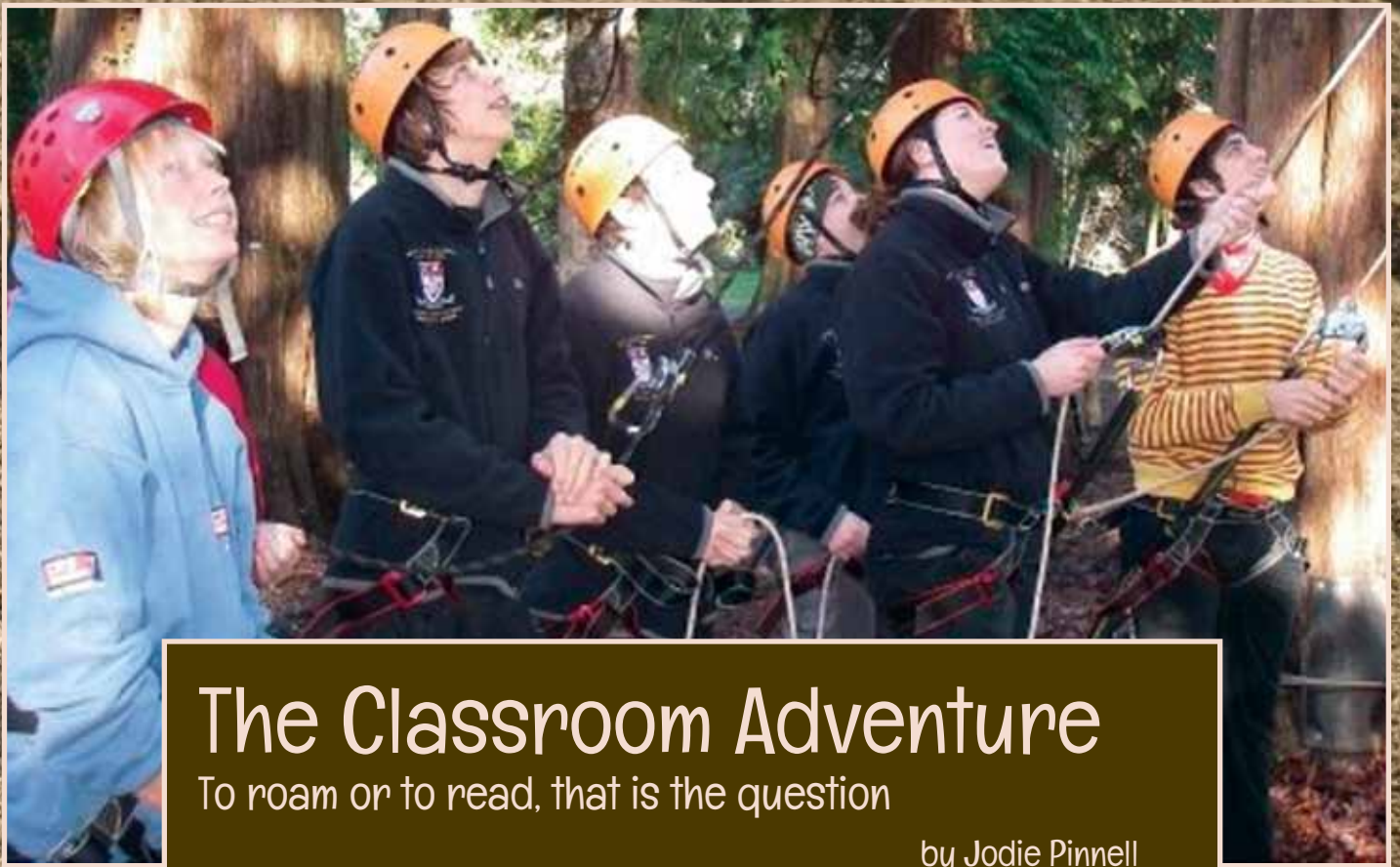




# The Classroom Adventure

To roam or to read, that is the question

by Jodie Pinnell

In a bid to prepare myself for a career hopefully in teaching Outdoor Adventure in Further Education, I chose to write my university dissertation on the value added by theory-based learning at college level. The research involved a case study with a series of interviews from both lecturers and past students of a Further Education course. It is safe to say it produced some powerful outcomes and it has distinctly shaped the way I view Outdoor Adventure and Further Education as a whole. The study was regarding the BTEC National Diploma syllabus for Sport in Outdoor Adventure<sup>1</sup>.

In the adventure world, the value of theory has been questioned on many occasions. I explored an abundance of literature on the nature of learning in the outdoors, and at the beginning of the study, evidence suggested putting outdoor enthusiasts into a classroom will be of little significance to their development. To give an idea, I investigated serendipitous learning in the outdoors<sup>2</sup>, as well as the well known debate of 'letting the mountains speak for themselves<sup>3</sup>' and also views on Outdoor Adventure in academia as it stands today. With these ideas creating an impression of where the study may take me, the results were pleasantly surprising.

The main finding was that although practical activity and interaction with an outdoor environment was preferred, the academic side held a large amount of value from every perspective. The course as a whole formed an integral role of the student's lives and was fondly spoken of when asked about the influence it had.

A traditionally held view of Outdoor Adventure in academia proves it to be a contentious issue; it has been said; 'You can't train guides inside the walls of a college. You have got to be outside.' Although these views have been described as 'both misleading and totally unacceptable,' one lecturer in the study did emulate this 'traditional' view; 'I don't feel there are many academics in Outdoor Education at all.' This opinion had a place in the findings as it showed that even when feeling this to be true, importantly value can still be gained from theory based learning. The course was found to be of much greater significance than just 'studying.' Analysis of the data uncovered reflective accounts of the course from the student's point of view, and the most conclusive result was that the process of the qualification held an immeasurable amount of value for the students; the qualification itself appeared to be almost irrelevant- there was no mention of the certificate gained at all. When asked also about the forms of assessment on the course, the students and lecturers referred to the 'skills' needed to complete them such as 'being critical' and a 'desire to continue it further' as opposed to writing assignments and completing written tasks.

By reviewing the nature of Outdoor Adventure combined with the results from the study, I feel as though in Further Education, and indeed in any level of education, the need for grades and a final outcome can hinder the potential learning for students. Not every student grows through the process: one lecturer noted that; 'for some students, the course is just a process to get a qualification and it was meaningless to them.' Although this view was not reflected by the students in the study, it became apparent that the final outcome of the course can actually be detrimental to learning. Researched literature agreed; 'The greatest road block to creating an experiential learning environment in a post secondary education setting is the institutions' need, and to some extent the students' need, for grades.' I liken this to a horse wearing blinkers. The horse can see a narrow path on which to reach a destination; it is however blind to the journey, thus missing key experiences essential to life. This can be seen to happen in Outdoor Adventure in Further Education; some students will learn the bare minimum in order to pass and miss valuable learning and development along the way. In an experiential manner typical of the outdoors, I questioned how this can happen; how can we filter our experiences to learn only specific skills in order to gain a qualification?

Some aspects of the study opposed this. The results found that values noted from reflection on their studies involved 'broadening horizons,' 'building confidence' and 'growing up.' These outcomes showed that the process of the student's education was somewhat unfiltered; the students gained unquantifiable skills, and these became the most valuable aspects from their perspective. Another discovery was the difference



between students and lecturers in the nature of what can be learned. Lecturers mainly focused on personal and social education, whereas the students put strong emphasis on gaining an appreciation and awareness of the natural environment. This personally highlighted a distinct influence for my own teaching practise- I will never disregard the importance of what the students are learning about the precious environment in which our activities take place.

To use the term 'The Classroom Adventure,' implies that the classroom is

always the element to which the learning is delivered. The study however showed that theory has a strong place in shaping practitioners in the outdoors and this held a large amount of value- however the use of a traditional schooling classroom was of less importance. One lecturer in the study clarified this perfectly; 'The classroom is always going to be harder to engage students. That's standard, regardless. The theoretical side is very important; however the different ways to deliver it are vital.' Students agreed; 'I'd say I would like more practical activity.'

This finding combined with the main outcome (that the process is more important than the qualification) has led to educated suggestions for future practise, especially in terms of a personal pursuit for teaching Outdoor Adventure in Further Education. These suggestions are firmly based on a foundation that realises that theory- based learning is, whatever you would like to think, an incredibly valuable aspect in Outdoor Adventure.



Firstly I propose for my own teaching practise, that I do not disregard the environmental aspects that the students may be gaining from their studies. Although it is apparent that social and personal outcomes from the course are vital, environmental appreciation will play a major role under my influence. I will also teach with a conscious awareness that the process of learning theory holds greater importance than the qualification itself, and when teaching, the need to encourage life skills such as empathy and confidence will ensure I am a better role model. Finally the most important suggestion I have, is that students should be able to show learning from their entire experience, not just the narrow assessment methods currently used. I propose that forms of assessment should be open to intelligent interpretation, less prescriptive and students should have a creative input to show subjective learning outcomes from their education. With experiential learning, how can we funnel every students experience to the same outcome, when each class is full of individuals? If possible in teaching I wish to find a way to allow learning to emerge with the experiences given, whilst still using theory to guide and contextualise. This allows each student to evidence learning in their own way. A balance is required here- a balance between the classroom, and the adventure.

To roam and to read:  
*that* is the answer. ■

#### Notes:

1. (Edexcel, 2010).
2. (Greenaway, 1995)
3. (James, 1980)



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#### Author Biog



**Jodie Pinnell** - I recently graduated from The University of Wales: Trinity Saint David with a First Class Honours degree in Outdoor Education. I am currently studying for a PGCE at Cardiff University and hope to become a successful teacher in Further Education. I am from Portsmouth but I'm currently based in South Wales where I am doing a teaching placement; also filling my time with lots of surfing and mountain walking. In the future I hope to continue research in the field of Outdoor Adventure, focusing on both environmental and philosophical approaches.

**Photos:** Background: Alexandra Zakharova. Inserts: Mark Leather