

2005 Outdoors WA Conference, 5th of December

Opening Plenary (and Endnotes): Mark Dingle, Victorian Outdoor Education Association

It is exciting to come together as people passionate about the outdoors to consider the “trail ahead”. Such a task requires us to reflect on where we have come from and who we have travelled with. As you will all be well aware both the landscape and our companions will shape our journey and in turn influence the people we become. In reflecting on the “trail ahead” I’d like to begin by sharing my conception of what outdoor education is and what it offers in the context of a conference that brings together a whole range of people with an interest in the outdoors.

Over the last few decades outdoor education and outdoor recreation have travelled together on the trail. In fact outdoor education began the journey as the product of outdoor recreation (Martin, 1999). At the very least many outdoor education programs were the result of teachers who themselves enjoyed outdoor recreation pursuits and saw the value in engaging students in these activities. Out of simple beginnings has grown a realisation of the educational potential of outdoor experience and recognition of the distinctive knowledge and skills underpinning these experiences.

These beginnings also saw the development of representative bodies such as the Victorian Outdoor Education Association (VOEA) and Outdoors WA. Yet what is it that they represent?

Outdoor education is largely a social construct (Martin, 1998). By this I mean if you referred to “outdoor education” in Brazil the listener would not have the same conception of outdoor education as we do in Australia. And in many respects this has been one of the key reasons outdoor education is not more widely valued, because it is not widely understood - even here in Australia.

Despite this outdoor education is emerging as a unique discipline that can be offered in our schools to develop specific and distinctive knowledge and skills in students. (I would also recognise that as outdoor educators and as the peak body for outdoor education in Victoria we also support and resource ‘education outdoors’ which engages outdoor and experiential learning for interdisciplinary outcomes; that is, education that happens in an outdoor context for a broad range of learning outcomes be they for literacy, personal development or scientific knowledge. This presentation, however, will focus on the emerging discipline of outdoor education.)

Recognising outdoor education as a distinctive discipline narrows the conception of outdoor education from broad labels such as “education ‘in’, ‘about’, and ‘for’ the out-of-doors” (Ford, 1986, p.2) to something that happens in our schools and contributes directly to the wellbeing of young people. This allows us as a profession to define our purpose more clearly.

This also means that being an outdoor educator necessarily implies that one is first an educator because the people we serve within our profession are children and it is their needs that are paramount.

It is in this role as educators that we contribute to a grand social enterprise which has three primary responsibilities.

Our first responsibility as educators is to develop knowledge and skills relevant to the lives of our students. This will be explored further in my first workshop later this morning, but to paraphrase outdoor education seeks to:

- enhance student understanding of, and connection with, natural environments
- build understanding of the interdependence of natural systems and human life and educate for sustainability
- develop an ability to interact positively with uncertainty through student-directed outdoor and adventure-based experiences
- engage the educational potential of outdoor experience for human and interpersonal development
- develop students' ecological literacy

VOEA Tertiary Advisory Group, 2005, p.17)

Secondly we are expected to pass on the social and cultural values of our society. This is implicit in the process of teaching and will be done in unique and distinctive ways by outdoor educators.

Finally, the third responsibility of educators is to support students to either avoid or overcome the specific challenges they face as young people in the early days of the twenty first century. So what are some of the challenges and what relevance does outdoor education have?

Two recently published books that I would recommend to you that give an insight into the lives of young people in Australia are "No Time to Lose" and "Children of the Lucky Country".

"Fourteen per cent of children and adolescents...have clinically significant mental health problems" (Richardson and Prior, 2005, p.21)

"...rates of smoking, alcohol consumption, drug use, assault, accident and injury continue to be of concern and often coincide with mental health problems" (Richardson and Prior, 2005, p.17)

"15 to twenty per cent of school-aged children have persistent problems in numeracy, literacy, or both" (Richardson and Prior, 2005, p.20)

“A recent study ... of 8-12 year-olds found that 25 per cent of children are overweight or obese”
(Richardson and Prior, 2005, p.16)

“...children...are much less likely to have one or more siblings with whom to interact”

(Richardson and Prior, 2005, p.8)

“One in seven children lives in poverty.” (Stanley et.al., 2005, p.34)

Whether you are an outdoor educator or a science teacher some of these problems seem insurmountable. However, I'm sure that many of the outdoor educators here have contributed to enhancing the lives of young people facing some of these challenges. To exemplify how outdoor education might make a contribution let me tell you about “Eco 9”. This program engages year nine students who have demonstrated challenging behaviours and poor academic performance in an experiential program with a focus on outdoor and environmental experiences. As a result of this program the literacy and numeracy competence of students have in most cases improved. They've also shared success experiences with their peers and at the very least built a positive reference point for their self-esteem. I'm sure we could generate a wide range of stories along similar lines.

This brief overview of the place of outdoor education affirms that as outdoor educators our philosophical home is in the education community.

The irony is that many who work within our profession are not trained as educators. They bring – as I did more than a decade ago – enthusiasm, energy, and passion to working with young people. They understand the intrinsic value of sharing with children and adolescents the benefits of outdoor experiences. However, our mainstream education system does not admit people into positions of responsibility as teachers without extensive training. As a profession if we are to grow and continue to contribute to the lives of young people we must demonstrate our professionalism in tangible ways that connect with the context of our schools and reflect the expectations of our society.

In particular it means that as educators we must be able to demonstrate several key competencies. These include:

- a sound knowledge of childhood and adolescent development
- an understanding of a range of learning and teaching approaches
- a thorough understanding of your discipline(s)
- an understanding of curriculum frameworks
- a commitment to ongoing professional learning

The challenge for outdoor educators is to show that we are professional. We know that we effectively manage the risk we encounter in our programs; we know we can operate in

ecologically sound manner; and most importantly, we know we have something distinctive and meaningful to offer in educating the children of the lucky country.

One way in which we can demonstrate this is by developing for ourselves a set of professional standards that describe what it means to be a professional outdoor educator. These standards however need to do more than simply describe our professional practice. They need to account for evolving practice and changing knowledge and skills. In my recent reading I have come across the work of Ron Ritchhart and his book "Intellectual Character". One of his cautions is the adherence and dependence on "standards". He suggests that we consider articulating our "ideals" rather than mandate standards. "[I]deals can do something that standards cannot: they can motivate, inspire, and direct our work. It is the difference between watching the road between our feet and keeping our sights on the mountain growing ever closer before us" (2002, p.9).

Professional standards therefore need to be grounded in our practice and establish a point of reference that will inspire professional growth. They will need to be rigorous and defensible. They will need to recognise the discipline-based knowledge of our profession, the outdoor skills required of outdoor educators and the teaching and learning principles that underpin our practice.

Professional standards owned by the profession and understood as ideals that guide and shape the growth of outdoor education may contribute to a better understood and more sustainable profession.

Endnotes*

Professional standards are not yet a reality. Other developments in outdoor education are a reality and contribute to the 'quality toolkit' other speakers referred to in the plenary session. Two recent developments of note are Guidelines for Outdoor and Adventure Activities developed by the VOA for the Department of Education and Training in Victoria. These are in the final consultation phase and will be available online in 2006 as guidelines for all government schools in Victoria conducting adventure activities as part of school programs. These Guidelines are an invaluable resource for school communities and as such are an essential part of the 'quality toolkit' for outdoor educators. Whilst not based on the Adventure Activity Standards they are consistent with these minimum standards and provide a more extensive online reference for schools.

The other recent contribution coordinated by the VOA is the establishment of Professional Activity Statements for graduates of Victorian university courses with a specialisation in outdoor education.

These statements articulate the knowledge and skills developed by graduates in the course of their university studies in Bushwalking. Other activities will be developed in the coming months. Graduates who are eligible for Professional Activity Statements may choose to submit these for registration with the National Outdoor Leaders Registration Scheme.

Both of these initiatives demonstrate that the VOA is working to make more apparent the existing professionalism of its members.

[*These final thoughts were not included in the presentation, but on reflection are important for delegates and others to be aware of if they are interested in the 'quality toolkit' that the outdoor community is developing. These initiatives demonstrate the professionalism of outdoor educators and the leadership being shown by professional associations and their members.]

References

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