

# ASSESSING QUALITY IN OUTDOOR LEARNING



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How do you judge quality? The answer to that question will likely vary depending on a wide number of factors that relate to what is being assessed (e.g., a product, an experience, a facility, a service, etc.), expectations, and the meeting of needs. These perceptions may be influenced by contextual factors such as cultural background, societal structures and personal experiences, leading to highly subjective views.

Understanding the idea of quality in outdoor learning (OL) can therefore be challenging. The term itself can refer to how good or bad something is or be used to claim a high standard - within the outdoor sector there are multiple interpretations of high quality which is reflected in the wide range of available frameworks, qualifications, accreditations, and awards. Looking from the 'outside-in' this can be seen as a lack of coherence and, to those tasked with making decisions around educational aims or evaluating programme quality, somewhat bewildering.

In the UK, as with many other Western countries, there is an increasing emphasis on inspection and outcome frameworks to gauge the value of an intervention. While it can be argued that reducing everything to a set of tick boxes misses an essential emotional element of the outdoor experience, such frameworks are a part of the accountability culture that currently dominates our society. They also serve to break down an overall experience, product or service into manageable chunks that can help participants, practitioners and observers make valid judgements, helping them to understand just what it is that leads them to recognise quality.

In their recent book 'Outdoor Learning Across the Curriculum' (see page 36 for a review of this book), Beames, Higgins, Nicol and Smith (1) attempt to address this challenge by providing teachers with a series of questions to ask providers as a route to assessing quality. They are aimed at schools who are talking to a residential provider, but have relevance across all aspects of OL provision:

1. *What theories or educational frameworks do the providers use to support learning?*
2. *What qualifies the provider's staff to deliver the aims of the visit?*
3. *What are the educational purposes of the timetable, how are the activities appropriate for achieving the aims, and what evidence is there for this?*

This article proposes a conceptual framework that helps providers to answer these questions and offers a range of ways of looking at quality of provision. Drawing on a model of quality assessment widely used in the health sector and combining the idea of a 'theory of change' (2), it brings together ideas from existing practice, publications, and academic theory to create a new model for assessing quality in OL.

## Theory of change

A theory of change (ToC) is the thinking behind the change a programme or service wants to achieve. It makes very clear the rationale which the work is based upon and sets out the link between the needs in a specific context and the impact a particular programme or service is intended to have on those needs. Developing a ToC begins with understanding the gap that the programme is trying to address, the background needs of the people that you are intending to work with and the organisational and personal values that drive the provision, collectively referred to as the context of the programme. This, in turn, leads to an appreciation of the longer-term sustained impact that the programme is trying to contribute to, something that participants can only achieve for themselves and that may be influenced by numerous other experiences and interventions beyond the specifics of the OL programme.

OL programmes, through facilitated activities and experiences (the mechanisms of change), can lead to specific outcomes which contribute to the sustained long-term impact. The 'mechanisms of change' created by providers of OL include not just the activities, but the conditions that will contribute to the outcomes achieved by participants that can be measured. Underpinning the ToC is an appreciation of 'quality', which considers consistency across different practitioners and participants and depends on the criteria agreed to gauge success.

A ToC helps to articulate why an intervention works and sets out a framework to help evaluate its effectiveness - a recommended strategy to improve the evidence supporting OL (3). There are obvious benefits in being able to justify OL approaches at all levels of decision-making, but the primary reason is to increase the impact on the lives of the people with whom we work. It is not just about proving the value and effectiveness of an intervention, but also about improving its quality.

## Defining quality

Any assessment of quality must be based on a shared understanding of what quality is. The idea of quality is highly subjective and essentially a set of value judgements that reflect a person or organisation's point of view. As such, it is challenging to arrive at a definition that meets every stakeholder's expectations, especially in a field as broad as outdoor learning. The criteria that are used to define quality will influence the methods used to assess OL.

## What can be assessed?

In the clinical healthcare sector, the Donabedian model (4) is widely used for measuring the quality of care. The model proposes three aspects of provision that can be assessed to inform a judgement of quality - structure (the physical and organisational characteristics of the provision), processes (what is delivered to the participants) and outcomes (the effects the programme has) - that have relevance to the outdoor learning sector.

The model can be presented as a linear sequence and, thus, is similar to the structure of a ToC. Designing a ToC is often achieved by working backwards from the desired long-term outcomes to arrive at the activities and conditions that will create the best chance of achieving the programme specific outcomes - so that is where we'll start.

Outcomes, both short-term and longer-term (impact), provide the ultimate assessment of effectiveness of an OL intervention. The English Outdoor Council's definition of High Quality Outdoor Learning (5) captures ten categories of outcomes that can be used as a framework to assess effectiveness and has been widely used across the OL sector. Other frameworks can be applied, for example, through specific school curricula or syllabi, outcomes frameworks or identified needs. However, issues exist around capturing meaningful outcomes data relating to the highly subjective areas of feelings, emotions and attitudes (6). Furthermore, outcomes and impact can, in certain contexts, be difficult to measure and attribute specifically to the OL intervention in question. The second part of the Donabedian model that can be assessed involves looking at the processes involved. What is involved in such an assessment demands careful consideration - what may be appropriate in one context may be less so in another.

Teaching and youth work standards, school inspection criteria, apprenticeship frameworks and National Governing Body criteria all offer potential solutions. For those assessing the quality of processes it is most clearly represented by what they see and feel on the ground, and will broadly cover aspects of planning for learning, the relationships between leaders and participants, how the learning is facilitated, how the learning environment is managed, and how learning is assessed and progressed.

From a provider perspective, it may also be beneficial to include aspects such as programme continuity and flow, inclusion, sustainability, continuity, adaptability and reactivity to change, etc. Work on this aspect, commissioned by the IOL, is currently underway based on the idea of a common framework applicable to all approaches and settings (see page 6).

The settings where the outdoor learning takes place, through their structures and systems, provide the third source of quality assessments within the Donabedian model. Information is relatively accessible and can be checked or assessed against agreed criteria.

Statutory schemes, such as the UK's Adventure Activity Licensing Authority (AALA) (7) inspections of adventurous activities, are supplemented by a range of externally assessed voluntary accreditations (for example, the Learning Outside the Classroom Quality Badge, 8), covering broadly similar areas of provision including health and safety policies and procedures, emergency procedures, use of vehicles, staff competence, safeguarding, accommodation and data protection. Some schemes, but not all and to varying degrees, also assess teaching and learning, overlapping with the process domain.

The Donabedian quality assessment model can be reframed in the context of outdoor learning (see Figure 1 on page 30).



## Linking the elements together: theory of change

Combining the three elements of outcomes, process and structure with a theory of change provides a framework that addresses the potential criticisms of each element of the Donabedian model when viewed in isolation. Donabedian (4) highlighted the connection between means (processes) and ends (outcomes), where the outcomes 'are themselves the means to still further ends'. In the language of a theory of change, this is the connection between what happens during the programme, the outcomes that are achieved through it and the sustained longer-term impact that the programme outcomes contribute to.

The processes and structures from the Donabedian model are the 'mechanisms of change' within the ToC that contribute to achieving the desired outcomes. The context aspect of the ToC emphasises the uniqueness of each intervention and allows for the particular blend of outcomes, process and structure that is being applied.

The model (Figure 1) provides a conceptual framework that enables an understanding of quality in the context of the desired change. The ToC is positioned at the centre of the model and links the three domains of structure, process and outcomes. The double headed arrows illustrate how evaluation of each of the domains can influence the others through application of learning.



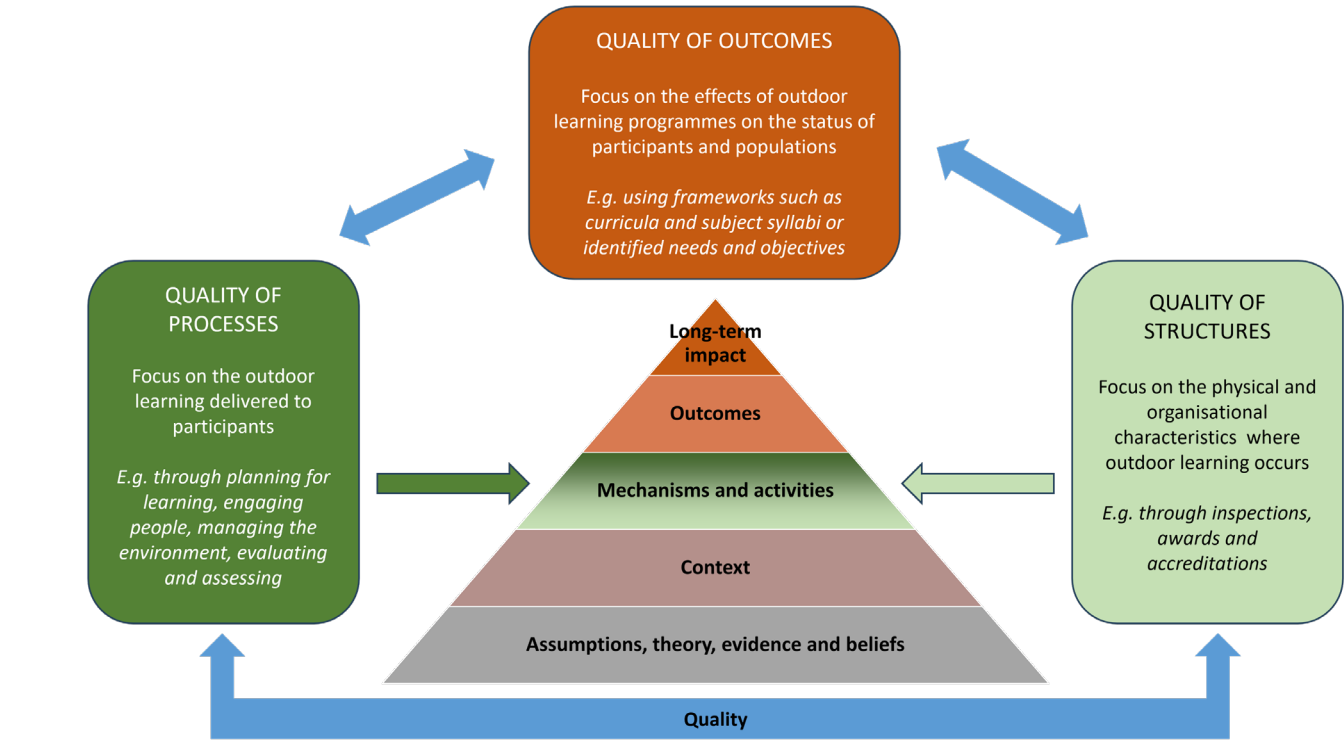


Figure 1. A conceptual model for assessing quality in outdoor learning.

Applying the model

The model can be applied to specific contexts across the outdoor learning sector and can be used by users and providers alike to frame quality. Other users might include people commissioning outdoor learning experiences who may be teachers or visit leaders tasked with the experience itself, or they may be advisers or others interested in judging quality. The second group, providers, includes all those offering services to clients, but could also include, for example, schools who deliver their own outdoor learning.

As a person organising an OL experience and looking to engage a provider, the model offers a framework to guide the decision-making process. If a provider is able to share a theory of change with the organiser it should address the thought processes that underpin the programme offer. External accreditations, evidence of programme evaluations and staff competence combine to create an overall picture of quality. Once the programme is running, a focus on delivery is possible ‘in the moment’ and many judgements about repeat bookings will be made during this phase.

For a provider, the model sets out the areas that a potential client or commissioning body would be interested in and is likely to ask questions about. Developing a theory of change encourages a close look at what is done and why, and helps other audiences to understand it as well. It also provides the basis for an evaluation framework, enabling providers to gather data that helps to both prove the value of the chosen approach and to identify areas for improvement. The underlying aspect of quality that supports a theory of change is critical for translating theory into practice – evaluating outcomes is less valuable if the key elements of practice (i.e., the mechanisms of change) are not present in the first place.

For the wider sector, the model provides a framework that demonstrates awareness and understanding of the issues underpinning quality in outdoor learning. For sector professional bodies it offers a common approach to quality assessment that allows for specific approaches and contexts. Beyond the sector, for example at government level, the model provides a basis for developing guidance for non-specialists with an interest in assessing and evaluating quality.

Summary and final thoughts

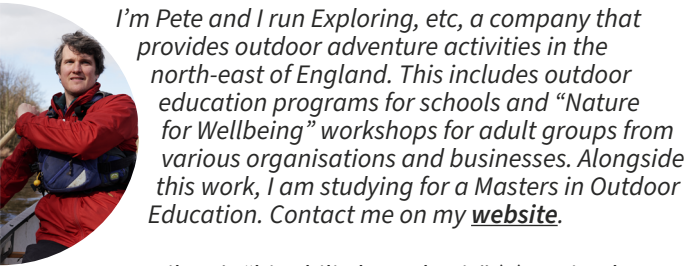
Creating a theory of change helps providers to articulate what they do and why they do it. It draws together the evidence they base their programmes on and makes clear the assumptions and beliefs that underpin their work. By addressing the three different quality domains of structure, process and outcomes, providers will be in a good position to make a strong case for the value and credibility of their work. As a result, users will be better able to make informed decisions regarding the quality of provision.

Evaluating quality is challenging and can be controversial. The question, ‘do we value what we measure or measure what we value?’ is highly relevant - the current trend towards the measurement of outcomes that are judged to be desirable is seemingly at odds with an assessment of quality that focuses on process. The discussion is valuable and the framework offered here, while not being the only solution, highlights some of the ways that quality can be judged. It is intended to be flexible enough to allow users to focus on the aspects of provision that they value most and will hopefully prompt further debate ▲

References

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# CANOEING FOR NATURE CONNECTION



*I’m Pete and I run Exploring, etc, a company that provides outdoor adventure activities in the north-east of England. This includes outdoor education programs for schools and “Nature for Wellbeing” workshops for adult groups from various organisations and businesses. Alongside this work, I am studying for a Masters in Outdoor Education. Contact me on my [website](#).*

E.O. Wilson’s “biophilia hypothesis” (1) posits that we have an evolved affinity with life. This potentially explains why canoeists are drawn to time on the river. Britain’s rivers can be rich with life. They are habitats for a wealth of species including river mosses, a whole world in miniature of invertebrates and dippers that eat them, freshwater fish being preyed on by kingfishers or otters, salmon spawning on clean gravels, and, in the very best rivers, the very rare and special pearl mussels.

Drawing on Wilson’s work, Lumber and colleagues (2) have identified five pathways to nature connectedness. They are contact, emotion, beauty, meaning and compassion. Perhaps surprisingly, their research found that traditional ways to engage the public with nature are less effective, such as sharing facts about nature or teaching people to identify species. It is not that learning about nature isn’t important, but the scientific attitude to nature seems to necessitate a distancing, an objectivity, that separates us from nature. Instead, the five pathways appeal to sensory perception, emotions, artistic aesthetics and a person’s moral compass. Before we try to understand nature objectively, we should fall in love with it subjectively. To try the five pathways out for size, this article will explore their use in the context of river canoeing.

Senses

Canoeing can help us engage with nature through the senses. Moments of calm and rhythmic movement lend themselves to a mindful experience of the river surroundings. Simply watching and listening to running water has a certain soothing, hypnotic effect. One minute there’ll be a waft of wild garlic, the next a flash of orange and blue from a kingfisher. Canoeing is a multi-sensory experience. A canoeist is constantly responding to their senses: the balance of the boat, the wind, the water. They are in a constant interplay of perception and action. If this goes wrong for you, and you capsize, you will at least enjoy another sensory experience...swimming.

Emotion

Spotting an otter can make the hairs on the back of your neck stand up. There is an emotional heft to being close to a wild animal and being privileged enough to spend time in their presence. Life on the river can inspire a range of emotions. For better nature connection, we must become more aware of how nature makes us feel. Do we feel awe or humility in the face of thousands of gallons of water tumbling headlong towards the sea? Do salmon jumping up a weir make us feel empathy for the struggle of life? The river environment can bring a feeling of vitality. A splash of water to the face after neatly negotiating a rapid can be invigorating. In some languages, such as Scottish Gaelic, there are words that beautifully embody these sentiments. We need to build ourselves a personal vocabulary for how nature is making us feel.

Beauty

For greater nature connection, canoeists can make space to dwell on what we find beautiful. The physical beauty of a river has inspired many artists across the years. Water reflections bring a harmony between land and sky. Notice what it is about the forms, colours and shapes that we find pleasing. Canoeists might stop to sketch, paint, photograph or film what catches their eye.

Meaning

We connect with nature when we use it to communicate concepts symbolically. Rivers are rich in symbolism and meaning. Baptism rituals use rivers to symbolise spiritual cleansing and purification. Rivers can symbolise boundaries and division. Crossing a river can represent transition to a new phase of life. Turbulent water can represent the mercuriality of emotions. The flow of a river can represent the passage of time. The mystery of what is hidden beneath the surface of a river can be symbolic of the hidden depths of the human psyche. Canoeists might reflect on their experiences through creative, metaphorical language, whether they regale their exploits in the pub or pen poetry.

Compassion

Nature can be valued moralistically. We have a deeper relationship when we care and then act to look after the places we love. Canoeists take part in the **Big Paddle Cleanup** or just incorporate some litter picking into their usual paddles. They campaign against river pollution from industry, agriculture and sewage overflows. They help remove invasive species such as Himalayan balsam. They help monitor the health of the river environment with citizen science water quality monitoring such as the **Riverflies** kick sampling surveys. 65 river catchments in the British Isles have a **River Trust**.

Conclusion: Down the river

Our fortunes are inextricably bound up with the fortunes of the ecosystems we are a part of. When we turn on a tap, it is easy to feel disconnection with the rivers and wildlife that may have played a role in bringing us fresh water. The human exploitation of the natural world has happened in part because of this type of disconnection. We must seek to connect with nature, not just because it’s good for our health and wellbeing, but because it may help us return to living in sympathy with our ecology. Wilson (1984, p1) goes further, saying “our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents” ▲

References

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