attractive and valuable in its own right. These are vital life skills and their development should be the ambition of every educator for every student.

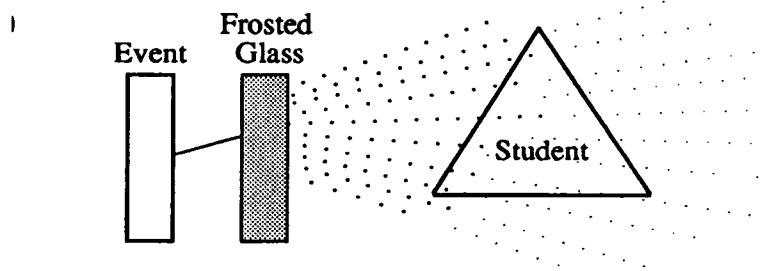
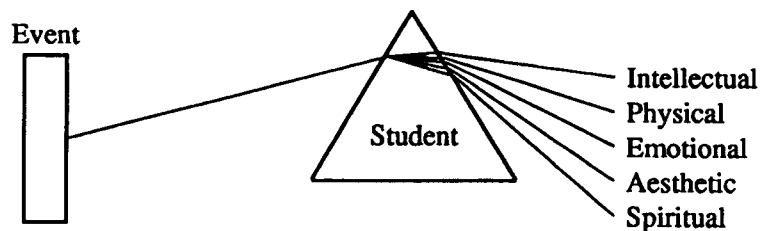
Throughout this debate it is important to remember that it is just as possible to do Outdoor Education in a non experiential way as it is to do other forms of education in an experiential way. Am I suggesting that there is nothing special about Outdoor Education or Outdoor Educators? I suppose I would rather evade the question by suggesting that there is something special about education out of doors. It then becomes the responsibility of the Outdoor Educator to maximise the powerful learning potential of the setting and not to be tempted to assume that the 'experience will speak for itself'.

Outdoor Education through Direct Experience

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. The mix will vary from individual to individual and from time to time.

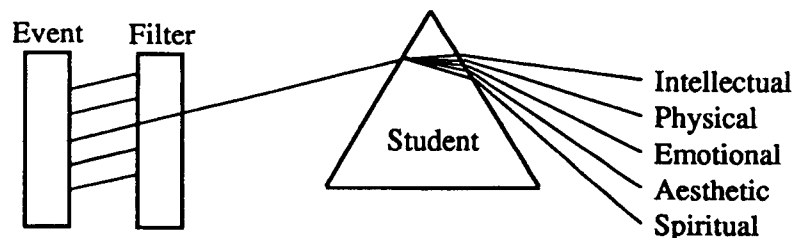
The teacher or instructor can take a number of roles in this process. Several of these are represented diagrammatically here. The student is represented as a prism, the experience as a beam of light which results in a spectrum development outcomes.

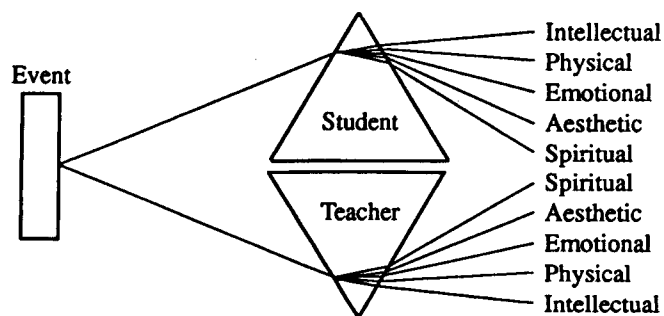
i) No role for the teacher. The student experiences the event without any intermediary (teacher or instructor). Some form of development will take place dependent upon the student's interest in learning. It is up to the student to interpret the situation or not to bother.



ii) The teacher as 'frosted glass'. The light from the beam becomes diffused by the influence of the teacher who selects and separates out the information he wishes to pass on to the student. There is no direct experience and there is a likelihood that the true nature of the experience will be so reduced by the teacher adopting this role that its value is substantially reduced for the student.

iii) The teacher as 'filter'. If the initial event is complex it is possible that the teacher may be acting in a very positive fashion by selecting the particular direct experience the student needs and then focusing this for the attention of the student.





iv) Teacher and student share a common experience. In this case both teacher and student are represented as prisms. The experience each gains from the event is separate but there is room for comparison and subsequent greater understanding of both the event and one another.

Teacher and student will have had different previous experiences. It is likely that the teacher will have a greater range of experiences to draw upon and these are set alongside the new ones. The result is a sharing of experience and subsequent development. This will probably be greater for the student as she/he will initially be less experienced. However, as the student gains more shared and independent experience there will be less need for the teacher to be involved or to interpret the experience. It is worth noting that the teacher also learns from this process.

This explanation could perhaps be applied to any subject area. However, what seems special about the outdoors is the potential for the wide range of development which can take place through direct experience.

Some Arguments For Outdoor Education

There have been a number of attempts to summarise the arguments in favour of Outdoor Education. In one of the most recent of these Barrett and Greenaway (1995) attempted to consider the educational processes and claimed outcomes for Outdoor Education experiences. However it is fair to say that they encountered great difficulty in filtering out the factors which had the greatest positive impact on personal development. Cooper (1996) provides recent anecdotal but substantial evidence for the value of residential Outdoor Education programmes.

Notwithstanding the paucity of proper research it is clear that a number of convincing arguments have been made in the past, and that these have found favour. Otherwise there would have been no growth and development of Outdoor Education.

Holism

This is the notion that Outdoor Education can generate opportunities for integrated learning experiences which may incorporate aspects of intellectual, physical, emotional, aesthetic and spiritual development. Although there are few other parts of the curriculum which can make such claims, it is important to appreciate that there are a number of factors acting in our favour which are nothing to do with the direct influence of the outdoors. For example many Outdoor Education experiences take place over an extended time scale, with small groups and in residential settings. It is quite possible that in such circumstances, Maths or History for example could have similar positive learning outcomes. Nonetheless the reality is that it is generally the Outdoor Educator who adopts this role and that positive development results.

However, we do have the advantage of the powerful influence of the outdoors which brings a variety of experiences likely to be new to the majority of students. For many this comes in the form of the additional and new dimension of physical or emotional challenge to their perceived limits.

There is a tendency to consider education as taking place in a purely intellectual domain. The view expressed above includes 'physical' and it is important to realise that this is intended as a form of education and not simply as exercise. Learning is likely to be more effective if it uses physical sensations as well as intellectual, and there are of course many things which must be learnt primarily physically. We know the world best when we encounter it through as many of our senses as possible.

Health

There can surely be no real argument as to the value of some form of physical exercise. For many of us life is becoming increasingly sedentary and a venture out of doors provides some counter to this. Furthermore, there have been claims as to the benefits of aesthetic appreciation in reducing stress related disorders and there is now a branch of Outdoor Education (Adventure Therapy) which has this as one of its major themes. Such experiences are perhaps of greatest value when they are seen as preventative rather than remedial.

Play and Adventure

Even adults need to play. It's just that our play habits are often more expensive than those of young people and we find ways of describing them in sophisticated terms. Young people are subject to increasing pressures to leave childhood behind and this may lead to a gap in development. To provide opportunities for young people to experience play and adventure in situations where they don't have to be embarrassed about it is a thoroughly worthwhile aim of Outdoor Education. Sometimes there is even the added benefit that this can be combined with learning!

Personal and Social Development

This has for a long time been one of the claims of Outdoor Education and it is in this context that it is justified within many schools. The benefits are probably as the result of the factors described above and the opportunity for students to spend time together and with staff in a new setting. Even sitting down to share a meal may be a new experience for some. The lack of familiarity with an unfamiliar outdoor setting is seen as offering a new 'playing field' with a new set of rules and therefore allowing a fresh start in the understanding of self, relationships amongst individuals within the group and with the members of staff present.

Environmental Connection and Sustainability

Issues of sustainability and environmental understanding are seen by several authors as a central responsibility of Outdoor Education. Amongst others, Cooper (1991, 1994) and myself (Higgins, 1996 a,b) have argued that a feeling for the natural world is an essential element in developing a sense of value and in encouraging sustainable practices. Who could be better placed than Outdoor Educators to develop programmes which take account of these aspirations ?

Consequential Education

There are few opportunities within formal education for young people to discover the importance of making correct decisions and taking the most appropriate course of action. For example, taking note of the correct way to place tent pegs may well have consequences for a decent night's sleep. Outdoor Education is uniquely placed to allow such experiences to be arranged and provide such opportunities. We are protected from our own mistakes to such an extent that we cease to be able to accept that we make them. This too is unhealthy and the overall effect is a dulling of the senses. I have argued this extensively elsewhere (Higgins, 1996 a,b).

Sense of Place

A sense of place, or of ones position in relation to other organisms and the landscape is often the result of direct involvement with these. To feel a love of place is for many Outdoor Educators a common emotion, as is a sense of connection with such places: of how we fit in there. For many of our students this may not be so familiar an experience. To express this feeling and seek to arrange learning experiences which encourage such involvement is an important responsibility. It is through such experiences that an appreciation develops of the aesthetic, which puts much of art, prose and poetry into perspective.

Rites of Passage

There is very little opportunity for the transition from childhood to adulthood to be acknowledged and valued in Western society. However, there are distinct similarities between traditional tribal 'rites of passage' and the residential or camp experience. For a number of reasons there is a tendency for young people to have Outdoor Education opportunities in the early years of their secondary schooling, ie as adolescents. The process involved is often that of extraction (from school or home); an adventure with a group of peers which may involve hardship; and return and reintegration. This is of course somewhat analogous to some tribal 'rites of passage'. There are few other opportunities for young people to have such experiences and allow them to become the hero of their own story. See Maddern (1990,1991) and Hodgkin (1981) for a more fulsome elaboration of this theme.

Citizenship: Taking Responsibilities

Famously now Colin Mortlock argued that through Outdoor Education we could encourage a love of self, others and environment; and that these should in balance. It is now well understood that the first step in developing positive attitude is to encourage an emotional connection. From this point it becomes possible to take responsibility for self, others and environment. In other words to take responsibility for one's actions. A well balanced Outdoor Education programme can provide a wide range of opportunities for young people to do so.

This is precisely what many individuals in our society would wish for our young people, and indeed would expect our educators to focus on. It is a source of bewilderment to me that we seem to have been unable to get the message over that this is what we do.

Different Learners, Different Potentials

Not all student are best suited to intellectual development within a classroom environment. there are those who excel in more physical or aesthetic ways. There are opportunities for such development within the school timetable but here again Outdoor Education can provide an additional stimulus. The issue is not simply the development of the individual in the way that best suits him or her, it is that through the release and acknowledgement of this potential, the student is seen in a different light by peers and staff. The consequent change in self esteem can have far reaching educational and social effects.

Reality: Virtual and Actual

Few would disagree that there is an increasing tendency for young people to spend more school and recreation time engaged in the virtual world of computer and television images. Whilst interactive computer programmes may well have their place, and there is no doubt as to the power of television as a means of learning, neither can expect to replace the real world. We must guard against the idea that such devices might obviate this need as it is only through direct experience that we can check the validity of the image. Furthermore the images presented through computer and TV technology focus on visual and aural images and therefore miss out the other senses. There seems little point in watching film of a storm and listening to the wind howling if one has never had to put on a waterproof. After all, the outdoors is where amongst other things the weather actually happens.

Government Legislation

The 1944 Education (Scotland) Act contains the following passage (Chapter 37, 3(i)):

'It shall be the duty of an education authority to secure that the facilities for primary, secondary and further education provided in their area include adequate facilities for recreation and social and physical training. For that purpose an education authority, with the approval of the Secretary of State, may establish, maintain and manage, or assist the establishment, maintenance and management of camps, holiday classes, playing fields, play centres and other places.....'. The 'camps' described here were the forerunners of the Outdoor Education Centres in use today.

In 1971 the Scottish Education Department issued Standard Circular 804 as guidance to Education Authorities and schools. Amongst other recommendations it suggests (Section 2) that 'during their school careers pupils (should) have a continuous and progressive outdoor experience as an integral part of the whole educational experience, including if possible at least one period of residence at an outdoor centre'.

There are strong justifications for Outdoor Education provision in a number of recent Government reports. Perhaps the strongest of these is to be found in the 5-14 Expressive Arts and Environmental Science Guidelines. For a full discussion of the benefits of Outdoor Education in the formal and informal see Chapter 4.

Some Arguments Against Outdoor Education

It is not the responsibility of the protagonist to make the case for the opposition. However, it is worth reviewing the arguments against as these will be one to be faced during any decision making process.

Whilst there is often support for Outdoor Education this tends to falter when the financial cost is considered. There is little doubt that this and similarly staff intensive forms of education are costly. All we can expect to do to counter the argument is demonstrate the benefits. Whilst these have been briefly described above, there are, as far as I know, no cost benefit studies of the process. We can continue to argue our case with belief and conviction, and take the lofty stance that we are not prepared to place a financial value on what we do. However, this does not seem to impress those who make decisions on the future of Outdoor Education. We have to find some way of addressing this issue, and establish that there are long term social and financial consequences of a lack of provision.

Whilst Outdoor Education may not have had its origins in any form of academic validity, some effort has been made in the last 20 years or so to make these 'new clothes' fit. In order to maintain credibility now we must make a convincing case. There are opportunities to do so and some of these arguments are made in Chapter 4.

The argument is often put forward that we are not really involved in the academic development of the student but rather their personal and social development. Some critics argue against this by pointing out that nothing has changed in their home circumstances and so ask the uncomfortable question 'what's the point?'. Whilst I could agree that there may well be issues which cannot be resolved, we can make some attempt to deal with this by adapting the nature of our programme to include follow up work etc.

Finally

If we are to get anywhere in making the case for this, or indeed any other form of education we first need to know something about the expectations society has for education. If we take the narrow view, that what we want for young people is training to do a particular job then there is little opportunity for Outdoor Education to play a part. If however we wish to encourage individuals to develop an interest in their own subsequent learning then Outdoor Education should take a central role.

If we work on the assumption that the purpose of education is to allow students to develop fully and become well balanced adults who take an active responsible role in society and the greater outside world, we have to allow them at some point to experience that world. In fact a narrow view of education would only prepare young people for adult life in a school! Similarly we must ensure that we do something more than encourage young people to want to work in an outdoor centre!

At the same time as it is appropriate to be advocates for Outdoor Education we must not expect it to be a panacea for all educational and social ambitions.

So, perhaps we should pose the question the other way around. *Why Educate Indoors?* To be fair there are clearly many things which will be best taught indoors, but the question still has validity as it may serve to challenge notions which are often taken for granted. The answer is perhaps fairly straightforward.....do your educating where it is likely to be most effective, allowing the combination of theory and practice to inform each other. There may be all sorts of constraints which may quite validly prevent this from happening. However, surely we owe it to our students (and society) to first consider whether we have the right to deny them the direct experience from which they will learn most effectively.

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