

Editorial

Towards Consensus on the Nature of Outdoor Education

By Peter Higgins and Chris Loynes

Introduction

The ongoing and seemingly unresolved debate within the UK on the nature of Outdoor Education might suggest that an international gathering should expect to encounter even greater difficulties. This paper is an attempt to express the unexpected accord the authors discovered at the Easter Seminar in Tornio, Finland. This paper formed the philosophical basis upon which the 'Statement of Intent' of the newly created 'European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education' was founded.

A number of interested organisations have decided that 1997 should be denoted 'The Year of Outdoor Education'. The 'Council for Outdoor Education, Training and Recreation' intends to promote the contribution of work in this field to society. In order to do so, it is attempting to define the common ground amongst practitioners within the UK. We hope this European perspective will act as a stimulus to this end and to other developments here and elsewhere.

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.

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 its 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' 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

GUIDELINES FOR CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Purpose: To describe the theory and practice of adventure-based learning in the outdoors. **For:** The professional working on education and recreation programmes outdoors throughout the world. JAEOL has a focus with a worldwide circulation. **Content:** Criteria:- relevant to the practitioner - useful- informed by study or experience - written in an accessible style - of international interest. **Submission:** Articles are welcome from practitioners and observers of the field. They can be submitted in any form including hand written. Typed documents are a great help. Best of all is a typed manuscript with a copy on disk suitable for an Apple Macintosh and using Word or Works software. Graphics such as tables or photographs are encouraged. We are also happy to receive notice of training events and other services to the profession. **Copydates:** The first day of February, May, August and November each year. Publication will be towards the end of the following month. However, it can be up to a year before an article can be scheduled once accepted. **Copyright:** The copyright of any article remains with the author. The Journal is the copyright of AE. Reproduction for educational purposes approved with no need for reference to AE, provided author and source are acknowledged.

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.

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.

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.

The Vision

Outdoor Adventure Education is a common response to disassociation within society. European collaboration will enrich our practice in addressing this issue to the benefit of all.

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Authors Notes

Dr. Peter Higgins is Senior Lecturer in Outdoor Education at Moray House Institute of Education, Heriot Watt University, Edinburgh.

Correspondence address:

Moray House Institute of Education, Heriot Watt University, Cramond Road North, Edinburgh, Scotland, EH4 6JD.

Tel: 0131 312 6001, Fax: 0130 312 6335.

E-Mail: PeteH@mhie.ac.uk.

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You can also email us at:

Prof. Pete Higgins, pete.higgins@ed.ac.uk

Dr. Peter Allison, peter.allison@ed.ac.uk

Dr. Robbie Nicol, Robbie.nicol@ed.ac.uk

Dr. Simon Beames, simon.beames@ed.ac.uk

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