

ON THE NATURE OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

by Peter Higgins and Chris Loynes

Introduction

Outdoor Education has often been considered to be an approach to education which can permeate throughout virtually any curricular subject area. In addition it is used to satisfy the aims of those wishing to encourage outdoor recreation, environmental awareness and personal and social development: a role as broad as any subject area within the field of human experience. It should be no surprise then that this has often left Outdoor Educators with a feeling of some bewilderment and of being everywhere but nowhere! However, the field has perhaps now 'come of age' and has its own distinct body of knowledge which is reflected in the publication of dedicated journals (eg Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership, Journal of Experiential Education).

Outdoor Education is now seen within the profession as drawing on three main areas of outdoor activities, environmental education and social and personal development. A good Outdoor Educator may well be focussing attention on one or other of these at any given time but will still be sensitive to opportunities to guide experience within the complementary areas. However, all experience must take place within a framework of safety. Appropriate decision making and the discrete maintenance of a safe environment within which outdoor experiences take place are a hallmark of professionalism. This view of Outdoor Education is shown in diagrammatic form in Figure 1.

Much of what follows is an attempt to express the unexpected accord the authors discovered at an international gathering of Outdoor Educators at the 1996 Easter Seminar in Tornio, Finland. This section formed part of the 'Statement of Intent' of the newly created 'European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education' was founded, and a paper published in the Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership (Higgins and Loynes, 1997).

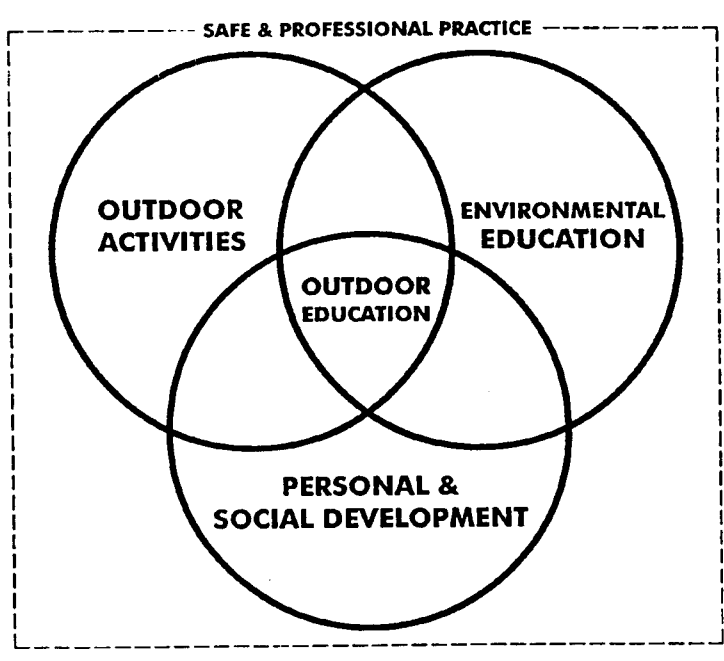
The Common Ground

There are many views as to exactly what Outdoor Adventure Education is. This is not only to be expected in such a broad subject area, it is to be welcomed. Individuality of approach reflects individuality in learning. Internationally the same variety is reflected in cultural diversity. There is, however a great deal of common ground and most practitioners would agree that the process comprises most or all of the following elements.

- * The educational intention is to stimulate personal and social development. Those who work in this field have learning aspirations for their students beyond physical recreation to the academic, aesthetic, spiritual, social and environmental.
- * The themes of Outdoor, Adventure and Education are all important to some degree in the process, which should not simply be recreational, nor should it take place without at least some experience of the outdoors. Adventure in this context implies that there is a 'journeying out' (a move onto new ground) to embrace the experience.
- * The process engaged in is that of learning 'experientially'. To maximise the effect, the experience should be direct rather than mediated, with the facilitator acting as a guide rather than in the usual formal capacity of a teacher.
- * The result of this approach being applied in the powerful context of the outdoors is that many report the experience to be effective as a means of personal and social development, and in increasing awareness of community and environment.

Figure 1

THE RANGE & SCOPE OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION



* Whilst some aspects of the experience may involve the use of settings in which there are apparent or real hazards, the physical and emotional safety of the client is protected through appropriate professional standards.

* The natural environment is usually 'the workplace' and professional standards must be applied to ensure it's protection from overuse. Outdoor Education programmes should also encourage participants to develop respect for the environment.

* This respect is extended and developed through the concept of 'friluftsliv' (see footnote) which 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 a result of this experiential process, participants should take increased responsibility for their own learning, and consequently develop increased confidence in their own judgment and ability to direct their lives.

* 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 respect through increased responsibility in a small group.

The Development of Outdoor Education

In a sense Outdoor Adventure Education had its origins in debates between the philosophers of Ancient Greece over the dominance of the body or the mind in controlling the actions of the individual.

The debate has moved on over the centuries with philosophers and academics from many countries making contributions. In modern 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 we encounter in modern society.

To some extent these issues have been resolved and most practitioners agree on the merits of this form of work. The theoretical base for the process of experiential learning is strong with research and publication now being a feature of the work of Outdoor Educators in Europe, North America and Australasia.

However, as a subject area Outdoor Education is still young, with the bulk of the development taking place over the last 30 years. A great deal of work still needs to be done to develop the underpinning philosophy, techniques and professional standards in the field.

Outdoor Activities

In a sense the development of Outdoor Education may be seen as a consequence of those who took part in the adventure activities themselves appreciating the potential for both formal and informal education. With all the discussion surrounding educational value, curricular links etc which follows it is worth remembering the uncomplicated joy to be found in simply taking part in the activities, and participating in an 'adventure'.

The activities which seem to be used most for educational purposes are mountaineering, rock climbing, canoeing, kayaking and orienteering. Other providers are still able to offer more staff intensive activities such as sailing and windsurfing. However, activities such as gorge walking and abseiling seem to be even more popular. The degree to which these and others are discussed and reviewed to enhance educational outcomes appears to be very variable.

The Social Context

Since classical times philosophers have been aware of the disassociation between people and nature brought about by the civilising process. Today, at a time of rapid change, the individual is also becoming increasingly disconnected from society. There is a widespread feeling of a loss of control and lack of influence through the political process.

Outdoor adventure 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, risk 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.

The concept of 'friluftsliv' 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. For further elaboration of the concept and what it can offer Outdoor Education see Repp (1996) and Tellnes (1992).

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.

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.

However, 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. Without the opportunity to draw upon such experiences our opinions and values are formed in isolation and our attitudes and actions may be ill informed. In this area Outdoor Education has strong links with Environmental Education and these should be developed.

Outdoor Education for Specific Purposes

The outdoors appears to be used increasingly for '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.

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