

Understanding the Power – Dr John Quay

UNDERSTANDING THE POWER OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

QUESTIONING OUTDOOR EDUCATION

When a group of students returns from an outdoor education journey, we know – as teachers and parents of these young people – that a lot has gone on and that much has happened in their lives whilst they've been away. We know this because we see their grimy faces and hands, smell their unwashed clothes and bodies, and begin to hear some of their stories.

These stories are very specific, recounting events that occurred. But they are not always easy to understand, because "you had to be there" to really get it. This sometimes makes it difficult for young people to share these experiences because, while they mean a lot to them, conveying this meaning to others is not a simple task. The stories seem to be held in the moments of the camp or expedition, and that's where many of them stay. As teachers and parents who weren't there, we often feel left out of the conversation.

This situational nature of outdoor education is both a strength and a weakness. It is deemed a weakness because much of what is learnt during outdoor education seems to be relevant only to that situation. So when compared with academic subjects, outdoor education falls short.

Why is it, then, that schools continue to offer outdoor education? What is the educational strength of these experiences? To understand this we need to paint a different picture of how education works.

EDUCATION FOR KNOWING

Academic subjects are all about knowing things. What should the next generation know? Why, the most important knowledge from our culture or civilization of course, which is contained in the school curriculum, organised by subjects. This will best prepare them for their adult future so that they can eventually get a job that enables them to contribute to their own well being and to that of society.

Some may say, then, that the academic aim of schools

is to pass on all of that important knowledge so that the vocational aim of schools can be achieved – helping young people to eventually attain a job.

This is the common sense way of understanding how education works. But when it comes to achieving these aims, many young people experience difficulties. We see them struggling to get enthusiastic about their subjects, their homework, even though we tell them again and again how important it is for their future that they do well on these tasks. Not all young people experience these difficulties, but a significant number do. So what are we doing wrong? And what might outdoor education be doing right?

EDUCATION FOR BEING, DOING & KNOWING

Academic subjects are set up to prepare young people for an adult future. But setting education up in this way asks young people to hold off on what they really want to do and who they really want to be here and now – instead we ask them to study, and to be students.

Now this would be OK if they could see beyond being a student to the adult life and jobs that will come. Then being a student would make sense as a way of achieving something greater. But this equation does not really add up for many young people for one main reason: we see the future from the present (this is the same for all of us, not just young people).

For most young people the future they see in being a student simply involves more of being a student: knowing things for passing tests that seem to have little meaning beyond comparisons with other students. And if these comparisons aren't that favourable or don't appeal, then being a student and doing all the work required doesn't seem worth the effort.

Young people aren't mini-adults. They have dreams of their own, pertinent to their age and the groups they socialise with. And just like us they get to the future through following their present dreams. These

aspirations are not arranged around school subjects and being a student. Rather, they are different ways of being a person that are significant to them socially. Now this is where outdoor education comes in.

THE POWER OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

Outdoor education can best be understood as a way of being a person. So can school sport and other co-curricular activities. While we usually consider these as mere activities – and therefore as non-academic – they are all actually alternate ways of being a person. And this is where they get their strength. Being a student is also a way of being a person, but it falls far short when compared with the many possibilities that exist outside the classroom.

So in a broader sense school can be understood as offering young people a (limited) range of ways of being a person – both as academic subjects and co-curricular activities. Being a maths student and being a history student sit beside being a basketball team member and being a band member in the same school week.

Seen in this way, education works by enabling young people to take on different ways of being. Through each way of being they learn different ways of doing things and different ways of knowing things: being-doing-knowing.

When we ask why we should learn something, one answer is because we need that knowledge to achieve something, to do something. And when we ask why we should do that something, one answer is because it is part of being that type of person: a science student, a netballer, a debater: being, doing and knowing. Outdoor education, as a way of being, offers another range of possibilities in which this why question has different answers.

So when young people return from an outdoor education journey and struggle to share their stories, it is because these are contained in this outdoor education way of being-doing-knowing. But this presents an opportunity that we sometimes miss with outdoor education. When they return, they have to change back to being a student and all the ways of being relevant for them at home. So when they return they can feel the difference - how do we help them to understand this difference between ways of being a person?

A significant aspect of this difference is how we relate to other people. Another is how we treat the local environment. Why are these different at school and home and camp? Investigating these comparisons via such questions involves learning why things are as they are and points to ways of achieving change, which involve not just knowing or doing, but most importantly being – learning involves changing ways of being.

The power of outdoor education is that it offers a significant way of being-doing-knowing for young people that is added to their growing repertoire of ways of being-doing-knowing; this repertoire is who they are

and this is where their greatest interest lies – in seeking out ways of being to which they feel they belong and which broaden this repertoire.

So outdoor education works in a very different way than academic subjects. Its power comes not from focusing just on knowing things (for a seemingly remote future) but on being someone, now. Outdoor education offers a way of being that enriches a young person's life by providing them with another way of knowing and doing. It fits into that way of understanding education that emphasises the whole person.

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Biography:

John Quay taught outdoor education in Victorian schools for ten years, first with the Outdoor Education Group and then with St Paul's Anglican Grammar School. During part of this time he served as president of the Victorian Outdoor Education Association, completed a Graduate Diploma in Educational Administration, a Postgraduate Diploma in Student Wellbeing and a Master of Education, where he researched student caring as this occurs in both outdoor education and other classes at school. John then began work at the University of Melbourne along with completing his Doctoral studies. His Doctoral thesis received the ACHPER (Vic) award for distinction in 2012. It focused on deeper understandings of the connections between experience and education. John continues to work as a senior lecturer at the University of Melbourne, teaching pre-service and in-service teachers as well as researching in a range of areas of interest.

