

Alternative visions of learning: children's learning experiences in the outdoors

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Abstract

Outdoor learning opportunities for school pupils are likely to increase following the publication of the Government's Manifesto for Outdoor Learning (DfES, 2005). However, the formalisation of outdoor education to meet local authority demands, and national policies and initiatives, presents the danger of outdoor education centres becoming increasingly similar to schools. This paper reports on interim findings from a doctoral research project investigating children's learning experiences at a residential outdoor education centre. It suggests that the power of outdoor learning may lie in the informality and deeply contextual learning activities on these programmes. It argues for outdoor learning as an alternative vision of education that should be seen as essentially different from traditional schooling rather than an extension of schools. It argues for the freeing of outdoor education centres from the structural boundaries imposed by the national curriculum and government curriculum enhancement projects, whilst reducing or removing the demands for centres to continually investigate the impact of their work.

Keywords: *outdoor experiential learning*

Introduction

Outdoor learning opportunities for English school pupils have until very recently been 'constrained by a combination of official statute, an obsession with desk-bound tasks and a fear of litigation' (Hayes, 2007: 153). Such opportunities have been codified by Rickinson et al. (2004: 9) as field work and visits to field study centres, outdoor adventure education, and projects in school grounds or the local community. Opportunities are likely to increase following the publication of the Government's Manifesto for Outdoor Learning (DfES, 2005).

The increased engagement of children with the outdoors is desirable for a number of reasons:

- It can help improve their health and fitness – bigger spaces mean bigger movements are possible so exercise increases physical fitness, coordination and wellbeing;
- the natural world provides a real life authenticity for learning and helps to embed de-contextualised learning;
- subjects covered in class can be productively extended by trips which bring new insights and learning;
- It can enthuse and (re) engage – novelty, fresh air, space.

(adapted from Waite and Rea, 2007)

This paper argues that Government involvement with outdoor learning is already re-shaping it into a more formalised experience than it once was and making it more like school, when the benefits of outdoor education may lie in its informality: its difference from school.

Background and Literature review

The (school) effectiveness discourse (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998, Wrigely, 2003, 2007) has become dominant in many areas of education (and other areas of social life such as health and social care). This has led to the widespread use in England of school 'league tables' reporting examination outcomes to compare school performance; target driven performance management for teachers and school managers, and a focus on impact in school inspections by OFSTED. 'Impact', based upon the assumption that there exists a causal link between educational aims, objectives and pedagogy, and learning outcomes or benefits, became a mantra of late twentieth century state schooling in Britain. I suggest that this same effectiveness discourse and search for impact is leading to the over formalisation of outdoor learning.

Hayes outlines the drawbacks of an over formalised school curriculum that squeezes children's learning into 'predetermined packets' of time to meet learning objectives (2007: 151). He sees outdoor learning as a possible antidote to this. The value of outdoor learning opportunities is represented in a broad literature, reviewed by McKenzie (2000) and Rickinson *et al.* (2004). Benefits have been reported in terms of improved self-concept (Ewert, 1983, Gibbs and Bunyan, 1997, Hattie, Marsh, Neill and Richards, 1997, Swarbrick, Eastwood and Tutton, 2004) which may have an effect on academic achievement (Nundy, 1999) and on academic performance *per se* (e.g. Christie, 2004, Dismore and Bailey, 2005, Hattie *et al.*, 1997).

Perhaps because of these claims, the Government's manifesto for outdoor learning (DfES, 2005) produced as a well-meant reaction to the pervasive trend of passive, sedentary learning that does not suit all children, presents an argument for outdoor learning as an entitlement for all and states that:

.... learning outside the classroom is about raising achievement through an organised, powerful approach to learning in which direct experience is of prime importance.

(DfES, 2005 my emphasis)

Thus, outdoor learning is now prescribed as an entitlement for all, which few argue with, but is also defined in terms of 'school effectiveness': raising achievement, measured using the existing formal methods used in schools (Dismore and Bailey, 2005) to blend with a Government agenda that has been heavily criticised (Hargreaves and Fullan, 1998 Wrigely, 2007). This is an interesting example of how government policy and agenda are quick to colonise the language of others, in this case those of inclusion and outdoor learning.

That outdoor learning must feature direct experience as an issue of prime importance is uncontroversial (much outdoor learning has always done this), but the manifesto (DfES, 2005) points to direct experience as the fundamental contributing factor, ignoring other contributing factors. I suggest that the power of outdoor learning may also lie in the informality and deeply contextual learning activities engaged in, approaches to learning that traditional schooling struggles to do well (Desforges, 1995, Resnick, 1987).

The manifesto dictates that outdoor learning is to be an organised approach to learning. I suggest that if this means overly formalising it, benefits may be lost. There are two main aspects of the formalisation of outdoor learning that I wish to develop in this paper. These relate to the organisation of learning and to pedagogy.

The organisation of learning

Education in England has become synonymous with schooling (Campbell, 2005) and schooling with organisation and formality. The current orthodoxy and 'best practice' in English schools is for the teacher to organise every aspect of a child's learning. Shepherd (2007) suggests there is probably no universal and absolute best practice in education, and if learning is seen as a theoretical concept (Stables, 2005) best practice orthodoxy becomes problematic. To organise learning requires first that learning be reified and treated as a material or concrete thing. Nationally agreed and overly-prescriptive curricula and pedagogy, the trend towards outcome testing and the perceived influence of external inspections have all contributed to this reification. It has meant that child-centred learning, with children passionately investigating problems that really interest them, has become a rarity (Hayes, 2007).

What is of even greater concern is the current best practice mantra in English schools of teachers sharing their intended learning outcomes (often articulated in the bewildering language of the national curriculum) with children (Hayes, 2007). There can be few objections to teachers engaging in discussions with their pupils about what has been learnt. However, this practice may commit children to a passive role and does not recognise that meaning; therefore learning is filtered and constructed through multiple discourses to which children contribute as much as adults, so that there is no direct correspondence between a particular teaching method and desired outcome (Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Put another way, teachers may devise and articulate learning objectives for children, but what the child learns from the resulting experience may be quite different.

If we accept that learning is a theoretical concept and that constructing meaning from experience may be a more useful way of thinking about it (Stables, 2005), then we are forced to recognise the active part the learner (child) has to play in that constructive process (Re'em, 2001, Strauss and Quinn, 1997). Thus the practice of teachers attempting to organise all aspects of children's learning needs to be challenged. There is some evidence from my findings (see below) that these practices are spreading to outdoor education centres, at least to those run by local authorities, though this is not reported in the literature.

Pedagogy

Little mention of theories of learning appears in the literature about outdoor education (Rickinson, 2001). Kolb's (1984) experiential learning (EL) theory, which stemmed from his work with adult learners, is the most widely adopted pedagogic method. The theory underpins a number of practical models for use in the outdoors (Beard and Wilson, 2002, Dennison and Kirk, 1990, Exeter, 2001). Amongst outdoor practitioners 'processing' (Bacon, 1987) and 'reviewing' (Greenaway, 2002) have become techniques that are now embedded in practice. Yet there has been little research conducted on this. The literature is largely uncritical of this theory and what limited debate there has been has focused on the need or otherwise for explicit processing interventions by adults. This has been strongly advocated by some (Greenaway, 2002, Pfeiffer and Jones, 1983, Ricketts and Willis, 2001), but challenged by James (1980). Exeter (2001) emphasises the centrality of encouragement of

reflection. He has adapted Kolb's (1984) four-stage cycle specifically for the outdoor professional, and includes the 'transfer of learning' as an adjunct to Kolb's (1984) cycle.

The notion of learning transfer as an outcome of outdoor education programmes (e.g. Hattie *et al.*, 1997, Sibthorp, 2003) has been widely and uncritically accepted. In other areas of educational thinking transfer is accepted, but problematised (e.g. Claxton, 1999, Desforges, 1995) with strong suggestions that the formal approaches adopted in schools may have detrimental effects on the transfer of learning and knowledge utilisation (Desforges, 1995, Gardner, 1993, Resnick, 1987). Desforges (1995) summarises the evidence that shows that children have great difficulty in applying, or utilising, knowledge learnt in one context to different contexts.

This widespread acceptance and implementation of the Kolb (1984) model as a pedagogical approach has led to a high degree of proactive intervention by leaders and instructors. Bacon (1987) refers to this as the 'Outward Bound Plus' model and it appears in Priest and Gass' (1997) chronology of facilitation as the second, third, fourth and sixth generations. Such approaches focus on experience plus discussion about the experience, and occupy a position on one side of the debate about facilitating reflection. They emphasise feedback, discussion and group processing practices. Many manuals for outdoor practitioners urge the promotion of reflective techniques. Ricketts and Willis (2001) have argued that practitioners ought to be extracting meaningful learning from experience, whilst Pfeiffer and Jones (1983) go as far as to suggest that the processing modes of the experiential learning cycle are even more important than the experiencing stage.

So the adoption of an under-researched theoretical model has led to a pedagogical model of practice that formalises de-briefing and the facilitation of reflection. This adds to the formalisation of outdoor learning due to Government and Local Authority (LA) strictures and accepted practices. How these manifest themselves in practice will now be discussed.

Methodology

The site of my doctoral research project is a residential outdoor education centre in the south west of England. The project is investigating the learning experiences of children aged 8 - 11. The centre is owned and administered by a Local Authority in the English midlands. Children reside there for five days in groups of up to 34, accompanied by teachers. The centre is staffed by the head and four other outdoor instructors (three of whom are qualified teachers) and support staff.

I visited the centre in 2004 and conducted an archive search of the centre's documentation. Though these documents may be considered as the same medium, there were a number of different modes (Fincham, Scourfield and Langer, 2007) represented therein, including policies, schemes of work, lesson plans, assessment instruments, letters and publicity material. I also conducted follow-up interviews with key members of the centre staff. Between 2004 and 2006 I made five further visits to the centre, adopting Jeffrey and Troman's (2004) concept of compressed time mode ethnography, and generated data from direct observations of the centre during these periods. During these visits I had many informal conversations with children, visiting staff and centre based staff. I made detailed notes of my observations each night and transcribed them once back at the university.

I analysed these data by coding emergent themes within them (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Preliminary findings allow a view of the centre's activities, ethos and pedagogy, and

children's experiences there which inform debate about the formalisation of education in this and similar centres.

Organising learning

The Manifesto (DfES, 2005) emphasises organised approaches to learning. In response to the LA need for measurable learning outcomes, this centre plans for six major learning outcomes during the residential:

- *Making the future* relates to its eco-centre status and ethos. The centre is an 'eco-centre' (FEE, 2004) and encourages the children to play an active part in its efforts to operate on a sustainable and ecologically sound basis. Thus children re-cycle, reduce water and electrical consumption and learn about the food miles associated with their meals. Local wildlife experts visit the centre bringing along animals like owls, stick insects and otters, emphasising the environmental needs of the animals and human impact.
- *Caring and sharing, and being a social being* both relate to aspects of social learning; for example, team work and relationship nurturing, and also to aspects of learning to be encapsulated in the centre's well used verse 'smile and the world smiles with you.'
- *Learning for life and adventure for life* are mainly about the acquisition of those skills and attitudes necessary for a full and active participatory life style.
- *Risky business* is about doing things safely, emphasising risk assessment and risk management.

Each of these intentions may be laudable. As previously mentioned, however, Hayes has problematised the over formalised school curriculum that shapes learning into 'predetermined packets' governed by learning objectives (2007:151) and sees outdoor learning as a possible response to this. There is much evidence of the power of learning outside the classroom and the positive effects it may have on children. As one head teacher who regularly takes children to centres like this one told me, "you know, it's this they will remember. Not the end-of-key stage tests or the literacy hour. The children come back to visit us years after they have left the school, and it's their visit to the (residential outdoor education) centre that they want to talk about" (Waite and Rea, 2007). In view of this, it is perhaps surprising that one of the first things children do at The Gables is sit for an hour listening to a presentation about the intended learning outcomes.

My criticism is not of the staff at The Gables for adopting schooling practices. On the contrary, their dedicated and skilful approach to outdoor education has contributed greatly to the education of many children over a number of years and they have made efforts to resist the LA's attempts to make them act and perform like schools.

Shepherd (2007) has questioned the schooling practices I have outlined. Why, he asks, do educators emphasise their intentions explicitly and not allow meaning to be constructed by learners? Or allow time for meanings to slowly 'dawn' on them? He likened the practice of focussing the learner on the intended learning objectives of the teacher, to a novel that starts with an abstract including revelations of the final chapter 'punch line'. Some of these practices could be challenged to useful effect in outdoor education centres. For example,

free writing could be encouraged, free form discussion and diarying may allow children to construct their own meaning from the powerful experiences they have at the centre.

Pedagogy

There is a danger of over-emphasising Kolb's (1984) EL model. Shepherd (2007) has criticised this model on internal (how the theory is constructed) and external (how it has been applied) grounds; suggesting that educators have dwelt too much on the reflection part of the cycle at the expense of other stages. This is in part because of the attitude towards learning theory held collectively by the teaching profession. Whilst some practitioners debunk theory as part of an anti-intellectual stance and do not acknowledge its contribution to practice, others accept it uncritically. (See Franklin, 2006, for a discussion of this phenomenon in another context.) Eraut (2007) suggests theories are resources for thinking and understanding and offer partial explanations of relationships between people and events. But too often EL theory is accepted uncritically, to the extent that Beard and Wilson suggest that it has become 'an almost taken-for-granted theory of learning' (Beard and Wilson, 2002: 36) embedding in practice a formalisation of reflection on experience.

I have concerns that the emphasis on facilitating reflection advocated by some (Greenaway, 2002, Pfeiffer and Jones, 1983, Ricketts and Willis, 2001) might over-formalise outdoor learning and negate the largely positive benefits such opportunities may otherwise promote. Practitioners run risks of disengaging children if they insist on 'extracting meaningful learning' (Ricketts and Willis, 2001) from each and every experience, or if they spend too long on de-briefing (Pfeiffer and Jones, 1983). I have observed groups of children who seemed cold and bored standing in a group circle for ten minutes at the end of a stimulating outdoor experience, and question the educational validity of this. There is evidence that many young people will engage with reflective thought independently, quite apart from any of these practices (Rea, 2006).

My findings suggest that children construct meaning from their experiences without (or in spite of) these practices, and suggest that these experiences have had a powerful effect on many of them. For example, interviewed a month after her visit one nine year-old girl reported that her behaviour had changed as a result of the centre experiences, "I laid the table, I don't know what came over me. I laid the table and I cleared it... I still do it sometimes." Another reported that his attitudes to life had been altered:

It sort of made me think a bit more about how I was, erm, how I was spending my life really, because I got a game boy for Christmas and I was playing on it for hours on end, but when I came back I, erm, I thought, erm, actually it was quite nice not doing anything like that, it was, erm, more active and social.
(male aged 10)

In her writing, one child showed that she thought she had become more confident and assertive through the week-long activity and residential programme, "Not sked of the sea. I smiyal when I swalld a bit of the whter... I put my hand up more and not being a skedy cat" (female aged nine).

I suggest that the power of the experiences at this centre may lie in the informality and the deeply contextualised learning activities there. For example, Hattie *et al.* (1997) argue that whilst many of the group learning activities undertaken on an Outward Bound programme may be simulated in a classroom, the consequences do not have to be lived with by participants. This, they argue, goes some way to explaining the power of outdoor,

experiential approaches. Outdoor learning and opportunities for situated, socio-cultural learning on residential programmes, are difficult to organise and measure. In trying to do so, the resultant over-formalisation may actually serve to reduce opportunities for learning benefits.

Conclusion: an argument for informal learning

My argument is based on research undertaken in a local authority owned residential outdoor education centre, which combines outdoor adventure education with field study. Many of the benefits reported in the literature seem to be repeated at this centre. However, I argue that the formalisation of outdoor education to meet LA demands, and national policies and initiatives such as those reported in the Manifesto (DfES, 2005) presents the danger of outdoor education centres becoming increasingly similar to schools. This may present a risk of them failing to do well what they have in the past been so good at: maximising opportunities for, and capitalising on, informal learning.

I argue for outdoor learning as an alternative vision of education that should be seen as essentially different from traditional schooling, rather than an extension of schools. I argue for the freeing of outdoor education centres from the structural boundaries imposed by the national curriculum and government curriculum enhancement projects, whilst reducing or removing the demands for centres to continually investigate the impact of their work.

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