

Prince, Heather ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6199-4892> , Campbell, Liz and Lemmey, Richard (2006) A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are built for: an overview of outdoor studies at St Martin's College. In: Humberstone, Barbara and Brown, Heather, (eds.) Shaping the outdoor profession through higher education: creative diversity in outdoor studies courses in higher education in the UK. Institute for Outdoor Learning, Carlisle, UK, pp. 23-32.

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# Shaping the Outdoor Profession through Higher Education

Creative Diversity in Outdoor Studies Courses in  
Higher Education in the UK

Editors: Barbara Humberstone and Heather Brown

# **“A ship in harbour is safe, but that is not what ships are built for”**

## **An overview of Outdoor Studies at St. Martin’s College**

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### **The ship and its origins**

Sea-going vessels come in all shapes and sizes with different hulls and rigging. Different people view them through different eyes. The vessel that is Outdoor Studies at St Martin’s College is one of those well-loved craft of indeterminate class that has been so constantly trimmed and re-fitted, it isn’t the vessel it was. However it handles well in most conditions and the crews pass through happily enough.

The keel was laid over thirty years ago by Colin Mortlock, and was designed for small crews and high performance, an Advanced Certificate in Adventure Education. She sailed far and wide and the crews weathered well, sailing demanding courses under a strong navigator. The strengths of this approach were soon recognised and offers came to add a new dimension to Initial Teacher Training at Charlotte Mason College, developing in student teachers those characteristics that constitute a well-rounded crewmember.

Colin’s models and views on key human qualities and self-reliance, as expounded in his book *The Adventure Alternative* (1984), were a prescriptive philosophy that underpinned all elements of the course, be they planning, performing or reviewing. Such a strong structure provided clear direction and was found by many to be inspirational. Adventure and peak experience were central themes evolving into a holistic philosophy; in a nutshell, a balanced awareness, respect and love of self, others and the environment became the course objectives.

Latterly the thinking has moved away from Mortlock’s prescriptive philosophy and key human qualities, (for example, courage, compassion, determination, integrity, humility and self reliance), towards encouraging students into a process of philosophical engagement, largely under the aegis of Mortlock’s successor, Jack Parker. In addition, while the course kept its focus on adventure, this was complemented by a new emphasis on environmental sustainability and personal and group development.

The sponsors of initial teacher training and the requirements of the National Curriculum increasingly dictated both the range and content of the course, limiting opportunities for creative teaching and learning. While what was being done was still of value, (Lemmey, 1999; Prince, 1999), the full potential of the Outdoor Education provision was restricted. In effect the commitment to self-realisation and the development of personal philosophies had

been replaced by the demands of the Office for Standards in Education. The national move towards a utilitarian curriculum meeting the needs of the economy lay uneasily with these core philosophical commitments, and the course eventually broke its moorings and became a free-sailing undergraduate degree, the Outdoor Studies BSc.

Over the last seven years provision at Hilltop has expanded from one vessel into a coherent fleet comprising; a BA, BSc and Foundation Degree in Outdoor Studies; a Graduate Apprenticeship Programme in Outdoor Education and Development Training and an MA in Development Training. The crew numbers over two hundred and the staffing and resources have grown accordingly. Twenty years ago, the captain and first officer worked in two temporary classrooms. Now nine officers, associate lecturers and supporting technicians and administrators are housed in a purpose designed teaching and resources building. The building stands on the hillside, separate from, but close to the main college, and offers a glorious view across Ambleside to the fells of Loughrigg and beyond.

There is a management structure within the ship's complement yet everyone plays his or her part in plotting its course. The captain and officers are from very diverse backgrounds and the original prescriptive philosophy for the course has evolved into a continuing dialogue and practice that presents itself as an analytical and critical process to the crew. As part of this process, the crew are introduced to a range of philosophical positions and the basic ideas of critical theory as presented, for example, by Scott Wurdinger (1997). Through the identification of assertions and assumptions and the generation of questions, students are equipped with a method of philosophical enquiry. The development of the philosophical curriculum is an on-going process with critical thinking at the core.

As well as considering experience in the light of particular prescriptive philosophies, such as Mortlock's and Hahn's, students are presented with a range of relevant experiences within which to develop their own philosophical positions. Perhaps the most extreme example for BA students is spending five days in a remote mountain area with no map, no watch, no compass and no other, non-essential, equipment. This gives an opportunity to 'let the mountains speak for themselves', a time in the wilderness to experience and reflect. The prerogative of getting directly in contact with nature is one of the central philosophical themes of the course: the importance of learning what nature has to teach. Heightened awareness, clarity of perception, quality of thinking, informed response and sustainable behaviour are central to students' progress through their chosen field.

## **Philosophical issues**

As the vessel has had major re-fits twice in its life and the officers and crew have changed, it is worth noting that each planned voyage reflects not just the vagaries of the weather, but also the capabilities of those on board. How has the crew changed? It is interesting to note that both Hahn and Mortlock were staunch critics of much of the contemporary youth culture of their times. Therein lies the danger of the 'young people nowadays' critique. Are the crew significantly different now? Given the rider that it is almost impossible to know empirically, from an impressionistic point of view it seems not. Young people have probably always had a hedonistic streak. The crews' wealth and technologies have changed, as has their popular culture, but essentially their passions and motivations in the outdoors are the same.

The outdoors is the environment that has been shaping our genes for the last 450 million years. Arguably, if our potential is to be realised, our genes must be exposed to the outdoor environment that has selected them as fit. Our human environment may change rapidly but fortunately our genes are more reluctant and our current crew still get the same thrill from natural beauty and physical performance, from the seasons, from finding shelter, from making fire, from preparing food, from chasing and being chased, from being secure in foul weather, from co-operating and from being alone. Outdoor Studies both builds on these primal needs and offers the capacity to reflect critically on their contemporary relevance.

The issue of the sustainable use of resources poses difficult philosophical and ethical questions for the running of the course. Of these, none is so stark as the balance that must be struck between the positive personal effects and negative environmental impacts of expeditions. Can a two-week environmental expedition to the Picos de Europa be reconciled with the fact that many students will be using short-haul jets to get there? Other dissonances also have to be faced, not least the conflicting needs of safety and adventure. Both are issues of balance, and the need to compromise without being compromised illustrates how philosophical debate has to be live in the running of the ship.

We may interpret how we interact with nature and present our philosophies in so many different ways. On our ship we don't all share the same positions and the captain's cabin can be a noisy and occasionally argumentative place. What unites us is a belief and passion in the power and sanctity of the environment and an undying optimism. If there are genes for caring and optimism, then our Outdoor Studies team of officers has a number of them. What better could suit us for survival and what more important qualities are there to nurture in our crew?

In summary, Outdoor Studies at St Martin's, (erstwhile Charlotte Mason College, then Lancaster University) has weathered a variety of storms and continues to wrestle with a range of philosophical and ethical issues. Mortlock's objectives of fostering a balanced awareness, respect, and love of self, others and the environment are still maintained. However, they are now achieved through a more open, questioning, self-reflective process rather than through a prescriptive philosophical structure.

## **The voyage**

It is the end of September and the ships have been scrubbed down over the summer. The BA/BSc Outdoor Studies ship lies in harbour waiting for the arrival of the crew; the FdA ship is running with the wind, on the homeward leg of its voyage, and will not set sail on a new voyage until January; and the 'roll on, roll off' MA vessel continues its year round journey, comprising a series of short, linked, crossings picking up a new officer and complement of crew for each one.

On the BA/BSc vessel the new crew arrive first, some believing they know how to sail and just what the voyage will entail; others not sure why they have signed up. Some are attracted by the words in the brochure but are not sure if they will like the reality; others have selected this voyage against the advice of their school or family; few feel that they have been impelled into sailing on this particular ship; it is their own choice. Some view themselves

as embarking on a three year relaxed voyage travelling as passengers or guests. Little do they realise that their role and understanding of the process will gradually change and that they will leave prepared to work hard and independently in their own field, able to determine the course of other ships and perhaps, if they choose, the course of a whole fleet.

At Level 1, all crew follow a set curriculum that focuses on developing knowledge and understanding in five main areas:

- the academic skills that are needed to enable them to perform to their potential during their three-year passage;
- where this ship fits into the fleet, the nature and design of other vessels and the philosophical base on which the fleet has been built;
- the technical and group work skills that will help them work effectively together;
- the historical and geomorphological origins of the landscapes of the home port;
- the broader ecological concepts and the implications of these for us as individuals, and for ecosystems as a whole.

Throughout Level 1 the emphasis is placed on enabling students to understand what it means to be on this ship and to see the opportunities that exist already or that they might create for themselves in the future.

Throughout their voyage, but particularly at Level 1, crew are encouraged to explore their own learning styles and strategies and to experiment with new ones. Conventional roles are challenged by innovative and varied teaching styles, and the use of experiential learning to help the crew engage with concepts and ideas, encouraging a deep approach to learning from the outset (Gibbs, 1992a). Although many lectures are delivered to the whole cohort, (55-65 students), the crew are impelled into personal engagement in sessions through the use of techniques such as cross-overs or envoying, snowballing and listening triads. These methods have been shown to be effective in developing good speaking and listening skills (Gibbs, 1992b).

At the beginning of Level 2 crew make a choice between the BA and the BSc degree. The BSc offers a scientific approach to the subject area with an emphasis on the study of environments and human interactions with them. The BA has a more 'people centred' approach with a focus on behaviour, motivation, and human responses to mountain environments and cultural landscapes. Students also choose two, from a possible four, optional modules.

At this Level students have to develop links between theory and practice. Returning to the metaphor they are encouraged to move between different parts of the ship taking on areas of responsibility, supporting the new crew and learning to apply their theoretical knowledge. They learn the intricacies of the rigging, how to trim the sails and to respond to the unexpected. They become resilient sailors, better able to anticipate problems and access support to solve them.

In April of their second year the crew leave Ambleside for a few weeks and travel independently to the Picos de Europa, Northern Spain. These journeys, solo or in small groups, can be rich and colourful experiences. There are stories of broken down cars, man-

eating surf, missed ferries, epic cycle rides, and thefts, but the travellers are united by the excitement of having had to cope with the unexpected. Fifty-five young people each taking on the responsibility for an unpredictable 1200-mile journey.

On the designated day in May the crew rendezvous with the staff in the Picos de Europa. The atmosphere is one of coming home, meeting old friends and sharing tales of adventures and, for most, a welcome return to the security of a structured day. Ambleside staff are joined there by experts from the UK in the fields of alpine flora, freshwater ecology, ornithology and by Spanish National Park Wardens, local mountaineers and translators.

The independent journey to the Picos, the new and spectacular environment, the different and varied cultural landscape and the residential setting create a stimulating learning environment. Add to these points careful planning, the luxury of small groups, negotiated work patterns, individual project work and round the clock tutorial support, and it is hardly surprising that for many this is the most powerful learning opportunity of the three year voyage.

The curriculum at Level 3 builds on the work of the first two years and explores its application in a number of vocational and academic contexts. At this level students can specialise. They have a free choice of subject area and methodology for their 10000 word research dissertation and can elect 4 out of the remaining 6 modules. Students are encouraged to take an increasing level of responsibility for their own learning. This is achieved through mini presentations, seminar work, negotiated content and delivery style.

The course has an expanding Erasmus programme and currently has well-established exchange agreements with ships based in the Czech Republic, Norway and Germany. Normally a few of our students study abroad for part of their second year and visiting students join us for three or four months taking modules from Levels 2 and 3. These visiting students and staff give an insight into how other outdoor boats are built, they have spent their outdoor lives sailing on quite different ships, yachts and dinghies and offer a fresh perspective on the nature and purpose of the fleet. (Martin, Franc, & Zounkova, 2004). Of particular significance is the deep connection with the environment they appear to have, which often forms part of a well articulated philosophy on sustainable living.

It could be argued that Outdoor Education in the UK over the last 10 years has done little to foster this deep connection with the environment amongst our young people. Students when they arrive on board our ship struggle to identify 3 or 4 species of tree let alone to know and understand where they grow, how they are harvested or which wood will make the best mast, decking, or firewood. Nor, typically, do they know all that much about the huge impact human societies are having on forests and other ecological systems, and what lifestyle changes we might need to make to turn this around. Looking at the formal Outdoor Education provision in the UK Higgins (2002) identifies a pattern of change from what he terms 'experimental' education to 'recreation'. Voyages are getting shorter, and taking place in more spectacular 'instant thrill' locations. The crew are often passengers, protected from real risk and real responsibility. The UK fleet could be seen as being in The Doldrums, (Higgins, 2003), and we believe HE has a responsibility to play a pivotal role in setting a new course.

## **Pedagogical issues**

Student to staff ratios are, and will remain, an issue for our ships. We approach this problem as creatively as we can and try to focus our staffing on key areas. At level three, for example, these are dissertation tutorials, advanced outdoor skills, seminar work and short focused work experience. The work experience includes a number of practical sessions working with pupils from inner city schools, from small rural schools and with students and adults with mental and physical disabilities. These opportunities are not simply a case of visiting other craft and exploring what they have to offer - students might well have to work with young people and teachers who have never seen a boat before! They have to justify their design, then build and sail their own craft, which, by definition, has to be fit for purpose in the new environment. Assessment is based on critical reflection of this process. The importance of the inclusion of supported work experience at undergraduate level is emphasised in the report *Higher Education in a Learning Society* (Dearing, 1997) and will be included in the next refit of this vessel in 2007.

The development of Outdoor Skills amongst our crew is also something of a dilemma. The new crew inevitably arrive with a range of experience and often a perception (to some extent grounded in reality), that as graduates they will need to hold qualifications in a range of national governing body awards to get meaningful employment. In an ideal world, each student would have his or her own curriculum to fit his or her own career pathway. The world of HE seems far from being ideal for the development of outdoor skills. Yet there are still exciting opportunities.

One opportunity we try to capitalise on is the inclusion of journey-based work. As mentioned previously, the current trend in society is towards 'fast burn', 'park and play' type of outdoor activities at the expense of the more traditional longer duration, journey-based activities. Whilst these approaches are not mutually exclusive and both have inherent potential value, it could be argued that the second approach offers greater opportunity for participants to take on real responsibility and to manage the decision making, resulting in deeper learning. Journey-based work is included at all levels.

Another opportunity we try to offer our students is the opportunity to progress from being a beginner at a chosen activity in first year through to being able to complete one of the advanced skills options in third year. This progression, supported in part by taught sessions and in part by allowing students access to college equipment for practice in their own time is viewed as a key element of the course. This year students have sea kayaked in the Outer Hebrides, ice climbed and canoed in Scotland, kayaked and rock climbed in the south of France.

The assessment of competence in practical skills remains contentious. Whilst it will never form a major part of the assessment it seems logical, in a degree of this nature, to attribute some marks towards it. The dilemma then is how to do this. How do we measure performance? Do we reward those who are (already) competent or those who put in a lot of effort and make significant progress? Do we award awareness and understanding or simply value absolute level of performance?

The management of safety is clearly a fundamental part of outdoor skills teaching and learning and throughout the voyage the crew are encouraged to be involved in this process. As individual crewmembers become more skilled at an activity and the associated decision-making, the expectation is that they should take on greater responsibility for personal and group risk management. Modules at level 3 are designed to facilitate this.

Our voyages are fairly autonomous and it would be easy to lose contact with the other vessels in the wider outdoor industry fleet. Maintaining currency in all aspects of our work is therefore an important focus for us. Our industry awareness is enhanced by partnerships and close communication with a range of charitable trusts and organisations in the private sector and public sector. We also have strong links with several HE and FE Outdoor providers. Some of these courses share similar philosophical values to our own and in terms of the metaphor could be said to be tied up alongside us; others, where the links are not so well developed feel as though they lie at anchor some way out. We feel that building strong links, sharing experiences and developing an HE fleet with a clearly defined identity seems to be an essential element in developing the provision of Outdoor Education within the UK. The time pressures of work in HE make this a difficult goal.

To summarise, if you board a St Martin's Ship as captain, crew or cabin boy you will be involved in the creative planning of future voyages, you will be asked to work hard to achieve the goals of the current voyage and encouraged, in all aspects of your life, to emulate the words of Mark Twain,

“...throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

## **The end of the voyage and beyond**

One of our officers, Terry Storry, left the ship in a tender one day. We support all members of the staff and students undertaking activities in their own time, and help them to make their own pathway in their lives, be it through expedition work, voluntary experiences, skills development or other experiences in the outdoors. On that day, Terry went climbing; he fell. Our sadness was overwhelming; such is the close nature of our work. The realities of risk in the outdoors were made all the more apparent to our staff and to the students. But the ship moves onwards; she beats into port or runs with the wind behind her and still the elements are influential and need to be dealt with safely, but are not prohibitive. The metaphor of this chapter would have been better written by Terry.

(Prince, 2004; Storry, 2003).

As the ship and her crew approach the final destination, there are thoughts of what the journey has achieved and what the crew might do next. For some, they will embark on another journey, usually in a smaller vessel for a shorter timescale a voyage which has a more focussed outcome for the future. For others, they may travel or seek temporary work to pay off debts incurred in paying for their undergraduate years. For some there is an opportunity via the Graduate Apprenticeship Programme to join an established outdoor centre or development training organisation. The career pathways of the crew are varied but with a bias towards the 'caring' professions and recreational and sporting activities (68%)

(Prince, in press) The decisions the crew will make in the future are usually based on values, interest and aspiration rather than on salary or career. The crew may not be heading for a high salary unless they move away from working with boats into law enforcement or viticulture but within five years, the evidence is that they will be satisfied with their pathway (Prince, 2005).

The ships complement have seen a change during the voyage. The crew has developed good personal and process skills. They are flexible, have initiative and enthusiasm; they can lead, make judgements and decisions and work in groups; they have matured. All these skills are seen as essential for their future pathways.

Developments continue on board the other ships in the St Martin's fleet. There will be a first cohort of graduates from the Foundation Degree in Outdoor Studies (FdA) in 2006 – a vocational degree, developed in partnership with The Outward Bound Trust. A new course (BA) in Adventure Recreation Management will provide for those seeking more of a business and management role in the future. The Graduate Apprenticeship Programme and MA in Development Training will attract some of our own undergraduate crew in the future, and others from the outdoor industry who are seeking high quality postgraduate provision. Outdoor industry representatives, current crew and recent graduates are involved in course development and curriculum organisation over the whole fleet.

The voyage has produced individuals whose eyes have been opened to the possibilities beyond the horizon. They are environmentally conscious and have at least a basic technical competence in a range of skills. Moreover, through a wide range of expectation to arrive at the final port, they have good interpersonal skills and can 'articulate their professionalism'.

The fleet of ships in this class has weathered many storms and will, no doubt, weather many more. It may mirror a sine curve with the lows of accidents, a narrowing National Curriculum and increasing litigation but may be balanced by the Excellence and Enjoyment initiative in schools (Department for Education and Skills, 2003), Summer Initiative Scheme, outdoor education in terms of health related fitness, increasing environmental consciousness of the population and the need to live sustainably.

We have a strong anchor at St Martin's College, founded on the beliefs of the initiators of Outdoor Education at Charlotte Mason in Ambleside. We are continually re-fitting parts of our ship to meet the demands of the environment. Many of our crew are in key positions in the outdoor industry, influencing the direction of outdoor learning and the lives of young people. We will strive to maintain our excellence as awarded in a QAA review in 2001, even when the number of officers decrease for a bigger crew and the resources to support the voyages continues to decrease.

The student experience, and particularly the maturation of the individual, is central to our vision (St Martins College, 2004) and we see the provision of appropriate modes of study as important. St Martin's College will also seek to provide a focus of enhanced international and European engagement. We will augment our own research and consultancy in response to industry needs and also in liaison with other HEI's.

What we are trying to achieve through our portfolio at St Martin's is to:

- build undergraduate and postgraduate courses in Outdoor Studies and Development Training which are distinctive and unique;
- develop and build on a long history of excellence in Outdoor Education at Ambleside;
- continue the philosophical aims of Colin Mortlock which underpinned those early courses at Ambleside through a more open, questioning, self-reflective process rather than through a prescriptive philosophical structure;
- develop the core threads of speaking and listening skills, critical thinking skills and the ability to be self-reflective;
- offer uniqueness and distinctiveness through radical and different approaches to teaching and learning, such as through the use of metaphor in this chapter;
- offer opportunities for students to explore pathways to match with their own interests, needs and aspirations;
- enable graduates to progress to key positions in the outdoor industry;
- undertake research and consultancy to meet the needs of the outdoor industry in its widest context.

Our vision is for a Centre of Excellence in Outdoor Studies, responding to the needs of stakeholders, partners, employers, students, graduates, professional bodies and the outdoor industry in workforce development. This will be through increased provision of courses integrating the practical and academic at all levels including Masters Level and through professional training and development, evaluation and reflection, and knowledge transfer.

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