COLLOQUIA

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Six waves of outdoor education and still in a state of confusion: Dominant thinking and category mistakes

Streszczenie

SPOSOBY MYŚLENIA O OUTDOOR EDUCATION I KATEGORIE BŁĘDÓW

W niniejszej pracy badaniu poddano niektóre z dominujących sposobów myślenia o *outdoor education* w Wielkiej Brytanii oraz przedstawiono sugestie, że myślenie takie może być ograniczone i obejmuje kilka kategorii błędów. Owe ograniczenia i błędy są częściowo wynikiem nieprecyzyjnego aparatu pojęciowego, a także zmian w polityce państwa, w kontekście polityczno-społecznym. Innymi słowy, *outdoor education*, historycznie było nastawione zbyt pragmatycznie i w efekcie doprowadziło to do bałaganu w badaniach oraz rozumieniu *outdoor education*.

Słowa kluczowe: kategorie błędów, *experiential learning*, dezorientacja, jasność koncepcji.

The landscape

Literature in the area of outdoor education is disparate, and while there is a concentration in a handful of journals there are also publications in different journals in what might be considered mainstream education or leisure and recreation journals (Thomas, Potter & Allison 2009). The literature is difficult to summarise as it is written by people who study in different subjects and disciplines and see outdoor education from their different perspectives. These perspectives can be widely categorised as psychology, sociology and philosophy, with a wide range of sub categories too numerous to list at this stage (Thorburn & Allison 2010).

No doubt for some the above will sound somewhat vague and to others axiomatic. It may be useful, then, to point out that these trends in the substantive literature are not evident in the natural sciences to the same extent: for example researchers in astrophysics tend to publish in astrophysics journals, but there are numerous outlets for publications for the social sciences and many have both conceptually and practically overlapping foci (Campbell 2000; Carr 1999). These issues are further complicated when considering the history of outdoor education and the ongoing debates regarding purpose. Even a brief skim over literature on outdoor education leads to a conclusion that the research is weak, easily criticised and typically preaches to the converted (Allison, Davis-Berman & Berman 2011).

By looking at some general historical trends (at least in the UK) and the influence of policy on outdoor education, we can begin to see why the thinking is confused and category mistakes are apparent. Caveats are of course needed – I am trying to offer a broad brush overview here – and there are exceptions and contentions to any such narrative. However, the purpose here is to gain some kind of meta-view rather than a fine grained analysis.

Six Waves of Outdoor Education

My understanding is that it is possible to identify six 'waves' of outdoor education, which are a useful way of summarising historical developments in outdoor education.

1. Exploration. The origins of outdoor education in the UK can be traced back to a history of exploration and the British Empire. These foundations involved travel to discover and map distant lands which also involved some science work (Allison, Stott, Felter & Beames 2011). Examples of this tradition can be found in Arctic and Antarctic exploration and much of the exploration tradition which are based around the Royal Geographical Society. Activities were undertaken at this time and skills developed to enable travel (i.e. as a means) and interestingly some of the people involved in these endeavours were responsible for aspects of the next wave.

2. Personal and Social Development (PSD). Following the above explorations people realised that through the hardships of explorations they grew in ways which were difficult to express but have subsequently become recognised as 'character'. Engaging in exploration and adventurous journeys somehow

contributed to peoples characters or, put another way, contributed to their personal and social development (Allison & Von Wald 2010; Quay, Dickinson & Nettleton 2003). Examples of this can be found in Surgeon Commander George Murray Levick who was part of Scott's 1910–1913 Antarctica expedition and subsequently founded the Public Schools Exploring Society (PSES). Levick also served in both the first and second world wars. Concurrently educators such as Kurt Hahn (imprisoned by Hitler) saw great value in experiences of adversity contributing to developing character traits, such as tenacity, which helped in addressing the decays of society (Veevers & Allison 2011).

3. Environmental Education. The origins of this wave are difficult to identify but an aspect of environmental education runs through outdoor education (Chapman 2007). This can be identified in the days of exploration (such as collecting rock samples in Antarctica) or seeing the environment as a backdrop to adventurous activities. There is of course an overlapping field of environmental education which shares many practices and some different historical foundations such as Leopold in USA and Muir in Scotland/USA (Kaplan 1984).

4. Curriculum connections. In the UK in the 1970s and 1980s the importance of residential experiences gained traction and it became popular for schools to visit a residential outdoor centre for one week to participate in outdoor activities, environmental education and similar activities. These activities were generally connected in some ways to the curriculum that students were following in school and were seen as a way of enriching the curriculum. Such activities were also seen as contributing to young people's personal and social development and often were justified on this basis (Thorburn & Marshall 2014; Thorburn & Allison 2016). (Note that the term PSD has come under some critique for lack of clear definition which seems somewhat ironic given the lack of clarity around the term outdoor education!)

5. Sustainability and Climate Change. In the late 1990s into the 2000s when climate change became politically popular, outdoor education became a way of contributing to an enriched understanding about sustainability (Bonnett 2004). Around this time it is possible to identify changes in terminology from outdoor education to outdoor learning, which can be seen as a politically motivated change. During this time there was also a significant increase in exploration for young people through overseas expeditions which continues to this day.

6. Inter Cultural Education. In more recent years (from around 2005 onwards) several organisations have started to focus on inter- or cross-cultural education (e.g. Outward Bound Peacebuilding) in an attempt to address wide ranging concerns of international relations, wars and civil unrest. Interestingly this focus relates to some of Kurt Hahn's ideals and the subsequent Round Square Schools which were started in his honour in 1966.

While the above is a very UK centric view of outdoor education, these six waves may be useful as a way of thinking about historical influences and continuous waves of changing practice. Indeed, throughout the last c100 years it is possible to trace exploration and outdoor activities as important and regular foci for outdoor education. With this backdrop, we can now consider outdoor education from two other related perspectives: policy surfing and category mistakes.

Policy surfing

One way to understand the history of outdoor education is using sociological theory. American sociologist Kingdon (1995) created a model to understand policy development and in so doing identified three policy streams: problems, policy and politics. He argues that the ways in which problems are identified are normally founded upon beliefs of political actors that the government should do something to address a certain condition. An example of this can be seen in the environmental movement where a concern about children's disconnections to nature has gained traction and become pathologised as 'nature deficit disorder' (Louv 2005). This pathologising might be understood as a political agenda of a lobbying group to maximise attention and encourage politicians to take action to encourage children to spend more time in nature. A problem or condition is identified, a lobby group call for a change in policy to address the condition and the outcome is heavily politicised.

Building on Kingdon's work Boscarino (2009) developed the concept of policy surfing. Her work suggests that it is possible to trace certain movements or practices that change their agendas or the way they present themselves to align with current 'en vogue' policies at local or national level. An obvious example here is climate change and sustainability education which was identified by scientists and then became a political issue. Once politicised, outdoor educators saw an issue that they could address and gain traction / funding. With some adjustments

to practices, different approaches to marketing and new presentations to relevant funding bodies, outdoor education morphed into sustainability education to fit with the emerging and popular 'policy agenda'.

It is possible to see two overlapping policy theories and their relevance to outdoor education. In the first policy is influenced by people identifying a problem or condition of some kind and lobbying to create or change a policy. In the second, policy is created and a field of practice changes their presentation to benefit from the policy and, often, associated funding streams. In practice these two policy theories are not clearly delineated but provide two ways of thinking about aspects of outdoor education which can relate to different contexts. In the Scottish context Baker (2016) has written about policy of outdoor education in more detail.

Dominant thinking – a state of confusion

So far I have identified and summarised six waves of outdoor education in an attempt to offer a meta-view of relevant patterns and trends. I have then suggested that policy streams and policy surfing might inform our understanding of these trends. I want to offer some brief critique of these and suggest that the dominant thinking in the literature has led us to this state of confusion, which I believe are category mistakes and at this stage it will be useful to re-conceptualise outdoor education (Seaman & Coppens 2006).

Combining the six waves and the policy perspective it is possible to understand outdoor education as a heavily politicised, chameleon-like endeavour. In other words, what outdoor education offers is dependent on the socio-political landscape. This is not inherently good or bad. However, one consequence of this chameleon-like character is that outdoor education does not have a principled position in the landscape and is not a subject in the same way as, for example, mathematics or history or chemistry. So what is outdoor education? This seems less clear than ever. Indeed it is hard not to conclude that, when viewed over a period of time, outdoor education is in a state of confusion. One response to this analysis is that outdoor education operates within the socio-political context which is changing and the changing landscape is the source of confusion. However, such a state or degree of confusion is not evident in many other areas of education, leisure, recreation or sport. Another approach is to question the dominant thinking and dominant narratives around outdoor education (Roberts 2008).

The six waves might be one way of thinking about dominant narratives in outdoor education. Another is to think about outdoor education as an alternative to indoor education or to mainstream 'school' education. Such approaches rely on a binary conception of context (indoor vs outdoor) or formal vs. non-formal. The latter approach tends to align outdoor education with youth work – a significant association and contribution to youth work which is often overlooked and undervalued (time and space do not allow for a more detailed explication of outdoor education and youth work here).

The main point here is that the way that outdoor education is conceptualised may be the source of the problem. Put another way, perhaps there is a category mistake underpinning literature, theory and practice that would be helpful to examine.

Category mistakes (or errors) – let's get experiential

A category mistake (or error) is a term originating from Ryle's (1949) seminal work *The concept of mind*, in which he argued against Cartesian dualism and that the source of many confusions is in errors associated with categories. To be more specific, an often cited example offered by Ryle is a visitor to Oxford who sees buildings, libraries, students and professors but still asks 'where is the university?' The visitor considers the University to be an object rather than an abstraction. The source of the confusion is a category mistake.

If we turn our attention to outdoor education with this in mind, we can see that outdoor education is often categorised unhelpfully. If it is seen as 'not indoors' or as 'not formal' then it is defined by what it is *not* rather than what *it is*. Similarly, if outdoor educators subscribe to the chameleon approach which has historically dominated, then categorisation is unlikely to be forthcoming. Policy surfing contributes to the state of confusion as there has been no principled position or consistent philosophy or value that outdoor education as a practice has 'stuck to'. Or, as one student recently put it to me: the only common thing about outdoor education is the use of the term outdoor education.

With a lack of ability to consider outdoor education within any clear category it seems sensible to consider it from another angle as an approach to learning. In considering the six waves the one recurring undercurrent is that an experiential approach to learning is espoused. Regardless of the context or the aims all of

the six waves have placed value on the importance of experience as a source of meaningful learning. This categorisation (as an approach rather than the context or aim of learning) might also be helpful in bringing together views around an approach or pedagogy which places value on the experience and learning emerging from that experience (constructivist learning theory) (Delay 1996).

This categorisation is helpful in focusing on what is of value rather than what people ought to learn (which can lead to criticisms of indoctrination). Such a categorisation, of course, requires educators to think in different ways and to see their role as creating environments where students might be engaged in learning and in being led by the learner rather than learning. It also requires educators to accept that learners might reach conclusions about their values which are different to their educators'.

What I am suggesting is that it may be much more beneficial to focus energy in practice, research, writing and debate on experiential learning than outdoor education. Furthermore, it might be an approach which reduces the energy wasted on academic debates about whether or not environmental education, sustainability education, personal and social development, values education, cross cultural education, outdoor activities or some other term is better or worse or somehow has greater worth than the others.

The term experiential learning accurately describes what is at the heart of my own practices and beliefs, ontological position and epistemic preferences. Perhaps more importantly though, I believe that such a term describes a principle to which other terms can be appended to communicate practices with a greater degree of clarity. For example outdoor experiential learning speaks to the context in which practice takes place, outdoor adventurous experiential learning speaks to the context and the approach that one might anticipate, as does outdoor environmental experiential learning, or values education through experiential learning, and so on.

In this paper I have concentrated on a UK perspective. Recognising that this paper will appear in a Polish journal and (hopefully) have an international readership my intention is to raise some questions and provoke thinking that might help other countries or regions avoid falling into the same category mistakes which I believe to have happened in the UK and thus maximise the benefits of experiential learning to a wide range of individuals in a diversity of contexts.

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