



How Can 'Outdoor Learning' Programmes Best Link to and Support Student's School Based Learning?

By
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Outdoor Education

I've been giving this question a great deal of thought recently. It all started when I was given a similar title for an interview presentation. In this article I hope to briefly address some of the issues that I believe have had an impact on the provision of Outdoor Learning over the past couple of years and how they relate to the delivery of high quality outdoor learning experiences and to propose a solution about how to address this issue. As part of my current role I manage an outreach programme offering outdoor learning opportunities for 45+ schools in the South Lakes with the majority of these being primary. Whilst I encourage these schools to think holistically about the outdoor learning experiences I offer, I'm not convinced that this actually happens. This concerns me and I am planning to address this issue through INSET sessions for teachers from participating schools.

Every Child Matters

It is easy to show how outdoor learning contributes to the outcomes of Every Child Matters. For example engaging in a programme of outdoor activities can help to 'develop understanding of the environment' or 'experience risk assessment and risk management'. Without any effort it is possible to think of four or five other examples for each of the five Every Child Matters tenets but I don't intend to discuss this further here.

Learning Outside the Classroom

The vision of the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto is to 'raise achievement through a practical and organised approach to learning'. It is essential for educational institutions to take on board the key recommendations as stated in the manifesto.

These are:

1. **Curriculum planning** should provide structured opportunities for all learners to engage in learning.
2. **Evaluating** the quality of **learning** facilitates learner achievement.
3. **Monitoring participation** allows facilitation of equality of access.

I have emphasised those words I believe to be key to developing programmes that offer high quality outdoor learning experiences and will discuss these later.

Learning Outside the Classroom - Ofsted - October 2008

It is gratifying that the government has had the vision to introduce the 'Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto' and is promoting all forms of outdoor learning within schools and colleges. However, this entails accountability and for schools this means Ofsted. In their inspection of Outdoor Learning this year Ofsted identified a number of key findings I was particularly interested in the following:

Positive

- When **planned** and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to **raising standards** and improving **pupils' personal, social and emotional development**.
- Learning outside the classroom was most **successful** when it was an **integral** element of **long-term curriculum planning** and **closely linked to classroom activities**.

Negative

- Too many residential and other visits considered during the survey had **learning objectives** which were **imprecisely defined** and **not integrated sufficiently** with activities in the classroom. This was **particularly** the case in **primary schools**.
- Of the schools and colleges visited, only three had evaluated the impact of learning outside the classroom on improving achievement, or monitored the take-up of activities by groups of pupils and students. The **vast majority** in the sample were **not able to assess the effectiveness, inclusiveness or value for money** of such activities.

The first two key findings came as no surprise as it's easy to understand that good planning and effective implementation will lead to pupil progress by building upon experiences within the classroom. However, I was initially surprised that primary schools were seen as being weak at integrating outdoor learning. Upon reflection of my experiences with my outreach programme I began to put two and two together and found I was in complete agreement with this finding. Further evidence from the Ofsted report suggests that communication between residential providers and schools is not what it should be if schools are to fully address their medium and long term planning needs. Many schools surveyed chose activities for their pupils for which the centres published learning objectives, therefore it can be argued that schools had no real ownership of their programme. Another key issue was that teachers' knowledge of their pupils was used ineffectively and learning opportunities missed.



What then is the problem? In an attempt to address this issue I questioned a number of primary teachers. The common response was a lack of awareness and confidence about how to use outdoor learning effectively. This lack of awareness therefore makes it difficult to integrate outdoor learning into any form of planning other than short term 'good experiences' identified in the Ofsted report. Perhaps the key here is communication between provider and school. I have attempted to show this in Figure 1, with the overlap indicating communication, albeit limited.

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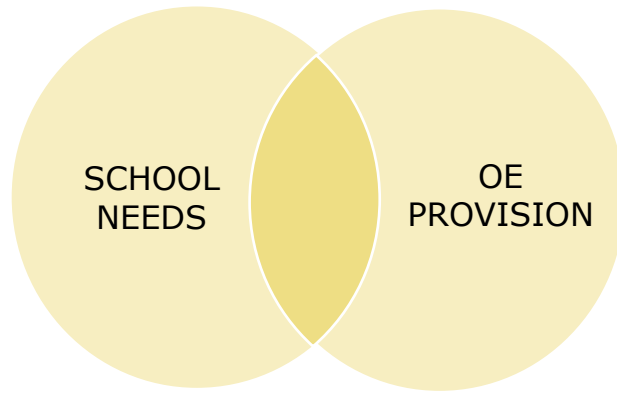


Figure 1- Basic Communication Relationship

Obviously an Ofsted report is a snapshot of what is happening. This particular report looked at 27 institutions of which 12 were primary schools and 10 secondary, and as educational institutions are judged on Ofsted reports they have to be taken seriously. It has to be stressed at this point that the report looked at all aspects of learning outside the classroom not just adventure activities. If the outdoor learning industry is using the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto to help justify programmes on offer then the findings of this Ofsted report need to be addressed. From my experience of talking to outdoor professionals working in outdoor centres I believe the bulk of most Outdoor Centres work comes from primary schools. The question needs to be asked. 'Are outdoor programmes really linking to pupils' school based learning?' It could be argued that Ofsted say in the case of primary schools 'No'. In my own experience, the programme that I run falls short in this respect. Despite this I believe it is an excellent program and the schools like what they get ,and through word of mouth it has become highly oversubscribed. Is this enough? I believe not and want and need to address those issues highlighted by Ofsted.

The Way Forward

I believe that to move forward it is essential that schools take ownership of their programmes. I believe this can be achieved through a series of steps:

- High level of communication between course director, course tutor, school staff and relevant stakeholders.
- Programme staff and teachers work collaboratively on medium and long term planning.
- Clearly defined outcomes set by the school.
- Groups of teachers visit their Outdoor Centre or provider to receive training or outreach work.
- Programmes need to be tailored.
- Clear understanding that an educational experience is taking place and not a holiday.

A major disadvantage with this model is tailored programmes take longer to develop, as teachers and programme leaders have to meet which can involve travel, teachers need supply cover, programme leaders are taken away from delivery. The net result of all this being increased costs. I'm afraid I don't have an answer to that one apart from make time!

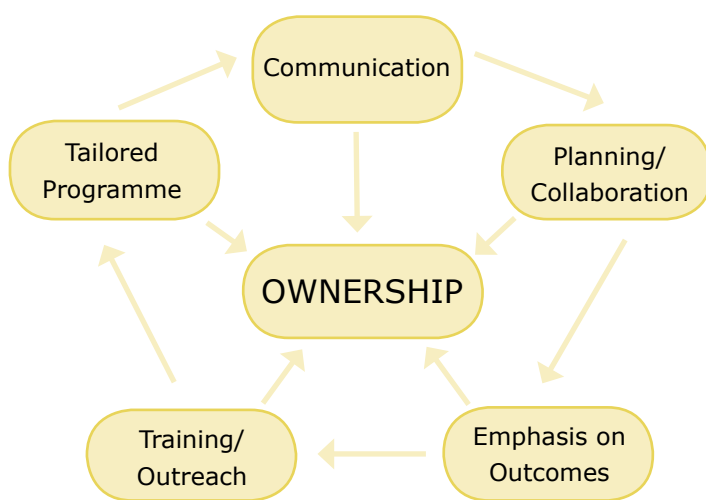


Figure 2 - Model of Ownership

So what am I actually going to do?

For my programme I will be encouraging/insisting that teachers from the schools I work with attend in-service training that equips them with basic journeying skills. Where possible I will encourage teachers to attend an Outdoor Learning Cards course. These teachers can then deliver basic journeying skills to their pupils in their schools. As part of this training the pupils will plan an adventurous journey which they will undertake as part of the programme I offer. My programme staff will then act as facilitators, technical and safety experts. This journey could be a day or even an overnight expedition. It could be a stand-alone activity or a part of a residential course. The teachers will then have a powerful experience which they can follow up back in school.

The benefits of using this model are numerous, for example pupils are exposed to high quality outdoor learning experiences which they have ownership of; journeying can be linked to the new National Curriculum PE specification; staff are involved in all aspects of the programme therefore they have ownership, and programme staff get to work with highly motivated pupils developing existing skills rather than introducing primarily new skills.

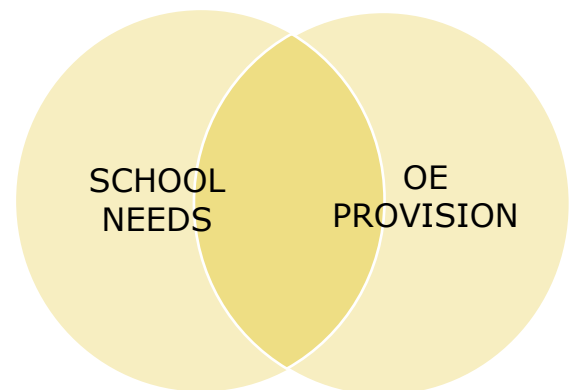


Figure 4 - Improved Communication Relationship

Through increased communication and co-operation, schools have greater understanding of outdoor learning in using adventure activities. This understanding gives greater levels of ownership of programmes which empowers more effective medium and long term planning. As a result the pupils' opportunity to develop their learning increases. I hope it works! ■

Author's Notes. Simon is Head of OEd at The Lakes School, Windermere. He is passionate about the outdoors and outdoor learning and tries to balance work, family and play with varying degrees of success.

Photos: all from the author.

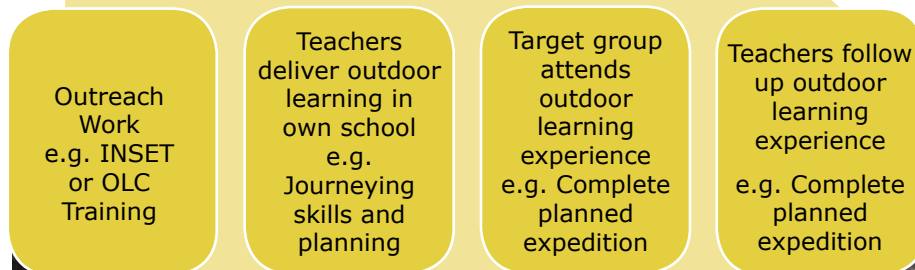


Figure 3 - INSET/OEAP Outdoor Learning Cards Model

