



# COMING OF AGE FOR OUTDOOR LEARNING

## A Boost for Learning out of the Classroom

by Geoff Cooper

Studying a food chain at work in a pond; hearing the sound of a water wheel driving cogs and turning millstones to grind flour; sitting by a campfire watching a clear night sky; finding your route with a group of friends across a mountain pass or seeing flocks of wading birds gather on a sandbank at low tide are all powerful experiences you cannot replicate in a classroom. These are real world experiences that involve active learning using all the senses. There is growing evidence to suggest that these experiences are not just about enriching the school curriculum but are fundamental to lifelong learning.

Many of us working in outdoor education are familiar with the benefits of our approaches to learning and there has been much evidence from practitioners, outdoor organisations and researchers to support our claims. Added to this is the wealth of anecdotal evidence from teachers who have reported the many ways in which individual students have gained from their outdoor experiences and how this has been carried back to the classroom.

Over the last ten years a range of Government initiatives and agendas has presented outdoor education with an even stronger case to demonstrate its value to lifelong learning. For example, it can address the health agenda in terms of offering exercise and active outdoor interests; it supports the "Every Child Matters" agenda by encouraging enjoyment and achievement and helping young people to manage risk; it contributes to the "Inclusion" agenda by offering teaching methods and styles appropriate to a wide range of learners and it can encourage environmental awareness and more sustainable lifestyles through practical and personal experiences and action.

Unfortunately this contribution, although recognised, has not always been realised. There have been significant barriers to outdoor learning. We have

suffered from an over-prescriptive, target-based curriculum in Britain. There has been pressure on teachers to concentrate on classroom learning and demonstrate pupil progress in terms of literacy and numeracy. A culture of risk aversion has also taken its toll. Taking young people out of the classroom is not straightforward. It involves paperwork on risk assessments and group management and teachers have concerns about health and safety incidents that may result in litigation. Furthermore, cost is a factor. Whereas schools have funded computers and whiteboards there has been little financial support for learning out of the classroom.

Outdoor organisations such as the Institute for Outdoor Learning, the Association of Heads of Outdoor Education Centres, the Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel, Field Studies Council and the English Outdoor Council have worked hard through co-operation and partnerships to reduce these barriers and promote outdoor learning. The "Campaign for Adventure" and the "Real World Learning Campaign" have had a significant impact on changing Government attitudes<sup>1</sup>. The world of outdoor learning has certainly benefited from the concerted action of many organisations involved in "Out of the Classroom Learning". These organisations encompass a wide variety of educational activities such as day and residential visits for field studies, outdoor education and art, use of the school grounds, investigations into the local area, visits to parks, museums and historic sites, sporting events, and music and drama productions.

As a result of these initiatives and effective lobbying, the Department for Children, Schools and Families published a Manifesto for Learning Outside the Classroom in 2006<sup>2</sup>. It's vision is that:

*"Every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age, ability or circumstances".*

Since then over 1,100 local authorities, schools, voluntary organisations and outdoor providers have signed the Manifesto. In October 2008 at a national conference in Greenwich, the DCSF launched its "Out and About" package of web-based support, advice and guidance<sup>3</sup>. This will help schools plan, run and evaluate exciting and challenging learning





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experiences outside the classroom. Alongside this, a new Quality Badge<sup>4</sup> will help schools identify organisations and venues that offer high quality teaching and learning experiences and manage risk effectively. Keeping pace with these initiatives, the Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel has developed sets of Outdoor Learning Cards for classroom teachers wishing to introduce four areas of personal development- journeying, bouldering, orienteering and teambuilding- to their groups<sup>5</sup>.

### Learning outside the Classroom - How far should you go?

The OFSTED report, "Learning Outside the Classroom- How far should you go?" was published in October 2008<sup>6</sup>. It provides great evidence that learning in the outdoors has positive benefits for all groups. It states that:

*"when planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributes significantly to raising standards and improving pupils' personal, social and emotional development".*

This isn't a great surprise to outdoor practitioners; it's what we've been saying for many years! The significance is that it's being said by OFSTED and if followed up in school inspections should lead to a growing demand for schools to use the outdoors which could include the school grounds, a local park or woodland or wilder, more remote environments.

The report makes some other conclusions about learning outside the classroom:

1. It commonly leads to greater motivation, achievement and better behaviour.
2. Memorable experiences are more common out of the classroom and these lead to memorable learning and help to raise standards.
3. It is most successful when it is an integral element of long-term curriculum planning and closely linked to classroom activities.
4. Schools rely very heavily on contributions from parents to meet the costs of residential and other visits and should consider alternative ways of financing them. Whereas many schools are happy to fund computers, few invest in outdoor learning experiences.
5. Few schools effectively evaluate the impact of learning outside the classroom. There is a need to monitor its effectiveness.

### "A week's residential is worth a term in school".

Tim Brighouse, former London Schools Commissioner, re-asserted this statement in October at the launch of "Learning Away", a five-year initiative from the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. The project aims to support schools in planning a progression of residential opportunities for young people throughout their school careers. It argues that these well-planned residential courses will accelerate learning, build confidence and develop responsible citizens. Proposals are invited from groups of schools for residential projects starting in September 2009<sup>7</sup>.

## Some pointers for Outdoor Education

Evidence from recent initiatives, surveys and reports suggests that outdoor learning is at last gaining the level of recognition it deserves. I believe that when working with school groups we can strengthen our position in the following ways:

1. We should no longer describe our work as "enrichment". Outdoor learning is not about enrichment, it is fundamental to a young person's education.
2. There has been a clear shift from concerns over safety to concerns about the quality of learning. We should embrace this change in emphasis and be prepared to demonstrate our high quality teaching and learning.
3. We have much to gain from closer co-operation with other sectors involved in learning outside the classroom. Young people will benefit from broader outdoor programmes that may include aspects of environmental awareness, field studies, art, drama, practical conservation etc.
4. I believe our work is about values and we should show how our work relates to the bigger picture through encouraging global awareness and more sustainable lifestyles<sup>8</sup>.



5. One of our key strengths is the proven value of our learning and teaching methods. Recent curriculum developments, such as the 14-19 Diplomas, are adopting experiential models of learning that are long established in outdoor education.
6. We need to strengthen links with schools, understand how our work is an essential part of the curriculum, how it meets the aims of "Every Child Matters", how it leads to greater achievement and motivates lifelong interests and learning.
7. Finally, we should put energy and resources into evaluating our work, its impact on individuals and develop ways of recording this achievement for students and schools. This is not easy, but if we ignore evaluation we do not do justice to outdoor education or our students. ■



### References

1. Cooper, G. (2005) The Value of Outdoor Learning for Schools, Horizons 29 p20-23.
2. The Manifesto can be viewed at [www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningoutsidetheclassroom](http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/learningoutsidetheclassroom).
3. See [www.lotc.org.uk](http://www.lotc.org.uk)
4. See [www.lotcqualitybadge.org.uk](http://www.lotcqualitybadge.org.uk)
5. See [www.oeap.info](http://www.oeap.info)
6. Ref.No. NR-2008-30 see [www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports)
7. See Foundation's website: [www.phf.org.uk](http://www.phf.org.uk)
8. Cooper, G. (2007) Going Global in the Outdoors, Horizons, 40, p.4-7.

### Author's Notes

Geoff Cooper has worked in schools, teacher training and outdoor education centres. He is head of Wigan Council's two outdoor education centres in the Lake District and chair of the Adventure and Environmental Awareness Group.

All photos by the Low Bank Ground Team.