MOBILE TECHNOLOGIES, SOCIAL MEDIA

WHERE TO F

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This is the fourth and final article in this series that has presented some of my PhD data around the use and impact of mobile technologies and social media at the Outward Bound Trust. This series has covered a lot of ground and this article synthesises some of the study's findings, as well as providing a couple of recommendations and some final thoughts on the place and use of mobile technologies and social media in practice.

Across the series, I have asked questions for the sector to consider, as well as presented data on key aspects of the study. Some of these are:

1. "Are personal biases or generational gaps shaping how technology is perceived in outdoor education practice? (1)".

2. Data has been discussed in relation to instructors recognising young people's mobile technologies as portable comfort zones (2).

3. Online media and gaming such as Netflix, TikTok, and Minecraft have been recognised to frame how young people interpret and interact with nature (3).

Alongside these points, a key finding from the study has centred on most instructors preferring their practice to be phone-free and that young people disconnecting from their technologies during their residential experience enhanced learning. However, through focus groups and observations with young people at Outward Bound's Ullswater, Loch Eil, and Aberdovey centres, young people regularly shared with me how they struggled with what was often their first adolescent experience of being "phoneless".

Interestingly, this sense of struggle came from young people not being able to speak with home. As Ellie and Blake (all participant names in this article are pseudonyms) told me during a focus group at one of the centres, "it's just anger, I get really angry. You can get good signal, but then if you move only slightly it'll just go off and you'll be in the middle of a conversation" (Ellie) and "I'm pretty mad, umm, because I can't talk to like any of my mates or any of my family" (Blake). As a researcher in this space, I frequently asked myself whether young people having their connectivity disrupted for extended periods of time was generating appropriate spaces for

learning. Certainly, for some young people at least, not being able to speak with a parent defined their Outward Bound experience, and informed my stance that not having access to home can distract from the purposes of an outdoor education residential.

Of course, as I described in the third article in this series (3), alongside seeking connectivity with home, young people readily interpreted nature through the lens of their online environments. Particularly prominent were spaces such as Minecraft and Netflix which, across all three centres I visited, featured as a way for young people to make sense of the landscape. Such a finding encourages us to look beyond the 'yes technology – no technology' binary in practice and to recognise that young people arrive at a residential outdoor education centre as digitally entangled citizens; these networked environments and the ways in which they shape contemporary youth culture cannot simply be switched off.

Tensions in the data

With young people's lack of connectivity with home generating a sense of distraction and online environments underpinning how nature was engaged with, it was intriguing to compare this data with the perceptions of instructors. The interviewed instructors often recognised young people as being addicted to their mobile technologies, represented in Helen's interview when she told me how Outward Bound courses are "almost like a bit of rehab away from your phone" and that "I just think, it's just a detox, get rid of it [technology]". Alongside this, instructors regularly described young people's parental contact during an Outward Bound programme as a "nightmare" with Lisa telling me that "probably the worst, worst [repeated] thing to come of it is that parents connect to the young person on a two-day or a five-day course".

As I examined the data, the anger and emotion young people expressed around not being able to speak with parents generated a sense of tension in relation to the identified benefits of residential outdoor education that instructors shared with me. My PhD thesis covers this in significant depth, but in summary, one article provided foundational insight into young people's emotive responses to experiences of connectivity disruption (4). Through recognising that mobile technologies and social media construct a sense of always-on connected availability, Taylor and Bazarova (2021) suggest that significant others (in this case young people's parents) are always contactable and that this provides a sense of security and protection. In other words, being able to immediately contact a parent can generate a sense of wellbeing.

If we are to recognise a young person's connection to home as an avenue that maintains wellbeing, then the tension present in the study will need to be examined further. The data I have generated is exploratory and has lifted the lid on some of the key issues encompassing mobile technologies and social media in residential outdoor education. What has struck me is that this is a complex aspect of outdoor education practice and that there is not a "one size fits all" approach that I can recommend that will provide a quick fix. That said, especially in relation to the extended time young people spent at home due to Covid-19, it is important for us to recognise that young people's networked baselines (e.g., their entanglement with online worlds)

will likely shape how residential experiences are interpreted and navigated. Alongside this, I think it will be important for us to ask whether complete disconnection generates a learning environment for young people where they feel supported within residential experiences where they are often away from home for the first time.

A couple of recommendations for practice

I believe that my PhD raises important considerations moving forward for Outward Bound and for the residential sector more broadly. Historically, we have often sought to remove technologies from young people and have frequently recognised that the presence of screens distracts from being in the outdoors. Given the tension present between instructor perspectives and young people's experiences, it may be necessary to incorporate continuous professional development packages for instructors which extend beyond considerations on how and/or whether to use technology in practice. It may also be that we can extend these discussions and explore the ways in which contemporary youth cultures are entangled with online environments in ways which further enhance learning development and transfer. These forms of training may enhance the impact a residential experience could have on young people as they transfer their learning back to their always-connected home environments. Of course, if aspects such as connection to nature are an important learning outcome, and therefore considered a reason to remove technology, training packages may also acknowledge that connection to home may enhance a young person's wellbeing and sense of security whilst nature connection is developed.

As I have examined the literature in relation to young people's access to technology and the relationships this may have with wellbeing, I was interested in an update to the United Nations convention on the rights of the child in relation to access to the digital environment (5). In one section, they recognise that "information and communications media, including digital and online content, perform an important function" for young people, and go on to state that access to information through technology is a right for a young person and "that the exercise of that right is restricted only when it is provided by law" (Para. 50). Recognising young people's access to technology as a right that is protected by the United Nations may require greater scrutiny. In particular, practitioners and outdoor education providers may need to consider how their practices and policies around young people's access to mobile technologies intersects with international legal precedent.

Final thoughts

My time spent at Outward Bound in 2022 was a life-shaping experience. Although I was there to generate data around mobile technologies and social media, each week reinforced the importance of these experiences for young people. Whilst my findings provide some key considerations for Outward Bound and the broader sector, I left the fieldwork component of my study sure of one thing: Residential outdoor education is transformational for young people. Across each week at the Ullswater, Loch Eil, and Aberdovey centres, I saw young people flourishing, engaging in activities that had a profound effect on their self-confidence, relationships, and connections to the natural world. My sense is that young people's mobile technologies can enhance these factors. I also think this can be achieved whilst holding onto the historical foundations of residential outdoor education, whilst ensuring that experiences away from home remain relevant for young people whose education and future employment are becoming more-and-more digital ▲

For more informatin on this series or to find out more about the author's research, visit ed.ac.uk/profile/jack-reed-student.

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