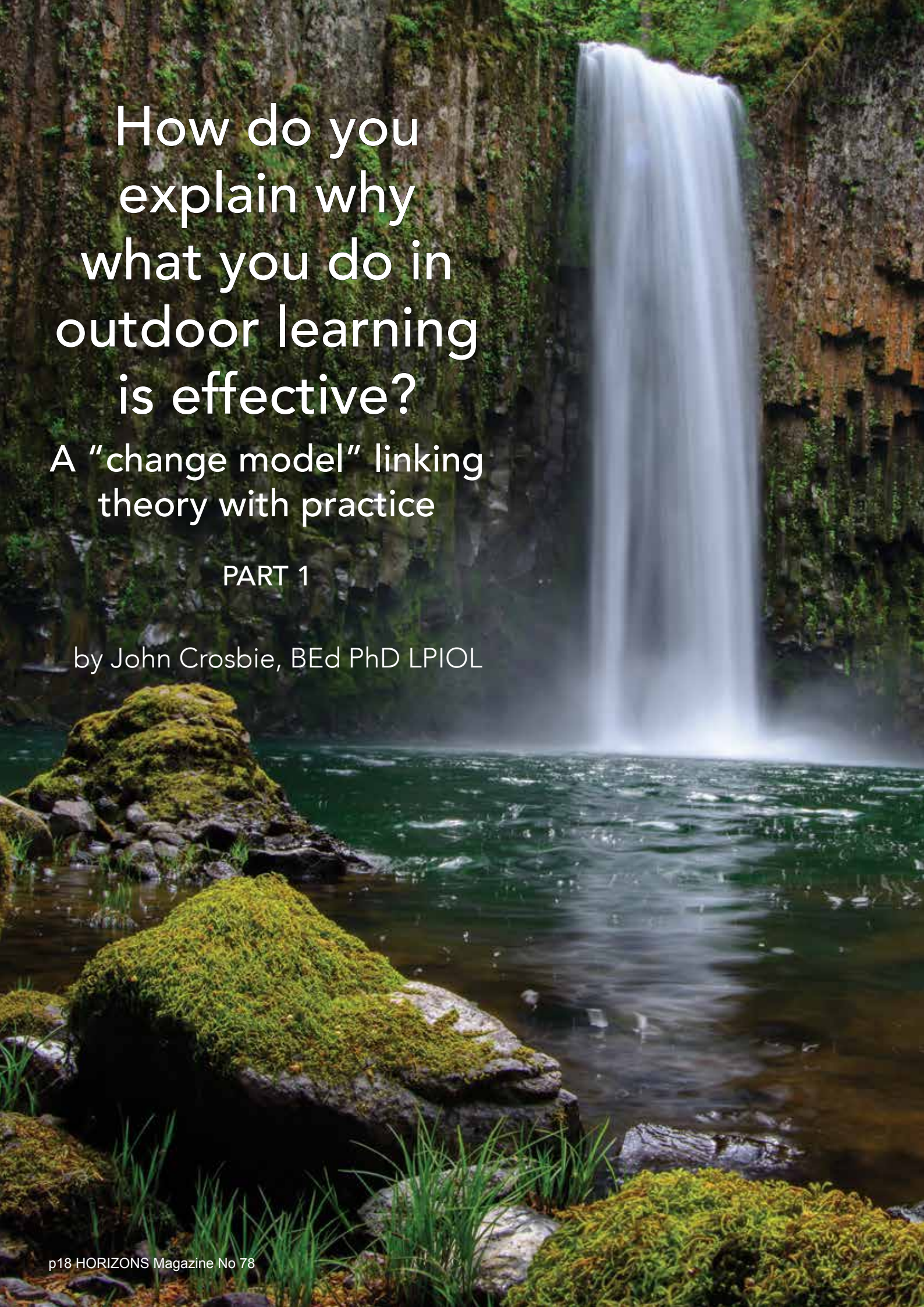


How do you explain why what you do in outdoor learning is effective?

A "change model" linking theory with practice

PART 1

by John Crosbie, BEd PhD LPIOL

INTRODUCTION

As part of my PhD I read many papers that gave me a greater understanding on how or why the outdoor learning I practiced worked. In an attempt to pull a number of different ideas together I ended up with a model that made sense to me, and has better enabled me to explain the components of outdoor learning to others. This is not a simple model, but through this series of articles I intend to explain the constituent parts so it is easier to fit them together. I recognise that not all the components or links are common to all outdoor delivery, however, the aim is to share and describe my model in the hope that the concept may help others explain how what they do in outdoor learning works.

The context in which this model was developed was a centre-based practice using outdoor adventurous activities for personal development with people with disabilities to fulfil the stated aims of the charity. There are likely to be common elements across most outdoor practice but some components will vary for different areas of practice and these will need to be substituted for more appropriate elements or links.

A large proportion of these articles are extracted from my PhD thesis, and the references quoted are only examples of the research or literature or that is available. The full PhD thesis is available at: https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/9443

Agreeing a common language

To help charities better evaluate their work, the Charities Commission[a] produced a helpful document clarifying some of the commonly used terms. I found this very useful when looking at outdoor learning and the role this plays in wider society. I will outline the terms used for an outdoor learning context, as these have helped form a structure for the model.

Inputs refer to the resources put into an organisation to carry out an action or programme. The inputs may be human, material, financial or time. For outdoor learning, these *inputs* are considered to include the participants, the aims and objectives, the activities we undertake, the physical and social environment in which activities take place as well as the staff and infrastructure that support the activities, which includes any residential setting.

Outputs generally refer to the activities, services or products provided by an organisation. In outdoor learning, they would typically be the number of participants we put through a programme. Outputs are easily defined, easily measured and often quoted by many outdoor learning organisations. However, they do not provide any insight as to the value of the work undertaken.

Outcomes, on the other hand, are the changes, benefits, learning or other effects that happen as a result of the activities provided. These are often the aims pursued by customers or providers and are the focus of many evaluations of outdoor learning. Outcomes include concepts such as increased self-esteem or confidence, improved attainment or specific learning, and better wellbeing or resilience. However, there is the "so what?" question associated with outcomes. Is self-esteem beneficial to persistent offenders? Do we need a society full of people with high confidence? If so, how do we differentiate the great from the good? This leads on to the final element…

Impact is the wider change to the individual or society that results from the outputs. It is often long-term, broad and is invariably difficult to measure or evaluate. In outdoor learning, impact goes beyond the benefits obtained by participants following course or programme to the difference that participation will make to their lives specifically, or to society generally. Reduced unemployment, a better skilled work-force or reduced mental health issues may be regarded as impacts that are regarded as beneficial to the individual or society. As such, *impacts* may influence policy decisions even at government level (especially if there are potential economic benefits from the impacts).

The factors that influence the outcomes from outdoor learning programmes

There are many component factors that contribute to the outcomes from outdoor learning, but a number of writers[1,2,3] agree that the three major influences are the people involved, the programme followed and the processes used to obtain the outcomes (although it may be argued that these three elements will affect any learning situation.) I shall expand on these in an outdoor learning context:

The people

Every individual is different, and an individual's personality and past experiences will provide a lens through which they will view their world. This will include how they view their outdoor experiences and the learning outcomes they take from that experience.[2,3,4]

For courses aimed at personal development, Neill[3] identifies the individual's background and previous experiences, motivation to participate, personal goals and readiness for change as important influential factors.

The aims and objectives of outdoor learning experience may be set by the provider or customer organisations but these must be influenced

by the needs of the individual participants. Their needs should affect the aims as well as decisions concerning both the programme and the style of its delivery. These decisions may include the geographical location, the chosen activities, the accommodation and catering arrangements, the other participants or other people sharing the accommodation. All of the above will affect the outcomes from the experience.

Although outdoor learning programmes can be designed to deliver numerous specific outcomes[3,6,7] they are unlikely to be successful in doing so without first considering the participants and through a programme designed to deliver these.

The programme

A well-designed programme for outdoor education is not the timetabling of a series of activities that a group will undertake. It needs to take into account the participants, the aims of participation and then decide on the optimum method of delivering the outcomes through the activities undertaken and the learning processes used. It is the programme design that draws together the people and the learning processes in order to generate a successful formula for the delivery of the intended outcomes.

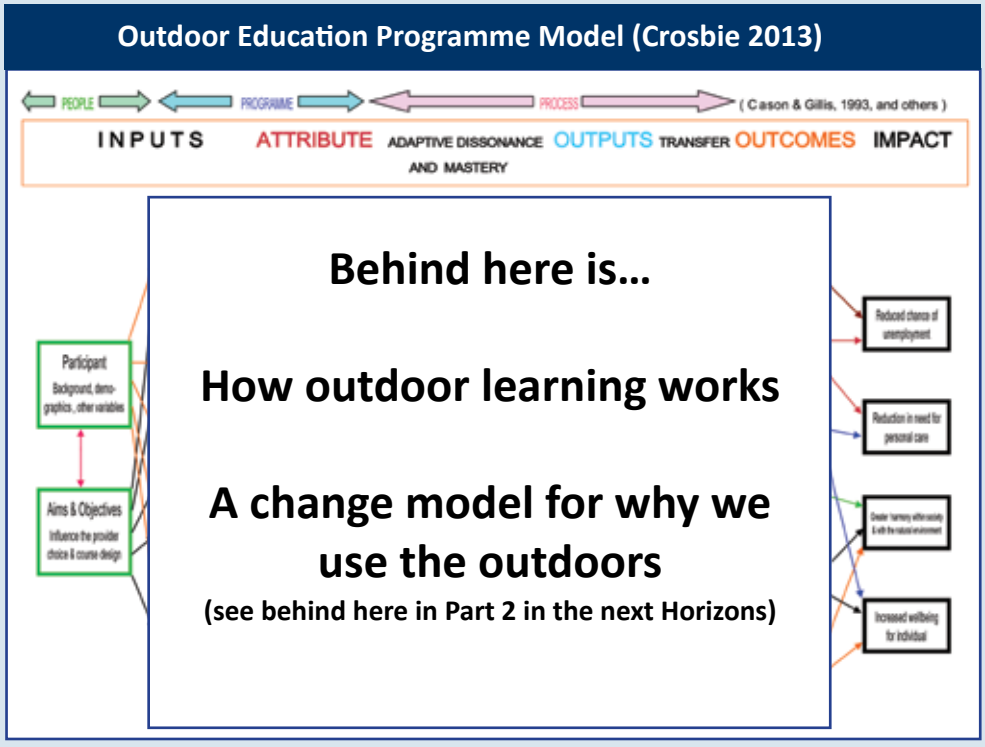
The literature provides some help in identifying what elements should be included in programme design[8,9] and programmers need to be aware that the sequencing of the activities within a programme will also impact on the learning outcomes[10,11,12].

The Process

The process may be described as the theoretical underpinning for the outcomes of the outdoor learning. Without an understanding of the process(es) involved, the factors that have contributed to any benefits cannot be understood and any changes made to programmes in an attempt to improve the outcomes must be regarded as guesswork, with success left to chance alone.

The theoretical and philosophical basis for outdoor education is grounded within experiential learning and the educational psychology that underpins this approach to learning[13,14,15]. Recent research with participants, teachers, parents and instructors / tutors into outdoor adventurous activities[16] commonly identified challenge and achievement as the underlying learning principles. These relate to well-known literature on adventurous outdoor learning situations (Mortlock[17] and Tuson[18]) and fits in with Piaget's theme of "adaptive dissonance and mastery"[14].

Diagram



Finally, any learning must be transferred from the "outdoors" to the "home" environment. Gass has been a prolific writer on this topic but has always referred to Bruner's learning theory and descriptions of specific and non-specific transfer of learning[19] to explain the ways in which learning in one environment can relate to different situations.

Conclusion

In this article, I have defined a number of terms that can be used in the outdoor learning process and evaluation, along with those factors which are the major influences on the outcomes. In my model these are closely linked together as indicated. This is shown in the Diagram which comprises the over-arching theoretical framework that forms the top section of the complete model, which will be shown in Part 2 in the next issue of Horizons. This article has also explained the green boxes on the left-hand side of the model containing the inputs of the People (or participants) and their Aims. On the right-hand side (the black boxes) are the intended impacts of the programme on which the model is based. The explanation of how the programme inputs provided change to the participants, so resulting in the desired impacts is contained in the detail of the rest of the model and will be covered in the subsequent articles, starting with a description of the components of an outdoor learning programme in the next edition. ■

Part 2 will be published in Horizons 79, Autumn 2017.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Crosbie has many years' experience working in outdoor learning with people with disabilities. He spent 17 years managing an outdoor education centre specialising in working with disabled populations, he has advised a number of NGBs on their inclusive policies and instructor training and completed a PhD in this field.

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