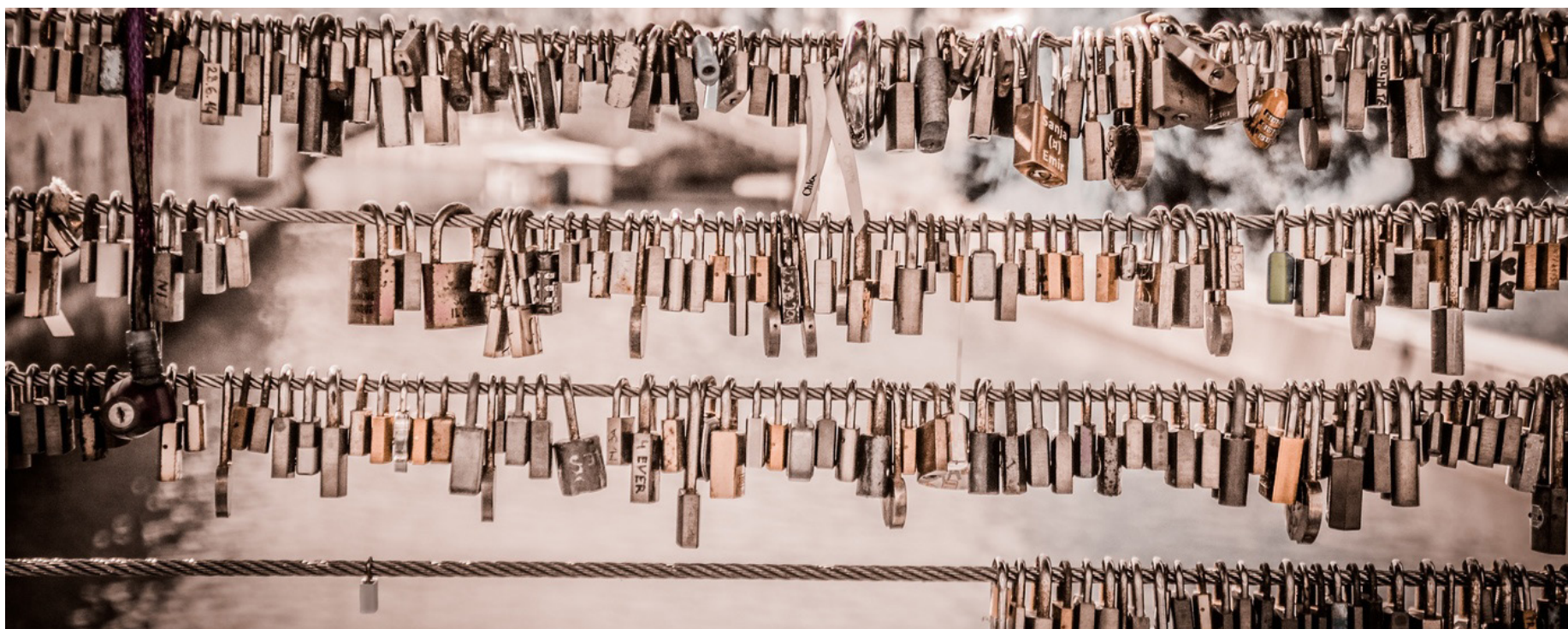


LEARNING OUTCOMES

Thinking about Outdoor Education, diversity, equity and inclusion



This is the final of a four-part series looking at diversity, equity and inclusion within the U.K. Outdoor Learning sector. In this article I seek to demonstrate how programme design can have a big impact on student outcomes.

I have been introduced to a new podcast called *ConnectEd Institute Talks* (available on Spotify- see page 3). In episode one guests discuss gaps between the research of Carole Dweck's 'mindsets' and its use within classrooms. One of the core ideas in 'mindsets' is that we are not born with a fixed set of abilities, we can improve with appropriate effort (see page 29 for further details).

In brief, Carol Dweck places importance upon the attitude we bring to a challenge and how this will ultimately affect how successful we are in dealing with a challenge or improving our abilities. The point of the podcast was not to denounce 'mindsets' as a useful tool, but to say that according to their research, it is not the fix-all tactic that its reputation often suggests and it is the use of the theory, not the theory itself that is often problematic. The podcast suggested that it created 'for' or 'against' groups within some education circles and, in their opinion, neither group managed to grasp the nuance of either 'mindsets' or their critique of it.

There is a lot to gain within diversity, equity, and inclusion from exploring nuance and never settling on one method for all situations. Learning outcomes is an area that I feel could use additional nuance in approach. Learning outcomes are predefined goals to give direction to a programme or plan. They allow you to know when you are moving towards your educational destination, the metaphorical peak of the mountain.

I am not against learning outcomes completely, I argue against having them for all programmes all the time.

Here are two sets of learning outcomes from two major Outdoor Education organisations; these are typical of what I have seen in Outdoor Education programmes:

Learning outcomes example 1:

- Assume leadership roles
- Live and travel in the outdoors
- Act with confidence and competence
- Respect and collaborate with others on expeditions, on teams and in communities
- Care for themselves and others
- Understand their strengths, habits and areas for growth
- Function under difficult circumstances
- Make informed and thoughtful decisions
- Communicate effectively
- Connect with natural places
- Appreciate living simply

Learning outcomes example 2:

- Increase awareness of own skills
- Increase confidence and self-belief
- Improve ability to communicate effectively
- Increase awareness of local environment

Of these two sets of examples, the first is more defined and specific than the second. For both of these organisations, these learning outcomes are over-arching and omni-present; every programme will have these learning outcomes assigned to them. Though there are strengths to both examples, I believe that by applying them universally across all programmes creates inherent issues in accessibility for students.

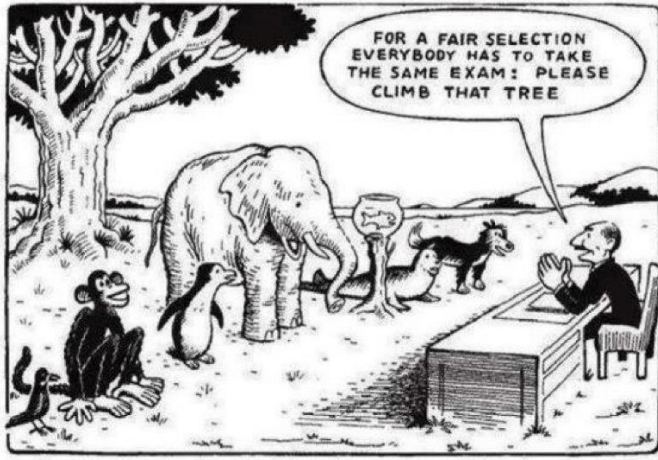


IMAGE ONE: Our education system (3)

Over-defining

From the first set of learning outcomes we can ask... if a student does not appreciate living simply after completing the programme, are they then a failure? Or are we saying that simple living is THE correct way to live? These learning outcomes go from being educational to a statement of values very easily. Are students or educators failing if they do not meet all the learning outcomes in the fashion they have been written down?

The more you define something, the more you define what it is not.

There should always be the possibility for people to thrive beside one another. This over-definition of learning outcomes can serve to further crystallise people into groups and place barriers between groups. Perhaps these become groups of those who achieve the learning outcomes and those who don't, or perhaps those who value the learning outcomes and those who don't?

The issue is compounded when this simple logic strays into the diversity, equity and inclusion conversation. By over-defining what diversity is, you start to say who does not fit into this version of diversity, effectively excluding individuals, groups and communities from a diversity effort. If learning outcomes are very defined, but used universally, the more different students are from the person(s) who wrote the learning outcomes, the more difficult it may be for the students to achieve them.

It is almost impossible to have students arrive at a similar educational place by providing the same experience. By defining where the learning must lead, you are deleting, or at least reducing, the options for teachable moments or making success personal to everyone. There is no universal definition for a teachable moment, but a common suggestion is that it occurs when an adult recognises an opportunity to provide a child with learning that they are ready for (1). I suggest if you swap out the words 'adult' and 'child' and replace them with 'educator' and 'student' then it becomes more useful.

WHAT'S YOUR MINDSET?

Carol Dweck explores ideas about how we have two mindsets, growth or fixed, and how we use our mindset to guide our behaviours.

Read more about mindsets here:
<https://fs.blog/2015/03/carol-dweck-mindset>

Or watch here 10 minute presentation by Dweck here:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiiEeMN7vbQ>

How can an educator design learning that someone is ready for if they have never met them (which is often the case for Outdoor Education organisations)? Furthermore, if the measurements of a successful programme are laid out in the form of learning outcomes, then how much room is there to flex the programme away from the learning outcomes and towards opportunities for learning as they present themselves? In adventure sports instruction, a fundamental part of planning is knowing your clients' abilities and desires. Why does this appear less common in Outdoor Education?

Under-defining

If the learning outcomes are under-defined, how can the student recognise achievement? When we wish for a student to have an increased awareness of their own skills, what are we asking for? Perhaps a lot of students did achieve this, but does it stray into rewarding people for just turning up? There are times when it is appropriate to step back and 'let the mountains speak for themselves'. Being less structured in Outdoor Learning is becoming more important when we consider how it seems that many mainstream schools, colleges and universities operate in very prescribed ways; where success fits into a very narrow range of outcomes. It is not hard to find a narrative that suggests that Outdoor Education is defined by experience-led learning - just think about how well known the saying above is.

But it goes deeper than this: the call to let the experience provide the education is loud, researched and has its followers. Ken Robinson's TED Talk (2) on whether schools kill creativity is still the most watched talk of all time and has appeared in many of the Outdoor Education training events I have been a participant in.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, in an effort to gain professional recognition, Outdoor Education in the UK has had to show its worth by displaying success in a form similar to other areas of education. Now the suffocating aspects of overly scrutinised and defined education seem present in Outdoor Education, previously a sanctuary for those that did not excel in the classroom. This is not diverse education: it is standardised education. Standardised education is not a new conversation, it is a specific goal of many policies. Perhaps you have seen this cartoon giving a representation of standardised exams (see image one)?

The cartoon highlights belief that all students turn up with equal privilege, abilities and support. Though it is perhaps equal for all students to take the same test, it is not equitable. I think that used inaccurately, learning outcomes mirror this cartoon; rewarding those who can and excluding those who can't. Moreover, learning outcomes have the potential to create a value system of what is right or wrong, based on certain educators' preferences, not any objective system.

The central figure in any education programme should be 'who' is being educated, before attending to the 'what, when, where and why'. When learning outcomes are universal or written without specific knowledge of the student(s), we create opportunities for

education to be standardised or generic, which in turn highlights how standardised education becomes less accessible to a greater number of students.

What are these learning outcomes really asking for?

Going back to the learning outcomes shared earlier (page 28), example two includes the outcome to ‘improve ability to communicate effectively’. Are we tasking an Outdoor Educator with improving the communication abilities of any student they work with, expecting that they should be versed in the communication styles used across all cultures, ethnicities and communities across the UK and able to seamlessly merge them together? I touched on some different styles of communication various cultures use in previous articles (*Horizons* Issue 92) and both anecdotal and academic articles exist on this topic (4, 5, 6).

I worry that many Outdoor Educators are working towards what they believe to be effective communication, potentially erasing the styles of other cultures, which is a documented occurrence in multi-ethnic English-speaking schools (7). An educator needs to be able to articulate how the learning outcomes are relevant to and achievable by the class or programme they are running.

Ultimately, learning outcomes that are generic to all courses lack useability and depth. They need to strike a very fine balance between not being so defined that they become exclusionary and not being so under-defined that a path to achievement is marred in complexity or a lack of clarity.

It is not the over or under-defining of learning outcomes that is the root cause of the issue. It is the universal application of a tool. Learning outcomes are a tool for organising and structuring an education programme, but they need to be designed with who it is for in mind. This situation is exacerbated when working with a diverse audience. It is problematic to assume the education professional knows what is best for the student, in some cases without ever asking the student directly.

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IMAGES

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Within Outdoor Education, the plan is often set before the educator has met the student. But as well as individual differences, gender identity, socio-economic, ethic and cultural background influence the education a student is ready for, or how they will understand it. This is an argument for why staff teams should be diverse; because when they are engaged in designing a service, such as an Outdoor Education programme, a diverse team will be better able to take different backgrounds into account. This is not foolproof, as it will still be a small group of people thinking for a large group; hence I argue that if an Outdoor Education programme is being designed it needs to have the specific user group in mind. With this perspective, learning outcomes can never be universal, and under-defining learning outcomes to make them seem flexible enough for any student is not a workable solution.

The Outdoor Education sector needs to reflect those within the community it operates in, so that it can be useful to those it serves now and whom it may serve in the future. Making strides to this end means more than hiring a range of different people. It is about broadening the scope of all aspects of a programme or operation and imbedding enough flexibility to incorporate the myriad of people and perspectives you are not able to pre-plan for.

I agree with Dr Crystal Jones who says,

“there is a difference between you are welcome here and this space was created with you in mind.” (8).

Though no one can predict all the types of people the space might need to serve, by having diverse flexible approaches, we can aim to have systems to fit the people, rather than insist people fit into a system ■



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