

How do you explain why what you do in outdoor learning is effective?

A "change model" linking theory with practice
PART 3

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BACKGROUND

As part of my PhD, I read many papers that gave me a greater understanding on how or why the outdoor learning I practiced worked. In an attempt to pull a number of different ideas together I ended up with a model that made sense to me, and has better enabled me to explain the components of outdoor learning to others. This is not a simple model, but through this series of articles I have tried to explain the constituent parts, so it is easier to fit them together. I recognise that not all the components or links are common to all outdoor delivery; however, the aim is to share and describe my model in the hope that the concept may help others explain how, what they do in outdoor learning, works.

The context in which this model was developed was a centre-based practice using outdoor adventurous activities for personal development with people with disabilities to fulfil the stated aims of the charity. There are likely to be common elements across most outdoor provision, but some components will vary for different areas of practice and these will need to be substituted for more appropriate elements or links where appropriate.

A large proportion of these articles have been extracted from my PhD thesis, and the references quoted are only examples of the research or literature that is available. The full PhD thesis is freely available at: <https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/9443>



INTRODUCTION

In Horizons issues 78 & 79, I outlined a number of components of a model as to how outdoor learning could be seen to work. This has included *Inputs*, *Outputs*, *Outcomes* and *Impacts* as well as those factors which are considered to be the major influences on the learning outcomes, namely the people (participants), the *programme* undertaken and the learning process. I went on to identify both the *components* that made up outdoor learning programmes and some *attributes* of these that may contribute to the learning.

In this article, I shall attempt to link these *attributes* to the outcomes of a programme and how these may affect the longer-term *impact* on the individual or society. As I identified in Part 1, impacts are both extremely hard either to quantify or to measure and are difficult to ascribe to a single component, attribute or experience within a programme. Nonetheless, if there is no coherent link whatsoever, then it is difficult to make any claim that the programme has influenced either the *outcome* or the *impact*.

PROCESS

The first two articles considered the *participants* and the *programme* whilst in this article I shall look at the third major influence on the outcomes of a programme, the process. This is often described as the 'black box' of outdoor learning, as we are aware of the *people* and *programme* inputs and hopefully have at least some credible evidence of the outputs, but there is difficulty in identifying the direct links between them. I do not claim to know the secret of the black box, and I do not have research evidence to confirm my theory, but I have tried to use existing knowledge to make a credible link 'through this black box'. The following sections identify elements of the *Process* or a possible roadmap through the 'black box'.

LEARNING THEORY

The theoretical and philosophical basis for outdoor education is grounded within experiential learning and the educational psychology that underpins this approach to learning. I do not intend to go into these in any detail, but only to emphasise the role that experience plays in learning. This 'experience' is the medium through which most of us learn, as we use previous experiences as a reference point that informs or guides our future actions. This principle of learning has been described in numerous models or theories^{1,2,3} and these fundamental concepts are still cited in contemporary thinking on outdoor education today.

ADAPTIVE DISSONANCE AND MASTERY

Closely linked to the learning theories above, is adaptive dissonance and mastery³. This may be translated as 'challenge and achievement' in outdoor learning speak and encompasses the *stretch* in Tuson's¹⁰ model which includes *comfort* and *panic*. Research has confirmed that participants, instructors and visiting staff all recognise the learning that can be achieved through being presented with a challenge that can be overcome through individual effort¹¹.

OUTPUTS

The presentation of the range of *attributes* identified in the model is likely to (or maybe designed to) provide challenge or mental discomfort to the participant. Through overcoming or even mastering these challenges a range of *outputs* may be achieved. Different programmes will place a greater or lesser emphasis on each of the outputs which can be achieved through outdoor learning. In the diagram, a number of outputs are identified (this is not an exhaustive list) which may be obtained through the *attributes* of the programme delivered. These outputs may be either an intended learning outcome, or an incidental benefit which is the result of experiencing various components of the programme, their attributes, or a combination of these.

As was mentioned in the first article, a list of *outcomes* does not provide any insight as to the value of the learning. As stand-alone outputs, they are unlikely to make any difference to the lives of the participants. Hence, meaning must be made of these outputs to enable them to make sense to the participant and become applicable to their lives.

TRANSFER

Successful transfer of learning can make a substantial impact on the lives of a participant by changing the way they operate or perceive themselves. This transfer applies to both converting the *outputs*, such as *success* and *achievement*, to an outcome like *increased self-concept* as well as transferring the learning that occurred in a remote outdoor situation to that of the home environment.

The proponents of the learning theories previously mentioned agree that learning cannot take place without the learner reflecting on an experience. Reflection is a cognitive activity where people "recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over, and evaluate it"⁴, and this knowledge may then be applied to future situations⁵. Reflection is a key part of the process to help an individual assimilate what they have learned. Some participants may be naturally reflective and some experiences in outdoor learning situations may be so powerful that the individual will reflect spontaneously on the results. Alternatively, if the messages are less obvious, or the participants less reflective, then there is the need for a guided process whereby learning through reflection can take

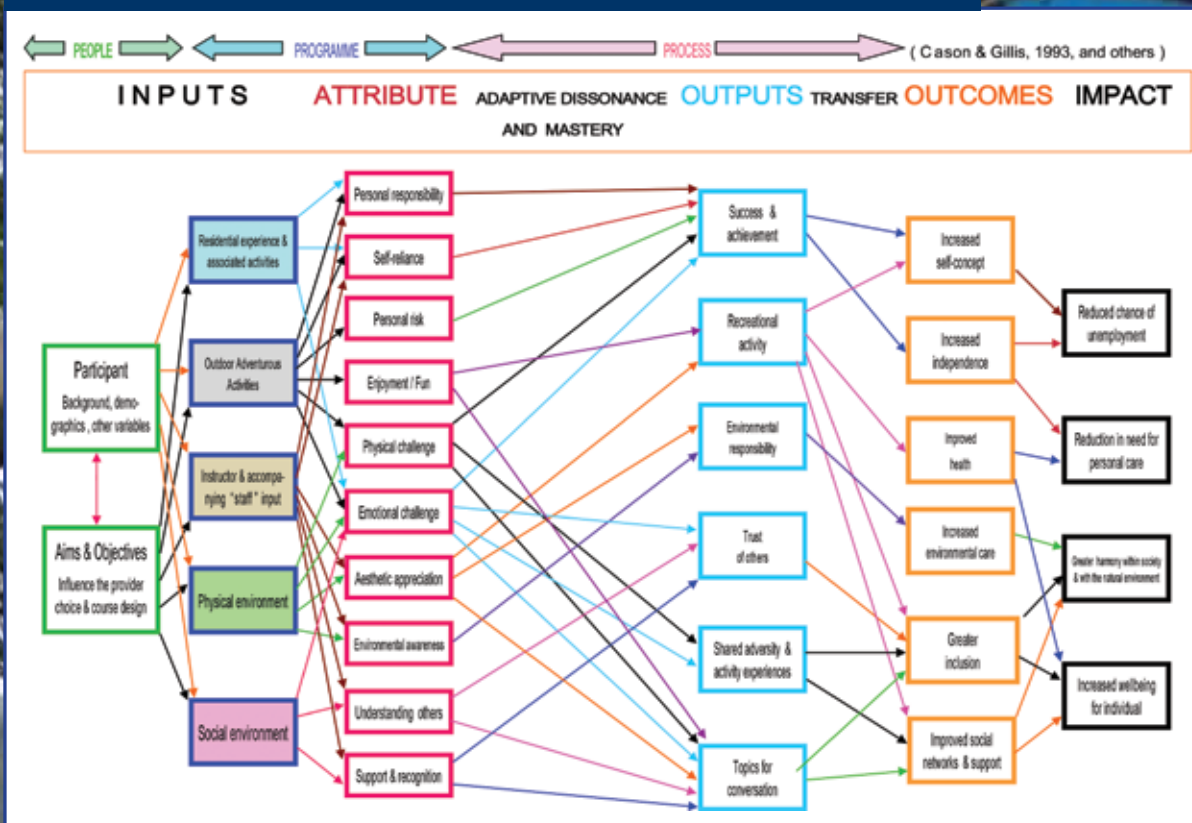
place, so as to realise the potential outcomes⁶. In the majority of situations, some degree of assistance is needed to help the learner interpret elements of the experience and assimilate the learning⁷. In the absence of this guidance, the learner may remember only the enjoyment of the experience, as opposed to the endeavour to achieve and the satisfaction of success as a result of that endeavour⁸. A major role of the instructor is to ensure that “learning is not left to chance”⁹ so that whether or not the participant is naturally reflective, the instructor has a responsibility of providing appropriate opportunities for participants to reflect on their experiences and to satisfy themselves that the intended learning has occurred. This highlights the importance of reviewing in outdoor learning because if the learning is not assimilated into everyday behaviour, or does not transfer back to the home environment, then the behaviours learnt during the outdoor experience become a one-off performance, with the potential for any resultant long-term benefit being lost.

Transfer to the home environment is most effective when there are good links between home and the outdoor experience¹². This may be achieved through ‘significant others’ such as teachers, parents or care workers who have observed the changed behaviours or are aware of the learning outcomes. These ‘significant others’ have the potential to connect the outdoor experience to the home environment in any review of the activity, as well as enabling them to encourage or reinforce the positive behaviour when back in the home environment^{13,14}.

OUTCOMES

Although the outcomes themselves may have significant personal benefit, they are not necessarily of benefit to society or those who fund the outdoor learning experiences. The question must be asked as to whether we need a society full of people who possess the outcomes, for example, high self-confidence, high self-esteem or whatever other outcome we have chosen to focus upon. We must be able to explain why this outcome has value to our society. If we can provide evidence, or at least a convincing case to link high self-concept with, say, employability; or improved health with reduced cost of healthcare, then we have identified the potential ‘impact’ our programmes have to the benefit of the nation, and because of this support for our programmes will follow.

Outdoor Education Programme Model (Crosbie 2013)



CONCLUSION

A *Change Model*, like the one described in these articles, provides the opportunity to demonstrate a cohesive link of our work with the intended benefits we purport to offer to both our participants and wider society. It also provides a way of explaining to outside agencies why or how what we do, works. From an internal management point of view, without an understanding of the processes involved, those factors that may have contributed to any observed benefits cannot be evaluated, and any changes made to programmes in an attempt to improve the outcomes must be regarded as guesswork, with the mechanisms of any success left solely to chance.

If it is not possible to make a link from a programme input to an outcome or impact, through using a change model such as this, then it is difficult to claim that the programme delivers the identified benefits. Conversely, if you CAN provide a convincing change model with the inputs of your programme linking directly to the outcomes or impacts, then you are in a far stronger position to make such claims, especially if you can provide credible research evidence that supports the existence of the links to the claimed benefits. ■



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Crosbie has many years' experience working in outdoor learning with people with disabilities. He spent 17 years managing an outdoor education centre specialising in working with disabled populations, he has advised a number of NGBs on their inclusive policies and instructor training and completed a PhD in this field.

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