

# **Making Outdoor Education more academic: A case from the Victorian Certificate of Education (or is it scenes from *Ned and Stacey*?)**

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*The 1998 review of the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE) recommended that VCE Outdoor Education should be amalgamated with VCE Environmental Studies to make outdoor education a more academic subject. The resultant new subject, VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies, raised questions about relationships and knowledge in outdoor education, the role of cultural and geographical context and the pedagogical process in developing such relationships and knowledge, and the connections between theory and practice. The new subject can also be seen, in part, as embodying many of connections and disconnections the between outdoor experiences and everyday lives, and home and remote settings. This paper will discuss the change processes involved in creating the new subject, and the issues arising from it for the field of outdoor education, the teachers of the subject, and the constitution of a more academic outdoor education curriculum from a broader social, cultural and education theory perspective, particularly Foucaultian.*

## **A constraining order**

Since writing the above abstract last year I have been contracted by the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA), the body that controls the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE), to be the Writer for the revision of the *VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies Study Design* (Board of Studies, 2000b). A condition of the contract is that I “refrain from making public statements about any aspects of the Study Design” (Clause 1.5, VCAA, 2004). This constrains me from writing the planned paper, but I will endeavour to work within it in the following exegesis.

### ***File Note: Slow learner?***

Being gagged was not a new experience for me, it had happened twice before (see Gough, 1998; Gough, 2000) and I am not usually such a slow learner. In both previous instances the governance of my performativity had come from the Department of Education and Training in relation to science education research projects with strict confidentiality clauses on the disclosure of data. Oh well, one always needs new challenges in educational research – and writing!

## **A revised focus**

The purpose of this paper is thus slightly different from what I had envisaged in that it will focus more on the ways the new subject area, Outdoor and Environmental Studies, has come to be. In particular I explore the discourses that have led to the creation of Outdoor and Environmental Studies using Foucault’s discourse theory, as it is understood in his both his archaeological and genealogical texts, i.e.

in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality. (Foucault, 1971: 8)

Foucault's notion of discourse is different from that of linguists and philosophers: rather than referring to speech in the traditional sense, discourse is a firmly bounded area of social knowledge. Discourse is only an activity, of writing, of reading, of exchange; "it never involves anything but signs" (Foucault, 1971: 20-1) and it constitutes a form of control and "involves a profound logophobia" (Threadgold, 2000: 47). Foucault's understanding of discourse changed as he shifted his interest from discourse to power and knowledge in the projects after *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972). In his genealogical texts his object is power as it functions within institutions and in the creation of knowledges and truths, but his analysis in, for example, *Discipline and Punish* (1979), is almost completely descriptive, asking questions about the subject and its historical processes of formation rather than containing words of judgment about forms of punishment, and with an overt methodology (spelt out directly in *I, Pierre Rivière*, 1975) of "non-intervention, non-critique, non-judgment" (McHoul, 1997: 774). My intent in this paper is to provide a genealogy of Outdoor and Environmental Studies, analysing and uncovering the historical relationships between truth, knowledge and power in its formative processes.

This genealogy has been written as an "'effective' history [which] differs from the history of historians in being without constants", "confirms our existence among countless lost events, without landmark or point of reference" (Foucault, 1994: 380-1) and cultivates "the details and accidents that accompany every beginning... scrupulously attentive to their petty malice" (Foucault, 1994: 373). Foucault (1994: 382) also notes that "the final trait of effective history is its affirmation of a perspectival knowledge [*savoir*]"; so, rather than erasing myself from this work as a traditional historian would do, I have been explicit on my positioning in this paper.

**Background note: Environmental education**

Environmental education as a field in formal education emerged in the late 1960s. It arose out of the growing awareness of the threat of environmental degradation through "increasing contamination of land, air and water, the growth in world population and the continuing depletion of natural resources" (Gough, 1997: 2). Australia's first national conference on environmental education was convened by the Australian Academy of Science in April 1970. Early on in its development in Australia the description of environmental education as education *in* the environment, education *about* the environment, and education *for* the environment became a framing statement of the field, and it was usually accompanied by the caveat that "it is only when education *for* the environment is the intention that environmental education is actually taking place and the aims...have a possibility of being achieved" (Greenall, 1980: 5).

I come to this paper with a background of three decades of work in this field.

**Environmental education in the VCE**

Environmental education has a long (but not necessarily all that successful – see Table 1) history at the senior secondary level in Victoria (as does its development at other levels of schooling). It was introduced as a separate subject in the curriculum at the senior secondary level in 1975. Initially entitled Agricultural and Environmental Science it became Environmental Science in 1977. In 1991 it moved from the 'Science' to the 'Earth Studies' field of study (and subsequently to the SOSE key learning area) and was re-titled Environmental Studies (Board of Studies, 1994a). Since 2001 there have been two environmental education subjects at the senior secondary level – Environmental Science (a science subject, Board of Studies, 2000a) and Outdoor and Environmental Studies (a health and physical education subject, Board of Studies, 2000b).

**File note: 1997 Review of the Victorian Certificate of Education**

Relevant to *Environmental Studies* and *Outdoor Education* were the Board of Studies' recommendations following the 1997 Review of the VCE. These recommendations were (Mitchell, 1999: 6-7) that there should be:

- discontinuation of *Environmental Studies and Science*.
- strengthening of the environmental education components of other studies, specifically *Geography, Biology, Chemistry and Economics*.
- a new science study, *Environmental Science*, in the Science Key Learning Area.
- rewriting of the study Outdoor Education as a new subject '*Study of the Environment and Outdoor Education*' in the Health and Physical Education Key Learning Area.

Environmental Science was to be a replacement in the Science Key Learning Area for the low enrolment subject Science (see Table 1), taking a similar multidisciplinary approach to science and complementing government environmental priorities (Mitchell, personal communication). The merging of Environmental Studies with Outdoor Education was intended to give an academic orientation to complement the perceived skills basis of the Outdoor Education study design (Gervasoni, personal communication, see also Brookes, c1999; Keeble, 2003).

The course outlines of Environmental Science, and its predecessor Environmental Studies, are multidisciplinary in their approaches. Environmental Studies drew on both natural and social sciences to develop an understanding of different environments and to provide a context for investigating strategies for conservation management (Board of Studies, 1994a; Mitchell, 1999). Environmental Science is a broadly based science subject that draws on the traditional disciplines of biology, chemistry and physics and applies their concepts in environmental contexts. It focuses on developing an understanding of natural ecosystems and human impact upon them as well as the application of environmental science to ecologically sustainable development and environmental management (Board of Studies, 2000a). The discourses of the Environmental Science document have been regulated so that there is a greater likelihood that the subject will be acceptable to scientists and science teachers whereas the study design for Outdoor and Environmental Studies (Board of Studies, 2000b) has been allowed to be more holistic in its approach, while aiming to be acceptable to outdoor educators.

Since its inception, Environmental Science has been a marginalised subject within the senior curriculum. Although accepted for entry purposes as a science subject by the major universities in Victoria in the 1980s (such status was removed when the subject changed to Environmental Studies in 1991), the subject never reached anywhere near the level of enrolments of any of the traditional senior science subjects and, indeed, has declined in enrolments during the 1990s (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1:  
ENROLMENTS IN RELEVANT VCE SUBJECTS IN SELECTED YEARS**

SUBJECT	1992#	1997#	2000#	2001*	2002*	2003*
Biology	15183	10823	10546	10668	11123	11579
Chemistry	10737	9051	8090	8166	8348	8712
Physics	10176	8005	7534	7697	7632	7871
Psychology	7831	11352	12272	13418	14014	14781
Science	668	127	59			
Environmental Studies	980	893	662			
Environmental Science				530	408	360
Outdoor Education	Not available	1925	2148			
Outdoor & Environmental Studies				2263	2395	2493

# Unit 4 enrolment figures \* Unit 3 enrolment figures

Fensham (1990) and Mitchell (1999) have documented various aspects of the seemingly constant battle for survival that the subject has faced since the late 1980s. The arguments for abolishing it have had two main themes. Firstly, there have been attempts “to hoist environmental education on its own petard... that there is a weakness in a sectional and optional subject approach” (Fensham 1990: 18). Instead of Environmental Science/Studies being a separate subject opponents have argued that the environment should be included as a dimension of other subject areas. Supporters of a separate subject have countered that, until the ideal of an environmental ethic over-arches “the whole curriculum and indeed the life and practice of the school and educational system... environmental subjects need to exist to exemplify what environmental education is” (Fensham 1990: 18). The challenge is to raise the level of acceptability of the environmental subjects and bring them in from the margins.

The second argument focused on the overlap of subject matter between Environmental Science and other subjects such as Geography and Biology and some of the other sciences. As Fensham (1990: 23) notes, “except for Psychology which at this point is very individually oriented”, Physics, Chemistry and Biology “quite explicitly refer both to the importance of the sciences for solving social and environmental problems and to the problems that the application of science in the form of various technologies have caused”. However, the focus in these subjects is on education *about* the environment rather than *for* the environment, i.e. on facts and concepts rather than the values, cognitive tasks and social skills that characterise environmental education. The current study design for Geography (Board of Studies, 2000c) is very like that of the old Environmental Studies (Board of Studies, 1994a), but that is because Geography has expanded its territory to include studies *for* the environment as well as its traditional focus on studies *about* and *in* the environment.

Based on enrolments statistics from its first three years of offer (2001-2003), the decline of interest in Environmental Studies evident from 1992 to 2000 has continued into the new decade with the new subject. From an environmental education perspective the enrolments in Environmental Science are significant. They will be affected by the number of universities that are willing to accept Environmental Science as a legitimate science subject for pre-requisite entry purposes and the number of schools that are willing to offer the subject, as well as student interest in the new subject, but, as the statistics currently stand, the future is bleak. In order to survive as a subject must meet the VCAA (2003: 5) criteria that “A VCE study will not be developed or approved unless it can be demonstrated that it has maintained an enrolment of 1 per cent of the year cohort, or in the case of a new study will do so within three years of its implementation”. The year cohort in 2003 for Unit 3 was 48917, whereas the enrolment for VCE Environmental Science Unit 3 was only 360 which is considerable less than 1 per cent of the year cohort.

**Background note: Outdoor Education at VCE level**

Outdoor Education has a different history at VCE level. It was introduced as an accredited senior secondary subject in 1982, and by 1993 it was studied by over 5000 Years 11 and 12 students, with many more students taking it at junior secondary levels (Brookes, 2002: 412). This level of interest has been sustained: a decade on, in 2003, a total of 5602 students were studying Outdoor and Environmental Studies at Years 11 and 12, and enrolment numbers continue to rise (see Table 1).

It is against this background of environmental education and outdoor education as subjects in the VCE that I will discuss the creation of the new subject, Outdoor and

Environmental Studies. But first I will outline a history of the relationship between outdoor education and environmental education.

### **Outdoor education and environmental education**

Environmental education and outdoor education have very different histories in the formal curriculum in Victoria. Outdoor education has been formalised as a legitimate part of the curriculum since its inclusion in the *Personal Development Framework P-10* (Ministry of Education 1987), and subsequent documents, as well as the VCE subject. In contrast, environmental education in the P-10 curriculum has been a peripheral activity – encouraged but not mandated through two iterations of ministerial policy statements (Ministry of Education, 1990; Department of Education, 1998) – and with questionable curriculum foci indicated by a leaf symbol in the Curriculum and Standards Framework documents (Gough, 2002).

The relationship between environmental education and outdoor education has been much discussed by outdoor educators (see, for example, Brookes 1989, 1994, c1999, 2002; Lugg, 1999; Martin, 1999; Payne, 2000, Thomas, 2004), and the relationship has often been problematised – for example the title of Brookes’ (1989) article is “Outdoor Education: Environmental education reinvented, or environmental education reconceived?” and Thomas’ (2004) paper is “Skills and thrills in outdoor environmental education: A contradiction or a beautiful tension?”.

Outdoor Education has traditionally distanced itself from Physical Education, a fellow subject within the Health and Physical Education Key Learning Area, by associating itself with environmental education and emphasising its environmental content (Brookes, 1989). But environmental educators have tended to see outdoor education as simply education *in* the environment, and not possessing the distinguishing characteristic of being education *for* the environment, or even teaching much education *about* the environment (Gough, 1997: 22-3). Nevertheless, many environmental educators as well as outdoor educators have argued for the importance of outdoor experiences in developing people’s relationships with natural environments (in addition to the aforementioned, see, for example, Chawla, 1998; Kahn & Kellert, 2002).

#### **Reading note (with a Canadian reflection):**

I have been in correspondence with a prospective doctoral student from Canada who is interested in designing a wilderness immersion program for teenagers that will connect them to the land through intense experiences in the wild. His proposed focus was in my mind when I recently read Margaret Atwood’s (2004: 118-9) description of male settlers in the Canadian wilderness in the nineteenth century as

most frequently seen outdoors. They are encountering the land – they penetrate it, they open it up, they stake it out, they grapple with it, they fight with it, they wrest its secrets and its treasures from it, they win or lose. If they stay in their cabins too long they get cabin fever, because they are usually in those cabins by themselves... Women of the first wave were not out on the land, but inside houses with their families, nor do they utilise verbs of the staking and penetrating variety.

I am sure this is not the type of connecting with the land that the prospective student had in mind, but, for me, it contrasted an environmental studies approach with an outdoor education one – and it made me reflect on the culturally, gendered and class specific nature of the wilderness experiences that are often an aspiration of outdoor educators.

The personal and social development and experiential aspects of outdoor education are much stronger than these aspects in environmental education (see, for example, Lugg, 1999;

Martin, 1999; Payne, 2000). Environmental education has different emphases; it is concerned with awareness, knowledge, attitudes, skills and participation related to the resolution of environmental problems (see, for example, Gough, 1997).

***File note: Goals and objectives of environmental education***

The goals and objectives of environmental education recommended at the UNESCO-UNEP Tbilisi intergovernmental conference on environmental education were the following (UNESCO, 1978: 26-27):

1. The goals of environmental education are:
  - (a) to foster clear awareness of, and concern about, economic, social, political and ecological interdependence in urban and rural areas;
  - (b) to provide every person with opportunities to acquire the knowledge, values, attitudes, commitment and skills needed to protect and improve the environment;
  - (c) to create new patterns of behaviour of individuals, groups and society as a whole towards the environment.
2. The categories of environmental education objectives:

Awareness: to help social groups and individuals acquire an awareness of and sensitivity to the total environment and its allied problems.

Knowledge: to help social groups and individuals gain a variety of experience in, and acquire a basic understanding of, the environment and its associate problems.

Attitudes: to help social groups and individuals acquire a set of values and feelings of concern for the environment, and the motivation for actively participating in environmental improvement and protection.

Skills: to help social groups and individuals acquire the skills for identifying and solving environmental problems.

Participation: to provide social groups and individuals with an opportunity to be actively involved at all levels in working toward resolution of environmental problems.

In a document that informed the deliberations of the committee which developed the *Outdoor and Environmental Studies Study Design* (Board of Studies, 2000b), Lugg (1999: 17) concluded that outdoor education is inextricably linked with environmental education through

providing students with a unique opportunity for:

- direct interaction with natural environments for developing understanding of those environments and the relationships of humans with them
- students to interact with each other, solve problems and make decisions in a context that has immediate, tangible consequences for themselves, others and the environment
- developing positive beliefs, attitudes and understandings of the world and our place in it
- developing knowledge and skills that may lead to a healthier, more fulfilling lifestyle.

There are obvious resonances between Lugg's conclusion and the Tbilisi goals and objectives for environmental education cited in the box above.

### **Outdoor and Environmental Studies**

Some years ago Brookes (1989: 15) argued that outdoor education potentially provides "powerfully affective forms of de-schooled environmental education" and that it "can allow powerful forms of environmental education to develop". He saw a distinguishing characteristic of outdoor education being that it has arisen from a persistent practice of taking students out of school and into a new environment rather than from a curriculum specification.

Herein lies a tension for Outdoor and Environmental Studies. Outdoor education distinguishes itself by its separation from schools and its experiential orientation, yet environmental studies are generally school and text based. In order to achieve its aims, Outdoor and Environmental Studies students require “well-crafted outdoor experiences [to] help participants understand that they have an inherited worldview and [to] become aware of alternatives” (Brookes, 1994: 39). But, as Brookes (c.1999) queried, who will teach this subject?

In reflecting on the merging of Outdoor Education and Environmental Studies I was firstly reminded of Ingmar Bergman’s 1974 film *Scenes from a Marriage* – reconstructed as *Scenes from a(n Arranged) Marriage* – then, in a more recent popular culture context, the 1990s sitcom *Ned and Stacey*. Although the merging of the two subjects was a marriage of convenience, it was not a marriage that satisfied mutual needs because, while Environmental Studies was a subject with declining enrolments, Outdoor Education had rising enrolments. The marriage was arranged because an external party (the 1997 VCE Review Committee) who saw Outdoor Education as needing an academic partner. Fortunately, however, the two parties to the marriage were different from the characters of Ned and Stacey in not coming from a base of mutual loathing: “the decision to merge OE with Environmental Studies was both pragmatic and political” (Geary, in Keeble, 2003: 20).

**File Note: Ned and Stacey**

*Ned and Stacey* was a television sitcom screened initially from 1996-1998 in Australia, and now on repeat showings on cable. It was about a man and a woman who can't stand each other but enter a marriage of convenience. Ned needed a wife so he could get a promotion. Stacey needed an apartment so she could “get a life”. In today’s society getting married would seem to be an improbable solution, but audiences suspended belief and greatly enjoyed the show.

Within a *Ned and Stacey* framework the question does arise as to who exactly is getting a promotion and who is getting “a life” in the Outdoor Education/Environmental Studies marriage? One reading is that Outdoor Education is getting a promotion by becoming more academic, and Environmental Studies is getting a life through becoming associated with a subject with growing enrolments which also has a more experiential orientation.

According to Goodson (1985), a new subject needs to define its boundaries with other subjects – so how does this new subject define its boundaries? One way of analysing a subject’s boundaries is to look at its aims. Outdoor Education (Board of Studies, 1994b: 6) had the following aims:

This study is designed to enable students to develop:

- an understanding and appreciation of the relationship between people and the outdoors;
- physical, sensory and intellectual abilities for safe and worthwhile exploration and protection of the outdoors;
- knowledge of outdoor environments and their effect on outdoor activities; and
- an understanding of the direct and indirect influence of biological, social and cultural factors on outdoor activities and environments.

The list of aims for Outdoor and Environmental Studies (Board of Studies, 2000b: 7-8) is considerably longer and reflects the marriage of Outdoor Education with Environmental Studies:

This study is designed to enable students to:

- develop an appreciation and understanding of outdoor environments;
- develop an understanding of basic ecological principles;
- develop an understanding of the diversity of views of nature and that outdoor environments may or may not be synonymous with nature;
- develop an understanding of human impact on and relationships with nature;
- develop skills and knowledge related to practical experiences of outdoor environments;
- acquire practical skills for safe outdoor travel and living;
- acquire skills for minimum impact travel, living and investigation of outdoor environments;
- develop skills of observation, data collection, analysis, synthesis and evaluation fundamental to outdoor environmental inquiry;
- develop an understanding of the role of the outdoor environment in contributing to Australian culture;
- develop respect for the outdoor environment and a concern for its conservation;
- develop an understanding of the strategies used to protect, conserve and manage the outdoor environment.

These aspects of Outdoor and Environmental Studies are reflected and expanded upon in the Study Design (Board of Studies, 2000b) and the Study Advice (VCAA 2000a, 2000b) through an emphasis on human-nature relationships in the past, present and future. Because of my “constraining order” I cannot comment on the Study Design, but only refer to these existing documents which describe a subject similar to but different from Outdoor Education.

There is little discussion on the new subject in academic outdoor education and environmental education literatures to date, although *Journeys*, the Victorian Outdoor Education Association journal, has published some articles. One of these (Keeble, 2003), through “John’s story”<sup>1</sup>, provides a teacher’s perspective, which may or may not be a typical one, on the differences between the old and new study designs.

As reported by Keeble, John Geary makes a number of comparisons between the two study designs. In Outdoor Education, “the obvious learning for students could be the outdoor skills... with some environmental knowledge and impacts thrown in”, and a key element was “the power of experiential learning”, kids forming “their own sense of inquiry” and “personal interaction with the environment” (Keeble, 2003: 20-1). However, with Outdoor and Environmental Studies “you need to focus on nature, human relationships with nature and environmental outcomes... the outdoor skills are the incidental learning from practical trips” and “you have to complete much of the theoretical work before you go into the field” (Keeble, 2003: 20). John has been able to maintain his Outdoor Education trips but he has changed their style and focus which has made them interesting and effective. However he acknowledges that some teachers’ bias towards outdoor skills has made them frustrated in the new course “because they did not have the teaching tools, resources or perhaps the desire to challenge themselves or change their pedagogical practices” (Keeble, 2003: 21-2). Geary

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<sup>1</sup> In one of those forces operating in history that “do not obey destiny or regulative mechanisms” and “appear through the singular randomness of events” (Foucault, 1994: 381), Tony Keeble wrote John’s story as his Master of Education research paper under my supervision while I was working with John Geary on a VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies text (Black, Geary, Gough & Pleasants, 2002).

concludes that “it would be a step in the wrong direction if we were to go back to what could be seen as the old activity-focused curriculum of VCE Outdoor Education... it was time for a change” (Keeble, 2003: 22).

**Reading note: Another Canadian reflection**

Margaret Attwood (2004: 140) concludes her discussion of the “Malevolent North in Canadian Literature” with an environmental message which I will quote in full because, for me, it provides a reference point for defining Outdoor and Environmental Studies as distinct from Outdoor Education, and in many ways the Australian bush/outback is not that different from the Canadian north in terms of “wilderness experiences”:

The bad news is coming in: the North is not endless. It is not vast and strong, and capable of devouring and digesting all the human dirt thrown its way. The holes in the ozone layer are getting bigger every year; the forest, when you fly over it in a plane, shows enormous wastelands of stumps; erosion, pollution, and ruthless exploitation are taking their toll.

The edifice of Northern imagery we’ve been discussing in these lectures was erected on a reality; if that reality ceases to exist, the imagery, too, will cease to have any resonance or meaning, except as a sort of indecipherable hieroglyphic. The North will be neither fearful nor health-giving, because it will be dead. The earth, like trees, does from the top down. The things that are killing the North will kill, if left unchecked, everything else.

What I have found inspiring in Attwood (2004) is the idea that we can no longer just hold the imagery of the wilderness as forever there. We need to do more than just dream of wilderness and taking students there – we need to confront the environmental problems created by human activity, study them and work towards their resolution. This can be in a more experiential way than many environmental education programs have previously offered, but we need more to our education programs than just adventure activities in the wilderness, or the wilderness won’t be there.

**Conclusion**

According to McHoul (1997: 777), Foucault’s central question in his “ontology of the present” was always “who are we today?”, a question which he answered by “*deliberately* abstaining from addressing how things are today and turning instead to the (discursive, political and ethical) conditions which have made them possible”. In the light of the constraint I outlined in my opening paragraph such a deliberate position was an appropriate one for me to adopt. So, who are we today within a VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies context? That question is probably best answered by someone in the future who can address how things are in 2004 by looking at the conditions that made whatever the future position of VCE Outdoor and Environmental Studies possible – or I will answer it myself after my constraining order is lifted.

What we do know is that some of the questions about outdoor education curriculum discourses, such as those raised by Brookes (2002), are starting to be addressed within the context of the teaching of Outdoor and Environmental Studies, through Geary’s reflections (in Keeble, 2003), but there is much more to be written about this new subject and its ontological and epistemological assumptions.

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