

Can outdoor education be dispensed with? An enquiry into some text book approaches to outdoor education.

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Abstract

In 1859 Herbert Spencer recognised that the key curriculum issue was not what to include but what to leave out. With Spencer's dictum in mind, this paper examines how outdoor education textbooks have approached the aims and purposes of outdoor education. "What to leave out" marked a shift in curriculum discourse from a search for universal approaches and absolute principles towards curriculum questions understood as only resolvable relative to particular social contexts. The study found outdoor education textbooks proffered context-free rationales for outdoor education, using one or more rhetorical devices: (1) treating education as personal development, with only limited acknowledgment of the social functions and contexts of education (2) omitting the outdoors from aims and purposes, or treating the outdoors as monolithic, and (3) describing aims and purposes in broad and abstract terms. Adopting any or all of these positions drastically reduced the capacities of the proffered theories to (a) help determine if any given program was necessary or (b) help determine what programs were necessary.

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Introduction

In what circumstances and on what grounds might outdoor education be dispensed with? The question of *what to leave out* is central to curriculum studies, the area of educational thought concerned with the aims and purposes of education. Undoubtedly all kinds of educational aims and purposes may be linked plausibly to outdoor education, and some educational benefits may seem obvious. Numerous contributions to the outdoor education literature which consider processes of teaching and learning in the outdoors, also consider possible aims of purposes. However, the question of whether or not outdoor experiences can or do fulfil any essential educational purpose is often treated relatively lightly. Is outdoor education the best approach to solving certain educational problems? Does it offer any exclusive educational benefits, and if so, should those benefits be preferred ahead of other possibilities? While a tendency to shy away from these more difficult questions is not ubiquitous in the outdoor education literature, it seemed to me to be a characteristic of many, if not all, published text books. How textbooks have avoided carefully pursuing these questions is the subject of this paper.

Outdoor education discourse need not necessarily be concerned with the question of indispensability, of course. It is not chiselled in granite that outdoor education achieve unique benefits, although recognising outdoor education as just one of several alternatives may lend more circumspection to the promotion of outdoor education programs. Nor is it written that all outdoor education research and scholarship be concerned with the significance of the field in a wider context – outdoor education exists, and there is work to do in explaining and improving it. It is conceivable that providers and participants alike support some outdoor education programs, whose educational aims and purposes are not unique, because to do so suits their interests and inclinations. Education often takes a particular form for non-educational reasons. The more grandiose the educational claims for outdoor education, the more one might suspect the real reasons for the program lie elsewhere, but that is not to say those non-educational reasons should be summarily dismissed. This study, however, focuses on educational reasons.

To consider dispensing with outdoor education is to adopt the perspective of one who has no sentimental or pragmatic attachment to any existing form of outdoor education. It is an ‘outside’ perspective, specifically a broad educational perspective, which I explore as a way to critically read outdoor education texts. While an “outside” perspective may not be an essential within outdoor education discourse, it is, I think, essential to understanding the educational potential of outdoor education.

Curriculum discourse and outdoor education discourse

It is only necessary to skim the contemporary outdoor education literature to see that it contains multiple discourses, parallel conversations which, even on a close reading, sometimes seem to have little in common. To the extent that nearly all contributions to the literature purport to be about outdoor education, these different strands can seem at cross-purposes. Given that all of the major outdoor education scholarly journals were originally the organs of professional organizations comprised of outdoor guides, teachers, skills instructors, camp operators, corporate trainers, youth workers and others, these differences are hardly surprising, especially when the different interests of academics, researchers, practitioners and

administrators are added to the mix. Textbooks or literature reviews sometimes exaggerate the importance of outdoor education, tidy up the discourse and ignore or downplay contradictions, but this too is not surprising. Most texts impose structure on their subject matter to some extent, this article included. Moreover, professional groups with one eye on their own interests and the other on the public interest dissemble as a matter of course.

Many contributions to the outdoor education literature are plainly aimed at an audience who work within the outdoor education field. For example, Hovelynck and Peeters (2003) discuss the role of humour in ‘learning and facilitating’. They draw on literature from outside the outdoor education field, and present some examples of humour within outdoor therapy sessions to illustrate points drawn from the wider literature. The article makes no attempt to argue that outdoor education humour is distinctive, nor that outdoor education discourse has something new to contribute to the study of humour. The article is apparently not intended for a readership outside the outdoor education field, and assumes a readership not familiar with discourse on humour and teaching. Contributions to the outdoor education literature that, like the Hovelynck and Peeters (2003) article, assume an audience who are ‘in’ the field, and which take the field to be defined by certain practices, are not the focus of this study, although a preponderance of such articles in any discourse would be worth noting.

I began this study to investigate further my impression that what might be called ‘textbook’ theories of outdoor education, which do consider the aims and purposes of outdoor education, have also tended to take an “insider’s” view of outdoor education. Theories I had encountered attempted to explain and in some cases rationalise outdoor education practices, but not to pursue the questions of whether existing outdoor education programs are necessary, or whether there might be better alternatives. Oversimplifying perhaps, the focus of these approaches seemed to be on outdoor education as an established set of tools, and on finding ways to use them or justifications for their use. The proffered theory seemed steeped in the overall commitment to established outdoor education practices which defines many of the discursive situations – professional associations, courses, and conferences – from which much of the outdoor education literature emerges. Sampling some of the thousands of outdoor education programs described on the world wide web, whose language seemed to be the spawn of the textbooks I had sampled, it was difficult to avoid the impression that whatever the educational problem, the solution always seemed to be some mixture or selection of ice-breaking, trust activities, ropes course, environmental awareness activities, an expedition and adventure activities.

Approaches to outdoor education that are not universal, but which begin with educational problems rather than with the programs to hand, can be found in the outdoor education literature. These are not of the mainstream and receive little attention in textbooks, although two older books ((Parker & Meldrum, 1973; Smith, Carson, Donaldson, & Masters, 1963) (both, incidentally, titled *Outdoor Education*) were more attentive to curriculum questions than more recent work. I have not attempted to consider the question of how extensive neglect of the “indispensability” question is. My focus was on examining some common ways in which the question is avoided, rather than establishing exactly how common any particular line of thought or rhetoric may be. Some of the textbooks I examined were decades old, but are still frequently cited, especially in literature reviews. I did not attempt to exhaustively map universalist approaches to outdoor education theory, but only to identify some repeatedly encountered features. I did not examine if and how readers have responded to various textbooks – it is possible that outdoor education practice is not much affected by textbook theories, but that is a matter for a different project. I treated the statements about the aims and

purposes of outdoor education I read as if they were seriously intended to guide practice and to help decision makers choose between outdoor education and other programs, and between alternative outdoor education possibilities.

In adopting a “curriculum studies” reading of outdoor education texts, I do not mean to suggest that one need simply look to the curriculum literature to better understand the potential educational significance of outdoor experiences. On the contrary, there is room in the curriculum literature for more attention to how education is shaped by geographical location, and how and why experiences with particular physical environments may be important (Brookes, 2002b). The curriculum literature is more extensive than the outdoor education literature, and linking it to the outdoor education literature introduces potentials for reading the curriculum literature selectively, overgeneralising or oversimplifying. Any overview of curriculum studies must be one of several alternatives, and it is not possible to turn to the curriculum literature for definitive or universal answers to curriculum dilemmas, unless one chooses to read the curriculum literature very selectively. However, some selection is unavoidable, and some kind of overview is necessary. I have relied more on monographs written as text books for post-graduate curriculum courses, than on individual papers, because while no text book is definitive, text books assume a readership unfamiliar with the curriculum literature, and present an overview that is at least widely accepted, if not universal. Texts books provide a relatively well signposted path to the curriculum literature, which is necessary, given I could find only patchy cross-referencing between outdoor education textbooks and curriculum discourse.

A curriculum perspective – curriculum as relative to time and place

The roots of curriculum study in Western Europe go back to at least the seventeenth century, which Hamilton (1990, p. 33) notes might be regarded as “the golden age of curriculum”. Scholars believed all knowledge had been mapped and the question of how to teach had been solved. Hamilton (1990) observes that belief that schooling could efficiently inculcate social discipline and intellectual deference contributed to seventeenth century theories of political absolutism. Comenius, for example, aimed to teach all things to all men using methods that could not fail (Hamilton, 1990), according to divine authority.

Revolutions in England, France, and America introduced more democratic and communitarian forms of politics. The industrial revolution transformed western European societies. Knowledge exploded with the emergence of science. Enlightenment traditions of critique and dissent, based on reason, empiricism, and cultural relativism challenged older sources of authority. Curriculum changed. In 1859 Herbert Spencer recognised that the “question of questions” for curriculum had become (and remains) not what to include but what to leave out: “it is easy to decide what might be taught; it is more difficult to decide what should be taught” (Hamilton, 1990 p. 37).

Spencer’s observation marks an end to the domination of fundamentalist or absolutist approaches to curriculum in the curriculum literature. Fundamentalist values or absolute principles are still invoked in educational debate from time to time, by religious decree, political fiat, or dogged assertion, but adherence to them is always local and circumstantial. It is this point – the point at which the answers to curriculum questions depend on who answers in what circumstances – which suggests a simple but robust indicator of outdoor education theory which is disconnected from curriculum theory.

Post-enlightenment curriculum developed in a climate of a continuous search for new knowledge, repeated attempts to develop taxonomies for knowledge that accommodated new knowledge, fragmentation in specialisations, and revisions as a consequence of the growing concept of academic freedom (Hamilton, 1990). Debates, that persist, emerged around the tension between the structure of knowledge, the interests of the child, and the stages of development of the child. One form of ‘progressive’ education developed around the notion that school knowledge should be arranged according to stages of child development, while another form gave precedence to learning experiences, planned and unplanned, over any kind of pre-programmed content sequence (Hamilton, 1990).

Curriculum determined by ‘what to leave out’ was and is, inevitably, socially relative. The choice of content and emphasis reflected, in turn, choices made about the social and cultural functions of education. Emphasis on social selection, social reform, citizenship, preparation for work, individual development, cultural reproduction, or cultural change varied not only according to differences between different societies and different historical conditions, but also were contingent on the particular processes by which such decisions were made, and even by the individuals involved. Had Margaret Thatcher not been Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, education in the UK would no doubt have had a different emphasis (Ross, 2000). Debates about education in any time and place vary according to social and economic circumstances. Such debates reflect changes in social, cultural, and economic theory over time, in addition the accumulation of ideas and experience in curriculum discourse itself. Education has diverse potential social functions, directed by contingent social processes (what if Margaret Thatcher had not been elected?), always determined in particular social contexts (contemporary Finland is not the same as pre-WWII USA). Curriculum theory reflects developments or shifts in social and cultural theory and research. Alongside the planned elements, curriculum in practice also contains hidden elements (Illich, 1973) that inculcate social and cultural values from the wider society.

The curriculum literature over the last three decades has not only recorded tensions between the role of education in social and cultural reproduction, and its transformative potential, but also empirical studies of the extent to which instances of curriculum practice succeeded or failed in their stated social goals (Ross, 2000). Curriculum theory, in other words, develops in response to historical contingencies, builds on accumulated experience of curriculum practices, but does not progress towards grand theories or fundamentals. If anything, it moves increasingly away from fundamentalist accounts as evidence accumulates of the extent to which curriculum questions are relative to time, place, and social circumstances. Perhaps it does not need to be said, but this move towards more careful consideration of the conditional nature of curriculum decisions is not a drift towards absolute relativism, but a move away from fundamentalist views of curriculum.

Once curriculum becomes a matter of “what to leave out”, the resolution of curriculum depends on who decides and on the circumstances in which they decide. If there are universals in educational thought (outdoor or otherwise) – derived for example from human biology or psychology - they constitute only a small contribution to the totality of educational practice, which reflects both the diversity and the changing nature of human societies and beliefs. If there are absolutes, they are confined to particular situations where alternatives have been ruled out by religious decree or some other means.

Some limitations

I have described the standpoint of this paper as “outside” the main currents of outdoor education discourse, but like outdoor education discourse its relevance is confined to particular circumstances.

The texts considered speak to audiences who are relatively well-educated, and whose cultural outlooks have origins in western Europe. For the most part these texts at least imply that “the outdoors” is intended to connote something different from everyday life or normal educational settings, and requires a special effort to visit. The discussion this paper contributes to takes for granted a relatively high level of classroom education (evident, for example in the presumed literacy of the readership), and socio-economic circumstances in which it is feasible to contemplate educational choices. Outdoor education of the kind discussed here derives its meaning from life in modern industrial democracies having established mass education.

In areas of the globe where individuals struggle to obtain basic “classroom” education, or where governments or other agencies struggle to provide it, a more important question may be how to make best use of precious classroom time. There are areas in Australia and its territories where traditional indigenous culture is relatively intact; in these circumstances the provision of classroom education, and all that entails, might be considered against loss of traditional knowledge and culture. To describe traditional indigenous education in those situations as “outdoor education” would be misleading, and to introduce outdoor education of the kind implied by the texts I discuss here may be as problematic as the introduction of other forms of western education. Away from these extremes, there may be situations where there is ample opportunity for both classroom and outdoor education, in which the outdoor education option may simply be preferred, rather than essential. The “Rain or Shine” pre-schools in Sweden are an example where a choice is made for students to learn outdoors as much as possible, and indoors only when strictly necessary (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1998). In these circumstances the question for teachers becomes “when is it essential to take the class indoors?”

Considering Australian outdoor education further narrows the discussion. At the time Spencer recognised that the problem for curriculum planners in Europe had become what to leave out, each of the newly democratic colonies in Australia were struggling to provide basic elementary education, especially in rural areas. Preparatory schools were just being established to serve the relatively small middle and wealthy classes, as were universities (Sydney in 1850, Melbourne in 1851) (Barcan, 1980). Industrialisation came late to Australia, and it tended to import skilled workers. Australia also lacked a traditional aristocracy, so demand for education beyond an elementary level was relatively small.

In the 1830’s Governor Bourke of NSW had argued that the educational needs of a pioneer society were different to those of England. According to Barcan (1980, p. 42) “from then on references to the special circumstances of ‘a new land’ were to be a constant theme in Australian Education”. The division of responsibility for education between the various church denominations, the state, and individuals was a matter for more or less constant debate. Only after all four colonies became democracies by the end of the 1850’s did moves for free, secular and compulsory education gain momentum. When the colony of Victoria legislated for free, compulsory and secular education in 1872 it was the first in the British Empire to do so. Contemporary outdoor education, almost always positioned as an alternative

or supplement to mass education, could hardly be imagined in circumstances where as Barcan (1980) notes the state was struggling with questions of providing sufficiently qualified teachers, ensuring school attendance, deciding on how schools and the education system should be governed, the place of religion, state aid to non-government schools, and other problems.

The question of choosing between classroom based education and something resembling contemporary outdoor education could really only arise when the provision of basic classroom education was universal in the colonies. That is not to say that within say, the tent schools on the goldfields, or the informal education received by the many children who truanted, did not sometimes engage in practices with some resemblance to “outdoor education”. Perhaps they did. But the idea of outdoor experiences as part of the curriculum only emerged alongside debates about curriculum reform around 1900, and it is difficult to see how it could have come much earlier.

Textbook outdoor education theory

Outdoor education is not one set of programs and practices, as Ford (1981) clearly demonstrated, at least in the case of North America at the time she wrote. Parker & Meldrum (1973) provided a similar, more critical, discussion of diversity in the UK. McRae (1990) observed diversity in Australia, a decade later. It is clear that there is not a single outdoor education literature either. Ford (1981), for example writing in the USA, did not refer to Parker & Meldrum (1973), who wrote for a UK audience. Parker & Meldrum (1973), in turn, mentioned a major text from the USA (Smith et al., 1963) only in a final chapter reviewing outdoor education worldwide.

These observations suggest two qualifications. First, the textbooks I examined were not written as contributions to a single discourse, although all are now available to students in the courses in which I teach. Second, in fairness to the authors, any universal language in these textbooks could be read with the intended audience in mind. While outdoor education is sometimes promoted as a kind a franchise that can be established anywhere, it seems likely that at least some authors assumed their texts would be read in fairly specific situations. To take an extreme example, “textbook” outdoor education may make little sense to Israelis or Palestinians alike on the Gaza strip, but I doubt that any of the authors expected their ideas to apply in such circumstances. Some universalist tendencies are artefacts of the reading situation (reading in Australia a textbook written forty years ago in the USA), but others are evident even when the implicit readership is taken into account.

It might be argued that given the intended audience, the general value of outdoor education is obvious. McRae (1990), for example, introduces his edited text with a few remarks about urban Australians and some generalisations about their experience of the “outdoors”. Smith et al.(1963) repeatedly made a similar point about urban Americans lacking personal experience of the outdoors. At this level, the argument might go, the onus of proof should rest on the proposition that it OK for Australians to grow up and complete their education *without* experience of non-urban environments. Accepting the latter for the sake of argument still leaves open the question of how *particular* educational aims and purposes might lead to *particular* outdoor education practices.

For example, I would expect students who attend school in Alice Springs to have significantly different prior experiences and understanding of “the outdoors” to students attending school

in Sydney. Moreover to treat the “outdoors” around Alice Springs, in central Australia, as essentially the same as the “outdoors” around Sydney, hemmed by the Blue Mountains on the east coast would be to discard almost every salient feature of those environments, except some abstract ecological principals, the fact they share a continent and the social fact that both are politically part of Australia. Delving further, those who have grown up in the city of Alice Springs might be expected to have different prior outdoor experience to students who grew up on the missions in the desert. Students in Sydney whose parents regularly visited their country property and had vacations on the coast will have different understandings from those who migrated to Sydney from Asia and have never the left the city. Around Bendigo, in central Victoria, one might expect to distinguish between students who live on rural farming properties and those who have recently moved to a “bush block”, and presumably neither of those groups are homogenous. Individuals who go fishing will have different understandings from those who go fox shooting, and some, no doubt, will spend little time in the outdoors. Presumably the kind of program developed for families who own properties along a particular catchment will be different from the kind of program developed for visitors to the local forests from Melbourne. Neither program may resemble the standard outdoor education offerings. General arguments in favour of some kind of outdoor education do not help decide how different kinds of programs will contribute to any of these different circumstances.

These kinds of differences are neither obscure nor trivial, which makes the question of how outdoor education textbooks have approached the question of aims and purposes without attending to circumstantial details all the more interesting. One possibility is that textbook writers have regarded the aims and purposes of outdoor education as self evident. Smith et al (1963: p. 21) cite L.B.Sharp :

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 there be learned.

as do others including (Ford, 1981), as if the quote, which to me raises a question, settles something. Gair (1997: p. 9) makes explicit an assumption which often seems just beneath the surface of outdoor education discourse:

The benefits of all forms of Outdoor Education will be clearly seen by those who already participate, instruct or have experience of such activities and who will not generally need to be further convinced of the educational advantages. We must, however, convince parents and other staff how much such a programme could strengthen existing courses and relate to other subjects on the school curriculum.

At the risk of labouring the point, from a curriculum perspective even if the benefits of “all forms” of outdoor education are obvious, before one could be in a position to advocate outdoor education as a “solution” one would have to know what educational problems were perceived by a community and what the alternatives to outdoor education (of any kind) were.

I found little direct attention to the question of whether outdoor education was indispensable. Parker and Meldrum (1973) provided one clear exception. They reviewed the stated aims of residential centres, and deftly disposed of character training, an introduction to lasting leisure time pursuits, and an experience of community living as sufficient justifications for the centres, given the costs. They continued:

The final purpose ... is to offer an introduction to and appreciation of the countryside. This, we feel, could be the *raison d'être* of many centres centres may need to alter their basic courses ... (1973: p. 89)

However, they did not apply the same rigour to other forms of outdoor education they reviewed.

All of the textbooks I examined discussed the history (or histories) of outdoor education, some in detail (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994; Ford, 1981; Gair, 1997; McRae, 1990; Parker & Meldrum, 1973; Smith et al., 1963). The use of history in outdoor education discourse deserves a separate study, but I will comment briefly. I did note some Whiggish historical references. It is true that outdoor education can be traced back to the Greeks, Egyptians, or early European thinkers such as Comenius, because that is true of all western education. References to ancient roots for outdoor education seem to imply that outdoor education practice represents either a return to, or the emergence of, some form of fundamental educational principle (Ford, 1981; McRae, 1990), no authors attempted to examine the historical roots of outdoor education in any depth.

Perhaps the strongest rhetorical function of descriptive and historical passages, found in all the texts, is to tie outdoor education discourse to existing practices, rather than to a field of educational concerns from which hitherto unrealised forms of outdoor education might emerge. My reading of these sections reinforced the impression that outdoor education discourse has tended to regard educational enquiry in outdoor education as a way to find uses or justifications for established outdoor education practices, rather than as a distinctive set of educational considerations, from which practices might emerge. The authors seemed to assume that the past acceptance of outdoor education programs implied such programs were educationally “good and true”, and not to assume education or other social constructions frequently flourish in spite of not being unambiguously “good and true”. There were exceptions. Richards’ (1990) study of Hahnism, in Miles’ and Priest’s (1990) *Adventure Education* is one. He places Hahnism in an historical and social context, and acknowledges that Hahn’s capacity to persuade, as a trained propagandist, overcame his “suspect sources and dogmatic style” (Richards, 1990: p. 68).

Three absolutist tendencies in ‘textbook outdoor education theory’

I read the sections of textbooks which seemed to directly address questions of aims and purposes, and looked for three possible ways in which universal aims and purposes for outdoor education could be presented:

1. Focussing exclusively on individual learning. This strategy would discount the social and cultural contexts of education, and avoid the social and cultural functions of education.
2. Leaving the outdoors out of the discussion entirely (ie as having no educational significance), or treating nature (or the outdoors) as one thing. Both strategies would diminish, if not eliminate, geographical considerations.
3. Speaking of aims and purposes in more abstract and general terms than outdoor education practices are spoken of. This strategy largely eliminates the capacity of aims and purposes to guide or determine program details.

I found all three strategies, in many cases presented in a simple, direct way. None of the texts I examined were entirely devoted to outdoor education theory or to questions of educational aims and purposes, and none of the relatively brief sections discussing aims and purposes seriously contemplated the possibility that outdoor education might be unnecessary.

1. Education as personal

Within curriculum studies education is routinely understood to have broad social functions and determinants. In Australia, education provides custody of young children and fosters

individual development, but it also contributes to a democratic citizenry, passes on specific bodies of knowledge, contributes to the economy (especially through preparation for work) and provides social selection (Marginson, 1993). It is subject not only to government policy but also to organized interests within the community, and is influenced by individual parents (in the case of the education of children) and students.

In everyday use the term “education” can also refer just to what an individual receives, as in “Mary was educated in Melbourne”. It is this individualistic use of the term that the outdoor education texts tended to lean towards. Some treated education as entirely a matter of individual teaching and learning; criticisms of this approach are well documented outside the outdoor education literature (Bowers (1993) provides a critique of individualism in education. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton (1986) provide a wider study of individualism in the USA). One cannot understand wars, economies, technological change, shopping, corruption, parking tickets or exams without reference to social entities and processes. Institutions and ideologies can’t be fully described in a language that can only speak of individuals, any more than humans can be properly described only in terms of cells or molecules, even if it is held that cells and molecules are all that humans are made of. Most of curriculum studies would vanish if it was not possible to speak of education at a societal level.

I found only occasional deviations from an individualistic view of education in Luckner and Nadler (1997). There is an implied social context - the photographs make clear the kinds of experiences the writers have in mind. About one third show ropes course or initiative activities, and another third show outdoor recreation activities such as rock climbing or hiking. Ten percent show some kind of nature study, with the remainder showing indoor activities or sports. It is difficult to avoid noticing that the intended audience of the book is American, educated, and in a position to regard cross-cultural issues, mentioned in one chapter, as something to be dealt with. The explicit education theory presented does not consider the social construction of education; education means individual learning. Priest (1999) proposes a narrower definition of “learning”, eliminating skills and knowledge: “a shift in the way people feel, think, or behave”.

To speak of individual learning does not necessarily rule out consideration of education as socially constructed, but in the aforementioned cases it tended to. Individualistic assumptions about education appeared most strongly in outdoor education associated with therapy and corporate training. The ready association of therapy, corporate training, self-improvement and formal education is a signal characteristic of some outdoor education, especially in the USA (Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) provide an account of the shared history of outdoor education and wilderness therapy). In the USA outdoor education and experiential education are to some extent interchangeable. Davis-Berman and Berman (1994) use the term experiential learning, but this does not appear to signal an intention to separate the education of individuals from a societal context. Rather, it is to emphasize a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning; explicit discussion of the societal context does not appear to be a consideration. Their descriptions of school based wilderness programs, which, “teach lessons about self-esteem, responsibility, leadership, risk-taking and respect for diversity” (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994: p. 95), also signal an individualistic emphasis. They regard school based wilderness programs as based on the “convincing” argument that “experiential learning is superior to any other kind of learning, and that there are simply some things in this world that are better taught outside of the classroom” (Davis-Berman & Berman, 1994: p. 95). The authors don’t explain why reading is not an experience, or why responsibility (for example) should be linked to wilderness trips.

Writing in the UK, Gair (1997: p. ix) “aims to convince ... of the tremendous value of utilizing the outdoors ... for ... trust, ownership, personal achievement, teamwork, leadership, determination, strategic planning and motivation” which he claims, are needed in the workplace but not taught in the curriculum. Like other authors more oriented towards outdoor education associated with schooling, he links educational imperatives to social problems, just as the original goals of Outward Bound were linked to perceived declines in the nation’s youth (Richards, 1990). He introduces no explicit social theory, but he seems to assume that social problems are individual problems writ large, solvable by instilling in youths whatever characteristics seem to be lacking in the larger society.

Parker & Meldrum (1973) provided an approving account of Outward Bound in the UK. Like other authors they endorsed the view that specifics of the activities learned, should be submerged beneath wider aims under the broad heading of character development. Their book, however, canvasses a wide range of possible aims and programs, and links the development of particular forms of outdoor education to social and geographical factors. Their overall presentation of potential aims and purposes of outdoor education is not individualistic, although the reader is in various places invited to endorse an individualistic approach.

On a different tack, Smith et al. (1963: p. 3) introduced wider society as a source of individual problems: “modern man turns to outdoor living to spend some of his newly acquired free time”, which they argued had created psychological needs which outdoor education can fulfil. More recent texts make less confident predications about too much leisure, but the point here is not the content of the claim but the way it introduces social questions. Just as an emphasis on the psychologised, autonomous individual provides a link between outdoor education and outdoor therapy, so too it provides a link between outdoor education and outdoor recreation: “recreation and outdoor education are inseparable when the interest, appreciations, and skills acquired ... find their full expression through creative living” (Smith et al., 1963: p. 25). Social becomes personal.

To limit the stated aims and purposes of education to those more or less under the rubric of personal development may be a good marketing strategy for outdoor education programs. But returning to the theme of this paper – can outdoor education be dispensed with? – individualistic notions of education construe outdoor education as a unique way to achieve routine aims and purposes, dispensable almost by definition. Unless certain personal qualities can *only* be acquired through outdoor education, something which no author was prepared to claim, or unless for some reason outdoor education programs happen to include personal development aims that have not been included in other forms of education, outdoor education conceived in this way is not indispensable.

That in itself may be a small matter, if outdoor education programs continue regardless and nobody cares. More importantly, those who absorb the textbook message may struggle to conceive of educational aims and purposes that apply only in certain social, cultural, and geographical situations, which relate to social and environmental (not personal) aims, and which involve questions not just about the kinds of experiences needed, but how they will be distributed in the community. Education seen as purely personal, one assumes, should be spread widely and generously. But from a social, cultural and environmental perspective different individuals may need to know and experience quite different things, depending on their social roles.

2. Nature or the outdoors as either one thing, or absent

In some textbooks, for example (Luckner & Nadler, 1997) outdoor settings are present in the descriptions of outdoor education, but almost absent from the discussion of aims and purposes. They include a chapter on spirituality and mother nature, but it is not integral to the rest of the text. The same is true of Davis-Berman & Berman (1994: p. 63), who are more forthcoming on the reasons – outdoor settings have a functional role, but are not relevant to aims and purposes:

[T]he wilderness environment is curative and healthy, especially for urban youth ... meaningful behavioural and cognitive changes can occur using this environment ... we seemed to “know” the benefits of the wilderness in earlier decades ... recent years have seen more attempts to document these philosophies.

From the “outside” perspective I adopt here, any assumption that the purpose of research was to articulate or prove what practitioners already know is a potential source of research bias, which should lead to redoubled efforts to investigate instances where similar benefits were obtained without wilderness, and to uncover instances where wilderness failed to deliver a benefit. However, what I am concerned with here is not the soundness of the assertion, but the fact that wilderness experience is treated as one thing.

Davis-Berman & Berman (1994) acknowledge that personal benefits apparently associated with wilderness might also be associated with parks and gardens, but this leads them to expand rather than differentiate their generalisations about the therapeutic value of nature. Although the research they cite (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) discuss differences between the way individuals responded to familiar and unfamiliar area, and differences in responses between cultural groups, Davis-Berman & Berman (1994) do not introduce a differentiated view of different outdoor environments. The Kaplans (1989) spoke of their research in general terms (humans and nature), and the Bermans (1994) treat it as evidence for some strong generalisations. (Whether the Kaplans (1989) research, primarily investigating how individuals ranked photographs of scenery according to personal preferences, provides a sound basis for generalisations about humans and nature is another matter).

Smith et al. (1963: p. 11) had earlier claimed a generalised psychological benefit from outdoor experience, asserting that modern humans required roots in the soil for spiritual satisfaction. Other authors, as do Smith et al. (1963) elsewhere in the same text, allow for knowledge of the outdoors, but here too the outdoors is treated as monolithic. Writing in the UK, Gair (1997: p. 26) also adopts a sweeping position: “environmental awareness grows through direct experience of the natural world.” Gair’s (1997) statement is not simply the heading for a discussion aimed at elaborating what knowledge, about which environments, should be distributed in what way, but stands as his final position. Ford (1981: p. 12) also treats “the environment” as monolithic in her definition of outdoor education: “[E]ducation in, about and for the outdoors”. Again, most of her discussion of aims and purposes treats the outdoors as one thing. It might be reasonable to assume that what is meant are certain preferred North American sites, but she does not introduce a discussion as to why it might be important to distinguish between those sites.

Smith et al. (1963: p. 21) do discuss conservation as an aim in relation to specific activities like hunting and angling, although here too they seem to suggest the development of generalised attitudes to conservation rather than those derived from attachments to particular places. Others authors who sought to catalogue a wider range of possible aims and purposes

(Ford, 1981; McRae, 1990) also hint at the possibility of specific knowledge, while not spelling out how different environments might have give rise to quite different educational problems.

Parker & Meldrum (1973) clearly distinguish between the outdoors in the UK and in other parts of the world, but are less careful to distinguish between different environments within the UK. The reader looking to cherry-pick some justificatory quotes will find many references to the countryside or the environment, and the authors do not present an explicit discussion of how local geography might influence curriculum planning, but they do not, overall, treat the outdoors as “one thing”.

Lofty generalisations about nature and “the environment” may work as rationales for pre-determined outdoor activities. But from a curriculum perspectives aims and purposes which can’t distinguish one part of the Australian continent from another, let alone distinguish between the different community relationships and histories found in different regions, are badly flawed.

3. Educational aims as abstract and general rationalisations

Gair (1997: p. 2) asserts that outdoor education provides a means of “personal, social and educational development” . Later he elaborates on the aims of adventure experience as learning about the self, others, and the natural environment.

Smith et al. (1963: p. 19) declare that outdoor education provides “simply a learning climate” that doesn’t have specific objectives. It fits goals such as self-realization, (experience in) human relationships, economic efficiency, and civic responsibility.

Ford (1981: p. 18), whose approach relies heavily on earlier USA texts, states: “the purpose of outdoor education is to develop lifelong knowledge, skills, and attitudes for using, understanding and appreciating natural resources and for developing a sense of stewardship for the land”.

McRae (1990), citing USA sources, lists broad aims such as learning of concepts, clarification of values and attitudes, participation in whole learning processes, and use of all the senses. He also goes on to develop a comprehensive list of possible aims, although he concludes the list is incomplete. No doubt he is right about the incompleteness; there are probably very few educational aims which could not be fulfilled in the outdoors given some determination. More clearly than other authors, McRae (1990) suggests, rather ingenuously, that readers use holistic or integrated outdoor education to cope with what might seem like a bewildering array of possibilities, many of which are surely mutually exclusive.

Miles & Priest (1990: p. 1), in the introduction to *Adventure Education*, make it clear that their use of broad, abstract aims is intended: “The defining characteristic of adventure *education* is that a conscious and overt goal of the adventure is to expand the self, to learn and grow and progress towards the realization of human potential. While adventure programs may teach ...skills [such as] ... canoeing ... [that] is not the primary goal learnings about the self and the world that come from engagement in such activities are the primary goals.”

Smith et al. (1963) include the possibility of more specific aims, although they don’t give them particular emphasis. They suggest that “local school curriculum should begin with local

community problems” (Smith et al., 1963: p. 35), and go on to give some fairly specific examples. Elsewhere, they include learning specific skills and knowledge of professions such as forestry as possible goals. Reading subsequent textbooks suggests the pathway towards specific aims and purposes which they signposted attracted little traffic.

Anyone following Spencer’s dictum that “it is easy to decide what might be taught; it is more difficult to decide what should be taught” (Hamilton, 1990 p. 37) would find remarkably little guidance from the statements of aims and purposes for outdoor education I found in outdoor education textbooks. It is clear that outdoor education has accumulated an array of specific practices, and has combined these with some very general arguments in favour of some kind of outdoor education which have gained little by being passed on from one textbook to the next. More or less separate from the general argument in favour of some kind of outdoor experience (urban humans are alienated from nature), potential aims and purposes are piled up and described in the broadest terms. There is certain ring to the assertion that students will learn about the self, others, and environment that saying “they will learn lots of stuff” does not have. But both statements are equally uninformative. Those textbooks that attended most to questions of aims and purposes concentrated on broad categories of what might be taught – Spencer’s easy part – but failed to deal with the question of what in particular should be taught – the harder question. There is little in textbooks to defend outdoor education theory from the criticism that it treats educational aims and purposes as lofty rhetoric intended not to guide practice so much as rationalise it.

Abstract aims may work as justifications for preferred forms of outdoor education practice. Just as to describe a child playing with blocks as “practicing fine motor skills and spatial perceptions” may be helpful in some situations, to describe the person (playing at) rock climbing as “really learning about himself/herself and developing positive attitudes to nature” may be useful. But it is not necessary to go rock climbing to learn about oneself and develop a positive attitude to nature, assuming either statement is meaningful.

Unless one is prepared to argue that there are whole classes of educational aims and purposes that can only be achieved through outdoor education programs in all situations, such aims provide no help in deciding why, in principle, any given outdoor education program should not be replaced with something else. Nor do they explain why one outdoor education program should be chosen over another.

Concluding comments

The question which we contend is of such transcendent moment, is not whether such knowledge is of worth, but what is its relative worth? When they have named certain advantages which a given course of study has secured them, persons are apt to assume they have justified themselves: quite forgetting that the adequateness of the advantages is the point to be judged. There is, perhaps, not a subject to which men [sic] devote attention that has not some value. (Spencer, 1911: p. 5)¹

Curriculum study, since Spencer articulated the problem as ‘what to leave out’, turned from universal aims and purposes for education towards a diversity of possibilities, the details of which only arise and can only be determined with reference to particular social contexts. It follows that any contribution outdoor education may make can only be determined relative to

¹ Essay titled “What knowledge is of most worth” originally published in 1859

particular social and cultural contexts. To the extent that ‘the outdoors’ is relevant to the aims and purposes of outdoor education, one might add ‘geographic context’. Unless one invokes divine authority, or simply asserts that education must serve some absolute purpose that is beyond debate, the aims and purposes of education, and hence questions of what to include and what to leave of curriculum, only emerge from actual discussions at particular historical moments in specific material, social, and cultural circumstances.

What I have called the three absolutist tendencies overlapped somewhat, but did not necessarily appear as set. However, any one is sufficient to severely limit the capacity outdoor education theory to illuminate the reasons why a particular outdoor education program could be considered indispensable, or more importantly, to identify situations in which it could be argued that development of an outdoor education programs was essential.

Outdoor education textbooks have attacked Spencer’s easy task vigorously. There may be textbooks, which I did not examine, that rigorously engage his more difficult task. What this study shows is that many available outdoor education textbooks clearly and prominently advocate an approach to understanding the aims and purposes of education which fails to comprehend the nature of the curriculum problem. None of the textbooks I examined clearly pointed to an alternative theory of outdoor education in which aims and purposes can only be determined once the particular circumstances are known. One obvious implication is that any outdoor education research which derived its educational theory from the textbooks I examined may be similarly flawed.

If there is a lesson from Australian environmental history over the last two centuries it is surely that if there is a need for outdoor education, it can only be determined by paying careful attention to particular regions, communities, and their histories (Brookes, 2002a). In Australia at least, approaches to outdoor education theory which try to eliminate or discount differences between societies and communities, cultural differences, and geographical differences are seriously flawed.

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