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Why Outdoor Learning Should Get Real

By Chris Loynes

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Biographical note:

Chris Loynes teaches Outdoor Studies and Development Training at St. Martin's College in the English Lake District. He has practised outdoor education throughout his career in schools, the youth service and corporate training contexts. He was editor and publisher of the Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Leadership and Horizons until 1999 and now consults to youth and social work organisations in the UK and abroad. He is a sailor and mountaineer.

Why Outdoor Learning Should Get Real

I have previously likened trends in outdoor learning to the McDonaldization of Society¹, a phrase used by Ritzer² in the title of his book on globalisation. My point is that, like Ritzer, I see trends that seek to make everything the same wherever it is experienced. Ritzer used the burger to make his point. I think the ropes course, skiing, rafting, bungee jumping, mountain biking and many more activities lend themselves to this globalised treatment, 'adventure in a bun'. I view this as something that is counterproductive to effective outdoor learning wherever it is practised. My concerns are that an 'off the shelf', commodified approach to providing adventure experiences is counter to the organic and emergent nature of experiential learning outdoors as people respond to the rich mix of environments, individuals, groups, cultures and activities involved. I also think this approach develops values that are counter to those educators should be developing in our students in a world of social and environmental injustice.

Spretnak³ argued for a 'resurgence of the real' and in doing so drew on the English romantic tradition to make her case. In looking for a more hopeful and positive response to what I saw as a widely negative practice it was heartening to consider that one author thought the seeds of what I was looking for were also embedded in the roots of UK outdoor learning practice. This chapter explores my journey of reconstruction as I seek a form of practice that is based on values that will help outdoor learning contribute to the educational needs of today.

I am writing this from the perspective of a white, English man who has been exploring the professional and cultural diversity in our work. This will inevitably give my remarks some ethnic, gender and cultural bias. I have become curious about the way an idea becomes an institution and, as such, is applied as a political tool both within and between countries and professions. I am also interested in what lies behind the apparently conflicting claims that, on the one hand, there are approaches to outdoor experiential learning that speak globally to the human condition transcending nations and cultures and, on the other hand, that each community should develop its own authentic approach to experience, learning and the outdoors. In the context of these questions the bias of my perspective is, potentially, a significant factor in my interpretation of which the reader should be critically aware.

The Algorithmic Paradigm

What are the characteristics of this algorithmic paradigm of outdoor learning? What are thought to be the problems with it? What other approaches are there, either hidden by the dominant discourse or lacking a voice in the English language? What good would these other approaches be and for what?

Ringer⁴ first used the term algorithmic to describe approaches to outdoor learning. It can be characterised in a number of ways, for example by the language that is used to describe it. Typical words include programming, processing, framing, funnelling, front loading, sequencing, cycles, outcomes, task, leader and team.

It can also be recognised by the beliefs that are taken as axiomatic. Those mentioned by the critics of this paradigm as potentially problematic are:

- Programmes have predetermined outcomes, which are measured.
- Programmes are sequenced according to a conceptual framework such as the learning or training cycle.
- Action and conversation are the central ingredients. You are not learning unless you are doing.
- The world of the learning experience is understood as metaphor and so not entirely real.
- Raised self esteem is typically the dominant outcome.
- The principles of challenge by choice, informed consent and other ethical concerns are seldom questioned.
- A belief in personal development and human progress and the centrality of the ego.
- There is an uncritical stance to the social context in which the learning occurs.
- Groups are understood as teams in the context of a shared goal and not as communities with a multiplicity of needs and dreams.

- Self reliance and leadership are widely practised taught and celebrated at the expense of human interdependence.
- Nature is understood as an assault course, gymnasium or puzzle to be resolved and controlled. It is a resource to be commodified instead of a home to which to relate.

The presence of some of these can indicate a programme influenced, perhaps overly influenced, by the algorithmic paradigm.

A Modernist Tradition

I think there are three distinctive features of the paradigm that attract critical comment. They are all features of the currently dominant, western capitalist, post-renaissance paradigm called modernism. They are the scientific rationale, the production line metaphor that lends itself to mass production and the notion of learning as a product and so a marketable commodity.

A Scientific Rationale. Programmable, formulaic approaches are influenced by the positivist scientific paradigm. This positivist approach has set out to discover the theory behind all observable phenomena and seeks to express these theories as algorithms. The benefit to society is that these general algorithms can then be “plugged in” to a particular problem and deliver a solution. Computer language works like this. Input the data, select the algorithm for the task you want undertaken and the result is a consistent solution.

Applying this method to the study of human behaviour has been under severe attack by other methodologies that do not treat people as predictable phenomena. Nevertheless the positivist paradigm has had a major influence as a metaphor for a course design understood as an algorithm with the capacity to deliver a consistent solution, hence Ringer's use of the term “algorithmic paradigm” to describe this approach. When this metaphor is attached to the metaphor of the production line a powerful combination of ideas capable of widespread influence is forged.

A Production Line Metaphor. Loading and processing are lifted straight from the world of production lines; programming, loading and sequencing form the world of computers. Both