



"This isn't PE, it's not physical enough"

Reflections on Adventurous Activity training for Primary Teachers

"Learning outside the classroom should be at the heart of every school's curriculum and ethos. Children can gain valuable learning experiences from going on cultural visits overseas to teachers simply using their school grounds imaginatively".

These were the words of Alan Johnson, then Education and Skills Secretary, as he launched the Manifesto for Learning Outside the Classroom in November 2006. At the time I was a Centre Manager of a third sector Outdoor Centre in West Wales. With this enthusiastic political agenda ringing in our ears we decided to support the work of the Outdoor Education Advisors Panel (OEAP) and put ourselves forward as course directors to deliver the inset course for teachers and youth-workers wishing to use the Outdoor Adventure Activity (AA) Cards produced by the panel.

The OEAP, through its regional advisors supports the delivery of high quality outdoor education across England, Wales and Northern Ireland in schools and outdoor centres.

The one day training course is divided into four sessions, each representing a subject area represented by the cards: 4 activity areas: orienteering, bouldering, team building and journeying. The activity cards are available in either English or Welsh and are designed to be a powerful visual aid-memoire for teachers to deliver sessions from within or close to their school grounds. Each card is sequential and builds a progression in each activity area, signposts safety issues or concerns and offers ways of delivering different curriculum outcomes using the same session (cross curricula learning). The cards are very well thought out, have inclusive portrayals of children engaged in activity and are easily accessed by children themselves with clear child-friendly pictorial representations of each activity and most importantly are "wipe clean". The activities are presented in an experiential style with opportunity for group work and review of learning. The accompanying handbook and CD-ROM for teachers incorporates a brief chapter on

Professional Development



<< reviewing and shows diagrams of an experiential learning cycle and cites Greenaway (1996) as a body of work to explore for further information.

As a small provider in a community-based centre we were particularly pleased to deliver this training to local teachers during a time of change in the Welsh National Curriculum.

Recently the Welsh education agenda has been a hotbed of development and change in all areas, from foundation phase through primary and onto further education. At a conference for Education Leaders in October 2008 entitled 'Governing in a time of rapid change' Professor Danny Saunders from the University of Glamorgan

asked whether Wales was in a period of 'Reformation, Transformation or Renaissance' and referred to the 12 consultation and five policy documents regarding education, published by the Welsh Assembly Government in the preceding year!

It was during the autumn term of 2008 our Centre was asked to run the courses for teachers from local schools. Having the opportunity to coach classroom teachers to deliver experiential, outdoor and adventurous learning activities proved to be an interesting experience with much cause for personal reflection and our own staff development throughout. There is a plethora of educational research that demonstrates the value of outdoor learning (McKenzie, 2000; Rickinson et al., 2004; Hattie et al., 1997) and it is on the back of these accepted benefits that the title of "Adventurous Activities" has found itself as a compulsory part of the Welsh National Curriculum. 25% of Physical Education at KS 2 & 3 is designated as Adventurous Activity, and it is a recommended aspect of the PE curriculum at KS 4.

"We are placing more emphasis on learning by doing, exploring children's natural curiosity to explore and learn through first hand experiences."

(Skills That Work for Wales, WAG, P.24)

This standpoint pushes back at the traditional stance of formal school practice and shows the way towards a method for learning that allows for the 'artistic, intuitive processes which some practitioners do bring to situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict'.



The reflections we had on delivering the three separate days to nearly 40 teachers

were a superb opportunity for us to examine our own practice and reflect on the changing culture for Welsh schools.

Reflections

After pondering and reading around the concept, we have begun to see 'Experience' as a metaphysical concept, related philosophically to 'reality' and how we, as human animals, perceive our world. As an experiential educator I often mess with reality and I am comfortable with the idea of 'suspension of disbelief'. I find myself using this as a methodology for de-personalising situations or creating a unique space to generate discussion, fun or focus. How readily participants will swap their actual reality for an obvious construct (Have you ever seen real shark-infested custard?) is intriguing, especially as this of course creates a new 'experience'. This willing suspension of disbelief is a part of what Luckner and Nadel (1997) call the "experiential learning laboratory" and this, through reflection and de-constructing of reality is what may make experiential learning

effective. It places emotions, learning styles and of course the complex nature of learners' realities at the fore of our facilitation practices.

However, despite my philosophical musings and a bit (too much if I'm honest) of 'staring at my navel' it was evident that the perception of the course from the participants' point of view was that of formal Continued Professional

Development training (CPD). As mentioned earlier the training was divided into four practical activity sessions, each focusing on an area covered by the Adventure Activity Cards with a fifth and sixth section spent exploring the accompanying CD Rom and the course handbook, and progression/transfer of learning respectively. Each session was experiential

in its design with participant activity centred around small groups working together to deliver aspects of Adventurous Activities to each other using the cards, as they would in school with their pupils. At the end of each session a short review was elicited by facilitators to allow any learning points to be shared.

At the end of the first training course teachers all scored a maximum when asked for their "confidence to deliver AA sessions" on "Score from 1 to 5" style evaluation continuum. This high score and high level of satisfaction was wonderful, but we as a group of trainers were very concerned with the learners' inability to interact with each other. This made the sessions very formal in nature and, to our minds, limited opportunity for shared learning and serendipitous outcomes.

This formality made us uncomfortable. We decided to alter our delivery for the coming course to invoke more interaction/discussion

in order to reduce the "Existential anxiety" (Heron 1999) we perceived our participants to be experiencing. This aspect of groupwork felt very important to us as trainers, and we felt that this level of student involvement was important in the delivery of the activities we were championing.

This strategy seemed to work. We had some excellent group discussions around some quite

philosophical points of delivery and curriculum. We were starting to get the picture. CPD is also a team-build for teachers away from the classroom. However delivering team building as an activity through problem solving games generated this comment from one of the delivery staff.



"They [teachers] still don't get the idea of reviewing"

Course Facilitator

Another quote from a Teacher during the bouldering session starts to paint a picture regarding the confidence of teachers to step away from their standard teaching practice. The session was taken from an AA card, and as such was exactly as the session would be run by a teacher for pupils, with the students having to go to the bouldering wall and decide for themselves in which direction/orientation the climbing holds worked best.

"Please, just teach me to boulder, then I'll know"
(Frustrated)

Teacher

The same participant also commented during the session on journeying.

"This isn't P.E! It's not physical enough" (Concerned)

Teacher



Of course from our facilitation point of view these were pennies from heaven! We generated some excellent discussion from these comments on experiential learning at the bouldering wall. For example - "What is PE???" These discussions ranged through examining how to include less able children, to nutrition and how to work with outdoor centres to deliver this curriculum during the annual school residential.

Interestingly the evaluation forms from this day still showed a high score for satisfaction but lower scores relating to "confidence to deliver AA sessions".

On the back of this feedback other changes were decided on. On the next course we started the bouldering session inside the training room, passing around holds so teachers could examine them and relate to them in a kinaesthetic sense. This would allow us to demystify bouldering

(some had not heard the term before and leapt straight to 'rock climbing' in their understanding) before the visual/emotional stimulation of being presented with a climbing wall.

Our changes to the bouldering session made a huge difference, combining kinaesthetic experience with the visual aspects of the OEAP Teachers Pack worked! The evaluations for this day were again generally excellent with the important "Confidence to deliver" question getting higher scores than the previous session.

Conclusions

To explore the methods of facilitation and the values of experiential education through the medium of the OEAP's Activity Cards was a complex task. Intriguing on one hand but also frustrating on the other. The overriding sentiment that I draw from this experience is the complexity that governs our interactions

and ways of knowing in this field. As an outdoor educator that rarely has opportunity to involve himself in the face to face delivery of learning, but spends more time using the same philosophies, rationales and methods as a manager, marketer and organisational development worker, I have gained much understanding through the experience particularly as it relates to our relationships with school teachers as outdoor educators.

In conclusion, I believe that the data we produced through cycles of evaluation gave us a paradoxical result. The sessions which we felt gave the most valuable 'learning experience' seemed to generate the least 'feelings of confidence to deliver AA' from the teachers. I tentatively suggest that this disquiet was generated from their feelings of being outside their comfort zones in areas requiring facilitation skills as

