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 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’ 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 handwritten. 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 in the profession. Copydate: 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 belongs to 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 debate
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 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
dissociation within society. European collaboration will enrich
our practice in addressing this issue to the benefit of all.

Acknowledgements

This paper owes much to a number of European Outdoor Educators
who stimulated the formation of the ‘European Institute’, and most
of whom gave papers at the Tornio conference. In particular, Peter
Becker provided focus with a thought provoking discussion paper
on aspects of philosophical influences, and the social consequences
of ‘dissociation’. Critical comment on the above text was provided by Gunnar Repp, Steve Bowles and Barbara Humberstone.

References

LOYNES, C (ed) 1996 Finland Welcomes Europe and the World.
Proceedings of the European Conference, April 1996. JAEOl.13

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.

Far Out - Practical and Informational Adventure Education
University of Edinburgh
Moray House School of Education
Outdoor Education Department

We offer the following programmes:

Postgraduate Certificate in Outdoor Education

Postgraduate Certificate in Personal and Social Outdoor Education

Postgraduate Certificate in Environmental Education

Postgraduate Diploma in Outdoor Education

MSc in Outdoor Education

PhD by research

If you are interested in information on the courses of study we offer please take a look at our web page at
http://www.education.ed.ac.uk/outdoored/
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

Further publications by the Outdoor Education faculty can be found in the Research section of the web page as well as in each faculty’s biographical page under the heading publications.