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Assessment of Effective Outdoor Education

Outdoor education should effectively encompass the following three major environments: the social environment, the physical environment, and the task environment. These three environments play a key role in what we know as outdoor education. So what is outdoor education?

According to Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, and Ewart's (2006) article:

Outdoor education is a method of teaching and learning that emphasizes direct, multisensory experiences; takes place in the outdoor environment; and uses an integrated approach to learning by involving the natural, community, and individual environments. Through the use of the outdoors, outdoor education programs strive to elevate the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and spiritual levels of the individual. (p. 5)

Over a quarter of a century ago outdoor education was defined by Priest (1986), as "education in, about and for the outdoors" (p. 13). All of the above elements combine together to provide participants in an outdoor education experience the opportunity for personal growth, through interaction with others, and the opportunity to learn life lessons and skills through a mostly "outdoor" classroom. An effective outdoor education experience also allows the participant to achieve success in overcoming fears and physical challenges through the pursuit of cooperative assignments with their teammates while accomplishing set goals. So collectively, as time progresses, the definition of Outdoor Education and its effectiveness as we know it is evolving.

The social aspect of outdoor education involves the participants: students, clients, friends, or family, whoever it may be. Participants of an outdoor experience look to their guide or teacher to provide the best experience in a safe manner. Educators must cater to the needs of these individuals in order to effectively produce a positive learning outcome.

First and foremost, Dewey (1976) said, "Motivation must be present in the learner. Learning is something the pupil does himself, initiative lies within the learner" (p. 3). Dewey (1976, p. 3) also believes that physical disabilities may limit the type of outdoor activity certain individuals can participate in, even if they have the right motivation. In order to put a successful group together the teacher/instructor must be able to determine the motivational intent of each participant. The success or achievement of the instructor's intended outcome for the group relies on each participant wanting to learn and actually contribute to the group's overall goals.

Research by Walsh and Golins (1976, p. 7) suggests that another aspect to the social ingredient of outdoor education lies in providing the group's members with problem solving activities such as; food rationing, distribution of equipment, and organization of roles and tasks to be accomplished by the group as a whole. The teacher is encouraged to plan the tasks assigned to be incrementally easy to hard tasks such as; setting up tents or shelters, preparing meals, planning the route of a hike, actually

attempting and completing the hike or climb, and thus, building self-confidence and unity among the group's members as they accomplish one goal at a time.

Also, Walsh and Golins (1976, p. 5) concur with Outward Bound's philosophy that encourages the *Ten Group*. The *Ten Group* suggests that seven to fifteen people is the optimum number to have in a group. This number allows for diversity in the group members' personalities, strengths, and weaknesses. It also allows for conflict resolution to occur, small enough that no cliques will form, and permits leaders and individuality to rise up among the members of the group. With this number of individuals participating there is room for cooperation, reciprocity, and for the group to achieve set goals.

The physical aspect of outdoor education involves the physical environment in which the learning takes place. A few examples of physical learning are adventure learning and experiential education. Gilbertson et al., (2006, p. 8) explains that "Adventure education is education that is conducted in a wilderness-like setting or through nature and physical skills development to promote interpersonal growth or enhance physical skills in outdoor pursuits." More specifically adventure education is, "A variety of self-initiated activities utilizing an interaction with the natural environment, that contain elements of real or apparent danger, in which the outcome, while uncertain, can be influenced by the participant and the circumstances" (Gilbertson et al., 2006, p. 9).

Experiential education is a method, it is learning that occurs through an authentic experience. According to John Dewey, who is called the Father of Experiential Education, "experiential learning requires a great deal of planning, organization, and structure by the teacher" (Gilbertson et al., 2006, p. 9). Outward Bound's adventure program or philosophy mandates that the teacher must pick an environment that contrasts highly with the group's norm, one that has the most learning opportunities and one in which the most people can be involved in the activity. The benefit of being outdoors is that all of an individual's senses are being utilized as each person takes in the sights, smells, sounds, taste, and touch of their surroundings (Walsh and Golins, 1976, p. 4).

The task aspect of outdoor education encompasses all the activities used when facilitating specific learning outcomes. Outdoor education focuses on three primary subject areas in which the instructor implements activities in order for group members to experience all three areas: ecological relationships, developing physical skills, and interpersonal relationships.

Knapp's (2005) article states:

The field of environmental education has produced considerable data that show it can impact an individual's attitude and behavior toward the environment... For example, the Everglades National Park has had a partnership with local school systems for the past 20 years. The program has received national recognition for introducing more than 250,000 students to the issues facing the Everglades. (pp. 2, 4)

An outdoor educator, must have an understanding of ecological relationships, and be able to relay them to his students, even if it is just the local flora and fauna. From the perspective of a student, while in the outdoors, it is valuable for them to have an understanding of the ecological relationships surrounding them so they can more greatly appreciate and respect their surroundings. "Although learning about nature may not be

the students' primary goal, learning some ecological concepts can enhance their overall experience" (Gilbertson et al., 2006, p. 5).

Physical skills development involves learning specific skills and honing these skills to begin to master a specific activity. A very important process of developing these skills is first learning how to use the equipment involved in a specific activity. For example, I myself am a very avid mountain biker. When I first began mountain biking, I thought to myself, "How hard can it really be? I know how to ride a bike, doesn't everyone?" So, if when I took off down the trail, what would have happened if I had gotten a flat tire fifteen minutes into my ride, or my chain had come off? I would have no idea what to do. I probably would have ended up turning around and walking my bike out to the car; frustrated, discouraged and certainly questioning whether mountain biking was an activity I wanted to pursue.

Before one can just take off down a trail, they must first learn how to properly use the equipment. They may know how to ride a bike, but what happens when the bike malfunctions on the trail? An individual must learn the specifics; like how to change a flat tire, to always carry an extra tube, and know how to use the proper tools necessary to address an equipment malfunction. Another needed skill to participate in biking is the knowledge of how to put a chain back on a bike after it has fallen off. There are many things to learn concerning the sport of mountain biking in order to be best prepared for a successful ride.

An outdoor educator must teach basic skills to participants with each introduction of a new activity. Mountain biking is just one example of teaching a group of students the basics of how to properly ride a bike on the trail: proper shifting techniques, proper use of brakes, and evenly distributing their weight while on a bike, etc.

Another example of the use of specific transfer of skills in adventure education can be seen in an excerpt from a student's journal in Gass' (1997) article, which reads:

Today in class we learned how to rappel. Initially I was quite frightened, but I ended up catching on to the proper technique and enjoying it quite a bit! One thing that helped me in learning how to rappel was the belaying we did yesterday.
(p. 2)

The student was able to transfer what he learned in a previous class and apply it to the new skill/task being learned with more confidence. So, in what setting can an instructor facilitate this type of learning? Do they go to the local park? Do they meet in the classroom? What is the best scenario?

Gilbertson (et al., 2006) suggests that:

The structure of an educational experience is often determined by the setting where the instruction takes place. It influences the purpose of the instruction, which influences audience type as well as intended outcomes. In this context, there are three predominant structures of outdoor education: nonformal, formal, and informal. (p.10)

Non-formal education is loosely structured. The non-formal physical setting does not take place in your traditional classroom setting, but more in the form of workshops,

community courses, or programs. Participation is usually voluntary. “When evaluation occurs, it is rarely a requirement to proceed to another level unless the student is seeking some type of certification. In these cases the student must meet a standard in order to attain the certification” (Gilbertson et al., 2006, p. 10). The length of time students spend with their instructor in non-formal education is minimal compared to that of formal education. It is usually measured in days. Because of this, the student-teacher relationship is not as strong as it would be in a formal educational setting.

Some students may learn better in a formal classroom setting with charts and pictures, and reading materials on how to properly use the equipment. In this environment they can meet certain requirements and be evaluated by means of written assessments or exams. A formal education setting is, “the most structured educational setting, and it involves the longest periods of time, commonly weeks or months. This is the setting where the teacher can develop the strongest learning relationship with their students” (Gilbertson et al., 2006, p. 10).

Other students may learn better through a more hands-on approach, which is called informal education. “Informal education is entirely determined and controlled by the student. Students essentially teach themselves” (Gilbertson et al., 2006, p. 10). Out at the local bike park students are actually able to hop on the bike, ride around and experience first hand how to use the equipment.

When using a park as the classroom, students can experience real life situations that better equip them for the trail; such as learning that shifting gears up while riding up a hill makes it harder to pedal. From this very simple hands-on approach that the outdoor educator has facilitated, the student makes a very important realization; instead of up shifting, he learns it is more effective to down shift and make it easier on themselves. The student gains a basic knowledge of their equipment; he becomes more aware of how to handle certain situations. I think this quote from Smith (1972) best sums it up. “That which can best be learned inside the classroom should be learned there. That which can best be learned in the out-of-doors through direct experience, dealing with native materials and life situations, should be learned there” (pp. 20-22).

“Some people that pursue outdoor education may be seeking to learn more about themselves and how they interact with those around them. This increase in self-awareness and insight is referred to as interpersonal growth” (Gilbertson et al., 2006, p. 6). In Gass’ (1997) article he suggests that the transfer of learning happens when a student’s experiential learning transfers over to his personal life or in his words, “non-specific transfer is the use of common underlying principles in one learning situation to assist the student in a future learning experience” (p. 3).

Expressed in the words of one student referred to in Gass’ (1997) article:

(as a result of the wilderness course) I’ve seen myself developing more trust in my friends at school. The no-discount policy helps me quite a bit, but I think what helped the most was learning how I receive as well as give support to others. I felt that this was the most important thing I learned (while on the wilderness course). (p. 4)

In experiential programming, the deliberate and purposeful use of activities to achieve change, the role of the leader is to facilitate reflection that will result in beneficial

change by using the appropriate facilitation techniques (Priest, 1996, p. 1). In a different article by Gass (1997, pp. 4, 5), he explains another method of intrapersonal learning. The Metaphoric Model of processing a participant's desired behavior change by having the instructor first explain the activity, then explain the ultimate outward behavior goal for each individual, and then actually do the activity. For example, the instructor's conversation would sound something like this,

Gass' (1997) article states:

Today we are going to corporately participate in the Trust Fall. Probably lots of you think that this exercise has something to do with trusting others, or with knowing that people will support you if you let them...we have a different lesson to be learned here. And that lesson concerns letting go of an old lifestyle....I want you to close your eyes as you hold on to the tree trunk, think of the tree as the part it for awhile, for 30 seconds, I'm going to ask you to let go- you'll just lie back free life. (pp. 225, 226)

This method serves as a means to help the participant to implement self-change during the activity. After the facilitator has frontloaded this information it is up to the participant to decide whether or not he chooses to embrace change.

Outdoor education as we know it, through trial and error, is becoming much more successful at creating life change in its participants. I believe that effective outdoor education takes place in a novel setting. Whether it is in a classroom or outdoors, the participants are able to interact with others, share what they think, and learn skills and life lessons. It is the outdoor educator's responsibility to produce a positive learning outcome. He must lead participants through adversity, help them overcome their fears, gain trust, and when needed help foster change.

Through personal experience, I think the most effective method of outdoor education is through informal education. The participants' learning outcomes are entirely determined and controlled by them. The instructor provides the participants with the appropriate setting, training, and guidance in order for them to achieve the self-realization that they can grow and learn something new intellectually, physically, and also grow and change in a positive direction internally. They have more hands on experience and training. In my opinion, something that an individual learns by themselves, what they are doing wrong and what they are doing right, and then adjusting their belief system accordingly will allow them to be able to retain that information for an extended period of time. This sense of accomplishment is a direct result of the individual's interaction with the outdoor educator and the other group members who corporately facilitate an environment where lasting change and growth takes place.