

Above and Beyond...

by Aled Edwards

We have all been there...at the top of a mountain seeing the clouds dissolve in front of you revealing a stunning view, running down a mountainside and exploding out the cloud base, free as a bird, floating through a magnificent secret gorge...whatever it was, wherever it was, we have all been there. That 'wow' moment that can come with being somewhere truly special, seeing something amazing, be it alone, or sharing it with the people around you. To some, whatever their beliefs, it is proof that there is a higher power at work. To others, it is a powerful feeling of being alive, of being part of something special.



A couple of years ago our school outdoor education department got an interesting request from the school chaplain. He wanted us to see how we could explore these 'wow' moments a little deeper. The days we designed have been running for three years now, and have drawn out some interesting and thought provoking ideas from the young people involved. The purpose of this article is not to be a 'this is how it needs to be done' report, it is intended to share with you what we have done to try and engage our pupils in what is an interesting subject.

We decided to focus our efforts on Years 7 and 8, with a day for each year group.

These days are designed to go hand in hand with their regular outdoor education days, which gets each year group out in the outdoors for a day every other week. They are a chance to reflect on the experiences they have had during their outdoor education lessons so far, and any 'wow' moments they have had.

For Year 7, the day revolves around what it means to be an animal, and how that relates to being human. We do

activities that involve the pupils hiding away in a forest using camouflage, running as fast as they can to compare themselves to the speeds of other animals, producing an animal mask that they design themselves, and a test of strength: camouflage, speed and strength being things that animals use to stay alive in the wild. Lunch is always fun as well, as we try to go back to basics, food that can be eaten by hand and be involved in...chicken legs, corn on the cob, bread, baked potatoes...with everyone sitting around big tables to encourage conversation and interaction.

In the afternoon, we run workshops designed to explore what it means to be alive. Pupils bake bread, produce a song about their experiences in the morning sessions, and take part in a play based around giving thanks. The bread, music and drama are then shared with everyone else at the end of the day.

In a school following a religious ethos, it is natural to lean towards giving thanks to God in these afternoon sessions, for all our 'wow' moments in the outdoors, and for life. However, it is also wide open to exploring what it means to be a part of such a wonderful world, and what we can do to better experience it - sharing in a community, conserving the places



Another activity focuses on decision making. We use a hashing trail for this, which makes the group make decisions about direction along a trail. This is then linked back to what decisions need to be made in everyday life, and where these decisions may take us.

The other activities focus on the environment around us - what fits in and what does not fit in? What are the implications of our actions on where we live and the living environment around us? And looking at using our senses to experience the world around us, we use a nightline for this.



Food is again a 'pick it up with your hands' affair, all outdoors still, and we then all get on to the beach as a year group to build a volcano on the sand, and get a fire going inside it. For those of you who have never done this, go and do it! There is something remarkably chilled about sitting on the beach, looking out to sea, next to a smoking sand volcano. Smoke has been used by religions and spiritual ceremonies for years, and it is easy to see why when doing this. The chaplain has written a special 'Volcano Liturgy' for this event!

So that each day starts with pupils briefed and focused and aware of what to expect, the chaplain gives each of the year groups a 20 minute assembly a day or so before the actual 'spirituality' day. It is also important that all the pupils involved have an opportunity to feed back on their experiences of the day, and we have found that using the model of the 'World Café' is very effective way to do this.

The hope is that after these days, pupils can continue to reflect on these 'wow' moments, with prompting and further input, through into their Year 9 and 10 outdoor education lessons.

Their experiences in Year 9 include traditional outdoor education activities, along with the opportunity to complete their John Muir Discovery Award and Bronze Duke of Edinburgh's Award. Year 10 sees all pupils train for and take part in a week long expedition in the outdoors, which for some is just one long 'wow' moment. These expeditions could be a wilderness canoe journey, a sea kayak journey, a journey through the mountains, or underground. Either way, they act as a fitting end to a journey of discovery we hope we have started with them during Year 7. ■

where we find these 'wow' moments, trying to understand why these moments make us feel so alive...and if they make us feel part of something special.

Year 8 are taken to Newborough Forest on Anglesey, which to me is a magical place to be. It has views across to the mountains of Snowdonia, a broad expanse of beach, and a remote spit of land, sometimes an island, on which stood the church of St Dwynwen. In some places it can feel wild and old, while in others it can feel warm and welcoming. A great place to explore 'wow' moments!

We run a series of activities with this year group, building on what they have done on their outdoor education days, and during their Year 7 'spiritual' day. The first of these activities is a solo activity, which involves the group going out from a set point to find somewhere by themselves to reflect in silence. No phones, no ipod, just themselves, and a piece of paper and a pen should they need to draw / write something. With the woods, beach and sand dunes here, they can choose a perfect little space for themselves for a short time.

About the author

Aled teaches in the Outdoor Education Department at St Davids College, Llandudno; a secondary school providing outdoor learning opportunities as part of the school curriculum. The days described in this article were developed by Aled Edwards, Ian Martin, Beth Swait and Steve Webb, along with the school chaplain Rev. Tim Hall and Rev. Julia Bartholomew. email contact - aedwards@stdavidscollege.co.uk
Photographs - all from the author

