

Redefining Outdoor Education: A Matter of Many Relationships

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ABSTRACT: A new definition of outdoor education founded upon six major points is presented. Outdoor education: (1) is a method for learning; (2) is experiential; (3) takes place primarily in the outdoors; (4) requires use of all senses and domains; (5) is based upon interdisciplinary curriculum matter; and (6) is a matter of relationships involving people and natural resources. The metaphorical model of a tree describes two approaches to outdoor education. Adventure education relates to interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships. Environmental education concentrates on ecosystemic and ekistic relationships. The author maintains that both approaches, properly integrated, achieve objectives for all four relationships, and, in the process, create a truly functional outdoor education experience.

Over a quarter of a century ago, the classic definition of outdoor education was "education *in*, *about* and *for* the outdoors" (Donaldson and Donaldson 1958, p. 63). In describing outdoor education as a method of learning, they used three key words. The word *in* referred to the location; taking place in the out-of-doors. The word *about* referred to the subject matter; learning about nature. The word *for* referred to the purpose of outdoor education; for the future benefit of our planet's finite resources.

This definition has been criticized from many viewpoints. Many educators state that some aspects of outdoor education can take place indoors. Others feel that there is more to learn about than just the outdoor environment. They claim that the personal environment and socialization are equally important topics which lend

themselves to outdoor education learning situations. Some believe that the purpose of outdoor education is not sensible stewardship, but independent learning, free thinking, and self-reliant problem solving. Nevertheless, the above definition has provided a solid foundation for outdoor education in North America for almost three decades.

As we move into the latter part of the 1980s, this author would like to offer a redefinition of the term outdoor education: *outdoor education is an experiential process of learning by doing, which takes place primarily through exposure to the out-of-doors. In outdoor education the emphasis for the subject of learning is placed on RELATIONSHIPS, relationships concerning people and natural resources.* This definition is founded upon six major points.

First and foremost, outdoor education is a method for learning. Julian W. Smith described outdoor education as "a learning climate for the things which can be learned best outside the classroom" (Smith 1955, p. 9).

Second, the process of that learning is experiential. Early educators such as Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi,

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and Dewey advocated the importance of meaningful experiences in the educational process. L. B. Sharp's often quoted thesis supports the experiential process: "That which ought can best be taught inside the classroom should there be taught, and that which can best be learned through experience dealing directly with native materials and life situations outside the school should there be learned" (Sharp 1943, p. 363).

Third, the learning in outdoor education takes place primarily, but not exclusively, in the outdoor setting. Some aspects may occur indoors such as learning basic concepts before the field trip, preparation of materials for an ecology study, watching a nature slide show or lecture, and planning the logistics for an expedition. However, it is the outdoors which provides the setting and, ultimately, the inspiration for learning.

Fourth, experiential learning requires full use of the six senses (sight, sound, taste, touch, smell, and intuition) and involves the three domains (cognitive, affective, and motoric) of learning. Lewis placed an emphasis on this sensory awareness when he said outdoor education "appeals to the use of the senses—audio, visual, taste, touch and smell—for observation and perception" (Lewis 1975, p. 9). Mand advocated that outdoor education involves "a full sensory rather than abstract approach to the subject matter. Children use their eyes, ears, nose and muscles in the outdoors and learn through the process" (Mand 1967, p. vi). Ford writes about three "planes" of learning: knowledge, skills, and attitudes. She contends "it is imperative that whatever objectives are established for an outdoor-related program they must encompass the three areas of learning" (Ford 1980, p. 50).

Fifth, the learning in outdoor education is based upon interdisciplinary curriculum matter. It is "an approach to achieving the goals and objectives of the curriculum" (Hammerman, Hammerman, and Hammerman 1985, p. 5). It is not necessary that the curriculum be school-based. The curriculum could exist within an outdoor club's birding trip or a senior citizen's whitewater rafting excursion.

Sixth, and most important, the learning in outdoor education is a matter of many relationships. The relationships concern not only natural resources, but also people and society. Four categories of relationships exist: the *interpersonal*, the *intrapersonal*, the *ecosystemic*, and the *ekistic*. The interpersonal refers to relationships which exist between people; how they cooperate, communicate, and trust one another during social group interactions. The intrapersonal refers to how one relates to him/herself; their level of independence, their self-concept, and their perception of abilities and limitations. The ecosystemic refers to the dynamics and interdependence of all parts of an ecosystem; how energy is transmitted through a food web, how nature heals through succession processes after a forest fire, and how

some organisms depend upon other organisms to survive. The ekistic refers to the interaction between people and their surroundings; how humans impact on natural resources and how that might have a reciprocal effect, with the quality of the land influencing the quality of society's life.

Historically there have been two approaches to outdoor education, each with a primary focus on a different pair of the relationships. Adventure education programs, involving outdoor pursuits, have traditionally concentrated on the intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. They have been successful in bringing about positive changes in individuals through overcoming wilderness challenges. Environmental education programs, involving ecological studies, have traditionally concentrated on the ecosystemic and ekistic relationships. They have been successful in imparting "a reverence of life through an ecological exploration of the interdependence of all living things" and "a land ethic illustrating man's temporary stewardship for the land" (Kirk 1968, p. 4).

Imagine a large tree called outdoor education. It has two major branches from the main trunk, each of which disappears into a mass of leaves. One branch is called adventure education; the other branch is called environmental education. A model of this outdoor education tree is diagrammed in Figure 1.

The leaves of this tree are the experiential learning process. As with the photosynthesis leaves of any other tree, these leaves derive their energy from the sun and draw supportive nutrients from the air and the soil. In this case, the sun is the outdoor setting, which radiates inspiration to all parts of the tree. The air contains the interdisciplinary curriculum, upon which the outdoor education program is based, and, just as leaves exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide with the atmosphere, an exchange of information occurs frequently between the process and the curriculum. The tree is firmly anchored to the soil by roots. The soil, in this case, holds the six senses, plus the three domains of learning. The experiential learning process draws direction from these senses and domains, only to return the processed learning for storage within the roots, as does any other tree. The tree presents a powerful metaphor for redefining outdoor education in terms of adventure and environmental relationships.

No matter which branch of the tree one climbs, the experiential learning process is obtained and all four relationships are realized. Based on this analogy, outdoor education programs should include a blending of both adventure and environmental branches. Each approach may still retain a primary focus on one pair of relationships but would also, by the very nature of being outdoors, touch on the other two. Adventure approaches need to deal with environmental issues if they are to protect the setting they treasure so greatly. Environmental

The Outdoor Setting

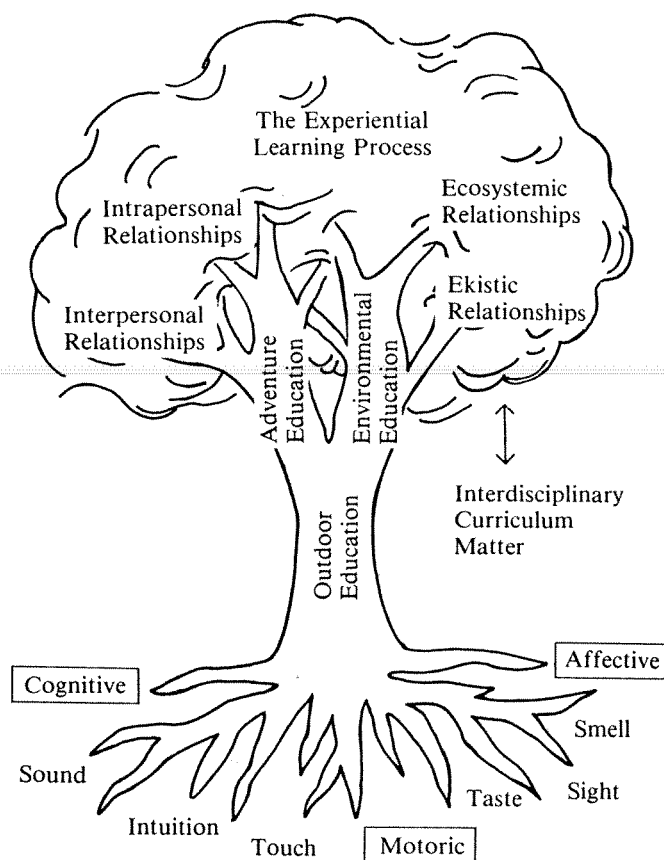


FIGURE 1. The Outdoor Education Tree

approaches need to develop confident individuals who solve problems cooperatively and who can make sound judgments regarding the stewardship of our planet.

Outdoor education, then, is the blending of both adventure and environment approaches into a program of activities or experiences. Through exposure to the outdoor setting, individuals learn about their relationship with the natural environment, relationships between the various concepts of natural ecosystems, and personal relationships with others and with their inner Self. The blended approach to outdoor education is the one recommended by this author.

Historically there has been much confusion associated with the definition of the term outdoor education. Hammerman, Hammerman, and Hammerman (1985) put it best: "the term outdoor education has been applied in various ways. . . . Conservationists, for example, may perceive outdoor education as relating primarily to the wise use of natural resources. . . . Recreation leaders, on the other hand, may view outdoor education as a means for realizing the joys of recreational pursuits in the great outdoors. . . . Environmentalists may see outdoor education as one means of assisting each student in developing an attitude of personal responsibility

for our finite and fragile environment." Add to this, the curriculum view of the school teacher and the therapeutic view of the wilderness adventurer, and it is easy to see the variance associated with the term. As experiential educators in the out-of-doors, we are one small step closer to agreement on the topic of what constitutes outdoor education, if we consider our teaching subject to be a matter of many relationships.

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