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DEVELOPMENT IN THE OUTDOORS

An asset-based approach

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The contributions to this volume illustrate how various perspectives on outdoor and experiential education resonate with informal education. Whilst the literature on all three is complex and multilayered, essentially all seek to educate people about themselves and others (Barnes and Sharp, 2004; Jeffs and Smith, 2005). Often engagement in the outdoors, even by ostensibly educational organisations, is for the purposes of fun and enjoyment, or sometimes as a reward for an ‘achievement’; however if this engagement is to be designated as an educational encounter, learning must be intended and the outdoors utilised as a stimulus for development. Such development could be related as Barnes (2005: 3) suggests to self-reliance, self-discipline, judgment, responsibility and our relationships with others and the environment. Although it is multifaceted and multidimensional and operates across a variety of domains, including physical, cognitive and affective, this learning will be and is essentially ‘experiential’ as well as transformative (Dewey, 1938; Ord, 2009; Mezirow, 2009). Its developmental essence is in attempting to bring about change in the lives of those it seeks to educate. However it is important to think carefully about how we frame such development. As a consequence it is the authors’ intention to commence by offering a critique of popular notions of development before moving on to argue that our thinking in relation to development in the context of the outdoors should be framed around ‘assets’. In addition the chapter further suggests that principles of positive psychology may well provide a useful basis upon which to base such claims.

Dominance of the medical model

Traditionally concepts of development commence from a negative standpoint that seeks to identify what is wrong and then improve what is judged to be at fault. Such an approach adopts what Thomson refers to as a ‘pseudo-medical model’

underpinned by ‘passivity and dependency – waiting for the expert to diagnose the problem and prescribe the solution’ (2007: 54). This model has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, prompting Ecclestone and Hayes to suggest that what they refer to as the ‘therapeutic turn’ is fast becoming all-pervasive within education. This model, they argue, views young people as helpless, vulnerable victims who need to be assessed by expert practitioners, who then engage them in some form of therapeutic talk to resolve or ameliorate their condition. This therapeutic ethos they characterised as:

... not merely the extension of therapeutic processes into new areas of life. Instead, it is the subtle ways in which the language, codes and symbols of therapy change our idea of what it means to be human. According to Nolan, notions of the Rogerian self, which is positive, optimistic and naturally disposed to improve, grow and learn, are giving way to a more negative, dysfunctional view of self and an acceptance of weakness caused by being only human. (2009: 135)

Plummer relates this ‘therapeutic turn’ directly to outdoor education, defining it as ‘a purposeful intervention directed at the individual and their environment that aims to enhance health and impact functioning in many critical life domains’ (2009: 291).

For almost a century advocates have highlighted outdoor education’s developmental benefits, extolling its holistic virtues for mind, body and soul (Berry and Hodgson, 2011:72). This conviction, in part, was sustained by a pathologising discourse in which young people were conceived to be ‘in decline’. Rather than fading over time this pathologising ‘deficit’ discourse has grown exponentially. For example, references to young people as ‘not in education, employment or training’ (NEET) or ‘at-risk’, ‘disengaged’ or ‘on the margins’ are not neutral but are derived from particular ideological representations of them as dysfunctional and in urgent need of expert intervention to return them to normality (Bradford, 2005). Moreover political and media constructions of young people are rarely if ever positive; as Griffin (1993) suggests they are almost invariably portrayed as ‘deficient perpetrators’ or as Jeffs and Smith put it as ‘thugs, users or victims’ (1999).

At the heart of this frequently medicalised approach to practice is the process of diagnosis which offers ‘the essential foundation’ and upon which subsequent interventions are based (Morrison, 2014: 238). It is this ‘medicalisation of behavioural symptoms’ which, as Cornwall and Walter (2006: 10) argue, consistently underpinned traditional psychodynamic therapies. Consequently outdoor education, which strives to be therapeutic or developmental, finds it difficult to avoid being consumed by the dominance of this discourse, which results in an emphasis upon the ‘remedying’ of those deemed ‘troublesome’. Importantly, by focusing on individual problems, therapeutic education potentially overlooks the structural causes of deprivation and inequality that have created the social contexts within which such behaviours are constructed. This is unhelpful, which is why we, the authors, prefer the notion of developmental education, why we employ the terms ‘development’

and ‘developmental education’ instead of ‘therapy’ and ‘therapeutic education’. This is because in our view the latter emphasises the need to ‘fix damaged people’, a stance which as you will have already gathered is not one we share. A number of writers such as Cornwall and Walter (2006) and Gesler (1992), whilst advocating a non-medicalised view of learning in the outdoors, nevertheless use the term therapeutic education. We do not do so because we view it to be unhelpful, but continue to refer to therapeutic education when discussing or citing their work.

A ‘positive’ approach to development

In contrast to the medicalised and therapeutic conceptualisations, we prefer to offer an alternative definition of the developmental value of outdoor education, one that moves beyond the remedial focus. Cornwall and Walter similarly argue we should be concerned with empowering participants through outdoor education, proposing we must:

Take into account the totality of a young person's experience, but it is more than just environmental or medical; it is holistic and encourages a young person to take responsibility for themselves, for their behaviour and their learning. Therapeutic education is the commitment to setting up an environment that enables and empowers a young person to do this. (2006: 12)

The alternative approach taken towards development by positive psychology offers a significant challenge to both the traditional ‘pathologising’ perspective on development and the dominant contemporary deficit discourse. In doing so it better reflects the dynamics of the developmental changes that occur through informal and experiential education in the outdoors by both recognising and developing ‘assets’.

This focus upon recognising and developing the ‘assets’ of participants relates closely to a central tenet and starting point of positive psychology, namely that we should concentrate on virtues rather than pathologies (Csikszentmihalyi and Csikszentmihalyi, 2006). Consequently positive psychology rejects the pathogenic paradigm which advocates of positive psychology contend focuses unnecessarily on remedial and reactive responses to health and well-being. Advocates of positive psychology have therefore constructed an alternative approach which is not rooted in negativity, an overemphasising of deficiencies and the need to identify and manage risk factors concerning the individual. Architects of positive psychology, including Antonovsky (1979, 1996), Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 2002), Fredrickson and Losada (2005) and Seligman (2003), have argued against such pathology and in favour of what has become known as an assets-based salutogenic approach. Antonovsky's principle research considered how some individuals suffer ill health whilst others, who are subjected to the same stressors, experience well-being. Health assets, he argued, serve to protect against negative health outcomes if activated and used purposefully and mindfully. A health asset is defined by Morgan and Ziglio as

any factor or resource which enhances the ability of individuals, communities and populations to maintain and sustain health and wellbeing and to help to reduce health inequalities. These assets can operate at the level of the individual, family or community and population as protective and promoting factors to buffer against life's stresses. (2007: 18)

Such assets it is maintained offer significant leverage and underpin health and well-being. For example, Christian considers health from the position of 'emotional and social wellbeing rather than simply physical conditioning' suggesting that Antonovsky's work on salutogenesis helpfully highlights the importance of taking an asset-based approach with adventure education (2011: 174). Rotegard and colleagues (2010) similarly claim that assets can be utilised to overcome challenging situations. An asset-based approach eschews a focus on needs, deficits and problems and instead values the positive capacity of individuals and communities. It is in the mobilisation of both individual and collective knowledge, skills, capacities and networks that characteristics of well-being may be nurtured. Placed alongside theories of positive emotion, these facets appear to be critical to building capacities to be creative, to question and to explore (Fredrickson, 2001, 2006). Importantly this mode of working also helps foster and maintain the kind of positive frame of mind that encourages learning and human flourishing (Fredrickson, 2006; Kopela and Clarke, 2005). Positive psychology is underpinned by a belief that well-being is determined in part by the realisation of personal goals as a crucial means through which self-confidence and efficacy is improved (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Wesson et al., 2000).

Applying positive psychology

An application of positive psychology to informal, experiential and outdoor education does not merely require the providing of positive experiences. It entails the careful construction of experiences which will draw on the capabilities, knowledge and skills of participants, who will encounter those experiences within the context of meaningful action. This will enable participants to utilise and recognise existing assets, as well as develop hitherto unrealised abilities, attributes and characteristics. Within the context of outdoor and adventure education the involvement of participants in decision-making, and the devolving of responsibility for organising and undertaking activities, can in particular play a crucial role in underpinning the application of positive psychology.

This approach to development in the outdoors is consistent with the critique of outdoor educationalists' overemphasis on 'risk' and 'challenge' by Brown and Fraser (2009). Risk and challenge may play some part in the provision of appropriate experiences but they do not necessarily always provide for the development and realisation of assets and they are certainly not of themselves sufficient. What is required is a far more nuanced understanding of the interests, aspirations and capabilities of those experiencing the outdoor environment. In contrast to the overemphasis on risk and challenge, positive psychology places emphasis upon the importance

of fostering feelings of ‘contentment’. Izard describes this as a positive and useful emotion ‘that broadens by creating the urge to savour current life circumstances and integrate these circumstances into new views of self and of the world’ (quoted in Fredrickson, 2001: 220). Outdoor educators are well placed to enable participants to experience such emotions, for their working environment affords an inexhaustible array of opportunities for quiet contemplation, be it listening to the ebb and flow of the waves on the shore, watching the swaying of the grass as the wind moves gently across an open field, listening to birdsong on a forest walk or marveling at the changing hues of the trees as autumn approaches. Such experiences can help participants begin to reclaim a sense of self that is independent of their problems and proceed to reconstruct their lives by giving them awareness of what is good about a life removed from the endless focus on the apparent circumstances and actions required for a resolution.

Previous chapters within this text recount how water and mountain environments can, if competently exploited, impart abundant possibilities for educational experiences. These and other outdoor settings are also suitable for the application of the principles of positive psychology. For example, the various means of immersing oneself in or on the water provides a rich array of possibilities for constructing experiences which will enable a group or an individual to begin to realise their hidden assets – whether that is the thrill and sense of achievement acquired from standing up for the first time on a surf board, the exhilaration and sensation of freedom gained from wild swimming or canyoning or the experience of self-containment and competence supplied by exploring a region by open canoe or camping in a remote location. Similarly the mountain environment embodies the quintessential experience of climbing to the summit. The symbolic goal of simultaneously attaining both individual and collective ambition, or the individual skills and determination required to scale a rock face, can also be allied to the trust required in a partner holding the rope. Such experiences provide scope to bring out hidden strengths and unrealised potential. Gesler (1992) describes such environments as therapeutic landscapes, whilst Dunkley reminds us that these therapeutic places are nevertheless ‘culturally constructed’ and therefore will be ‘experienced differently by different people, and not necessarily ideal or romantic landscapes’ (2009: 88). Traditional journeying in outdoor education can also easily be located into this rationale, especially when this is done participatively, where those taking part decide, for example, on the terrain, location, means of travel, and the length and pace of the journey. Of course such decisions cannot be made in isolation from the expertise of the educator, but the skilled outdoor and adventure educator will ‘work with’ and ‘alongside’ a group in ways that enable them to acquire a measure of ownership and experience genuine, rather than sham involvement.

Whilst traditional outdoor education practices offer a good basis for developing an approach founded on positive psychology, in order to provide experiences which maximise the development of a participant’s assets we may need to think differently about how we construct those experiences. Arguably for assets to be fully realised, they need to be part of a ‘collective action’ which has a genuine

impact on the world such as, for example, the construction of a community garden by members of a drug rehabilitation programme (Coburn, 2008). This and similar projects have the added advantage of enabling individuals to reframe themselves as productive citizens who are giving something back to the community and equally importantly will help them be recognised in that light. By offering an opportunity for participants to work and grow together in creative ways leading to the achievement of commonly agreed goals, it can thereby simultaneously transform participants and a portion of the environment in which they reside. Participants are thereby enabled to reconceptualise their experience (Dewey, 1938), to view themselves no longer as ‘wasters’ but as assets, contributing towards the achievement of personal and group goals. Potentially this can offer participants a bigger boost in confidence than they previously experienced when taking drugs. Rather than taking a normalised pathological approach, based on problem diagnosis and treatment, such a developmental (some would say therapeutic) outdoor intervention offers a productive salutogenic alternative.

At the heart of outdoor education environments, as asset-based models for well-being, is the building of social connectedness (Morgan et al., 2010). In this context the role of the residential experience can be crucial. Sometimes described as a ‘therapeutic camp’ (Thurber and Malinowski, 1999; Kearns and Collins, 2000), they serve as ‘hybrid spaces where social concerns emanating from the city are addressed in the “natural” spaces of the rural’ (Paris, 2000: 90). Generally this process embodies an *escape* to the countryside and the creation of conditions wherein participants can take forward their own *journeys* and find opportunities to talk more openly about their feelings and emotions than would normally be the case.

Also central to an approach to the outdoors based on positive psychology is an emphasis on building resilience. Therefore the capacity to set goals and make choices, achieve objectives, and act within the context of challenging environments is explicitly linked with building capabilities and resilience. The role of contentment and other positive emotions such as joy and love, as well as the development of interests, are also suggested by Fredrickson (2001) as an additional means of broadening and building creativity, and establishing a repertoire of reserved coping strategies that are able to build resilience. Fredrickson also argues experiencing and sharing such positive emotions builds psychological resilience so that participants feel good about themselves at the present time, but it can also increase their chances of feeling good in the future.

Development as ‘building capital’

Outdoor education has the potential to facilitate bonds between participants who are connected in both the activity and beyond, bonds that once forged can contribute towards the achievement of shared and mutually agreed outcomes (Kimball and Bacon, 1993). Such notions are redolent of Wenger’s (1998) ideas regarding learning in communities of practice. In this sense, outdoor education has the potential to help the individual to move from ‘legitimate peripheral participation’, a term

Wenger employs to describe the participation of people ‘on the edges’ of a group or community of practice who stand aside in order to observe how things work whilst preparing themselves for entry, to more concerted forms of mutuality, where:

Mutual engagement involves not only our competence, but the competence of others. It draws on what we do and what we know, as well as on our ability to connect meaningfully to what we don’t do and what we don’t know – that is, to the contributions and knowledge of others. (Wenger, 1998: 76)

Within outdoor education individual identity and collective enterprise is built from a communal experience of activity and becomes evident in a shared vocabulary, routines, rituals and symbols that begin to aid the formation of a community of practice. From this a mutual repertoire of experiences, ideas and stories may develop. This is evident in the way participants are able to identify with certain attributes of their outdoor experience and build narratives through conversation and dialogue (Jeffs and Smith, 2005), narratives that often come replete with tales of humour, trepidation, exhilaration or derring-do that draw upon experiences emanating from an activity.

Arguably, the development of mutuality and aspects of a community of practice amongst participants within outdoor and adventure education creates possibilities for the accumulation of bridging and other forms of capital (Taylor, 2011; Plummer, 2009; Putnam, 2000). Through an asset-based approach to development participant involvement in the outdoors can, individually and collectively, support a growth in social or organisational capital (Taylor, 2011: 187). Learning within this paradigm is active and participative and specifically intended to enable those engaged in it to acquire new knowledge that can be transferred to other aspects of their lives. Yet, it is also conversational and transformative (Mezirow, 2009), wherein the transformation of perspectives assists participants in using their experiences to make sense of the world and create new forms of knowledge (Sommerlad, 2003: 156). It has the potential therefore to develop capital across all three of Taylor’s (2011: 187) classifications:

<i>Human Capital</i>	<i>Located in the development of individual skills and knowledge</i>
<i>Social Capital</i>	<i>Established through networks and norms that build relational capacity</i>
<i>Organisational Capital</i>	<i>Expressed through the habits of organising and the willingness to take action</i>

The first of the above, human capital, is perhaps the most straightforward, and many outdoor experiences focus on individual development from increasing levels of confidence to changing views of the world (Mezirow, 2009). The emphasis on mutuality and the development of communities of practice begins to explain how social capital can be built, for example in the forming of new relationships between

group participants, the development of common goals and the promotion of a sense of solidarity with each other, all of which are indicative of how such experiences help young people to build social capital. Importantly, according to Bassani (2007), the acquisition of social capital mobilises other capitals, which, according to Weller (2006), can be used as compensation for a lack of financial capital.

Beames and Atencio offer a critique of social capital ideals that views their intentions as ‘unabashedly idealistic’, yet they do concede bridging capital is required as a tool to build richer and healthier communities and that outdoor education can ‘foster social capital’ (2008: 111). Their analysis strengthens the case for explicitly connecting reflection and learning in the outdoor experience to action in the locale and in the home community. In this sense not only must connections be made to the participants’ lives ‘back home’ but action plans need to be devised to ensure concrete action results from the good intentions formulated during the time away. Arguably this also strengthens the claim made earlier that outdoor education should embrace outdoor community or social action projects as well as, or even instead of, being preoccupied with taking participants out of their community.

On reflection and transferability

It is of course incumbent upon the educator to enable participants to link experiences of the outdoor environment to their understanding of the social world ‘at home’. So whilst the learning is situated in the outdoor educational setting, the educator often attempts to ensure it is transferable from the outdoors and fosters genuine development. Traditionally in outdoor education this process is ensured via the ‘review of learning’ (Greenaway, 2004), a process of reflection on the participant’s experience. Sometimes called debriefing or processing, this is often undertaken after activities as part of the ‘plan, do, review’ cycle. However, we should be wary of simplistically separating experience and reflection; therefore outdoor and adventure educators need to maximise the opportunities for conversations as to what particular experiences mean to participants. There may well be advantages to pausing later in the day and reflecting with a group on their experiences, however there are also distinct benefits to be found in grasping the moment, and on a hike, at a lunch stop or at the top of a climb to find ways to encourage party members to reflect on the hidden strengths, resources and abilities required to undertake a given activity. It may well be more pertinent to encourage reflection in the moment, or as Schön (1983) describes it, ‘in action’, by seizing the opportunity and grasping the significance of events ‘there and then’ when emotions are heightened and ‘realisations’ possible.

The approach adopted towards facilitating reflection and the reviewing of experience is crucial if the benefits of positive psychology are to be reaped. The educator must build on the positive aspects of the experience, encouraging participants to recognise hidden strengths, abilities and characteristics. A parallel can be found in the approach described by Greenaway as ‘appreciative facilitation’ which ‘pays attention to success and achievement . . . providing positive feedback on what they

did or said' (2004: 103). Building on the work of Torres (2001), Greenaway suggests that in relation to this approach it is important that the educator pays particular attention to what they are focusing on as it is that which 'gets expanded', rather than faults, that tends to result in their replication, whereas focusing on what worked is more likely to bring about positive change.

We are anxious at this point to qualify the claims being made about the outcomes emanating from the application of processes from positive psychology within the arena of outdoor education. The *feel good* factor may simply be that – and should not necessarily be portrayed as transformation in action. It must be acknowledged that at times it can be a fairly superficial or a shallow learning experience that remains isolated from deeper learning or from a process of translation into meaningful behavioural change upon return to the 'home' environment. It is a distinct challenge for informal and experiential educators in the outdoors to capture the potential in positive psychology for learning development and fostering change and to try to ensure it is transferable.

Dewey (1938) reminds us of the importance of grounding experiential education in the lives of those we are seeking to educate. Whilst in one sense outdoor education is significantly removed from the reality of everyday life, it is incumbent on the educators to make links if the experience is to be educational. It is no use merely forgetting about life back home as this is likely to provide a period of optimistic escapism and recidivism will in some extreme instances be likely to characterise the return 'home'. It is essential to try and continue the kinds of conversations that took place in the mountains, on the boat or around the campfire when back in the familiar surroundings. Research undertaken by Leberman and Martin illustrates this point. In situations where only a limited post-course review took place, a significant reduction in recall was found to have taken place compared to those settings where regular post-course reviews occurred. This led Leberman and Martin to conclude that 'post-course reflection enables participants to make meaning from their experiences with benefits of time and distance from the residential, thus enhancing transfer of learning' (2004: 173).

Person-centred approach

Developmental outdoor education must be contextualised in relation to the social lives of the participants. Those social lives with their rich and varied cultural and social components need to be acknowledged for they invariably shape the ways in which individuals and groups respond and react to the outdoor and adventure experiences they encounter. Thus, for example, what constitutes an 'informed choice' will be influenced by the ages, abilities, beliefs and backgrounds of individuals and parties. There are constraints on the kind of goals that can be set depending on the financial or other resources and the resilience of those involved. Consequently no simplistic assumptions can be made as to the capacity of participants to determine their own futures. Similarly the freedom to choose how much of an element within an outdoor or adventure education programme they will undertake may also be

determined in part or whole by social class, race or gender and will be influenced by dominant ideologies that inform commonly held views. In response to such constraints Gibson (2011: 228) turned to choice philosophy and adapted this to the outdoor and adventure context, arguing the developmental use of the outdoors calls for the inclusion of three core values. These are that participants:

- Set their own goals on each element
- Must be able to choose how much of an element they will experience
- Must be able to make informed choices

This application of choice philosophy places participants at the centre of the processes through which transformative education can be developed in outdoor environments. There are strong links here with the participative practices of those informal educators and youth and community workers who advocate a form of practice that starts from where participants are, appreciates ‘their’ experience, and works with them to enlarge and expand that experience (Jeffs and Smith, 2005; Deer Richardson and Wolfe, 2001; Batsleer and Davies, 2010; Ord, 2016).

‘Flow’

Before concluding the chapter we should perhaps consider the relevance of another important idea in positive psychology – the notion of ‘flow’. Csikszentmihalyi coined the term ‘flow’ for what he describes as optimal experiences: ‘when our body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and wonderful’ (2002: 3). Flow is hard to achieve and can be fleeting, but it happens when we are fully immersed in something that requires concentration, commitment and effort, and it is exhilarating and life enhancing. These optimal inner experiences have the potential to induce a sensation of harmony with one’s environment as the sense of self and of the task merge in action. Carr suggests flow involves a ‘total experiential absorption in an activity and temporary loss of awareness of other aspects of the self and one’s life situation’ (2011: 113). Fredrickson (2001) in a similar vein argues the best moments in our lives are not those when we are relaxed and passively contemplating the world but are those which approximate to ‘flow’ when we are wholly immersed in the completion of a task which requires effort to achieve and offers a great deal of satisfaction upon completion. There are therefore potentially significant benefits if outdoor educators are able to produce the conditions for similar feelings of ‘flow’ among their participants.

The outdoor environment offers many opportunities for optimal learning and for ‘flow’ experiences, for example the physical demands of hiking, perhaps in the mist, where the challenges of navigation are allied to the physical effort and absolute concentration is required due to the assumed presence of danger, or the sheer intensity of completing a first abseil with the need to galvanise every ounce of determination to overcome the fear associated with the chasm below and the requirement to rationalise the fear that the rope might not hold your weight. Flow experiences are of course not

necessarily linked to an element of danger for equally they can arise from, for example, artistic endeavour such as when individuals during a hike become 'engrossed' in their desire to search out the perfect photograph. What unites them all is that 'flow' experiences contribute to individuals feeling a sense of harmony and discovering a new way of seeing the world and of their role in it (Coburn, 2011a, 2011b).

Ideas on optimal experience suggest that degrees of skill and challenge are relational and need to be balanced to invoke optimum psychological states (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2009; Henry, 2006). To induce this optimal experience of 'flow' therefore requires a finely balanced set of conditions in which participants learn new or apply existing skills, set goals, receive feedback and take control within achievable limits (Delle Fave and Massimini, 2005). If these conditions are not just right then flow will not happen. If a learning task is set in which the learner has a low skill level and this combines with a high degree of challenge it will in all likelihood create fear and anxiety. At the other end of this continuum, when a participant has a high skill level and the task demands only a low degree of challenge it will nurture boredom and apathy. However, skills matched to an appropriate degree of challenge can be used to generate flow and bring feelings of serenity, involvement and satisfaction. At each stage, an appropriate level of challenge and skill requirement should aim to bring positive feelings of involvement and achievement.

Conclusion

Outdoor education offers opportunities for powerful learning at individual, group, social and community levels. Though deficit discourses are never totally absent in such contexts, the authors argue that a founding principle within informal and experiential education outdoors is the desire to bolster the positive capabilities of participants and the communities from which they are drawn. The starting point is about resourcing positivity, acknowledging and building assets among participants and facilitating a process through which assets are developed. Informal and experiential education therefore is not about the micromanagement of individually identified problems but should be more concerned with the holistic development of people based on the development of human capital, which in turn contributes to human flourishing (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, 2002; Fredrickson, 2001). Such growth and development, however, takes place in a community context, and where possible, this communal and social context needs to be acknowledged in order to maximise the potential for growth. In relation to this we conclude by suggesting that outdoor educators should not overlook the benefits of fostering organisational capital through the development of community-based programmes which have the potential for genuine action, not just reflection.

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