

EDUCATIONAL MODELS IN THE EUROPEAN SCHOOL. OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTAL EDUCATION

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Abstract: *This presentation argues a case for a broad concept of “education outdoors” as the natural corollary to “education indoors”. It argues that programs should provide independent learning experiences that address the capacities of learners and the value contexts in which they learn; and that taking responsibility for actions should be an important program focus. I’ve experienced the Outdoor Environmental Education Concept during the course “Outdoor Environmental Education. Experiential Approaches to Learning” that has been organized by Kinda Municipality from Sweden, at Blairvadach Outdoor Centre din Helensburgh, Scotland, UK. This course has been financed by the European Commission through the Lifelong Learning Comenius Program.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

The outdoor environmental education can be defined by different ways. In this course in Scotland it is about outdoor activities personal and social development and environmental education. The way of these related ideas are shown in the following model (Fig. 1.).

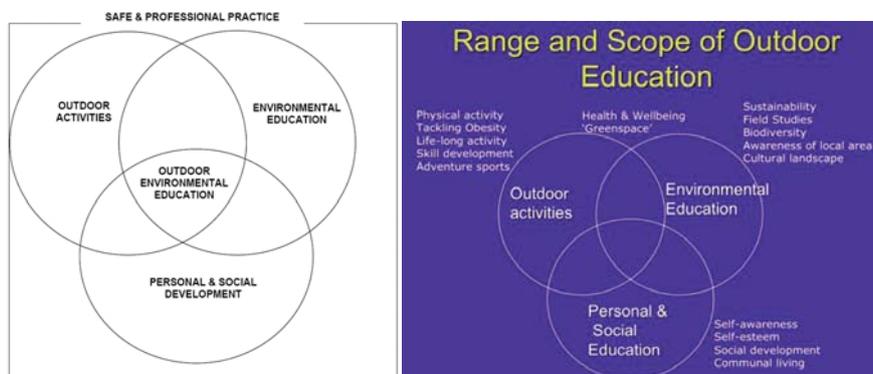


Fig. 1. Range and scope of outdoor education

2. THEORETICAL ASPECT

When we talk about outdoor activities we mean the practical activities that we do when we take learning out-of doors. When these activities are used to encourage learning about individual people and their relationships with others we call this personal and social development. When these activities are used to encourage learning about nature and people we call this environmental education. As the model suggests outdoor environmental education happens when we learn about ourselves as individuals, our role in society and our relationship with the natural environment.

What is common to these ideas is that the teacher and pupils pursue learning outcomes beyond the classroom. This is not to say that outdoor environmental education is a better form of learning than class-based learning. It is to suggest that some learning is better suited to being out-of-doors.

When we are indoors we are separated from much of the natural world by the walls that surround us. These walls insulate us from the elements providing us with a comfortable space to do many important learning tasks. The problem with these walls though is that they also restrict the use of our senses. This is a problem because it is through our senses that we are most profoundly linked to the natural environment. The purpose of going outdoors therefore is to use our senses to learn in different ways.

To explore this idea we use Patrick Geddes' model that education should not just be about the "3Rs" of "Reading wRiting and aRithmetic". Instead he developed the model known as the "3Hs".

The "3Hs" are the "Heart, Hand and Head". Geddes believed that traditional indoor teaching methods focused too much on developing cognitive thinking (head learning). Instead of starting with the head, Geddes suggested that when teachers teach they should begin first by understanding what motivates their learners. He knew that feelings were extremely important in motivating people to learn. This is why he said that education must begin firstly with the Heart (feelings and emotions) and then focus on the Hand (learning by doing) and finally the Head ('book' or intellectual learning).

Geddes was not saying that book learning was not important just that it had become too dominant as a method of learning. He was arguing instead for educating the whole person. Nowadays there is a very well developed theory called experiential learning and many people throughout Europe have contributed to its development. Aristotle (Greece) is sometimes referred to as the founding father of experiential learning because of his work in soil science. However the roots of experiential education can be found throughout many European countries. The main purpose is how we can use the outdoors to learn about ourselves and the planet and how we might live more sustainably on it.

3. PRACTICES ACTIVITIES

ACTIVITY 1

To begin with it used the theme of navigation which is common to many outdoor education programs. The group participants were asked to follow the guide (the coordinating teacher) and at the end of a 500m walk be prepared to describe the walk having used as many of their senses as they wished. At the end of the walk the group was asked to stand in a circle and tell the story of the journey. The guide asked one person to tell something about a story and clap his hands and the next person in the circle would take up the story. This would continue until the story had been told to the satisfaction of everyone. The group was told that the story needed not be told in chronological order but as it was remembered. The purpose of this activity was to show how the use of maps and compasses can interfere with observing the environment. A navigator who is very skilled with map and compass need have little knowledge of the environment that he is passing through other than its contours and to some extent its vegetation.

ACTIVITY 2

The first activity was a warm up activity. The second was the same activity but the group was asked not to speak to each other. At the end of another 500m walk everybody stopped and stood in a circle and told the story of the route with the guide clapping hands again. After the story had been told, the group had a short discussion. The guide asked the group to explain what the difference was between the two activities for them. Some had enjoyed the first activity because they had learnt something from a discussion with someone else. Some others preferred the second activity as it allowed them to focus more on the environment than the people they were with. So within the span of two activities two different learning styles had been catered for. In other words the guide was purposely using the activities to do this. He was not providing one activity which he expected all to learn from. So the idea of concept-based practice acknowledges in keeping with differentiated learning (Donaldson, 1978) that people learn in different ways and at different speeds. Note also that both activities and discussion remain focused on the theme of human/environment relationships.

ACTIVITY 3

Before taking the group out, the guide had identified a particularly beautiful spot. At this point he asked the group to find a spot they liked where they could spend some time alone. He asked that they came back not less than 5 minutes but no more than 10 minutes; his intention being to introduce some flexibility to allow for those who might want to spend longer alone than others. Before they left, he said that he would not call them back, his intention being to introduce an element of individual responsibility. After the time, period everyone returned and stood in a circle. He could sense by the slow speed that everyone was walking back and by the solitude they retained when they returned that something special had happened for many.

ACTIVITY 4

The final activity involved splitting the group into two. Continuing with the theme of navigation, both groups were asked to use anything lying around to create a sculpture to explain some aspect of their journey thus far. Each group was given 30 minutes and was asked to be prepared to present their sculpture to the other group. This process is rich in educational outcomes from the interpersonal relationships necessary to discuss what is to be done and how it will be done, to the actual creativity involved in creating the sculpture. However notwithstanding these important outcomes, the theme was still human/environment relationships and it was when the group presentations of each sculpture were finished that the chance arose to address the theme. The guide asked if the group should return the materials to their original places. Some argued that, on the basis of the 'leave no trace' principle, things should be returned. Others suggested that we were doing no harm and that there was no reason why we should return things to where they came from.

4. CONCLUSIONS

What the guide has endeavored to show there is how the environment can become a stronger feature of outdoor education. It does not mean forgetting about personal and social education which outdoor educators have traditionally claimed to be good at. Nor does it mean losing the fun and adventure elements. It does however require a refocusing of objectives, methods and practices. For concept-based practice to take place the individual outdoor environmental educator has key responsibilities. By reading widely about relevant pedagogical and environmental issues the individual becomes empowered to act within this educational domain. By 'empowered', he means that the person is able to mediate between the experiences people have and assisting in making sense of these experiences in a wider social and environmental context. This is the key to concept-based practice.

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