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“Outdoor Education is Dead. Long Live Outdoor Education!”

by Chris Loynes

The field of, as we call it in the UK, outdoor education, recreation and training (in strict alphabetic order as those towards the end of the line are always quick to point out) is, in Australia, evolving from its roots as a social movement into a profession or an industry. As Simon Priest¹ points out social movements and industries alike are noted for having life cycles of growth, steady maturation, plateau and decline after which they reinvent themselves or disappear. He places Australia at the point of maturation some way behind the UK which he places in decline.

This paper then is written by one immersed in decline. Elsewhere I have written ‘outdoor education is dead!’ My purpose, like the warning from the grave, is to encourage you to structure yourselves in such a way that decline and reinvention is your future and not disappearance. Maybe you can go one better and prove the textbooks wrong about this life cycle thing. Perhaps you will be able to add to my line ‘long live outdoor education!’

That all sounds somewhat gloomy! I’ll continue on that theme and get the worst over with! Don’t have a ‘Lyme Bay’ before you’ve got your act together. In the early 90’s the UK was where you are now exploring competencies, self regulation and quality standards. The UK is now dead in the water as a result of the caution, institutionalisation and bureaucracy that have resulted from that multiple fatality. There is hope but it is not in the mainstream. I will come back to that later.

Don’t get me wrong, the market is very strong. Centres are full. Freelance staff are rushed off their feet, instructor training courses and degree programmes are full. I am not referring to turnover or bed nights but to the way in which the quality of the experience and the meaning that experience has for the participant has changed. The title for the keynote address which this paper follows was ‘never mind the quality feel the width!’

Roots

Outdoor recreation has many beginnings:

The Woodcraft Folk, a Europe wide liberal response to utopian ideals of democracy and natural living gathered from native Americans.

Baden Powell seeking the moral equivalent to war after watching boys grow up as scouts in the Bohr War.

Kurt Hahn’s ideas of Outward Bound and the Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme, based on the same German liberal education concepts that led to the Hitler Youth Movement, brought to the UK before world wide export to address moral decline in society.

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Jack Longland's post war educational idealism that dared to dream of things being different for the next generation and which led to White Hall Open Country Pursuits Centre, the first of many outdoor education centres blossoming under the wing of education authorities in the UK.

The Brathay Hall Trust, founded on profits from insurance by philanthropist Francis Scott and established to broaden the horizons of urban young apprentices.

The muscular Christianity of the YMCA youth camps and their belief in the wholesomeness of nature, community living and physical exercise.

The Sting

All have survived the test of time to date. All are based on the social ideal of helping people realise their potential in order to create a better society. All have seen many of their dreams achieved though they often do not have time to notice whilst immersed in the dilemmas of the current age.

All are also suffering from massive structural changes. Funding from the government education purse has substantially declined. Programme directors who typically were lucky to have a petty cash budget within their control are now required to become managers exhibiting marketing, planning, finance and leadership roles instantly. Charity funding has literally become a lottery requiring managers to add fund raising to their portfolio.

By default the social movement became an industry. It turned for its role models to the commercial sector, a growing and healthy but often ignored group involved in activity holidays (PGL, the UK based company, is probably the biggest outdoor provider in the world) and corporate training (in the English Lake District alone there are over 400 registered training companies, the biggest concentration in Europe).

I have written elsewhere about the consequences of becoming an industry². In summary:

Commodification. The place, the activity and the outcomes become commodities with a trade value protected for their commercial worth and packaged like a product.

Commercialisation. The goal of an outdoor organisation shifts from social good to business performance especially surplus or profit.

Language. The field describes itself as an industry with products, markets and customers.

Contribution to society. Umbrella bodies and institutions start to talk about contribution to the nation and the economy. Your minister for sport and recreation opened your conference in just these tones.

Process. Production line ideas capture a linear and logical model of programming with design, process, product, output and delivery.

Managerialism. Outdoor organisations become obsessed by quality assurance, professionalism, qualifications, risk management and performance indicators.

Nature. Once considered a home shared with many species it is described as a resource and then an asset. Peter Hillary did just that at your conference.

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The Baby and the Bath Water

You may say ‘no bad thing.’ The field needs to mature to reach more people, avoid environmental degradation, create a capital base, resource national and state infrastructures and crucially to ensure you do not have a ‘Lyme Bay.’ After all John Gans in his keynote address to you³ demonstrated how a non profit organisation can hold true to its core values without being submerged by the consumer society.

I think Outdoor Education (I am using this term as the UK generic term for all that goes on outdoors) is in an unusual situation. Our relationship with nature and belief in community were not products with life cycles to be replaced by new lines once the market had dried up. They are, by default in danger of being so treated now.

We, like society around us (and to which we were in part a remedial response), have become disembedded from our world. Place is no longer a home but a resource, an asset or, at best, an oxygen factory. Family and community are harder to define. More people are lonely. Capitalism and the market exemplify that disconnection and the rate at which we are unplugging ourselves accelerates. As we join in with the capitalist model (along with many other previous services including, in the UK, education and health care despite a labour government) we buy into the disconnection. Our core is no longer value but product based; our activities and outcomes.

As a result outdoor education, in marketing speak, becomes demand rather than supply led. Instead of holding to our values as part of our culture we respond to niches in the market wherever they are. What are those niches?

Hypermodern Demand

Again I have written elsewhere about the way in which outdoor experiences have responded to hypermodern demand for:

risk free, instant adrenalin.
quick fix training solutions to organisational problems.
instant behaviour modification for dysfunctional youth.
citizenship in a week for hard pressed schools.

The result is a growth in closed environment facilities by which I mean operations with all their activities on site and constructed rather than natural features. The typical programme, with varying degrees of facilitation and progression, will be a series of multi activity sessions led by instructors with limited experience unable to give responsibility to the client for safety reasons. An increasing number of centres in the English Lake District make little or no use of the national park outside their own grounds. No local authority centre in the area camps any more. The benefit being sought by these trends is programme, safety and cost control.

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Another emerging trend has been the courting of outdoor education by the new social institutions.

The Nanny State

Outdoor education is being courted by those concerned with the moral order. In the UK non-government institutions are exploring the value of outdoor education to address problems of gender, ethnicity, drug use, criminality, unemployment and emotional deprivation. The education department is considering outdoor education as a vehicle for values, moral, multicultural, development and environmental education. Citizenship and sustainability are the buzz words.

I could get very excited about what outdoor education could contribute to most of these topics. What does concern me is the degree to which outdoor education is being seen not as a vehicle for exploring the individuals own understanding and values in these areas but as a delivery mechanism for centrally determined understandings and values, a means of enculturation.

Liberation and Oppression

When the outdoors was twinned with education it was always going to be a paradox. Adventure has always been a safety valve where personal self expression and freedom from social constraint could be found. Education at its best requires a sacrifice of some of that self determination in return for the benefits of civilisation. Sometimes it is reduced to vocational preparation or social manipulation. This paradox is part of the human condition. We are a social animal with a strong inquisitive streak. It is inevitably part of our work to work within this paradox. My premise is that it is a central part of our work. To stay in the swim we cannot become an agency of one or other world view. Our desire to survive in the market place for all the right reasons is in danger of leaving those ideals behind. What emerges maybe a 'good' thing. It wont be outdoor education. On the other hand I believe we can sustain outdoor education whilst staying within, just, the system and, even more, make a contribution to the transformation of that business world and to society. And I believe I have evidence.

The Phoenix Rises

Inevitably, for a radical domain such as outdoor education, there are signs of a counter current. I will finish with a case study of one such reinvention with which I have had the pleasure to be involved. It, I believe, offers lessons far beyond its watershed limits.

Eden Community Outdoors (ECO) is a non profit group based in the Eden river valley of north west England. The founders were interested in reconnecting people with nature and community. They believed that a revitalisation of a sense of place was the way in. By this they meant appreciation of that place, attitudes to it and action and involvement in it. The place was defined by the bio-region, in this case the watershed of the river. They also believed in minimal impact and revitalising the local economy.

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The group are a mixture of local people two part time employed by the project, others part time freelance and volunteers. They do not have a market or customers. Their approach is partnership with other local organisations such as schools, youth groups, local businesses, villages, conservation sites, etc. Money, when it is involved, comes from the local community and is spent back in the local community keeping it in the valley for that bit longer before it goes to a multi-national supermarket or petrol producer. They see employment as making a living not creating (financial) wealth.

They provide experiences tailored to suit the partner but always from within their philosophy. For example a senior school group worked with a local woodsman to produce mobile shelters which are taken to local primary schools. A paid worker coordinates a group of sixth form volunteers previously trained in workshops to provide an outdoor experience involving expressive arts, craft work, martial arts, story telling and adventure gaming.

Later, the young volunteers will undertake a journey into the next watershed to camp with their peers and exchange ideas and experiences. Meanwhile the primary school revisit the shelters now set up in a local wood where they overnight whilst exploring the wildlife and working with wood to make bowls and spoons to take home.

A Metaphor for Ethical Business

As I write about ECO I can't help making metaphoric connections with the kinds of relationships an emerging industry might aspire to developing and the sorts of issues it might need to address if it is to transcend the simple commercial model. For instance:

Keeping the money in the family.
 A self sustaining resource base.
 Partnership working.
 Valuing diversity without straying from the core values.
 Learning from other industry cultures and traditions.
 A mixed economy of volunteer, non profit and commercial work.
 Thinking global, acting local.
 Working from the ground up embedded in our community.
 Valuing and sustaining nature as an ethic.
 Listening to intuition as well as rational argument.
 Nurturing the radical for their creativity and new thinking.

It is interesting to note how many of these criteria are just now being explored by the business world including multi-nationals concerned about a customer base increasingly interested in the ethics by which goods are produced and supplied. Workforces, where they are not oppressed, are also expressing similar concerns about their labour being applied in ethical ways.

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Just at the time that our current western version of growth capitalism is widely accepted as having no clothes on we are jumping on the band wagon. Whilst it is the dominant paradigm we do need to relate to it and make it work for us. At the same time we need to have an eye out for alternatives and nurture them. With our special connection with nature and community we have an opportunity to make a contribution to any emergent new directions that will nurture our values at the same time as steer nations and economies into a new and hopefully sustainable future.

At the same time we can be involved with, as a student recently put it to me, 'a class in philosophy - a search for the truth - touching the real.' Not a bad endeavour to adopt as a career.

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