

Local solo

How-to
guide

Developing coping strategies for social isolation in an Outdoor Education context

In March of this year, the UK government implemented a lockdown strategy to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic, encouraging people to self-isolate at home and to only leave for essential reasons. Humans are a social species, and symptoms related to social withdrawal tend to be negative mental states such as loneliness or depression. In response to this, I have designed an Outdoor Educational session that could not only be facilitated remotely, but which I could also participate in myself during lockdown: the *local solo*.

This session takes elements from the solo expedition and place-responsiveness, both valued forms of experiential education in the Outdoor industry. It hopes to develop coping strategies for social isolation, as well as being run in an educational context, or individually, for various benefits such as positive wellbeing, creativity or spiritual awareness. Arguments for Outdoor Education to become more localised are ever increasing (1). This session offers a low-risk and easily accessible activity that can be used by various education providers.

Staying at home

Outdoor Education is typically thought of as being immersed in woodland and surrounded by nature. There is a perception, however, that nature is not just green spaces, but is everywhere and everything (1). Using this way of thinking, the *local solo* is designed to encourage people to stay at home to think about and interact with their environment in a unique way through place-responsiveness.

Place-responsiveness is rooted in the belief that people can have a deeper relationship with place, when attention is paid to that place.

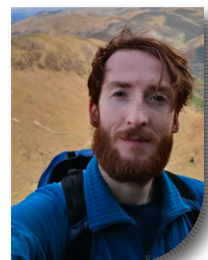
A person may learn the history of a place, discover something new about themselves or develop awareness of the greater world through this approach of experiential learning. Evidence shows that participants in place-responsive learning through an urban solo had very profound and meaningful experiences by spending time observing a location that is familiar to them, some noting that they would be inspired to use this type of practice in their own teaching (1). The *local solo* adopts this method of teaching and localises it even more, encouraging people to stop and listen to the environments they spend so much time in. By bringing the *solo* into the home, we also minimise many of the safety considerations associated with urban solos or expeditions, although some do still exist.

Working alone can always pose potential risks, both physically and psychologically (particularly during the time of the COVID-19 pandemic), and so it is still important that facilitators manage these risks and make it known how participants can contact them during the activity. Solitude is thought to be more achievable when basic needs are met (2). The home setting allows easy access to comforts, safety and facilities to help meet these needs whilst helping to manage risks.



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Gavin is a final year undergraduate student of Outdoor Education at the University of Cumbria. He has been researching the benefits of solitude in the outdoors for his current dissertation project, an interest fuelled by his love of exploring the unknown.



Session aims

- 1 Experience a unique interaction with the home environment.
- 2 Reflect on the experience to identify individual outcomes.
- 3 Develop potential coping strategies for social isolation.

Delivery of the session

For participation during times of self-isolation, the facilitation can be remote, using a large amount of autonomous learning. This also allows the individual to bring their own aims and outcomes into the activity (3), which is well suited to the *local solo*, as the home environment the activity takes place in, is individually very personal.

It is suggested that phones can distract from practices of solitude (4), so it is recommended that the phone is either turned off, on flight mode, or left elsewhere at home. *However, safety considerations may require an individual to always keep their phone on them, and so this is left to the discretion of each participant.*

The following shows an example of how a one-hour *local solo* session, taking inspiration and adopting elements from Nicol and Sangster's urban solo (1), can be delivered remotely, using three stages.

EQUIPMENT

- > Warm clothing, extra layers or waterproofs if outdoors.
- > A watch/alarm clock/mobile phone alarm.
- > A roll mat or yoga mat for outdoor comfort.
- > Pen and paper, sketchbook, audio recorder or other form of recording.



Self-facilitation

I hope for this activity to also be used in self-led practice. In order to gain authentic insight into the experience and outcomes I participated in the session myself. The location I chose was outside my bedroom window of my student accommodation. Although the weather was dry, I prepared waterproofs with some spare layers and a water bottle which were easily accessible in the open window and sat on a yoga mat.

During the solo I thought about the three areas: place, people, self (1) and discovered a fourth area which was place potential. This opened my creativity and I imagined many ways in which I could transform the garden (both realistic and hypothetical).

The outcomes of this session included a great deal of productivity and motivation to do tasks. I had gained new ideas in how I could interact with this space more often and developed an awareness of other species and the environment. I also thought about how this place would have been used in the past as a family home, which I compared to my own family home. This created a powerful new sense of meaning to this area, as I began to associate it with more personal feelings. It was also a refreshing experience to not use social media. I spent the rest of the day in a productive mood, without feeling the need to use internet devices at all.

Stage 1: Preparation

In preparation, participants are asked to do the following:

Choose a location in your home as your solo spot. This should be outdoors if possible, or have a view to an outdoor area.

Review the risk assessment and add anything that may be relevant to your specific location.

Check the weather forecast on the morning of the session date.

Prepare appropriate clothing and equipment needed to keep you safe and comfortable throughout the session.

Boundaries are limited to your home environment, not in public spaces.

Prior to the session date, a risk assessment and briefing form will be emailed to the participants, detailing what they need to do to prepare for the session and what the activity will involve.

Participants should be aware that they will be stationary for at least an hour and so should consider comfort when preparing their location, clothing and equipment.

Stage 2: Activity

The activity starts at an agreed time for all the participants and will last an hour. The briefing form aids in structuring the activity, informing participants of timings, boundaries, and what to do:

Stay in your chosen location, sitting or standing.

Observe your environment, senses and feelings.

Record your thoughts using any means you feel appropriate. (e.g. drawing, audio recording, writing, photography).

To structure the activity, the facilitator can ask the participants to focus on specific areas:

Place: What is the purpose or characteristics of this place? What is the history of this place?

People: How do people interact with this place?

Self: What does this place mean to you? How do you interact with, or feel in this place?

The involvement of creative activities promotes an interaction with the environment which encourages an outcome of place-responsiveness.



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Stage 3: Review

The review stage is essential in generating concepts from the learning and ensure outcomes are being met. This stage will be facilitated through video call. Each participant will have an opportunity to reflect and share any outcomes they may have experienced during the activity. The facilitator can structure this by asking questions:

Which of the three areas (place, people, self) stood out to you most during the solo?

How did you feel during the solo?

Do you feel like you have benefitted from the experience in any way?

Did you experience any negativity or discomfort?

Did you notice anything new that you hadn't before?

Were there any realisations or new ideas?

How might this impact your personal life?

How could the experience impact your future work?

How might this impact the wider world?

The facilitator may also ask questions specific to the aims of the session, for example: *"Do you think this experience could be relevant to the UK lockdown?"*

Variations

The above is a guide to delivering a local solo session. However, many variations to this session are possible depending on the context, aims and setting. For example, a briefing via video call, rather than email, may be appropriate if the participants have not met the facilitator before and they want to make introductions before the activity starts. Solo time is being explored as a beneficial activity for school pupils (5). This practice can be implemented and adapted to suit outcomes associated with younger participants or to fit in with school curriculum activities. It may be best to start small with a shorter duration to build up the skill for school pupils (5)

as people tend to cope better in solitude with age (6).

A minimum of one hour is recommended as an appropriate amount of time for adult participants to benefit from the experience but makes it short enough that it is easy enough for facilitators to arrange and manage. The length of the session can be increased, and participants can choose to use this practice in their own time, possibly even for a full day.

Future development and impact

This session offers a low-risk, easily accessible activity which brings Outdoor Education to the doorstep of different education providers and learners. This session can be adapted to focus on place-based or environmental education which can further benefit the world's biodiversity or climate issues (7).

There is the opportunity to use the activity as a personal tool to practice solitude at home and incorporate other elements such as meditation. Similar to the transcendentalists, like Thoreau in his cabin, this can develop a variety of personal outcomes including creativity, spiritual awareness and positive health benefits (2). Although I designed the *local solo* in response to COVID-19, I hope that the use of this session goes on beyond the current situation ■

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IMAGES

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