

The Essentials of Outdoor Education?

Thank you for inviting me to speak this afternoon at the opening of your conference. I hope that these thoughts on the "big picture" of outdoor education in Victoria contribute to your discussions over the coming days.

This brief presentation will examine a few of the issues that **will** impact outdoor educators in Victoria and provide suggestions as to how we as a profession can make a contribution to the potential changes and challenges these issues present.

Before we delve into these issues let's remember what it is that defines our practice...

Imagine yourself on a ridge somewhere in Victoria with a group of students in your care. The sun has just dipped behind the mountains and there are a few more kilometres to go before you make camp. You strap on your headlamp and keep doing what you've been doing all day walking, talking, laughing, listening, observing, learning and sharing. Helping young people have positive learning experiences in the natural environment.

A few weeks ago I was on that ridge watching a group of students preparing to walk those last few kilometres to their campsite. While the students refilled their water bottles I stood back a little and watched the outdoor education staff at work. It is a fascinating thing to observe especially for someone like me who for ten years was leading groups and now finds himself in an office five days a week.

Watching those staff interact with the students I was reminded that there are few other professions that have to deal with their clients en-mass. (Remind those who give you a hard time for the holidays you get.) As outdoor educators we do this beyond the four walls of the classroom, beyond the nine to three schedule of most teaching staff. And we do it because we see that it is essential. Essential because we are contributing to building positive relationships between young people and adults; we are fostering an ethic of environmental sustainability; we are encouraging lifestyles of physical activity that are non-competitive, and the list goes on.

This is the reality of professional practice for outdoor educators, and these are some of the motivations that I imagine drive us to continue to offer outdoor experiences to our students. However, there is another level we need to be aware of and that is the broader education landscape: The world of bureaucrats and policy papers; committee meetings and media releases.

So let's put our backpacks down before we follow that ridgeline to camp and explore the "big picture".

We are in the midst of a range of significant reforms that will impact on the education community. Some of these you may have heard of, others may be new to you. These reforms include: a new P-10 curriculum document, the Victorian Essential Learning Standards; a review of the role of School Councils; a reform of

the licensing arrangements by the Department of Sustainability and Environment for access to public lands; a review of the DE&T Guidelines for adventure activities being conducted by the VOA; and, not least of all, an overhaul of the entire Education Act of 1872.

As we know the benefit of any educational experience comes primarily when students are engaged in the learning process. Research tells us that those students who are actively and positively engaged in their education are less likely to move into at-risk categories (for want of a better term). In exploring several of these issues briefly with you now I would encourage you to reflect on how you are engaged or consider how you could connect with those areas of interest to you. We don't want outdoor education to become "at-risk"!

A few months ago I was buying some second hand furniture for the VOA office. As I chatted with the salesman he asked what I did for work. When he heard that I was involved in outdoor education he immediately told me what a great experience he'd had in his school's outdoor education program more than fifteen years earlier. (Talking with Somers staff last night I understand you regularly get letters from past students as far back as the sixties expressing similar sentiments.)

Not only did he happily recount his experiences but he could also remember his teacher – Brian Wattchow! When I asked him why it was such a significant experience he referred to it as "real life experiences". When pressed on what he had learnt he talked about the ability to work with other people, and a sense of increased self-confidence.

I'm sure that a straw poll of a cross-section of the adult population will find that outdoor education experiences are amongst the most significant of their schooling lives. I'm equally confident that outdoor education experiences can contribute to the Essential Learning Standards set out in the new planning documents.

The goal of the Victorian Essential Learning Standards is to help students "develop a set of knowledge, skills and behaviours which will prepare them for success in a world which is complex, [and] rapidly changing." My understanding of these reforms is that the Standards are following the practice of innovative schools rather than setting the agenda; the writers of the Standards have listened to the hopes and aspirations of parents and school communities and tried to articulate what it is that is essential for students to learn. I'm sure there are areas that will need further development, but what is exciting for us as outdoor educators is that when we reflect on our own practice and then examine the Essential Learning Standards we can see that it describes many of the goals and outcomes of the learning experiences schools such as Somers, Bogong and Rubicon offer.

As an example let me tell you a bit more about my sojourn to the coalface earlier this month.

During the staff briefing we were told of one student who was likely to struggle during the hike. She wasn't particularly fit or confident in her abilities but the

outdoor education coordinator assured us that with the appropriate support and encouragement from staff and students she would have a successful experience.

Sure enough on the first major hill less than an hour into the hike she was struggling (and I was empathising!). Again I observed the staff in action. She began to hyper-ventilate and tears were flowing. The staff member listened then reassured her that she was capable of getting through this challenge. In gentle measured tones he talked her through how to break the challenge down, reminded her to stay hydrated and assured her that he wouldn't be far away. He checked on the group that they were staying together, helped her adjust her pack and walked on.

Each day there were similar scenes with this student, and each time staff and sometimes her fellow students didn't let her negative self-talk dominate the situation. They focused on the achievements so far and encouraged her to look beyond her momentary challenge to all that was around her.

At the end of the hike at the staff debrief it was reported that this young girl had finished with a sense of achievement, pride and enjoyment. The Essential Learning Standards describe working in teams and communication as two essential components of a student's education. Recording and sharing the learning experiences that enable students to grow in these areas will be a valuable way for the outdoor education profession to demonstrate how we can contribute to the implementation and development of the Essential Learning Standards.

At the VOEA Conference in May this year and in later editions *Journeys* we will be exploring how we can audit outdoor education programs against the Victorian Essential Learning Standards and we would welcome your input to this process.

Curriculum reform is clearly the major area of interest for educators. However, because of our unique connection with the natural environment we also have responsibilities to engage in other areas as well. Let me tell you the story of SAL and TOM.

Parks Victoria will readily share with you stories of phone calls they received during the 2002-2003 bushfires from parents asking of the whereabouts of their children in particular national parks. Unfortunately their response was often that they didn't know there were school groups in the park in the first place!

The experience of the 2002-2003 bushfires gave birth to SAL, the Student Activity Locator by the DE&T. However this is only relevant for government schools and the information collected is not shared with Parks Victoria or other land management agencies.

Parks Victoria have also been busy and they are the proud guardians of TOM, the Tour Operators Management system whereby organisations or individuals with a commercial interest in using public lands must be licensed.

Sadly the parents of SAL and TOM don't talk as much as they should. However, with experiences like the 2002-2003 bushfires and with concern by licensed operators that schools do not always comply with the appropriate minimum impact procedures the DSE has established a Reform process that will address these and other concerns.

If you read the last issue of *Journeys* you will have seen the nine issues that will be addressed by the Reforms. Many of these issues such as the transferability of licenses don't impact on schools, however, the first issue on the list, and most difficult one for the DSE, is "who should be licensed".

The DSE has indicated that it wants to find an equitable way of engaging schools so that there is an ability to communicate with and manage school groups on public lands. Some – and I would stress not the DSE – have suggested that schools should become licensed like commercial operators.

The VOEA was invited on to the Reference Group that has been established by the DSE after we made an initial submission to a discussion paper circulated late last year. Gordon McDonald from Somers contributed to that submission and attended a briefing with the DSE personnel who are leading the Reforms.

Clearly this will have an impact on outdoor education programs in Victoria and the next few months will be a critical period of the process for the education community. The VOEA is meeting with the DSE and the DE&T early in April to discuss suggestions for the way in which schools are engaged. A Discussion Paper developed by the DSE will be circulated after this meeting for public comment. I would urge you to contribute to that discussion as I know that the commercial sector will be advocating strongly to protect their interests.

The VOEA will circulate the Discussion Paper on our email list and will be offering a chance to meet with the DSE staff leading the Reform process at a workshop at the State Conference in Geelong.

So you can see that the big picture grows steadily and there is a third major project moving into view.

As many of you will know the DE&T has for over thirty years provided schools with advice and guidelines on the conduct of outdoor and adventure activities. The DE&T Guidelines have had a chequered history – much of which I am still learning. What was obvious when I began in this role eighteen months ago was that there was no clear process in place to continually review and develop the DE&T Guidelines.

The VOEA advocated strongly to the DE&T that there should be a Review process put in place that enabled the Guidelines to be kept up to date and relevant to schools. (The DSE Reform process makes it clear how important this is.)

What was difficult initially about this advocacy work for me was actually finding someone in the Department to talk to. I know it may be hard to take me seriously at times, but with the Department in a state of flux in late 2003 it took some time

to find the person responsible. Fortunately we now have a strong relationship with the Community & Stakeholder Relations Branch who are managing the review of the DE&T Guidelines.

To cut a long story short after establishing this relationship the VOA has offered to review the entire series and provide advice to the DE&T in an web-based format. This has been accepted and we have been contracted to review the entire series of DE&T Guidelines with the exception, at this stage, of Target Shooting and of interest to your centres the addition of indoor climbing.

In order to provide the best advice to schools the VOA has established a five member Review Panel that will oversee this two-year process. Bogong Principal Steve McMurtrie is one member of the Panel. A detailed overview of the process will be publicised this week through the VOA email list and on our website.

There will be opportunities for public comment throughout the process and individuals or organisations with specific expertise will be engaged throughout to inform the development of the guidelines. You are welcome individually or collectively to express your interest in contributing to the consultation process.

The most exciting feature of the review is the development of the guidelines as an online resource. This allows the content to be updated whenever required so as to provide timely and relevant advice to schools.

The Snow Guidelines are the first set of activities being reviewed and we hope to have them ready for the 2005 ski season. The VOA and Bogong are hosting a Ski Fest on the last weekend in July, which will provide a great venue to discuss the guidelines and consider how they might be further developed.

In engaging with these issues it is easy to lose sight of our purpose. Throughout my years as an outdoor educator I have seen very few instances of unprofessional or unsafe practice by my colleagues. And yet there is no clear statement of what it is to be a professional outdoor educator. For me one of the most valuable contributions that the VOA as a professional association can make is to broadly describe the essentials of professional practice. Becoming focused primarily on risk management or environmental impact, as important as they are, is limiting. As a brief examination of the Essential Learning Standards shows, outdoor education offers all involved tremendous opportunities to learn and grow and in turn to contribute to the wider community.

In the next issue of *Journeys* you will be able to read a discussion paper on how Professional Standards for Outdoor Educators could be structured and how such a document might support the profession. Again I would encourage you to contribute where possible.

Now these issues I have briefly touched upon provide a glimpse into some of the big picture issues that will impact on outdoor education in the coming months and years. The member schools of ROSA have always made strong and thoughtful contributions to the development of outdoor education in Victoria and importantly

they have regularly supported the VOA through time-release of staff to be a part of conferences, council and sub-committees.

In addition to this I am pleased to announce today that the Residential Outdoor Schools Association will be the major sponsor of this year's VOA State Conference, confirming again the substantial contribution of Somers, Bogong and Rubicon to the outdoor education community in Victoria.

In closing I'd like to share with you an insight gained from the film "Finding Neverland" the story of J.M. Barrie and the writing of "Peter Pan".

In the film Johnny Depp plays J.M. Barrie and develops a great relationship with a family of young boys who inspire him to write "Peter Pan". His wondrous imagination and sense of fun so evident in "Peter Pan" come through in the film. But one of the boys, Peter, has developed a cynical streak early on in life and won't join in the imagination games that his brothers enjoy so thoroughly.

In one scene Barrie is wrestling with his dog, a huge St Bernard, pretending that he is wrestling with a bear. All the boys but Peter think it is hilarious. Standing apart from his brothers Peter announces stridently, "I don't see what's so funny it's just a dog!"

Barrie replies astounded, "Just!? Just?! What a horrible candle-snuffing word!"

Too often as teachers and outdoor educators we refer to ourselves with that horrible qualifier, "just".

Outdoor education has unique and significant place in Victoria and across Australia. We are only one part of a bigger picture, but we are recognised by our colleagues because we are more than "just teachers", we are professionals offering powerful learning experiences.

I encourage you to continue your great work whether on a ridgeline near Bogong, a river by Rubicon, or a beach at Somers in the knowledge that your place in the bigger picture is recognised and valued. I welcome your contribution to the work of the VOA as we endeavour to represent faithfully what it is that is important to you as educators and professionals.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'M. Dingle', with a long, sweeping flourish extending to the right.

Mark Dingle
Executive Officer
Victorian Outdoor Education Association