

capturing the spark

In this opinion piece, Matthew Harrington-Keeton explores how the metaphor of starting a fire might prove useful when making incremental improvements to an outdoor learning programme



Author profile

Matthew Harrington-Keeton, MSc, ProfGCE, QTLS, MSET, APOL, is a Lead Instructor at Essex Outdoors; previously working in adult education, he consistently advocates for developing the quality of outdoor learning experiences through diffractive practice and holistic development of practitioners.

Working in a busy outdoor education centre can sometimes mean it is easy to forget the true purpose of outdoor learning – to develop and inspire a new generation of people with a passion for and enjoyment of the outdoors. To achieve this, it is important to consider the fundamental building blocks of an outdoor education experience. In my role as a Lead Instructor for a large outdoor centre in Essex, I am always looking for ways to improve the service we provide. For this, I like to adapt the metaphor of lighting a fire - we need to create a safe and welcoming space to allow learning (finding a space), adopt an activity which engages and affects participants (gathering sticks for fuel) and set the fire in motion (creating a spark to ignite the fire).

While not all-encompassing, each element provides a clear structure for thinking about what might develop and improve outdoor learning. Although each component can be considered separately, the interactions between them can also be useful when planning and delivering outdoor learning. This article will consider each element and identify opportunities for developing learning outcomes and improvement within outdoor learning.

Finding a space

A safe fire can be built in the smallest corner of a much bigger, messier and expansive environment. Outdoor learning spaces are inherently messy, but we too can find that corner of ground which is safe, stable and ripe for learning. As practitioners, we should consider the value of debris, unstable spaces and less-than-perfect weather conditions; these elements can be key in developing spaces where learning can happen and curiosity can be piqued.

Outdoor learning happens in a physical space, preferably outdoors and likely somewhere green, blue or in urban greenspace. However, as we know, the most significant aspect of a physical space is the meaning that practitioners and participants attribute to it – be it land, water or sky. In my experience, I have seen a growing trend to disconnect outdoor learning from the uniqueness and nuance of physical spaces – activities are often used which are disconnected from the place they're undertaken.

However, I strongly believe that good quality outdoor learning is firmly connected to its location (1). As practitioners, we should consider how to embed physical space into our practice – the way we use learning theories. For practitioners, I feel it is essential to consider how social, physical, geological and environmental histories coalesce to create our participants' environment. For example, when operating in a woodland,



consider what trees are around you and how they got to being there, where the watercourses come from in the woods and how they have affected the biome of that woodland, what the soil is like and why it is like that - these are all crucial factors that can be infused into outdoor learning. Identifying notable features in the physical space and the impact that humans have had on them allows outdoor learning to connect with sustainable development – by demonstrating the human impact on outdoor spaces, learners can begin to understand alternative ways of being in physical spaces.

The physical spaces we work with in outdoor learning need not look tidy and managed. We can build safe and inclusive outdoor learning spaces where we might build a fire - in one corner of a much messier and more expansive environment - which is ready to explore and ripe for learning.

Gathering sticks for fuel

Finding sticks is a necessary endeavour when building a fire, as is moderating how and when you use them – add too many too quickly and the fire will die out, add too few too slowly and there is nothing to carry the flame. As outdoor learning practitioners, we can view our activities as the fuel for our fire. Developing progressive challenges which are suited to the needs of the group and deploying them at the correct time are fundamental requirements in a positive outdoor learning environment.

When fuelling a fire, the intended outcome is a stable and consistent flame. In outdoor learning, we too start with the end in mind – learning outcomes allow us to progress with stability and consistency towards desired targets. I believe that such consistency can come from practitioners aligning their own values with desired learning outcomes. Understanding the value that underpins practice is an important first step to this process – trying asking, 'what is the guiding belief that can be felt through your practice?'. From here, build an incisive question (2) that gets to the heart of your activities - 'what would (activity) look like as a product of (value?)'. For example, if we ask 'what would walking look like as a product of empowerment?' we can gain greater clarity on what actions and activities might enable us to work within our values. We may, for example, encourage people to take an active role in planning the walk, get them to decide when and for how long we should take a break, encourage them to practice various navigational techniques etc.

Through this mode of practice, I feel it is easier to gain the consistency and clarity needed to fuel the fire of outdoor learning appropriately – maintaining the flame by keeping the end goal(s) in mind.

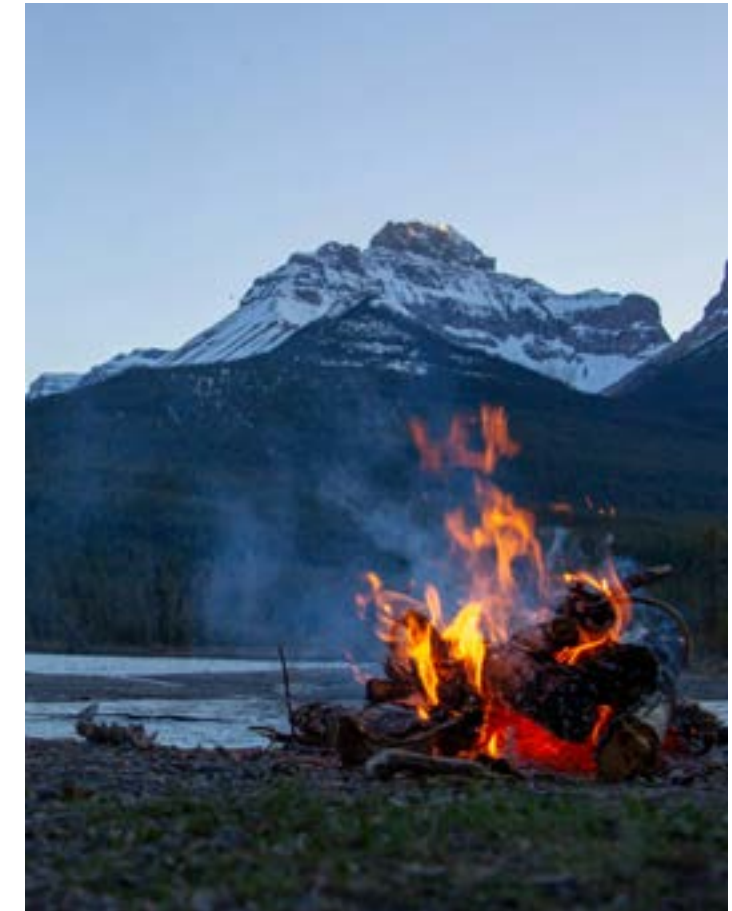
Creating the spark to ignite the fire

It's easy to underestimate the impact of good instruction on how well a session goes. The spark which truly lights the fire can often be found in positive connection between the practitioner and participants. I believe that learning names and knowing who participants are as people is a vitally important step in this process. Fostering a connection between individuals allows us to build relationships that encourage participation, starting from the moment an instructor meets their participants. Distilling what makes a great instructor is a challenging task; no one thing makes an instructor great, all outdoor professionals bring something unique to their work. These unique qualities are integral to finding the spark.

A spark does not necessarily rely on the technical skills or qualifications of an outdoor instructor, but often on the human skills. How to listen, engage, present, speak, act, collaborate and think are fundamentally important to outdoor learning and are skills which can be learned and trained. However, for

new people coming into the industry, these human skills are often not taught or discussed in the same way as technical skills. Arguably, these skills are those that people innately possess and should pick up throughout their lives, but this isn't true of everyone. Teaching these skills is essential in developing an inclusive workforce, so even people without the opportunity to develop these skills in earlier life can succeed in an outdoor learning career.

All it takes is a moment of positive connection to ignite the spark!



Conclusion

Finding a space, gathering sticks and creating the spark – as a framework, I am using this to consider the parts that make up the activity sessions we offer across our outdoor centre and how we might make incremental improvements to our practice in each of those three areas. How can a connection to physical spaces be encouraged? How can the activity be more aligned with our values? How can we develop the human skills of our instructors? Importantly, I don't think these need to be dramatic, revolutionary changes. The theory of marginal gains – which is the idea that lots of little changes can add up to significant change – inspires me. Thinking about outdoor education sessions through the lens of this fire model and identifying minor changes that can be made in each of the areas outlined within this article may be helpful in a range of contexts. I'm curious to know how this model applies to other settings, so if you do try using this model to develop your practice, please reach out to start the conversation ▲

References

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