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## OUTDOOR EDUCATION: ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION REINVENTED, OR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION RECONCEIVED?

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### **Abstract**

In most Victorian schools outdoor education has meant the weekend bushwalk or the end of year camp. It has been extra-curricula. But that is changing.

Outdoor education appears poised to achieve subject status in Victoria. It is included in official curriculum developments and is served by recognised specialist tertiary courses.

Outdoor education has been distinguished from physical education by its focus on environmental education, and a converse argument probably applies. But is the environmental education which occurs in outdoor education distinguished by anything other than an association with adventure activities? After all, field trips are not a new idea.

This paper argues that the distinctiveness of outdoor education as a form of environmental education is derived from its physical and conceptual isolation from schooling. Conceptual isolation provides the opportunity to construct powerfully affective forms of de-schooled environmental education.

The ways in which an outdoor education context can provide different situational constraints from those existing in schools or other institutions are outlined. An action research project is used to exemplify ways in which teachers might reconceive education within those new constraints.

The paper concludes that outdoor education can allow powerful forms of environmental education to develop, but that a technocratic rationalisation of the field associated with its increasing institutionalisation threatens to negate that potential.

### **Introduction: Outdoor Education & Perceptions of the Environment**

The success of the campaign to save the Franklin River wilderness from inundation was due in part to the efforts of Peter Dombrovskis. His meticulously composed large-format photographs compelled the viewer to recognise the intrinsic worth of the river.

In *Wild Rivers* he describes his early years in the bush:

... I was introduced to rivers and canoeing by Olegas Truchanas. Over the next decade - as weekends and holidays allowed - I made many river journeys, often in the company of three or four friends. For a few days or perhaps two weeks at a time we moved in a glittering, sun-splashed world where living assumed a clarity and intensity unknown in ordinary city-bound existence. Our bodies became attuned to rock and rapid; our senses eagerly absorbed the roar of whitewater, the silent greens of the rainforest. My steadily growing skill at negotiating obstacles bolstered my self-confidence and eased the shyness of adolescence. On

many of our trips Olegas was our mentor and inspiration ... (Dombrovskis, cited in Brown, 1983, p.128).

Dombrovskis' use of his art to influence public perceptions is one kind of environmental education. But when he describes the making of his own environmental perceptions he singles out another kind of environmental education: his outdoor experiences.

In this paper I argue that:

- i) there are differences in situational constraints between institutional environmental education and the kinds of experiences described by Dombrovskis (referred to henceforth as outdoor education);
- ii) outdoor education offers opportunities for developing unique forms of environmental education; and
- iii) outdoor education is by no means intrinsically defensible as a form of environmental education. The possibilities it offers have to be recognised and deliberately nurtured.

#### **Legitimising Outdoor Education as Environmental Education**

Stenhouse (1975 p.75) suggests that what teachers do is a good place to start a study of education because "... a good many of them know what they are doing."

A good many teachers do conduct outdoor education activities. A draft of the Ministerial Review of Outdoor Education describes "... an enormous commitment (sic) to outdoor education in victorian (sic) schools." Government secondary schools conducted over 2600 overnight excursions and adventure activities in 1980, '81 and '82 (Ministry of Education, 1987a, p.14).

One consequence of this activity has been a move to count outdoor education as a legitimate part of the curriculum rather than a peripheral activity (Ministry of Education 1981, 1987a, 1987b). It is included in the curriculum frameworks for Victorian schools. Several tertiary institutions run specialist outdoor education courses. Outdoor education appears set to be included as a subject in the new Victorian Certificate of

Education.

A new subject needs to define its boundaries with other subjects (Goodson 1985); as outdoor education has become institutionalised its advocates have distanced it from physical education by emphasising its environmental content. The Bendigo College of Advanced Education's B.A. (Outdoor Education) program defines outdoor education as "in the outdoors, about the outdoors, and for the use, understanding and appreciation of the outdoors" (BCAE 1988). The Ministry of Education "Frameworks" curriculum document (1987a) describes the environmental education component of outdoor education using an environmental curriculum model derived from the Tbilisi conference.

Both the above definition and the Tbilisi model could be applied to many environmental education courses. Outdoor education involves field trips, but that is a part of good environmental education in many situations. What, then, distinguishes outdoor education from other forms of environmental education?

Not much, it seems. At least, not when a cleaned and tidied outdoor education is brought inside for inspection in the normative light of curriculum specifications.

But that is not how outdoor education ought to be viewed. Outdoor education has arisen, not from a curriculum specification, but from a persistent practice. Outdoor education involves taking groups of children out of the school to a new environment. Usually the environment is less altered by humans, and usually the trip is for an extended period.

The distinctiveness of outdoor education lies in its separation from schooling. Stevenson (and others) have argued that environmental education demands "a new definition of the role of the teacher and demands changes in the organisational conditions under which teachers generally work" (Stevenson, 1987 p.79). The separation of outdoor education from schools and schooling allows those demands to be met.

**Outdoor Education: Physical & Conceptual Isolation from Schools & Schooling**

Part of the educational agenda of an outdoor education course in a remote area is set by the physical isolation; teaching is necessarily concerned with safety, comfort, and travelling skills. But such a course may also provide an opportunity for release from some of the of the limitations of institutionalised education.

It is worthwhile clarifying the ways in which outdoor education can differ from schooling, for three reasons:

- i) to establish the plausibility of the claim that outdoor education can offer emancipated forms of environmental education;
- ii) unless degrees of freedom are made explicit and deliberately explored, teaching habits formed in schools will turn outdoor education into another form of schooling, perhaps indistinguishable from environmental education. The conceptual walls might as well still be in place; and
- iii) to test institutional forms of outdoor education. Each freedom yielded by a program in exchange for legitimacy decreases the likelihood that the program could offer a distinctive form of environmental education.

An outdoor education course involves isolation from those immediate influences of the institution or of urban society which may contradict or negate environmental education attempted in those settings. (Freeing students from the influences of advertising and mass media are alone almost sufficient justification for outdoor education.)

Schools tend to define relationships between teacher and learner, to control the timing and duration of learning, to pre-determine what counts as worthwhile knowledge, to rely on extrinsic motivation for learning, and to teach fragmented knowledge. Schools are part of a society in which environmental consequences of actions often occur somewhere else or at another time. Schools participate in the deification of technology. Often schools are excessive consumers of energy and paper ... the

litany will vary from school to school, and the implications for environmental education are problematic. However, the point is simply that what can be achieved within a school is limited by the constraints of schooling.

Environmental educators must identify and seek to change those constraints if necessary. Outdoor educators put the students on a bus and leave behind the educational limitations of schooling and negative societal influences. Outdoor education offers an immediate means of beginning to construct new perceptions of the environment, of learning, and of education.

Compared to institutional education:

- i) an outdoor education trip is small scale education; it can be hand-made to suit the needs and purposes of its participants. Large scale education inevitably involves some sacrifice of responsiveness to individuals in favour of institutional efficiency;
- ii) outdoor education is subject to fewer time constraints. On an extended trip teaching can be tuned to natural cycles, can be timed to coincide with student interest, and can be of any duration found to be effective.
- iii) outdoor education is not seen by students as "school". Conditioned responses to new ways of learning which may negate innovation attempted at school might not occur in the outdoor education setting;
- iv) outdoor education's low status often makes it less accountable to the conventional wisdom of schooling. Conformity to institutional rules, assessment procedures, curriculum specifications and norms of behaviour (relationships) is not demanded;
- v) student participation in outdoor education is usually voluntary. Learning in schools is often compromised by the presence of reluctant conscripts. The same students are often willing participants in outdoor education activities; for such students outdoor education's separation from schooling is an attraction.
- vi) schooling takes place in a controlled

physical environment; outdoor education is subject to natural environments. Learning in outdoor education is both stimulated and constrained by nature. This applies more to the outdoor education expedition to a remote area than to an environmental education field trip in which a location is chosen to suit the intended lesson and where specific aspects of the environment are studied.

### **Institutionalised Outdoor education: A Contradiction in Terms?**

Outdoor education has the potential to change perceptions of the environment, of relationships with nature, of learning, and of the process of education itself. It deserves the improved status implied by its persistence in practice and the recognition it has gained in official curriculum statements.

However, the institutionalisation accompanying enhanced status presents outdoor educators with a dilemma. Outdoor education has been defined in practice by its separation from institutional constraints; can outdoor education achieve legitimacy within institutions on its own terms, or will the process of institutionalisation neutralise its potential?

Outdoor educators need to be alert to the ways in which institutionalisation can contradict or negate outdoor education's distinctiveness and legitimacy. They must become critical participants in the process of change. Action research provides a model for such critical participation.

Action research is a process whereby participants in educational situations systematically improve their own practice. It involves a cyclic process of observation, reflection, planning, and action (change). Its ideological basis is that change ought to be self-initiated, democratic, and collaborative (rather than externally, autocratically or bureaucratically imposed) and that educational theory must be developed dialectically with practice by practitioners (rather than in isolation from practice by specialists).

### **Outdoor Education in a Tertiary Course: An Action Research Project**

For outdoor education, the process of institutionalisation is problematic. The

establishment of tertiary courses and qualifications in outdoor education is a significant part of that process.

The Bendigo College of Advanced Education has offered a Bachelor of Arts (Outdoor Education) for five years. Much of the course is academic, and college-based. The remainder of the course involves engagement in outdoor education. In 1988 an action research project attempted to both improve and understand the ways in which course practical work could embody a distinctive form of education.

The process of superimposing action research on existing relationships, processes for change, and ideology is not as tidy as its specification suggests. In practice the project attempted (not always successfully) to make change more collaborative, to identify and challenge contradictions and negations more systematically (where prudent), and to develop theory dialectically with practice. The project initially involved staff engaged in practical work, and began by identifying and changing ways in which institutional constraints were negating the aims and purposes of practical work. This was a strategic decision; the course was due for re-accreditation, and the opportunity existed to make changes. The emphasis of the project then shifted to the conduct of practical trips, particularly the cross-country skiing trips.

The involvement of several staff was reduced, and the involvement of students increased. Coherence was maintained in spite of these shifts and changes by the continuing involvement of Andrew Brookes and Peter Martin, the focus on the issue of the institutionalisation of outdoor education, and the regular circulation and discussion of written reflections.

### **First Stage: Reducing Institutional Constraints**

A reconnaissance of course language and discourse, activities and practices, and social relationships and organisation yielded a number of areas of concern. Outcomes of course practice were specified in terms of behavioural objectives. Practical work was divided into subjects according to the technical skills involved. Teaching appeared to be emphasising the learning of skills like map-reading and rock-climbing but

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... exclude(d) both the uncertainties implicit in exploring wild places and the uncertainties implicit in a view of learning which reflects, among other things, individual differences ... there is a sense that practical trips are annual rituals with pre-determined outcomes ... (Brookes, 1988a).

Prospects for change appeared to be limited by the need for course practical work to be graded, by staff working in isolation, and by uncritical reference of learning to community standards (skills certificates).

A number of changes were negotiated to course organisation, discourse, and practice. Course exit standards were to be reviewed to emphasise processes and to problematise community assumptions that achieving teaching competence is a technical activity. Permission was obtained from the College to trial ungraded, descriptive assessment in the re-accredited course. Practical work at each year level was reorganised as a single subject to reduce fragmentation.

These are all long-term changes. More immediately, the effect of the action research project was to encourage a critical rethinking of the way outdoor education was conducted in the course. This process continued in the second stage of the project, which aimed to improve the course cross-country skiing trips, and to develop more coherent accounts of the ways in which the potential distinctiveness of such trips as a form of environmental education could be understood and realised.

### **Second Stage: Developing a Theory of Outdoor Environmental Education**

... Skiing can be one of the least educationally justifiable activities schools undertake. The hidden messages of a ski trip could easily be the promotion of vanity, unnecessary destruction of the natural environment, and endorsement of greed.

There are benefits of shared adventure and personal achievement; but skiing does not have a monopoly on those. Our rationale for the skiing we do, which involves ski-touring in relatively unaltered environments, is that we

hope it provides a particularly effective means of developing an understanding of, and care for, natural environments.

Hope, however, is about as effective a teaching method as it is a contraceptive; so attempts were made to identify sounder strategies ... (Brookes, 1988b).

Comments from student logs on the initial first year trips highlighted concerns with safety, relationships and skiing ability:

... I found it physically demanding but challenging, but that is what I love so much about it. I found our group to be great, we were all patient with each other and encouraging all the time ... [Wendy].

... because our group was supposed to be the most experienced, I noticed that we as a group didn't often ski together ... but did the other groups who were supposed to be less experienced ski and help each other? ... [Tony].

... People may argue and say that we should have had more environmental teachings of the area, however I believe that the main aim was to learn safety ... [Rebecca].

On introductory trips an emphasis on the technical skills needed for comfort and safety in the snow was necessary, but this seemed to convey the message that skiing was a technical activity rather than a means of environmental exploration. Students commented:

... Of all three days my favourite time came just after setting camp free time - nothing was expected - I skied to the tree line had a good look around - ate some icicles - walked around and marked the unblemished snow slopes followed some rabbit tracks and fell over - this was the best opportunity I had to "feel" the environment - I know the pursuit side had to be taught - but I believe this was the most education I received through the trip ... [Dick].

It felt fantastic to be able to just ski over to a nice untouched slope knowing that no one else had been

there and enjoy the peace and quiet of the Alpine area [Lisa B].

We decided to change the emphasis for the next trip. Slides and discussion about alpine areas were included in trip briefings; the conduct of skiing skill lessons emphasised terrain and snow conditions more (choosing a skill to match the terrain) rather than skills as an end in themselves (choosing terrain suitable for teaching a pre-determined skill). Discussion about ways of knowing the environment was initiated in a debriefing session to legitimise personal observation and feeling. . Incidental instruction on trips was broadened to include listening, observation, and to draw links between observations and major environmental issues.

... I appreciated the extra things we learned other than just the actual skiing skills, such as choosing a good route on the softer snow where the sun had been, being aware of the weather ahead by the clouds, camping/snow-caving on the south side for more shelter and deeper snow, knowing how to self-arrest, and experiencing sleeping in a snow cave. It was lovely to spend time relaxing by the waterfall listening to the water and taking in the environment, also listening to the silence before setting back to Falls Creek on the last day. I liked touring through the trees, not spending all our time on open slopes. The blizzard was a good experience. It made me realize how suddenly the weather can change, how vital navigation skills are, and how much more practise I need ... I loved sleeping in the snow caves, and learning things about the snow environment. I think we were a good group and all helped one another. I hate getting really cold but if you push yourself its worth it once you get warm again in a cosy cave or skiing again after a stop. I spent two cosy nights with my cave-mates which I won't forget for a long time. The trip made me angry that so many people are carelessly destroying our environment and at the same time I felt lucky to be exposed to an environment that future generations won't be able to see in Australia [Lisa].

With more experienced groups our

observations suggested the trips were lacking a sense of adventure and commitment. We provided more choice of venue for trips; we relinquished more control of the conduct of trips to students:

... this trip has been so useful in that it has taught me many safety hints in this environment e.g. self arresting (with ice-axe) as well as being the most superb walk/ski aesthetically that I have ever done!!! The view was phenomenal up the top and the weather was beautiful and sunny. The skiing was a real bonus and I improved in this area as well. The crisp air, starry nights and the finale - sunrise while sitting on top just blew me away - I really imagined that I was by myself and got a wonderful feeling of togetherness with the environment that morning and the solitude feeling was also important to me even though I enjoy social aspects of trips at certain times ... [Grant].

... I feel I benefitted in many ways from this trip re physical skills and mental conditioning to extended trips. It was a very strange feeling coming back to Falls Creek Village, I felt like turning around and going back to our snow caves [Jared].

We observed a "halo effect" of adventure and freedom; the positive atmosphere generated receptiveness and co-operation to environmental learning. The longer trip allowed students to "tune in" to natural environments; returning from the trip, the ski village was seen with new eyes.

As we developed our practice we began to identify some concepts against which to test our practice. We discussed our emerging ideas with final year students, with Graduate Diploma of Outdoor Education students, Diploma of Education (Secondary) students and with other faculty members. The list helped us to be clearer about the ways in which outdoor education could develop as an way of knowing the environment rather than an extension of institutional environmental education.

**Outdoor Education as a Reconceived Form of Environmental Education: Some Signposts**

*The role of adventure.* Adventure is commonly used as a metaphor for

learning, but real-life adventure motivates in a way which is rarely, or never, attained in the classroom. There is a halo effect of adventure however; students feeling enthused, challenged, and rewarded are in a receptive mood to gain insights about humans and nature.

*The role of group learning.* Outdoor education involves small groups in isolated settings; the teacher can foster the development of a group ethic of awareness and concern about the natural environment. Feelings of acceptance and worth arising from the co-operative nature of outdoor education activities can enhance receptivity to environmental learning.

*The holistic nature of outdoor education.* Outdoor education confronts students with their own needs and their impact on an environment; in everyday life students are separated in space and time from the environmental consequences of their lifestyles. Outdoor education can make obvious the connections between human needs and wants, local environmental impacts, and long term changes to the environment.

*Engagement and ownership.* The act of investing time and effort into travelling to wild places seems to give travellers a sense of ownership and a disposition to care about natural areas. This effect is enhanced when students feel they have been given sufficient free choice in the way the activity is conducted.

*Identification and competence.* Natural environments can appear hostile and threatening until students are competent to live safely and comfortably in the outdoors. Teachers need to be aware of the hidden messages they transmit when teaching outdoor living skills; hostility towards nature (the conquering ethic), or feeling comfortable with nature.

*The impact of natural scenery.* The effectiveness of a trip can be enhanced by the careful choice of campsites, routes, and resting places.

*Understanding learning.* Different ways of learning and ways of knowing are legitimised and reinforced by open discussion. The problematic nature of knowledge and the learning process should be shared with students.

*Content.* Teaching detailed under-

standing of ecosystems or environmental problems is the province of schooling. Teaching about the environment in outdoor education seems best to be guided by a sense of the power of outdoor experiences to change perspectives; outdoor education can give students a sense of place, of time, of relationships in nature, and of changes brought about by humans. These are things which can be learned in school or College, but through outdoor education students learn to care; knowledge about the environment becomes personal knowledge rather than school knowledge.

*Time.* The impact of outdoor education seems to be more profound on longer trips. This is not equivalent to giving longer lectures, but has more to do with allowing time for students to tune out of College and tune in to the natural environment. The teacher is free to wait for the "teachable moment" before intervening in the learning process. Sufficient time needs to be allowed for students to progress from concerns about personal safety and acceptance by the group to concern for life on earth.

*Affective education and the role of the teacher.* Institutionalised education can give students the impression that environmental problems are none of their business because they are not experts. Outdoor education aims to demonstrate that environmental literacy is accessible to everyone, and that environmental problems are everyone's business. The role of the teacher is part of that message. Gorman (1979, p.195) stresses the need for a real relationship between students and teacher for affective education in contrast with the impersonal, formal, and distant approach often adopted. The shared living of extended outdoor education experience almost inevitably breaks down the academic pretensions which are a barrier to affective learning (Brookes, 1988b).

### **Some Implications for Environmental Education**

Like the student returning from the wilderness to the ski-village suddenly recognising its discordance with the environment, outdoor education provides an opportunity to change our perceptions of environmental education. It is not contingent on the prior achievement of educational reform; on the contrary, it can allow the development through



practice of the powerful ideas which such reform requires.

The uncritical institutionalisation of outdoor education threatens that potential. Already there are signs that the threat is real.

The teaching of cross-country skiing, for example, is becoming increasingly dominated by technical accreditation standards. National Parks and Education Authorities appear to be uncritically assisting in that development.

Accreditation standards for ski teachers are based on models of education centred on training and instruction, and are concerned almost exclusively with skiing skills, group management, and safety. Both the content of such courses, and their adoption of simple educational recipes work against the critical development of innovative approaches to environmental learning.

Fear of litigation and deference to the perceived expertise of the accrediting bodies appears to be driving support for such accreditation standards by national parks authorities (for example, Alpine Planning Team 1987, p.110) and education authorities.

Increasing numbers of schools are contracting their cross-country skiing to commercial operators offering discount "outdoor education". There is little evidence that such operators employ staff on the basis of their critical approach to environmental education. Their low cost is based on paying staff far less than teaching rates. Like the accreditation schemes and National Parks requirements, the purchase by schools of packaged educational solutions implies a technical view of outdoor education.

Robottom (1987) has argued that the technocratic ideology underlying much schooling is an impediment to the development of the critical thinking and perceptual shifts sought by environmental educators. The technocratisation of cross-country ski instruction is derived from a technical approach to physical (rather than environmental) education (also not without its critics, e.g. Tinning (1988), Baxter (1988)), but the outcome is the same; environmental learning is stifled.

### **Conclusion**

Outdoor education can be used to provide uniquely affective and effective forms of environmental education. However, unless teachers develop a critical understanding of the ways in which conceptions of learning can be and must be reformulated in this relatively unconstrained learning environment, outdoor education will be at best an unnecessary duplication of existing environmental education, at worst another exploitative use of dwindling natural areas.

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