

Contents lists available at [ScienceDirect](https://www.sciencedirect.com)

Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jhlste

What kind of outdoor educator do you want to become? Trying something different in outdoor studies in higher education

Danny Towers*, Jonathan Lynch

Science, Natural Resources and Outdoor Studies, University of Cumbria, The Barn, Rydal Rd, Ambleside LA22 9BB, United Kingdom

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Outdoor education
Experiential learning
Higher education
Employability
Occupations

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to explore a way of responding to tensions present in formal education and outdoor education in UK higher education. Separation of the doing from the knowing could perhaps be limiting students' ability to become reflective practitioners and respond creatively to an ever-changing modern world. A different way of organising the curriculum through the concept of 'occupations' was the innovation and basis for an action research approach, with data gathered through the authors' observations, logs and diaries. Findings suggested that not only is the connection between education and experience important, the relationship with the landscape that it takes place in is central, in conjunction with the social context. Implications are that agency and autonomy within the learning experience leads to increased motivation and understanding that the process can be open and emergent and about change.

1. Introduction

Reading academic books on outdoor education is all very well and good but how do they fit into my practice? Which bits do I use, and why? Will it make a difference? These were thoughts swimming around our heads after we had read [Quay and Seaman \(2013\)](#) book on 'John Dewey and Education Outdoors'. In the book these authors helped us to understand some of Dewey's educational ideas and how we might use these to good effect in organising the planning and enactment of learning through outdoor studies in higher education. The book primarily explores a solution to a central tension that has been present in the organising of formal education and outdoor education. The tension is between the fundamental aspects of organising learning; do we privilege the 'process' (how we teach) or the 'content' (what we teach)?

In his book *The School and Society*, [Dewey \(1915\)](#) discussed the educational issue of separating the method from the subject matter, the doing from the knowing, and emphasised the importance of maintaining balance between the practical and intellectual phases of experience. [Garrison, Neubert, and Reich \(2016\)](#) note the continued relevance of Dewey's educational philosophies and suggest that the tension caused by dualist thinking in higher education has encouraged a split within the intellectual experience, not only leading to an imbalance between the perceived importance of subject areas and methods but also advancing the hegemony of capitalist values.

In education, we can observe a corresponding economisation that depends on measuring small items, turning them into smooth components like credits, and employing them as resources in a game of cost and outcome ([Garrison et al., 2016](#), p. 23).

[Suleman \(2016\)](#) examined the employability skills of higher education graduates and suggests that although modern employers do value mastery of 'subjects' and content such as written and IT skills these are only pieces of a puzzle that are connected with team

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: daniel.towers@cumbria.ac.uk (D. Towers), jonnilynch@gmail.com (J. Lynch).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jhlste.2017.09.002>

Received 1 February 2017; Received in revised form 21 April 2017; Accepted 13 September 2017

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working and interpersonal skills. Indeed, employability of students is a topical issue in HE institutions in the UK (Beaumont, Gedye, & Richardson, 2016). It is particularly topical due to the current necessity for the economic viability of universities (Minten & Forsyth, 2014; Olssen & Peters, 2005) with an emphasis on adding 'extra value' to degree programmes (Stott, 2007). Interestingly, Suleman (2016) also notes the importance of other, perhaps harder to measure, skills such as the ability to adapt and innovate. Beames and Brown (2016) agree that an important role of education is to help learners to more easily adjust within an ever-changing modern world, although the increasingly predictable, standardised and commodified nature of education, and outdoor education, is perhaps in opposition to this (Beames & Brown, 2014; Loynes, 1998).

The issue of how universities can enhance employability skills is markedly relevant to outdoor education due to the changing nature of outdoor education provision in an HE context, with increasing focus on attaining theoretical knowledge through the curriculum and acquiring practical knowledge through extra-curricular activities, such as gaining National Governing Body Awards (Barnes, 2006; Stott, 2007). Barnes (2006) has observed a move from the experiential/practical origins of outdoor education in HE to an increasingly lecture-room-based focus, partially due to growing financial constraints and a new and dynamic market place. Interestingly, a concern noted by Williams (2006) is that abstract/theoretical knowledge may not be what outdoor employers are looking for and instead, technical competence and qualifications are seen "as the benchmark for professional practice in the modern outdoor industry" (Williams, 2006, p. 21). However, Williams (2006) also highlights the potential for outdoor education courses in UK higher education establishments to meet the requirements of the industry by allowing individuals to construct meaning from their experiences in a considered manner, enabling students to become reflective practitioners.

Reflective practice is considered to be crucial for educators (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993) and central to the process of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Williams, 2006) which is a common pedagogical approach in the field of outdoor education (Dickson, 2008; Peart, 2006). Furthermore, such reflection on experience can transform learning and practice in higher education to generate new ways of thinking and doing (Ryan, 2013). It seems vital for us as educators to challenge our approach and understanding of our practice (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993) but additionally it is important for outdoor education students in HE to experience what it is that they will provide in their professional occupations (Dickson, 2008; Ryan, 2013).

In this paper we will take a key idea expressed in Quay and Seaman (2013) book, that of Dewey's concept of 'occupations' and we will explore how 'occupations' can help us to navigate out of the central tension of educational organisation; do we privilege process or content? In doing so we aim to challenge the (and our) common practices of outdoor education in UK higher education and allow knowledge to be generated from experience, applying some of the principles to the organisation of learning in the ways Seaman and Quay (2013) suggest. This study is a brief exploration of how two outdoor educators in higher education, working with postgraduate outdoor studies students, put these ideas into practice to gain knowledge and skills from the world around, people, places and tasks. These are our reflections on action and the potential consequences for future practice. We hope this account is useful to other outdoor educators and to those who are interested in how to practically employ Dewey's ideas of education into their work.

2. Methodology

An action research approach will be adopted to allow us to incorporate the concepts put forward by Quay and Seaman (2013) into our practice and then reflect upon the effectiveness of the changes we made. McNiff (2016) suggests that such reflective practice can develop the researchers into agents for personal and social change, therefore allowing us to examine both the way we organise learning within our specific context but also the effect it may have with regard to responding to the challenges of a changing world. This study is intended as an initial cycle of our action research and focuses on information gathered through our (the authors) observations and our personal logs and diaries. The key implementation into our practice was the organisation of the curriculum through 'occupations'.

2.1. Occupations – What are they?

In their book, Quay and Seaman bring Dewey's idea of 'occupations' to the task of understanding the 'ways of being' we are concerned with in education. 'Ways of being' are deeper than learning, it's about the people we can and do become through education and learning; a subtle point but a far reaching one. The ambiguous concept of 'occupations' is worth exploring and explaining more deeply, we do this next giving particular thought to how we can use occupations to organise learning.

An occupation is a living aesthetic whole, which has a structure that organises the doing and the knowing; the method and subject matter. We can (if we want to) understand our lives through occupations; we change as we change occupations, we take on new ones as we grow.

It is through the occupation we are living at any moment in time that we comprehend the people and the environment around us – what they mean (Quay & Seaman, 2013, p. 92).

Quay and Seaman note that Dewey advocated that we encourage people to discover these occupations not dictate or push them onto others.

An occupation concerns being a certain type of person, which involves doing certain tasks, and knowing certain facts/knowledge. It is the teachers' work to bring all three aspects together. This does not mean prioritising any one above the others but addressing all three (Quay & Seaman, 2013, p. 95).

Importantly Quay and Seaman (2013) note very clearly that the meaning of the term 'occupations' is not simply about vocational

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