

What is Outdoor Learning?

This article follows discussions at the IOL Strategic Forum, held in November 2011. It is intended to provoke discussion, and will coincide with a specific thread on the IOL's website forum.

by David Harvey



Background

"The Institute for Outdoor Learning encourages outdoor learning by developing quality, safety and opportunity to experience outdoor activity provision and by supporting the good practice of outdoor professionals. By representing and lobbying on behalf of our members, we can help ensure the development and progression of outdoor learning." (IOL, 2011) There is therefore a need for the IOL and its members to be taking every opportunity to publicise the value of outdoor learning, but what do we actually mean by 'outdoor learning'?

It could be argued that we have been here before. IOL's predecessor, the National Association for Outdoor Education (NAOE) succinctly defined outdoor education as *"a means of approaching educational objectives through guided, direct experience in the environment using its resources as learning materials"*, and this seems as relevant now as it did in the 1980's. Greenaway (2005) built on this when he identified outdoor learning as a broad church that values direct experience, involves active learning, broadens horizons and stimulates new interests. It is 'real learning'. However, while some might welcome that lack of definition, it can be argued that it is too vague. Barnes and Sharp (2004), discussing definitions of

outdoor education, make the point that it means different things to different people, and this is undoubtedly true today with regard to 'outdoor learning'.

One of the IOL's strengths is the diversity of the practitioners that it represents, but this can lead to problems when we try to present a unified approach, be it to government, the media, funders, students or their parents.

The confusion that exists over terminology in part reflects the rich heritage that underpins the outdoor sector, but it does lead to an interesting and potentially worrying observation: if we can't explain succinctly and clearly what we are so passionate about, how can we expect others from outside the sector to support us?

A confusion of terms

'Outdoor learning', 'outdoor education', 'adventure education', and 'learning outside the classroom' are all terms in common use, many of which are used interchangeably in the same publications and presentations. To these could also be added 'field studies', 'personal development', 'outdoor environmental education', 'adventure therapy', and many others. Each term has a different pedigree - some of which are longer than others - and each reflects the particular approach that it represents. Which of

these particular terms means most to an individual can often depend on the context within which they work.

Outdoor Learning (OL)

A relatively new term that came of age with the formation of IOL in 2001, this describes what the broad outdoor learning sector sees itself as offering in a way that draws attention to the learning involved rather than the form of delivery (Barnes and Sharp, 2004). As Berry (2011) points out, learning is done by people, not to them: the learner is central to the experience. This standpoint is emphasized in the UK Early Years Foundation Stage (DCSF, 2007:3), which although geared towards children clearly has relevance for any learner, old or young:

"Outdoor learning is more effective when adults focus on what children need to do rather than what children need to have. An approach that considers experiences rather than equipment places children at the centre of learning and ensures that the individual children's learning and developmental needs are taken account of and met effectively".

Outdoor Education (OE)

For many this has been the most common description and came to the fore in the second half of the last century with the rise of funded Outdoor Education Centres. Over the past 35 years the definition of just what



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outdoor education encompasses has changed subtly whether connected with environmental education, skill acquisition or personal development. However, many definitions share a number of similarities with the one that came out of the 1975 Dartington conference:

"Outdoor education is used to refer to those activities concerned with living, moving and learning in the outdoors. This will include survival, residential experiences, and a variety of activities, both physical and concerned with observing the environment. The outdoors will normally be interpreted in terms of situations where self-reliance is required. These activities are selected and designed to achieve objectives within aims which are concerned primarily with developing attitudes and relationships." (quoted in Hopkins and Putnam, 1993:9)

Reflecting the thinking of the time, there is a clear emphasis on activities rather than process. The same emphasis can still be detected thirty years later in the High Quality Outdoor Education guidance (English Outdoor Council, 2005):

"Outdoor education' embraces activities and experiences that normally take place in the outdoors, frequently have an adventurous component, generally involve physical activity, and always respect the natural environment."

Central to the philosophy of outdoor education is the idea of heightening awareness of, and fostering respect for, oneself, others and the environment. Forming part of the Dartington Conference definition and later developed by Mortlock (1984), these aims are still central to many practitioners today. The emphasis on personal growth is highlighted by Hopkins and Putnam's (1993:3) assertion that "it is not a subject but an approach to education which is concerned with the overall development of young people".

Adventure Education

Subtly different, 'adventure education' implies challenge coupled to uncertainty of outcome (Hopkins & Putnam, 1993), and is "a form of experiential learning typically associated with activities involving risk" (Berry & Hodgson, 2011:i). The use of specialized equipment and staff is usually a central feature, and, while there is often a strong link to personal and social development, there tends to be an emphasis on the use of activities such as canoeing, climbing and mountain walking as vehicles for development. Adventure education shares many attributes with outdoor education and the terms are often used interchangeably.

Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC)

LOtC is a specific movement that grew out of a government white paper in 2005, which led in turn to the LOtC Manifesto (DfES, 2006). It focuses on school and involves "the use of places other than the classroom for teaching and learning. It is about getting children and young people out and about, providing them with challenging, exciting and different experiences to help them learn." (LOtC, 2011) LOtC examples include activities in the school grounds, forest schools, visits to farms, museums and places of worship in the local area, as well as longer trips further afield.

It is fair to say that many of the terms mentioned above have developed in the context of working with younger people. There is a corresponding risk, therefore, that the focus of outdoor learning could remain with the younger age range. The enormous amount of work that is carried out with adults of all ages means that any up to date definition needs to reflect this fact.

Towards a definition

To develop the concept of outdoor learning, it might be straightforward to use a dictionary. However, dictionary definitions can be problematic, not least because they are so defined,

but also because different ones give different answers. For example, take the term 'learning':

Learning:

'Any relatively permanent change in behaviour that occurs as a direct result of experience.' (Collins English Dictionary)

'The act, process or experience of gaining knowledge or skill.' (American Heritage Dictionary)

Combining these definitions with one for outdoor – 'located in, existing or intended for use in the open air' (Collins English Dictionary), we would appear to arrive quite simply at a definition that involves a transformational process whereby there is a change in a person's knowledge, skill or behaviour resulting from experience, all of which happens outside in the fresh air. However, it is possible to argue that there is more to 'outdoor learning' than that – it is not just a matter of picking up our books and moving outside. This might well be 'learning outdoors', but is it 'outdoor learning'?

Asking a group of practitioners from a variety of backgrounds what outdoor

learning encompasses draws a wide range of responses (see figure 1). Incorporating some of these into a definition requires us to look at not only what we perceive OL to include, but also what we think it should include. Talking specifically about LOTC, Beames et al (2011:1) suggest that there are three good reasons for getting students outside the classroom as a normal part of the school day. "The outdoors brings curricula alive, it helps students understand our environment and related issues of sustainable development, and it encourages physical activity". It is possible to take these ideas and extrapolate to the wider 'outdoor learning' idea: outdoor learning helps to make the connection between theory and 'reality' – it is experiential; it helps to foster a connection with nature and places; and it has direct benefits in terms of promoting a healthier lifestyle.

Arguably, there are certain other pressing issues facing us that OL can help address, and awareness of these could underpin our work. We as a society face challenges caused by massive changes in lifestyle, most notably the challenges of mental and physical health and the wellbeing of

individuals and communities. There are clear needs for young people to be ready for the adult world – to be able to work collaboratively, have empathy for those around them and from other cultures and to be able to think, work and live in a sustainable way. There is an equally clear need for adults to be able to engage with the same issues. These expectations imply that there is now a need for the behaviour change resulting from the learning to manifest itself as action, whether it is personally or societally focused.



Outdoor Learning...

- Involves being in or connected with the outdoors
- Has the outdoors as a central part of the experience
- Invokes emotions and feelings
- Deals with affective education
- Concerns sustainable use of the outdoors
- Is about learning to learn, habits of learning, empowerment, metacognition
- Helps to develop empathy
- Is a process not a subject
- Uses the outdoors as the vehicle, not just the venue
- Is different from learning outdoors
- Encourages the behaviours necessary for modern society
- Involves risk/benefit, cooperation, social skills
- Is experiential
- Has a real context
- Develops a personal relationship with space
- Encourages a sense of place in the universe
- Puts the learner at the centre
- Encourages a relationship with the environment
- Develops emotional intelligence
- Is open to all
- Enables learners to develop knowledge of themselves as well as others
- Needs reflection
- Can be life-long
- Build on previous knowledge
- Is active!
- Links to the global dimension

Figure 1. What is outdoor learning?

Putting it all together

Synonyms for 'outdoor', include free, garden, healthful, hilltop, in the open, informal, invigorating, mountain, natural, nature-loving, out of the house, outside, unrestricted and woods. Many of these will resonate with outdoor practitioners and help to build the picture of where outdoor learning takes place. What takes place is undoubtedly experiential, and will incorporate a range of possible outcomes; how it takes place will depend on a wide range of factors.



A suggested definition:

Outdoor learning is an active, experiential approach to learning, that involves being outdoors as a central part of the experience. It seeks to use the outdoor environment as a vehicle for transforming the experience into changes in knowledge, skills, behaviours or attitudes.

Outdoor learning develops personal, social and environmental understanding and skills. It fosters a range of positive attitudes and actions towards risk, health, community and sustainability.

Outdoor learning can help to develop knowledge of oneself, others, the environment and specific curricula; it provides a means of developing cognitive, affective, and psychomotor skills; and encourages empathy, tolerance, understanding, cooperation and collaboration. ■



References and further reading

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Author's notes

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The author, whose background is in residential outdoor education, acknowledges the potential bias that this could lead to, and welcomes comments and feedback. He would like to thank Sam Moore, Geoff Cooper and Elspeth Mason for their contributions.

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