

"LOtC.....sparkling or still?"

by Lynsey Melhuish

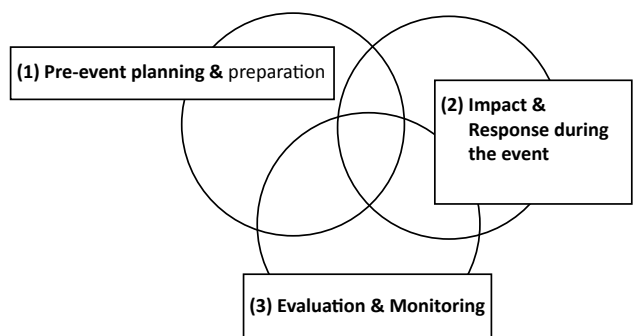


doors were opened and the children were literally, 'released' into the forest. Worksheets were forgotten and instead, sixty over-excited explorers disappeared into the undergrowth (followed in hot pursuit by ample adult helpers in bright neon jackets).

For the whole of the session I observed this behaviour. Free of worksheets the children were able to 'play' and explore, and to observe and consume every element and to engage with every sense that nature's classroom was exposing to them. This resulted in a dizzy headiness and a metaphoric 'explosion of bubbles' (the children) as they departed the coach (the lemonade bottle), darting through the forest, jumping on logs... jumping off logs...shaking braches, collecting pine cones, listening to rustles in the hedges, watching birds in the trees... and so it went on... all without a worksheet. So... the inevitable question... how would the experience have compared IF the worksheets had been in place....and does it matter? This and related questions proved fundamental in the research and subsequent outcomes, providing 'fuel for the ever burning fire' (yes I know...another analogy!), which rages on when researchers^{1,4,7,10,12,15,17} outdoor practitioners and teachers discuss and philosophise over LOtC experiences, benefits, outcomes.

This analogy, introduces the three themes which emerged from the research (illustrated in Fig 1). Having met with the school at the 'pre-planning' stages for the trip, I had a clear understanding of the learning strategies planned and which were being led directly by the teachers (ie no ranger involvement). However, as I discovered, what happened on the day bore little resemblance to the original plan and raises the further conundrum regarding the impact/influence of 'formal' or 'informal' LOtC.

Fig 1. Investigation Themes



So what do I mean by informal/formal learning? Well you have already heard about the "exploding bubbles" (let's call it the 'sparkling' option); sessions observed, usually without worksheets or formal planning and demonstrating a very natural, organic and 'informal' learning experience; less adult intervention (ie child centred) and with more of a 'nurturing' style to foster an uninhibited and creative learning environment^{2,5}. In contrast I observed a number of other LOtC experiences which were more 'formal' in delivery ie 'target-driven' and with recognition of a more influential adult figure (through instruction and guidance) to propel learning^{2,5}....and here is where the potential offence could be caused – ie suggesting that the latter may result in a less 'bubbly' (dare I use the word 'flatter' or 'still') atmosphere in the learning environment. Through the research, no preference was concluded yet there is definitely evidence to suggest that the way in which LOtC sessions are planned and delivered, does effect the behaviour and impact of experiences on the learner and the ability to provide meaningful post-LOtC experience evaluations. This formed the basis of my research outcomes as illustrated through Fig 2.

Thoughts on the inter-relationship between LOtC planning / delivery and evaluation and its influence on more formal/informal approaches to the learning experience...

... "I can only describe the children as bubbles from a lemonade bottle that had been vigorously shaken and then opened" ... I wrote this in my observation journal having spent the afternoon with a class of effervescent primary school children whilst researching for my MA in Education a few years ago. When I read it now, it takes me straight back to that afternoon and to the reader I hope, describes in one sentence a level of exuberance that I could have taken an entire page to capture. I love an analogy... I find it provides the invaluable mechanism for 'getting through' to a learner, when every other explanation/method has failed. Teaching bowline knots for instance: "rabbit comes up the hole, runs around the tree and goes back down the hole" or sculling in a kayak..."imagine buttering a giant piece of bread...";; the list is endless.

On the particular day in question, the school I had scheduled to observe arrived late to the country park. This resulted in a mêlée of activity and a rather 'tense' atmosphere initially, particularly with the early realisation that the 'worksheets' which had been so painstakingly created to link to specific curriculum objectives, had been left behind!! The looks of 'what do we do now' were plain to see albeit fleeting as the classic contingency procedures (teacher auto pilot) started to kick in. So a safety/logistics briefing between staff/helpers followed, whilst a coach full of children remained safe and secure... although close to bursting point with eager anticipation. Then it happened... the coach

THEME 1 – Pre-event planning and preparation

Themes did not work in isolation, and overlapped throughout a whole LOTC experience. However, theme 1 had the most influence; based around four areas covering staffing (role and influence), purpose of trip/activities, clarity of learning objectives and health and safety / logistics. Planning was seen as integral to the success of LOTC. Forest Schools clearly recognised this through the self-assessment toolkit^{8,11} and whilst this focuses on evaluation and monitoring, its design recognises that getting the preparation right, such as identifying and establishing all stakeholder objectives, is crucial to ensure that they are then later achieved, and just as importantly (though some may argue more), are 'measurable'.

Ranger or School-led?

At this early stage of planning, schools must make decisions which, as the research revealed, are significant to the success of the LOTC experience. In relation to 'staffing' in particular the decision for schools to book a ranger-led session as opposed to a school-led session, was seen to affect the type of learning delivered ie whether more formal/ informal as well as the level and type of learning achieved. Arguably, to be expected, ranger-led sessions observed were far more structured and controlled in comparison to school led sessions, due to the specialist skills, and repetitive nature of the rangers programme. This was not to say that school led sessions did not have 'control' but the research reinforced more consistency with the ranger-led sessions, being more rigid in delivery.

Communication

'Communication' between the school and the rangers, was also seen to have a significant effect on the LOTC experience. Some schools who chose to utilise ranger-led activities, failed to communicate their requirements in detail, 'pre-event' and thus impacting on the quality of delivery of learning objectives, key stages and curriculum links. This demonstrates that even when ranger sessions are booked it still does not guarantee a 'smooth ride'. Furthermore, this poor communication at the planning stages creates problems in being able to successfully monitor and evaluate measurable outcomes (theme 3).



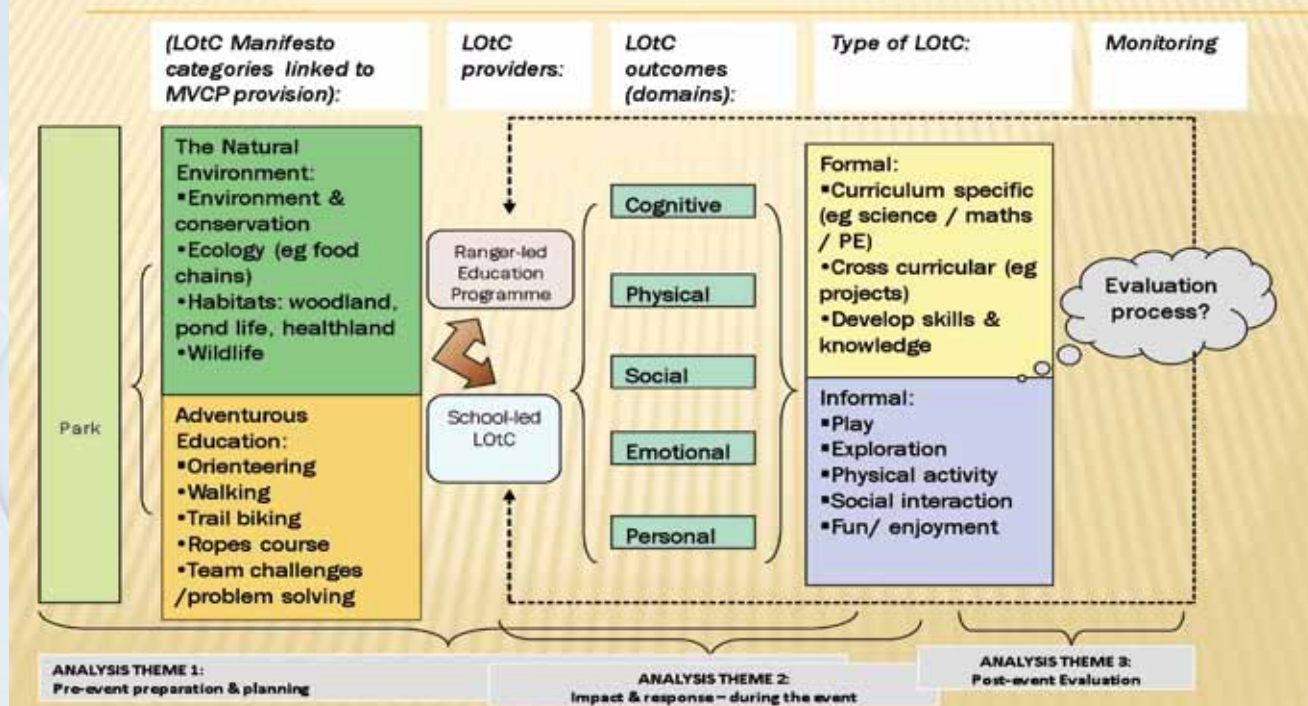
Preparation of Learning Objectives

Effectiveness of learning objectives was mixed. One school had quite clear objectives prior to the event, comparing similarly with ranger sessions regarding cross curricular activity and the development of 'enquiry and investigative skills'. However the actual session observed was less structured and it was impossible to ascertain any level of formative assessment for the majority of learners who tended to forget the worksheet and instead were distracted by the sound, smell, touch, sight of nature. Whilst many would argue that this is not a bad thing and that organic learning in the natural environment should be encouraged, research suggested that the potential for this was often stifled by the need for trip justification ie to fit the curriculum combined with additional pressures of continually changing educational policy, targets, finances etc.

Logistics

Issues regarding logistics suggested that pressure and responsibility of co-ordinating the whole trip, could at times take over the focus of the actual LOTC objectives. Schools have much more added responsibility beyond the LOTC experience itself whereas a ranger-led session has only the 'delivery' itself to think about. Logistics begin back at the school, in terms of preparing risk assessments, booking transport, collecting money, gaining parental consent etc. By the time the trip actually arrives and children and parents/ helpers are co-ordinated onto the bus, the actual objective of the session often takes a back seat. This resulting in a less structured

Fig 2 Research Framework (adapted through works of 1,3,8,11,12,13)



and informal session, unless, ranger-led sessions are utilised, and even then poor communications and/or logistics on the day can still hinder delivery, such as the impact of traffic delays / loss of worksheets / limited resources/staffing etc.

THEME 2: On the Day Delivery (impact)

Numerous observations were carried out to assess the impact and response of learners during the event and it was here that the most differences appeared when comparing ranger-led and school-led activities.

Staff impact

Apart from consistency in the level and standard of instruction, supervision and control, it also became apparent in ranger-led sessions, that alternative instructors ie those not in any way linked to the group, appeared to captivate the attention of the learners, more effectively than school/college staff leading their own sessions. Parents/trip helpers, although integral (to satisfy adult/child ratios) also appeared to influence learner behaviour/activity dependent on the level of engagement – ranging from direct involvement to merely crowd control. I cannot help but think back to a particular observation where one ‘competitive’ parent-helper, pretty much took over a group’s activity to ensure that they won the ‘squirrel challenge’, demonstrating that ‘over enthusiastic helpers’, can impact just as much as those not engaged/skilled.

Formal vs informal learning

School led sessions at times could be seen as quite dysfunctional with the children exhibiting far livelier, uninhibited behaviour and inspiring the “exploding lemonade” analogy. In contrast a ranger-led session appeared calmer, and as suggested, this is most likely due to having no responsibility for transport/logistics, only taking responsibility once the schools have arrived. Therefore they can concentrate on applying their specific specialist skills and extensive LOTC experience on setting up/managing the session and utilising repeat lesson plans/task sheets. Obviously there were still some external factors that could impact on the session, eg weather/ different ages/numbers of children etc, but it appeared activities could be more easily adapted by rangers.

Application/Achievement of Learning Objectives

Ranger-led sessions appeared more successful in attempting to deliver and achieve specific and measurable learning objectives. They had very clear, well prepared tasks which enabled objectives

to be met utilising the natural environment and with a range of techniques including interactive tasks / simple worksheets etc to provide formative assessment such as leaf recognition/collection & mini beast spotting. It could be questioned as to whether they provide as much opportunity for more generic/ informal learning ie play, exploration, social development as the activities were task based, potentially stifling ‘the ‘lemonade bubbles’. However through the observations it was evident that learners were still able to experience their environment more informally through play and exploration albeit as part of a more formally structured task.

School-led sessions, tended to have less clarity in meeting learning objectives on the whole. Despite some cross-curricular objectives being recognised prior to one particular trip (applying mathematical shapes to a play park), the actual session itself was the most unstructured I had observed, with children very much involved in ‘play’ on the apparatus, but not in relation to the worksheet or pre-trip activities that had been proposed. This is not to say that the session was unsuccessful but unlike the ranger-led sessions it would be difficult to measure exactly what each child gained from the experience and whether mathematical learning had been gleaned. The only outcome I could state with confidence was scuffed knees (I am sure the parents/guardians were pleased when they got home...).

To give a more balanced reflection, some other school/college-led sessions observed did exhibit formality, although the nature of the learning objectives were more generic falling into the personal/social development domains (Fig 2) as opposed to curriculum specific. However these sessions demonstrated the impact of ‘competition’ (quizzes / games etc) and really engaged learners of all ages and abilities (in both ranger and school-led sessions). For key stage 3/4 this might be an activity such as the ‘hibernator’ where teams had to successfully hide a cylinder of hot water as if it were a hibernating creature (the winning team being the one that kept their dormouse (cylinder) the warmest, or pretending to be squirrels racing through the forest to collect enough nuts and berries to see them through the winter (...the parent helper won...!). For older college students this involved following a nightline through the woods (blindfolded) with successful communication and teamwork or effectively mastering navigational skills through an orienteering course.

What became apparent was that whatever the age/level, a clear goal or objective is important to maximise learning. This does not have to be specific or curriculum focused but requires some task related activity to captivate learners. However the investigation also reinforced that not all learners gain the same experience ^{1,4,7,10,12,17}. This was clearly observed in one session with a boy who appeared disengaged from the main task but responded jubilantly when shaking a branch and watching leaves fall. This further demonstrates the difficulty in measuring the success of LOTC when some informal and quite insignificant event can impact upon a learner but in a way that is not measurable and nor does it meet a task or objective which has been set.

THEME 3: Post-event Evaluation

Post-event evaluation was found to lay dormant within themes one and two. The level of planning/preparation and subsequent formal/informal delivery on the day, not only influenced the quality of the LOTC experiences but also had a direct correlation with the potential for evaluating the quality and success of achieving learning objectives and therefore being able to provide any tangible measures regarding its effectiveness. At a time when schools/colleges providing LOTC must justify the significance, importance / impact, whether for financial, curriculum, health and safety or other political reasons, post-event evaluation cannot afford to be missed.

Interestingly though, and counteracting some arguments for more ‘formal’ learning to aid effective evaluation, the original school, that led me to the sparking/still analogy, did manage to achieve some measurable outcomes. Despite the lack of structure /formality





during the actual trip, post event activity back at the school demonstrated how teachers were able to create classroom tasks retrospectively to enable formative assessment to be measured. This involved children comparing their woodland experiences with the contrasting habitats of the rain forests. This would suggest that even if learning formality 'goes out the window' on the day, then it can still be rescued back in the classroom to ensure that post event evaluation can be undertaken effectively.

Concluding Thoughts

The research raised the question as to whether LOTC experiences should be more or less formal. According to the LOTC Manifesto³ its ambiguity suggests that any experience out of the classroom can be a valuable one, in which case how structured or formalised it is may not be an issue. Should it matter if on the day the experience is far more fluid and holistic as opposed to structured and curriculum based? Surely the 'fizz and bubbles' are more important – and particularly ensuring every individual learner is engaged in some way. Many outdoor researchers are likely to support such a notion, recognising that the individual experience can be just as important^{1,4,7,10,12,17} and reflecting on the more 'magical' atmosphere that children and adults can be exposed to within a natural environment^{6,9}.

The difficulty as practitioners/teachers however, is not just about engaging individual 'bubbles', but it is responding to the interconnecting themes from planning & delivery through to the importance of effective evaluation and monitoring. As has been observed through the investigation, the contrast between ranger/school-led activities are arguably significant, with school-led sessions tending to lack formality.....but not necessarily the 'bubble and fizz' factor! Therefore schools may need to consider more the implications of school or ranger-led activity, and spend more time during the planning stages considering logistical issues and weighing up the pros and cons of investment in ranger-led sessions. Meanwhile rangers and other outdoor practitioners may wish to consider the potential benefits of less structured/controlled activities at times and how a little more 'freedom' can still offer measurable learning outcome but with a little added 'fizz'!

Fig 3. Structure of Learning

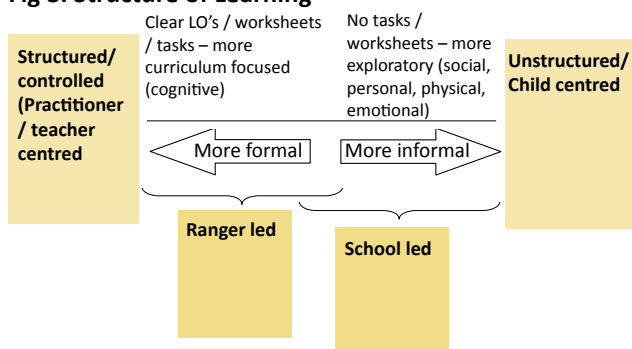


Fig 3 illustrates these different perspectives. You will note that I have not suggested adding where the 'sparkling or 'still' atmosphere is created, as it was apparent from the observations that it is not one factor that can influence this! However this fluid continuum does reflect the patterns observed through the research and can allow schools, rangers/outdoor practitioners to consider where best they fit and/or whether they wish to move along this continuum, depended on the LOTC experience being planned.

In conclusion, the themes which emerged from the investigation (illustrated through Fig 1-3) have demonstrated the complexities of measuring the achievement of the LOTC philosophy on the ground. Whilst the investigation recognised that it is still a 'grey area' it does clarify the need for schools and rangers/outdoor practitioners to consider their own responsibilities within the emerging three themes and recognise how all three inter-relate and impact on the learner experience. Ultimately it is hoped that the research outcomes, inspires outdoor practitioners/teachers to reflect again on the impact of the LOTC on the ground and consider how the issues raised can help inform practice.....and in deciding whether you prefer your LOTC experiences 'sparkling.....or still....'. ■

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About the Author

Lynsey Melhuish is a Senior Lecturer in Outdoor Education and Events Management at Southampton Solent University. She has a First Class Honours Degree in Leisure and Human Resource Management, PGCE in Post Compulsory Education and a Master's in Education (specialising in Outdoor). The diversity of these qualifications reflects her personal and professional experiences, spanning coaching and instruction, facilities, programming and events management in the 'early days' through to senior management roles in local government and education

establishments. For the last twelve years Lynsey has been fortunate to combine her passions of the outdoors, leisure and social, health and welfare industries through teaching and programme management and development in further and higher education.

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