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## INFORMAL EDUCATION AND THE OUTDOORS

*Tony Jeffs*

Observant readers will notice one word is common to each of the following: ‘outdoor education’, ‘adventure education’ and ‘informal education’. This chapter examines what this mutual concern with education entails by asking:

1. What is education?
2. What is informal education?
3. What is informal learning?

Responding to the first question necessitates delving into the origins of education as an idea and as an arena of practice; hence this will be the first topic to be discussed. The reply to the second question, besides considering what informal education is, discusses how it can and does relate to outdoor and adventure education. The third is addressed in part because it is repeatedly confused with informal education, so consideration is given to what distinguishes these two before moving on to discussing the role informal learning can play within outdoor and adventure education.

### **What is education?**

Education is a word frequently combined with others to explain a policy area or domain of activity. Some examples include ‘primary, secondary and adult education’, which relate to specific age groupings. Another category contains titles such as ‘outdoor, health, music, business and art education’, sectors identified according to subject matter. Finally we have groupings such as ‘special, liberal and informal education’, describing discrete modes of educational intervention. Predictably overlap arises between the categories. For instance, activities central to outdoor education, such as walking and aerobic exercise, appear within both health and physical education. Likewise a balanced primary or secondary education ought to incorporate elements found within

outdoor education. Linkages and crossovers are legion but cannot eradicate the diversity, for each educational ‘sub-species’ has claim to a distinctive history, unique formats and theoretical foundation underpinning its identity. The golden thread connecting each one is the concept of education as a process of learning designed to equip people and groups with the knowledge and skills to enable them to flourish, socially, spiritually and economically, and to learn autonomously throughout their lifetimes either alongside others or as individuals. Primarily this is what unifies disparate entities such as adventure, special and adult education, for, as Hopkins and Putman point out, they are like all educational pursuits ‘concerned with overall development’ (1993: 3), not the mere teaching of a skill or the training in a technique.

Etymologically ‘education’ derives from the Latin ‘educere’ or ‘educare’ which translates to ‘leading or bringing out’. Although Latin words provide our root, the ideas incorporated within them emerged not in Rome but Ancient Greece. There many citizens believed we are born with immortal souls which following our death return to a ‘world’ inhabited by the gods wherein all things become known to it. Afterwards the soul is reborn in a new body; however during the trauma of birth this knowledge and wisdom is forgotten but not erased. Thereafter learning becomes a process of recollecting. Articulated by Plato, Socrates and others, this theory held that acquiring knowledge and wisdom entailed ‘bringing out’ what is immemorially lodged in our souls. Presumably few reading this chapter share Plato’s and Socrates’ belief in the transmigration of souls or espouse the theory of ‘recollection’ outlined above. However before dismissing ‘recollection’ out-of-hand and moving on it is worth pausing to ask why so many have long found the teaching methods it cultivated to be attractive. One who did was Jerome Bruner, author of two of the twentieth century’s most influential education texts, *The Process of Education* and *The Relevance of Education*. Bruner in the latter argued for a method he designated ‘discovery teaching’ involving ‘not so much the process of leading students to discover what is “out there”, but rather their discovering what is in their own heads’ (1971: 72). So why do individuals who reject the beliefs on which the methodology resides still believe it relevant? First, because it furnishes an alternative to the dominant view that education amounts to nothing more than the pouring of ‘knowledge’ and ‘facts’ into empty heads. Instead here is a model inviting us to contemplate an alternative to what we encounter in schools, wherein students are force-fed a curriculum and drilled to pass tests with preordained answers force-fed to pupils deemed ignorant of the approved responses. Plato (1941) long ago warned this tactic consistently proved futile as nothing ‘learned under compulsion stays in the mind’ (*Republic*, 536d; if Plato seems old-fashioned some recent research buttresses the fundamentals of his position; see Grove, 2014; Jones et al., 2015; Jones, 2010). ‘Recollection’ remains alluring because it bids us to

view those we teach as possessing knowledge and talents we can help ‘lead out’ and nurture, to set aside deficit views of those arriving at the outdoor centre as blank sheets upon which we must imprint correct answers; instead it asks us to appreciate their hidden unexploited talents and expertise and as educators unlock and learn from them. Second, the concept of ‘leading out’ suggests we sidestep narrowly didactic approaches and turn to dialogue, conversation and discussion. Again this technique has a substantial protracted history, for we know it was employed by Socrates; known as *elenctic* or *elenchus*, it entails posing probing questions to help our partners in dialogue reveal what they know. *Elenchus* necessitates individuals interrogating their beliefs and embarking via dialogue on a search for truth. Skilful educators still cultivate learning by applying this method. Barrow is surely correct in suggesting the approach of Socrates and Plato still ‘strikes a radical blow against any view of education that sees it ultimately in terms of facts to be stored, the mindless accumulation of *obiter dicta* and the passive reception of unquestionable *fiats*’ (1976: 42).

Dialogical education may struggle to co-exist with a national curriculum, SATs and examination league tables, but it is congruent with the world beyond the classroom, not least that of outdoor and adventure education where the process generally concentrates less on ‘the end result’ and more upon encouraging participants ‘to think for themselves’ (Barnes, 2004: 9). This technique urges us to shun, for instance, telling groups or individuals the best route up a mountain or what to take on a trek; instead it commences by posing questions such as ‘What route would you take?’ or ‘What do you think we will need?’ Respondents may tender a competent answer, even one superior to our own, but some answers may, in our professional opinion, be unhelpful, even dangerous; however these are not worthless for they can provide a point of departure for a dialogue during which adroit questioning will allow all to collectively unearth ‘better’ answers. Embracing this procedure will, as stated by Herbert Read, who held it was the preeminent way to teach art, ensure ‘the education of the pupil is always the self-education of the teacher’ (1943: 285). Being interactive helps educators avoid becoming fusty and bored by allowing them to escape the tedium of dispensing the same ‘old script’. The foundations upon which the concept of education as ‘leading out’ rests may be improbable, but as a guiding principle for how outdoor and adventure educators might function it remains an attractive methodology, not least because it helps all parties acquire some mastery of the arts of reasoning and the making of sound judgements.

## What to teach?

Whatever approach we adopt as a teacher or outdoor educator, the question always arises regarding what it is you wish to teach. Sometimes it will be something specific, perhaps how to set up camp, or

sometimes a less precise outcome, maybe how to operate as a team. Be it narrow or broad an educator's intervention signals an ambition to achieve change. Indeed why would one wish to become an outdoor educator if not to help others change themselves for the better? It is surely inconceivable that one would become an outdoor educator in order to make people more stupid or evil, or to foster contempt and hatred for the things you teach and the values you hold dear. Hirst and Peters remind us how in this respect education, as opposed to training or instruction, proceeds on the basis that what it seeks to foster in someone 'is valuable but also that it involves the development of knowledge and understanding', not a mere skill. Therefore whatever else educated persons are, they are 'individuals possessing an understanding of something', not merely 'know-how or knack' (1970: 19). Ownership of a package of skills and itemised knowledge, although beneficial, is never of itself sufficient. Hirst and Peters' perspective by implication highlights the dividing line between an instructor, for example acquainting a group as to the 'correct' way to mount a horse, and an educator, who whilst superficially doing the same thing, is drawing upon a well of experience and theory that allows them to explain this 'skill' and contextualise and locate it within a conceptual framework. Possessing that framework means if the opportunity arises they can exploit it to reflect upon equine physiology, the design and manufacture of saddles or animal psychology. Equally the conversation accompanying the task might be nurtured by the educator so as to enable the group to reflect upon the moral and ethical issues relating to the 'exploitation' of horses for human enjoyment by drawing upon the ideas of writers and philosophers such as Singer (1975) or Regan (1983), or alternatively to a consideration of the aesthetics of horse-riding and say a consideration of the paintings of George Stubbs (1724–1806), Edwin Landseer (1802–1873) and Alfred Munnings (1878–1959). The range of topics that might arise from this ostensibly straightforward task are boundless, yet utilising them via the mediums of conversation and dialogue requires the outdoor educator to possess a deep appreciation of the theory and history of what they are teaching plus the facility to foster dialogue. In this context conversation must not be mistaken for idle chatter or banter which tends to manufacture winners and losers. Rather it is what Michael Oakeshott calls 'an unrehearsed intellectual adventure' involving individuals freely coming together to share their thinking and experiences who are content to let thoughts 'take wing' (1991: 198). It is this form of conversational adventure that accomplished outdoor educators are equipped to nurture and nourish.

Education, unlike instruction and training, always 'implies something worthwhile is being or has been intentionally transmitted in a morally acceptable way' (Peters, 1966: 25). This means if, say, an outdoor educator is teaching climbing or sailing they will do so in ways that do not imply an acceptance of morally reprehensible behaviours such as selfishness, cruelty or greed. Consequently

outdoor educators, like all educators, must pay due regard to what and how they teach. Sports coaches, for instance, have been known to become so fixated on training their charges to be winners that they jettison all normal moral values and inculcate dishonest techniques and excessive aggression, even *in extremis* encouraging usage of performance-enhancing drugs (Coulomb-Cabagno and Rasclé, 2006; Savulescu et al., 2004). This may generate champions, but society often pays a price as research highlights a disturbing correlation between male, and to a lesser extent female, involvement in organised and professional sports and overly aggressive behaviour, including sexual violence and bullying outside of that context (Forbes et al., 2006; Steinfeldt et al., 2012; Gage, 2008). Interventions that risk generating these outcomes are self-evidently antipathetic to the model of education set out by Hirst and Peters. Being an educator obligates one to work at all times in ‘morally acceptable ways’, and this is why numerous forms of coaching, training and instruction cannot be deemed educational. Outdoor and adventure educators endeavour to teach people to say climb, camp, sail or traverse a wilderness to the best of their ability, but as educators such ambitions will always be subservient to the need to create good citizens and morally responsible persons.

No teacher or educator would be wise to commence a session without a grasp of what it is they wish to impart; however identifying their objective is seldom a straightforward task. Two examples must suffice to exemplify the challenge with respect to this task. First, you may prioritise teaching the group a single or range of activities, but a majority may be fearful and nervous regarding the strange environment they now find themselves in. Faced with this situation, the primary task now becomes allaying those fears. This reminds us outdoor and adventure educators, like colleagues in adjacent fields, must eschew rigidity and be confident about when it is necessary to change tack in order to address the ‘here and now’. Second, are you certain as to what it is you actually wish to teach on a given day? For example, is it how to handle a canoe or foster a love of the outdoors, encourage empathy with others or increase self-esteem, teach transferable skills to improve employability or create independent self-confident thinkers? Readers will happily append additions to the inventory. Many will be compatible, some not. One way to escape this conundrum is to ask if an overarching aim can be unearthed. Ancient Greeks, although disagreeing as to specifics, broadly shared a belief that education was primarily concerned with refining the capacity for wise judgement. Plato held the preeminent aim was to foster self-mastery so that an individual cares ‘only for the right ... and above all justice’ (Plato, 1941, *Republic*, vii 540, p. 256). Aristotle similarly maintained education should focus upon producing good persons and citizens along with the capacity to make skilled judgements-*phronesis* (Ord, 2014; Natali, 2013). Others followed in their wake, especially those sharing the Ancient Greek love of democracy or ‘government by the people’. Thomas

Jefferson, who in 1779 drew up the legislative framework for the earliest universal state system of education, and three years before much of the American Declaration of Independence, believed educational institutions must prioritise teaching students to ‘think for themselves’ and how to ‘participate as equals in political democracy’ (Staloff, 2009: 129). Jefferson, like other democrats living in a world that was then ruled by tyrants and princes, shared Epictetus’ opinion that ‘only the educated are free’ (Epictetus, 1904: 291). So therefore, Jefferson held that education must place a sustained emphasis upon preparing all to be capable of fulfilling the role of a free citizen in a free society.

Such viewpoints are probably always in a minority. For how many of us nowadays believe learning to become an independent thinker or acquiring a love for a subject is more important than passing exams or getting a ‘good degree’? Not that many one suspects. The mainstream opinion that learning for employment should take precedence has a long history, emerging in its present form around the same time as Jefferson outlined his plans. Articulated here by Robert Owen in 1812, founder of probably the earliest primary school and first community centre opened in Britain, it advocates schools above all else should inculcate ‘habits of obedience, order, regularity, industry and constant attention, which are to them of more importance than merely learning to read, write and account’ (quoted in Tomlinson, 2005: 131). Here is an early expression of the belief that education’s primary role is the training of productive and docile workers. This long-running divergence as to role and purpose will not go away because, as Freire explains, ‘all educational practice implies a theoretical stance on the educator’s part’ that assumes ‘sometimes more, sometimes less explicitly – an interpretation of man and the world’ (1985: 43). These profound debates apply as much to outdoor and adventure education as mainstream schooling. Therefore, although much educational policy may be decided in public forums, all educationalists must to an extent choose what their own over arching aims are as well as what it is they really wish to teach. Ultimately doing so is not a responsibility a professional can entrust to others, but something they are obligated to take unto themselves. In particular they must select what values they seek to foster and what are those that they seek by deed and word to discourage.

## **Schooling and education**

Public debates relating to education regularly run into the sand because we conflate schooling with education. Principally this occurs because the formal education sector comprising schools, colleges and universities consumes a vast array of resources. In the UK it is the third biggest item of government expenditure, teaching eight million students and employing three and a half million.

Understandably politicians and the electorate focus on this sector. Schooling's primary purpose is to prepare students for adult life, as Harrison puts it, to age young people 'exponentially – to make them hundreds, if not thousands of years older than when they entered the classroom' by passing on knowledge and skills that have been acquired by our forebears (2014: 142). Profound disagreements, as we have seen, exist regarding what that entails, yet whatever the dominant current stance, surely a balanced schooling would embrace in part both the arts of industry and humanity, the first providing the knowledge and skills required to thrive in the labour market and the second those needed to live a fulfilling life as a member of a family, community and democratic society. The equilibrium between these two is never a given but always a matter of dispute, hence the re-occurring debates as to whether school pupils should receive outdoor and adventure experiences or music lessons or sex education. Of course they are not mutually exclusive for, as Beames et al. suggest, the two can complement each other and there are good reasons for linking the two, for 'the outdoors brings curricula alive' (2011: 1). Shifts in emphasis may be arbitrarily imposed on a whim but generally surface following public discourse, therefore educationalists must usually live with the outcomes. In some countries such debates do not occur. Schooling in such societies can focus solely on training and indoctrinating pupils to be compliant functionaries or unthinking adherents of particular religious or political codes. This warns us schooling is always a double-edged instrument, one as capable of serving as a vehicle for oppression as it is for liberation. Comparative evidence also warns us it can either entrench social inequality or erode it, the outcome being a matter of political preference (Green et al., 2006; Sherman and Poirier, 2007). Therefore schooling's history is best understood as a tale 'of changing circumstances, not ... of inevitable progress' (Hamilton, 1990: xiii). Schooling is of itself neither inherently bad nor an unalloyed good for either students or society. Yet Dewey, like others, was surely correct in thinking 'education is the fundamental method of social reform', but it is always essential to append the caveat that this will only occur if those responsible for managing our schools and colleges 'insist' it is a priority (1897: 78). Currently the formal sector in Britain and some other countries seems to be less concerned with social reform, or for that matter educating students, and their learning than it is with credentialising them via tests and examinations (Labaree, 2010). This has meant that value sets and subjects that are not formally credited such as PE and outdoor education are marginalised (Siedentop, 2002). Or as Ogilvie, the leading historian of outdoor education put it, 'We have ended up teaching subjects not people' (2013: 3). Whilst an overarching tendency to play safe and 'teach to the test' has led to activities and subjects not impacting directly on league table positions or exam outcomes being squeezed out (Fee, Greenan and Wall, 2009). Hence the decline during the last two decades in the time allotted to

outdoor and adventure activities in English and Welsh schools with even low cost pursuits such as walking and hiking being pushed aside (DforE, 2013). The imbalance between the relative size of the different sectors means that outdoor and adventure education, like adult education and youth services, are ominously susceptible to internal shifts in the structures of schooling leading to wide fluctuations in demand (Lynch, 2003; Higgins, 2005; Dillon et al., 2005; Tillings and Dillon, 2007). Pressure on schools, and latterly colleges and universities, to meet measured outcomes on diminished budgets has resulted in the prioritisation of standardised teaching, good order and discipline and rigid managerial hierarchies to secure economies of scale and ‘eclipse’ external rivals. The resulting ambience means they neither foster democratic discourse nor collaborative behaviour and ineffectually prepare students to be ‘interlocutors later in life, that is to give them the foundations on which they may find something meaningful to say to one another’ (Harrison, 2014: 141). Because these attributes cannot be tested, formal educational bodies display scant interest in helping students acquire a sense of the aesthetic, a love of nature or respect for their fellows. Hence the crucial need for provision of outdoor and adventure education, informal education, youth work and liberal adult education to compensate for the failings of an increasingly dysfunctional school system.

### **Taught or practiced?**

Kant (1900), two centuries ago, helpfully distinguished between what can be didactically taught and what must be practiced. Itemising what we cannot solely or to a substantive degree teach in a classroom or online is a helpful starting point. In lieu of a definitive listing, a few examples of what cannot be taught exclusively in this way might include medicine, leading an expedition, climbing, counseling, caving, social work and animal husbandry. Besides ‘activities’, one would find it difficult, even impossible, to teach solely in a classroom are an assortment of valuable traits that make for human flourishing – for instance citizenship, courage, empathy, respect for others and sound judgement. Albert Camus, the novelist, existentialist philosopher and French Resistance fighter, once told an interviewer ‘everything I know about morality and the obligations of men, I owe to football’ (Martin, 2012). Camus confirms what many of us believe, namely that sports, like outdoor and adventure activities, can teach morality and much besides by placing individuals in circumstances which oblige them to make decisions for which they find themselves accountable and collaborate with others. However it would be injudicious to make exaggerated claims for outdoor and adventure education (or sport) as hoped for outcomes are never a given. As Alexander (1995) in relation to American football and Fine with respect to both Little League Baseball (Fine, 1987) and chess (Fine, 2015) discovered, each of these impacted on participants in disparate ways. Sports,

cultural activities and outdoor and adventure education are, like schooling, double-edged. Outcomes are rarely predictable, partly because the educators' or coaches' variable techniques shape the 'lessons' learnt. Also the activities function within social contexts that wield an influence which may negate any values the educator sought to impart. Camus was fortunate his football experience was positive. Maybe it was because the coach operated according to a moral code and possessed a set of moral values Camus came to admire, or possibly he was repelled by those prevalent amongst his coaches and teammates and this motivated him to uncover better alternatives. It is unlikely we shall ever know, but asking the questions reminds us that all those whom outdoor and adventure educators work with possess what sociologists call 'agency' – a capacity to adopt or reject the behavioural models on offer. Educators in outdoor and adventure settings or elsewhere can never exercise more than partial control over what others take from what they teach, for much 'gets passed on silently or unknowingly during the education process [and] germinates discretely, slowly, and often unpredictably, especially when it comes to the realm of spirit' (Harrison, 2014: 141). Be that as it may, outdoor and adventure education still holds out a special promise that it can teach important ethical and social values thanks to the special environment it operates in and the opportunities it offers for dialogue and the modelling of morally desirable behaviours.

## What is informal education?

Josephine Macalister Brew's *Informal Education* (1946) was the first text to consciously employ the term 'informal education'. From 1940 until her death in 1957, the author served as education officer with the National Association of Girls' Clubs and Mixed Clubs. Previously she had variously been a community worker, adult educator and youth worker, which perhaps helps explain why she identified informal education as a golden thread permeating all three (Smith, 2001). *Informal Education* advocated taking 'education' into places where people congregate. Schoolteachers, for instance, were encouraged to perceive the playground as somewhere educational conversations and dialogue with pupils might prosper and the school gate as a venue where they might converse creatively with parents. Outdoor educators might similarly try relocating to the back of the mini-bus to cultivate dialogue and social workers might do the same with clients lingering on the office doorstep. Brew's reasons for urging these and others to 'reach out' was not for 'professionals' to go into the community in order to regale those they encountered with a pre-rehearsed script, but to partake in dialogue and conversation that might help everyone discover the knowledge within themselves and learn from each other. Doing this, and acting as an informal educator, would entail the professional being disposed to take part in the exchanges that arose from the concerns and

interests of others. It would also display a willingness to listen, to let others set the agenda and allow the conversation to flow rather than assume what they held to be important should dictate content. Before scrutinising what informal education encompasses, it must be noted Brew, and most subsequent writers on the topic, never wished for it to be the preserve of trained specialists (see Jeffs and Smith, 2016, ; Richardson and Wolfe, 2001). Rather, as the forgoing examples imply, this is a mode of intervention those operating in assorted settings can usefully embrace. For that to happen what is needed is for them to redefine themselves for a segment of their working day as informal educators and seize the opportunities open to them to attend to dialogue and educative conversations. The openings are legion. Be they an instructor at an outdoor centre, a social worker in a family centre, a sports coach at a leisure centre, a lecturer in a FE college, a volunteer running a village youth club, a care worker in a residential home or a shop-floor worker training apprentices, it matters not as long as each is predisposed to nurturing in themselves the skills required to foster mutual learning.

Brew may be the first author to embrace the term, but as this chapter has implied, informal education had a prehistory. She conceded this by commencing with a passage by Joseph Addison, a seventeenth-century essayist:

*It was said of Socrates that he brought philosophy down from heaven to inhabit among men, and I shall be ambitious to have it said of me that I have brought philosophy out of closets and libraries, schools and colleges, to dwell in clubs and assemblies, at the tea-tables and coffee houses. (1946: 6)*

Dialogical education, of which informal education is a part heir, possesses an honourable pedigree. It prospered in Athenian society, the era of Addison and subsequently in places and times when a vibrant democracy and civil society encouraged people to congregate and partake in the uninhibited exchange of ideas (Jeffs, 2001). The obverse is that when civil society is weakened and freedoms of speech and assembly curtailed, informal education retreats and *in extremis* is driven underground. So in part it functions as a barometer gauging the health of democracy at any given time within a given locale. Informal education is a delicate bloom requiring a sympathetic soil and climate to thrive, something which explains why at a micro level it rarely flourishes in settings such as schools or workplaces where power is unevenly distributed and workers lower down the pecking order cannot openly express opinions for fear of the repercussions.

## **What makes informal education unique?**

Informal education differs in notable aspects from training, instruction and schooling, and it is what makes it unique that now attracts our attention. First, informal educators preeminently operate via the mediums of conversation and dialogue. Unlike the formal sector where a set curricula and syllabi sculpt the educational encounter, or much of the outdoor education sector where participants are offered pre-ordained programmes, the content of informal education primarily materialises from open-ended conversational encounters. Informal educators consciously engage in these to foster learning by helping others to clarify their thinking, formulate ideas and better articulate their learning needs. Doing so tends to involve a number of stages best summarised as follows:

1. Assess – Making an assessment of what may be going on around us and our possible role
2. Engage – Engaging in conversation
3. Question – The raising of questions
4. Discern – Consideration of these in relation to what we discern as making for human flourishing
5. Develop – Proceeding to the development of a response (Jeffs and Smith, 2016: 74)

Second, informal education emerges from voluntary relationships. Even within institutions such as prisons, residential units or schools, where the attendance or presence of one party is legally enforced, informal educators will strive to ensure those they connect with choose freely to do so. Often problematic and requiring careful planning nevertheless, as the example of chaplains operating in prisons and the armed forces confirms, it is possible to manufacture physical and intellectual space wherein dialogue and unfettered conversations can flourish. Outdoor educators may work with parties and individuals who have been ‘sent’, but similarly they can consciously create openings for dialogue to arise on a voluntary basis.

Third, informal education usually takes place where people freely assemble so practitioners must simultaneously be ‘around’ and ‘accessible’. Often in settings controlled by others such as schools, colleges, prisons, hospitals, leisure centres and the ‘street’ this means the educators must be able to adroitly read the environment and gauge the mood of the spaces they operate in if they are to make contact with the assorted groups co-existing within these settings. Informal educators must study the ever-changing ‘geography’ and the ‘written and unwritten timetables’ of, say, a leisure centre, school, outdoor centre or college in order to ascertain when and where to make contact. That means being *au fait* with such details as where specific sub-cultural groups ‘hang out’ or the nooks and crannies ‘loners’ and the bullied retreat to. This kind of intelligence is crucial in order for informal educators to work with those outside the mainstream, who may be most in need of their help. Informal education requires space to breath, so practitioners allocate time between and within

activities for dialogue and conversations to flourish (Hirsch, 2005). Outdoor and adventure educators can likewise build into programmes space for this to occur and exploit meal times, journeys to and from activities and ‘rest periods’ to engage with users. Like ‘street workers’, they can adjust their pace to walk alongside an isolated member of the group or to allow those who are detaching themselves to ‘catch up’ with them. Equally they need to know when to let conversation run its course on the mini-bus, during breaks or over lunch and when to interject to exploit a chance to test an opinion or raise a question when the conversation is flowing. Social spaces in outdoor centres, notably canteens and dining rooms, lounges and outside seating provide promising venues where conversations can burgeon. MacKenzie in his account of setting up an outdoor centre recalled the importance of the ‘stray words’ that predicated thoughtful conversations, recounting how he consciously read a newspaper where youngsters gathered, a ploy which frequently prompted enlightening conversations on current issues (1965: 17). Sustaining and initiating conversations and exploiting the openings created by those ‘stray words’ is an art form in itself. The skills equipping one to do so are essential for any informal educator, but thankfully like many craft skills, these can be acquired by study, observing skilful practitioners in action and seeking their advice, and reflection upon your own performance.

Fourth, in a majority of the settings where informal educators operate, dialogue can be curtailed by time constraints, distractions and the ebb and flow of activities, resulting in educators finding it hard to close down and follow up conversations. Consequently they have long invested resources on outings, camps and residential events for clientele. In part, the function of these is to focus on teaching via experience, hence the tendency to take parties to unfamiliar locales with urban dwellers transported to rural settings and rural compatriots to cities. Visits to foreign destinations are similarly justified on the grounds they advance cultural awareness. ‘Taking groups away’ is also perceived as worthwhile because it allows informal educators to plan holistic educational encounters, presenting them with the space to develop sustained dialogue and generate conversation to a degree rarely possible elsewhere. Journeys, walks, meal times, joint activities and rest periods usually taking place in unfamiliar surroundings where existing hierarchies can ‘dissolve or be put aside’ (Priest and Gass, 1997: 21). All create entrees wherein conversations can flourish, conversations that it would be difficult, even impossible, to generate in other settings or circumstances. Shared experiences of living together, albeit as transitory communities, present unrivalled openings for educators to nurture dialogue and teach via the medium of modelled behaviour (see chapter 10, this volume, for a further discussion of this topic). Leaders may, however, have divergent agendas to those of party members, the former anxious to exploit the residential as a vehicle for learning can find themselves at odds

with party members seeking relaxation. When this occurs the outdoor and adventure educator can be trapped between factions, neither of whom have an authentic commitment to learning from them. Some may even resent them as interlopers thwarting their differing ambitions. When this arises the outdoor educator's first task may be to convince some or all the party that what they offer has an inherent value and comprises more than a menu of activities.

Fifth, informal educators must pay careful attention to the presentation of self, including being accessible and approachable but not 'in your face', friendly without being gushing, companionable but not obsequious and so on. Rarely is it easy to get the right balance, especially when, like outdoor and adventure educators often do, they find themselves working with groups they have neither selected nor know. Irrespective of the operating environment, informal educators must, to be effective, draw upon a repertoire of skills equipping them to make contact with strangers, manage group dynamics and sustain productive relationships. Such skills are not the exclusive property of informal or outdoor educators, but both rarely prosper without them. Informal education is a craft and as such must be studied and proficiency honed. Expertise in this field is, as Kant pointed out, something acquired in part via practice and constant reflection upon that practice. That means becoming what Schon calls a 'reflective practitioner', someone who permits themselves to 'experience surprise, puzzlement or confusion' throughout their professional lives and 'reflects on the phenomenon' encountered by relating this 'to prior understandings' of their practice. Crucially such reflection leads to the formulation of 'theory in action' which will sustain their professional development (Schon, 1983: 68). Books and training help, but only partially. For once the basics are acquired via that route, knowledge and theory need to be sharpened by usage and reflection, a process made easier by engagement with what Lave and Wenger (1991) label a 'community of practice'. This entails getting together with others who share your concerns and passion for outdoor and informal education. Membership of a community of practice is an intrinsic part of being fully professional. Making such a commitment to join a 'community of practice' is one reason why becoming an outdoor and adventure educator is more than 'doing a job'. It is, as Steiner reminds us, like all branches of teaching, a calling, a craft more privileged than most because it seeks 'to awaken in another human being powers, dreams beyond one's own; to induce in others a love for that which one loves; to make one's inward present their future; this is a threefold adventure like no other' (2003: 183–184). Within the context of outdoor education, to teach is a transcendental opportunity to share your love of nature and the activities you hold dear; it is a privilege beyond calculation. If you do not truly love nature and the outdoors, are indifferent to the activities you share with others, and do not delight in associating with people from many and varied backgrounds, ultimately no amount

of play-acting will conceal those truths from your companions. Authenticity is the bedrock upon which good teaching resides. Consequently not all are fitted for it. The narcissistic individuals obsessed with status and wealth and those afraid to confront truth and defend it against all comers are amongst the many unlikely to make good educators.

Finally informal educators must, as Brew (1946) stressed, be of themselves interesting, not boring or dull, and trustworthy people whom others will freely spend their time. Sensitivity to shifts in the social and cultural environment they operate in is essential for others to respect their judgement and opinions. Simply being ‘around’ is never enough, nor is the random dispensing of experiences, information and activities. Being an informal educator requires one to study the lived experiences of those they work with and alongside. They must be conscious of the influences of race, sexuality and gender. For example, in the case of the latter Estes and Ewert (1988) found women engaging with outdoor education typically looked for spiritual development, whereas males more often sought challenge and adventure. Witman reported that women valued ‘trust activities’, whereas males valued those related to ‘power and dominance’ (1995: 134). Such variations are not set in stone, but practitioners must always be sensitive to the possibility of their presence. Also practitioners should be aware, as Brown and Mitchell caution, that when individuals join an outdoor programme they do not leave all their ‘troubles and social ills behind’ but often bring with them ‘a baggage of problems and tensions’ (1991: 1). For outdoor and adventure educators, for example, this means constantly ‘making themselves ready’ for the next group; if it comprises young carers, they need to know something about how that responsibility impinges on the young person’s lifestyle and life chances. Some young carers may have no desire to discuss what this involves, but others may wish to unburden themselves to a relative stranger. Either way, the outdoor educator must be prepared. If the party is from Neath, Nottingham, Nigeria or Newry, the outdoor educator should find out something of the history and socio-economic background of the place to unearth points of shared reference and to ensure they respond appropriately during the conversations that will invariably arise. Failure to undertake basic research may result in irreparable offence occurring which will make it difficult, even impossible, to work effectively with the party. At every level outdoor and adventure educators, like colleagues in other settings, must pay meticulous attention to the presentation of self in order to be taken seriously. Much as they will seek to convey the appropriate demeanour and arrive correctly attired for an activity, so equally they must arrive intellectually equipped if they wish to be listened to and their opinions respected.

## **What is informal learning?**

Earlier the origins of ‘education’ were reviewed but no definition of ‘learning’ offered. So before discussing informal learning a brief definition of ‘learning’ may be helpful. In essence learning is the process by which we ‘come to know ourselves and the world around us’ (Oakeshott, 1991: 35). It comprises both doing – learning for ourselves – and receiving – learning from others including teachers and professionals such as outdoor educators. Learning takes many forms, but whatever the setting, the act of learning requires individuals to actively engage with the process for, as Berry (2011) explains, in the outdoor setting, as much as elsewhere, it is ultimately done by people themselves, rather than for them. Oakeshott sought to capture something of the variegated nature of learning by reminding us it included

*looking, listening, overhearing, reading, receiving suggestions, submitting to guidance, committing to memory, asking questions, discussing, experimenting, practising, taking notes, recording, re-expressing, and so on – anything which does not belie the engagement to think and to understand. (1972: 26)*

Although we learn via these and other means as a consequence of the planned actions of professional educators such as schoolteachers and outdoor educators, we also learn from non-professionals such as parents, friends and neighbours as well as from experiences that are random and accidental. We also learn ceaselessly, if often unconsciously, from being part of the world around us and from solving the problems that beset us. Yet mistakenly we all too readily assume learning ‘has a beginning and an end; that it is best separated from the rest of our activities; and that it is the result of teaching’ (Wenger, 1998: 3). One survey found just a quarter of adults described themselves as a ‘current learner’ (Sargant, 1997). What this ridiculous but understandable response tells us is that most of us only recognise formal inputs as learning and fail to credit the colossal volume of informal learning experiences shaping our lives. It is crucial practitioners grasp that people will be informally learning from the moment they join an outdoor and adventure education programme until they depart, albeit many, perhaps most, will not consciously be aware this is the case, perceiving only the formal instruction as ‘learning’.

Much learning may be unintended and accidental, ‘serendipitous or coincidental with some activity, and largely buried in the context of other tasks’ (Sommerlad, 1999: 16). However it is not always so straightforward. For individuals purposely seek out encounters they believe may proffer a chance to learn. Wordsworth for one walked daily for hours in the countryside partly because he knew that doing so often inspired his writing. Most of us similarly seek out places and people we believe will stimulate reflection and aid our learning. Informal and other educators understand that

process, which is why they organise visits to the countryside, museums, galleries, the theatre and places of social and architectural interest. And it is why outdoor and adventure educators plan their routes so a party might encounter a special vista or building. All this tells us informal learning may be the hoped for product of deliberate planning. This scattergun approach underpins the insertion of specific storylines into soap operas in the hope they will heighten public awareness of an issue as much as it does the placing of public art and information boards in public spaces. Similarly it is held good architecture, like beautiful scenery, can change people for the better, much as bad architecture degrades. It is a concept encapsulated in that wonderful phrase, coined by an Outward Bound worker, that ‘mountains speak for themselves’, educating us whether or not we know it without the need for an intermediary (James, 1980). Henry Morris, who planned the Cambridgeshire Village Colleges, which inspired a minor revolution in school architecture, similarly explained how

*competent teachers and beautiful buildings are of equal importance and equally indispensable. ... We shall not bring about any improvements in standards of taste by lectures and preachings; habitation is the golden method. ... [B]uildings that are well-designed and equipped and beautifully decorated will exercise their potent, but unspoken, influence on those who use them from day-to-day. (1945: 103–104)*

Buildings and the environment are, for good or ill, silent educators. This was why many nineteenth-century educationalists and social reformers, including Octavia Hill, John Ruskin and William Morris, devoted themselves to protecting the countryside, historic buildings and places of natural beauty for future generations, for they believed their destruction equated to the loss of the best of all our teachers. As Ruskin explained:

*My own belief is that the best study of all is the most beautiful; and that the quiet glade of forest, or the nook of a lake shore are when once you pass the multiplication table worth all the schools in Christendom. (1865: 82)*

It is always important to remind ourselves that much of what we enjoy in the world around us survives not through an accident of fate but because reformers founded bodies like the National Trust and Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings and fought for effective planning regulations to protect our environment from despoliation by the greedy, ignorant and selfish. Safeguarding our heritage remains essential because in part because it creates informal routes to knowledge.

## Learning by chance

Clearly informal learning has much in common with informal education, but they are not one and the same. The key difference is that the former involves no individually focussed premeditated intervention by an educator let alone conversation and dialogue. Informal learning emanates from random fortuitous encounters. MacKenzie deliberately taking his newspaper into the lounge of the outdoor centre to read it and thereby encouraging young people to pick up on his ‘stray words’ is an example of informal education. He purposefully behaved as an informal educator. If he had simply left newspapers scattered around the centre for party members to either read or ignore we would classify that as an example of facilitating informal learning. Similarly informal learning may result from a health education poster on the side of a bus, leaflets left in a waiting room or the work of a painter, landscape gardener or architect who hopes what they create may serve to educate, inform and inspire. Whatever the mechanism, the information or vision is communicated indiscriminately and without additional interpretation; no advisor, mentor or informal educator is on hand sharing, supporting or sustaining the educational journey. Individuals may gain an insight and debris will be left behind (Smith, 1994), but that is all that can be hoped for. Informal learning may be a ‘silent random educator’, but the outcomes can be profound. Therefore outdoor and adventure educators, knowing this, should exploit all the fertile openings for informal learning available to them, employing wall space for posters, artwork, maps, photographs and other material for visitors to view, read and study; leaving newspapers, magazines and books to be picked up and borrowed; carefully choosing what music to play; providing well-stocked bookshelves conveniently located with users invited to take home half-read volumes; sourcing local food for meals and including the appropriate details on menus; labeling the plants and trees in gardens; and leaving information sheets relating to local history, flora and fauna, places of interest, writers and artists, geology, farming practices and folk customs scattered about the building to read and take away. As the foregoing list indicates, the potential for informal learning in this context is boundless.

## Conclusion

Outdoor and adventure educators are blessed with abundant opportunities to fulfil their role as educators not least because where they are based is usually, of themselves, special places. Locations that Wordsworth had in mind when writing

*Come forth into the light of things,*

*Let nature be your teacher. (The Tables Turned – 1798)*

Combined with the excitement and challenge of the activities the venues themselves are often places that will conjure up exceptional gateways for informal education. Moreover the daily routine gives staff close proximity to individuals and groups, thereby presenting a rich array of openings for conversation and dialogue. Although outdoor educators may be fulfilling a leadership role, they are rarely obliged to operate within the constraints of the fixed hierarchy, which makes conversation in many other settings artificial and guarded. Yet to seize these possibilities outdoor and adventure educators must be able to first make effective formal presentations to groups in classrooms and beyond. For at times they will be called upon to teach to a set curriculum and present information, ideas, complex procedures and theories in an erudite, accessible and precise manner to others who may be nervous arrivals adjusting to an unfamiliar world. Second, they must be capable of embarking on an educational journey via conversation and dialogue with individuals and groups irrespective of the locale. Whether in the midst of crossing a mountainside, standing on a riverbank, in the depths of a cave or sitting by a campfire, they must possess the vocabulary and knowledge to enable them to express themselves with lucidity and enter into conversation with others on topics not always of their own choosing. That means being sufficiently well educated to help explain the world they are entering and passing through in ways that stimulate the interest of newcomers to it. Finally, as a music teacher must have mastery of their instrument so the outdoor and adventure educator must be similarly skilled and proficient, to a degree that conveys an easy reassuring confidence to those around them, a confidence that confirms to others they are in the presence of someone competent to teach via the medium of outdoor and adventure activities. Their demeanour must speak of this innate ability. Korn captures just how this often-invisible process works in relation to the art of fine furniture making. He explains how over many years he learned about being a maker not just from what people communicated purposely, but also from what they did, how they went about doing it, and the attitudes and beliefs that informed even the most casual conversations (2015: 77).

To teach any subject or craft in that way, including those embedded in outdoor and adventure education, requires dedication and professionalism. Fostering in others confidence on water demands the educator possesses a special belief in their capacity to operate in that environment; similarly to teach the importance of health and safety calls for a demeanour which conveys one's own belief in its value. Simply put, one must believe in the inherent value of what you are doing before you can hope to persuade others to treat it with a similar degree of reverence. As Csikszentmihalyi explains:

*Creative persons differ from one another in a variety of ways, but in one respect they are unanimous. They all love what they are doing. It is not hope of achieving fame or making money that drives them: rather, it is the opportunity to do the work that they enjoy doing. (1996: 107)*

Few educational sectors guarantee more openings for creative endeavour than outdoor and adventure education, and the same can be said of informal education; therefore to join the ranks of those who work in these fields is to embark upon a magnificent journey of self-discovery that, if you wish, will last a lifetime.

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