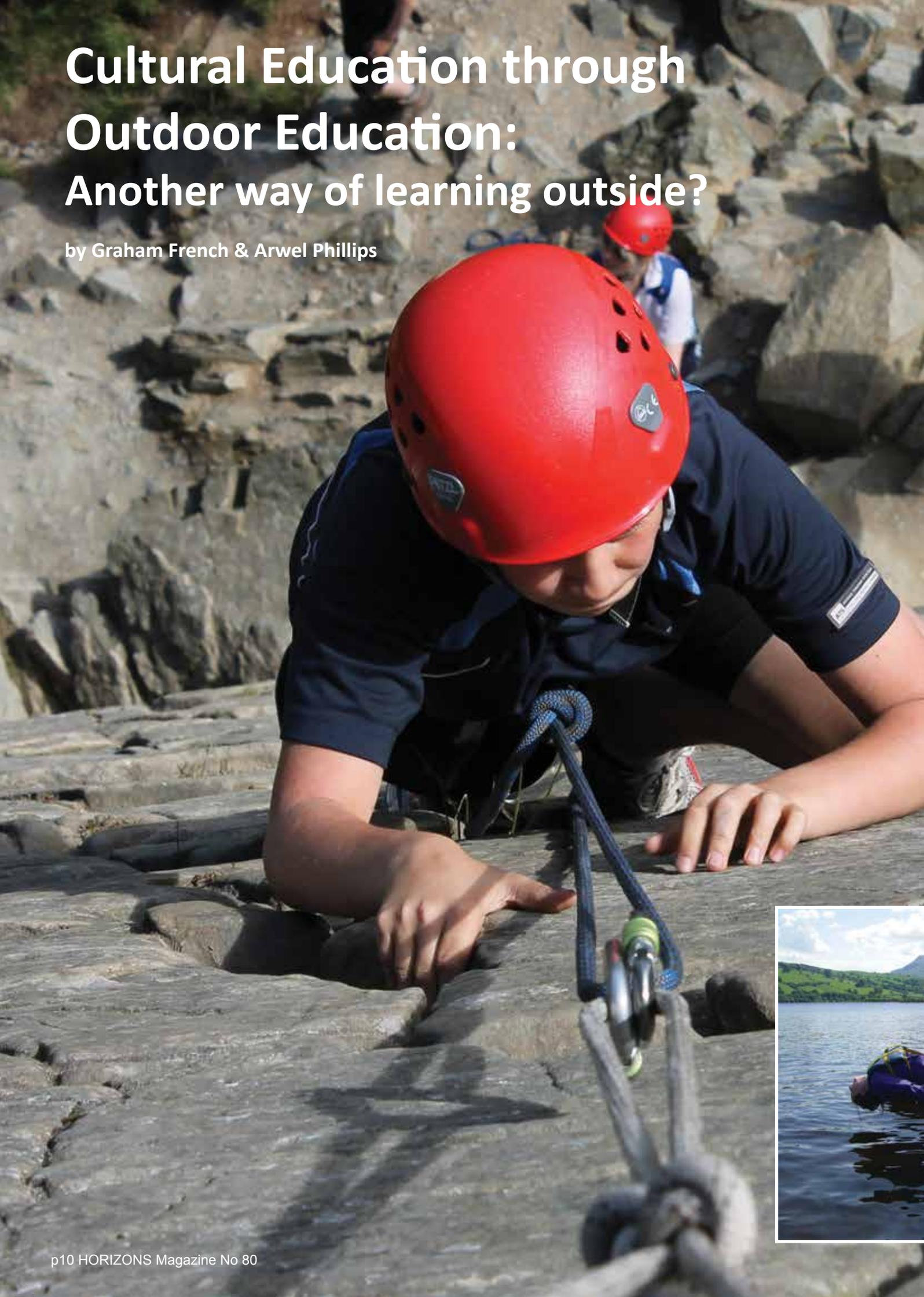


Cultural Education through Outdoor Education: Another way of learning outside?

by Graham French & Arwel Phillips





Whilst the field of outdoor learning has many and varied objectives and practices, it can still be argued that one of its best documented strengths is in personal and social learning¹. The residential nature of many outdoor learning experiences is an important factor in these experiences², but there are approaches to outdoor education that do not stem from a traditional root (based on the principles espoused by Kurt Hahn³).

Outside what could be called ‘mainstream’ outdoor education there are a significant number of centres providing residential outdoor education for other purposes, such as: faith based study/development; social justice; cultural development. There is little written about these approaches and how effective provision is at serving these ends. Internationally, there are better documented examples of alternative traditions, such as the concept of friluftsliv in Scandinavia⁴, and the Vacation School Lipnice from the Czech republic⁵.

This article intends to highlight a specific approach to delivering cultural education through outdoor education, both as part of formal school-based curriculum and through a unique informal curriculum delivered by a national, yet independent, organisation – Urdd Gobaith Cymru.

Formal education in Wales: Outdoor and Cultural

Since the devolution of power to the Welsh Government, Wales has sought to distinguish its educational policy from the other nations of the United Kingdom. The differences reflect the cultural and national identity of an emerging nation (politically speaking). Policy seeks to ensure children leave Welsh schools with the skills and knowledge needed for life-long learning and success, along with an understanding of their own cultural identity and how they may contribute to a global community⁶. As such, Wales established its own National Curriculum⁷ (NCW), which although has shared some philosophies with its English counterpart, is on a divergent development pathway. In the last three years, the NC Wales has been reviewed, and as a result, a radical new curriculum⁸ is to be implemented in schools in Wales in 2021. This curriculum incorporates concepts and ideas from work on the Curriculum for Excellence in Scotland, along with some philosophies from Scandinavia and the far east, where curriculum design is deemed robust and successful.

One unique aspect of the National Curriculum for Wales (NCW) is that it incorporates an overarching cultural aspect, known as the Cwricwlwm Cymreig (literally translated as ‘curriculum pertaining to Wales, Welsh culture or Welsh language’). Historically, the Cwricwlwm Cymreig was created as a response to the Education Reform Act of 1988, which introduced the National Curriculum to both England and Wales and which was intended to be common to all schools across the two nations.

‘The aim of the campaigning for a separate curriculum was to secure a national curriculum for Wales which would reflect the culture, environment, economy and history of Wales, and the influences which have shaped the country of today.’

The Cwricwlwm Cymreig, history and the story of Wales⁹ (Welsh Government, 2013:1)

The Cwricwlwm Cymreig operates as an overarching contextual framework through which subject-based education is delivered to children in Welsh schools. The inspection body for education in Wales, is tasked with reporting on the Cwricwlwm Cymreig as part of the quality assurance process. It is something teachers are expected to deliver on a day-to-day basis, as part of their normal teaching, and is considered an essential part of education in Wales.

When the current version of the NCW was introduced in 2008, it was seen by many as vindicating outdoor learning. For the first time since the inception of the (UK) National Curriculum, adventurous activities were mandated in the curriculum for 7-14 year olds. With the introduction of a new Foundation phase for 3-7 year olds also encouraging holistic teaching and learning that integrated indoor and outdoor activities, the future for formal outdoor education in Wales looked positive. At a similar time, the Outdoor Education Advisors Panel developed the Outdoor Learning Cards (OLC) resource and began to train non-specialist teachers (both primary and secondary) in the use of outdoor learning both as a component of Physical Education and as a cross-curricular vehicle to develop skills (including literacy and numeracy).

In the period since the introduction of both the current NCW and OLC, opportunities for outdoor learning in Welsh schools have increased¹⁰. There is increase in teacher confidence and the positive impact on children's learning resulting from teachers being trained in the delivery of outdoor learning using the OLC resource¹⁰.

The new curriculum, whilst still in development, appears to expand the opportunity for outdoor education and the culturally relevant aspects of all subjects. It moves away from Key Stages and stand-alone subjects, to a more holistic, interconnected approach. Whilst ultimately subjects will not disappear as the GCSE examination structure is to be retained, the concept of overarching frameworks (already seen with the Personal and Social Development Framework, Literacy and Numeracy Framework⁶ and the Digital Competence Framework) have been incorporated into the structure. It is based around four key purposes, that can be seen to enhance and further support both a holistic, personal and social development approach, and a culturally relevant and developmental method.

The four key purposes of the new NCW⁸:

To develop children and young people as:

- ambitious, capable learners, ready to learn throughout their lives
- enterprising, creative contributors, ready to play a full part in life and work
- ethical, informed citizens of Wales and the world
- healthy, confident individuals, ready to lead fulfilling lives as valued members of society.

With a culturally relevant NCW incorporating adventurous activities that are being delivered with greater consistency¹⁹, it can be seen that education in Wales is in a unique position to foster a place-based pedagogy (advocated in an outdoor learning context by many^{11,12}), that has hitherto been absent from curricula. In essence, the existence of the Cwricwlwm Cymreig and development of a culturally sensitive new curriculum, ensures teachers deliver their lessons in a culturally relevant and appropriate manner, and the position of adventurous activities within the content of that curriculum means they too are subject to being delivered in this cultural context.

Informal education: cultural and outdoors

Non-formal Welsh cultural education is often associated with the youth movement in Wales, Urdd Gobaith Cymru. The founder of Urdd Gobaith Cymru, Syr Ifan ab Owen Edwards, stated in one of the first issues of the magazine 'Cymru'r Plant' (published in 1922), that

Syr Ifan was concerned that the whole cultural 'way of life' including the use of language both socially and educationally was at risk, and that Welsh cultural norms or perspectives would be lost in the future. Urdd Gobaith Cymru provides the young people of Wales the opportunity to develop their cultural sense of place, belonging, and identity through a number of different acculturative¹⁴ experiences, including Welsh cultural outdoor education

Language and socialisation are predominantly associated with an individual's sense of national and cultural identity¹³. Traditionally, individuals' primary experience of Welsh acculturation¹⁴ would occur formally through the means of Welsh language lessons in school. Through this educational perspective of Welsh, the individual is potentially less likely to affiliate and make a personal connection to Welsh culture, language and identity.

Urdd Gobaith Cymru recognised the value of non-formal Welsh cultural education and in particular the value of residential experiences and outdoor learning. In 1950, Urdd Gobaith Cymru

opened a residential outdoor education centre, Gwersyll yr Urdd Glan-Ilyn, situated on the shores of Llyn Tegid, Bala, North Wales.

Gwersyll Yr Urdd Glan-Ilyn plays an essential role in the process of re-aculturating individuals' Welsh perspectives and attitudes through the medium of outdoor learning. Outdoor and adventurous activities at Gwersyll Yr Urdd Glan-Ilyn offer a vehicle for promoting desired learning outcomes that are different to those that are associated with the traditional delivery of outdoor learning within a residential setting. This different approach to outdoor education does not necessarily 'fit' within the dominant concept and view of outdoor education, creating the potential for discourse.



Often conflict exists between individuals from different cultural groups and organisations. The conflict is associated with different ideas and views of the world. Within outdoor education there is a community of like-minded individuals who share common ethical values and concepts of education¹⁵. However, there is also an element of mistrust or suspicion where outdoor educators do not share the values that are traditionally central to the ethos of outdoor learning. There could be an element of mistrust associated with the core values and beliefs of the cultural approach adopted by Gwersyll yr Urdd Glan-Ilyn and its delivery of 'Outdoor Education' within the wider outdoor education community. This may be due to the alternative approach to outdoor education. Put plainly, Gwersyll Yr Urdd Glan-Ilyn offers Welsh cultural experiences through the medium of outdoor activities, where the traditional concepts of outdoor learning are secondary to the Welsh cultural experience. It is important that these are recognised and understood as equally acceptable and valid objectives, and not seen as either subservient to, or of lesser importance than, the traditional values associated with the outdoor sector in the UK.



Conclusion

In these paragraphs, we have sought to explain how formal and informal approaches to cultural outdoor education can exist in outdoor education culture dominated by one particular set of differing values³. The effectiveness of acculturation through the medium of outdoor education is still in the process of being fully evaluated, and we would encourage an engagement in aspects of cultural education through the outdoors. That is not to say we espouse abandoning the values that have underpinned outdoor education in the UK for many years, but that perhaps there is space in the crowd of demands on outdoor education to meet cultural ends. Of course, what those cultural ends are is open to discussion, and perhaps even more so in a modern multi-cultural society.

That said, it is always important to consider the application of one culture's values to another without modification, so we would offer the following as a caveat to those considering introducing some cultural features to their outdoor programmes.

The import, export and adoption of cultures is nothing new within the outdoor education and formal education sectors. It has been suggested that Australia has uncritically accepted imported outdoor education theory from Europe¹¹ and that this imported form of outdoor education does not fully appreciate the significance of social, cultural and geographical contexts when shaping outdoor education programmes. Outdoor educators should have an understanding, a genuine interest and a high level of cultural awareness and this understanding should play an integral part in the delivery of outdoor experiences^{16,17}. Those outdoor educators who are to adopt cultural outdoor practices, must do so critically and must consider the cultural context in which the outdoor experiences take place. If an outdoor educator were to 'adopt' a culture uncritically and apply the cultural ideas and concepts with little cultural understanding, there is the potential that the cultural experience may lose its relevance. ■



Notes

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- Acculturation is the process of social, psychological, and cultural change that stems from blending between cultures. The effects of acculturation can be seen at multiple levels in both the original (native) and newly adopted (host) cultures. Acculturation comprehends those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups
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Photos: from the authors.