REFEREED ARTICLE

Current Trends and Tensions in Outdoor Education

Michelle Sabet

Abstract

This article explores some of the benefits of outdoor education and examines some of the historical approaches taken to outdoor education, with an emphasis on current trends in the field. Specifically, fostering environmental stewardship through connections to the outdoors, incorporating Indigenous perspectives into practice, and place-based education are discussed. Natural links between these trends are explored, and areas of possible tension between these approaches are examined.

The value of outdoor education lies in the multitude of benefits it provides to those who participate. Outdoor education has historically been adventure-based education, with a focus on individual health and personal growth through camping and survival skills. However, recent trends in outdoor education are shifting the focus away from individual health and wellness goals to fostering environmental stewardship through connections to the outdoors. Another current trend is incorporating Indigenous perspectives into the practice of outdoor education. Place-based education is another recent trend, which encourages teachers to focus their lessons on local places that students can relate to. These recent trends have natural links between each other, so they can complement each other. However, there are also areas of possible tension between these approaches that outdoor educators should be cognizant of and avoid.

Outdoor education is an important area for curriculum development and is beneficial to children and youth for several reasons. The physical benefits of being outdoors are too numerous to recount here, but include the usual gains that we associate with any physical exercise, such as improved balance, faster reflexes, and stronger bones and muscles (Dietze, 2016). It also boosts immunity and energy levels, and reduces the likelihood of developing nearsightedness (Suzuki, 2017). The physical benefits of outdoor education are crucial to the health of children and youth.

The benefits of being out-of-doors go beyond simply getting exercise to including emotional, cognitive, and social benefits. The emotional benefits to being outdoors include increased confidence and an increased ability to cope with stress and even trauma (Dietze, 2016; James & Williams, 2017). The cognitive benefits include more opportunities for independent problem solving, especially through manipulating objects (Dietze, 2016; James & Williams, 2017), and it gives students who may not demonstrate high-level thinking skills in regular classrooms a chance to do so (James & Williams, 2017). Another cognitive benefit of being outdoors, in more "natural" settings, is that it can be restorative and help people who have impulsive tendencies, are unable to concentrate, or are mentally fatigued, to work better and think more clearly (Louv, 2008). A child's social development benefits from outdoor activities in a variety of ways, including learning to work in groups, take turns, and understand social norms (Dietze, 2016). Students who are apathetic toward school-based learning are often more engaged in outdoor learning (James & Williams, 2017). I have personally witnessed, on more than one occasion, how students who do not normally interact with each other can more easily do so in the outdoors, and how some students who do not achieve well in regular classrooms can be engaged in lessons and excel during outdoor activities. Engaging in outdoor activities benefits students in many ways.

Outdoor education has historically emphasized outdoor skills and recreation. The precise focus of outdoor education is different in various countries, depending on their own historical developments and educational trends (Sutherland & Legge, 2016), but generally it has been viewed as a vehicle for personal character development and a method to foster a healthy lifestyle (Quay & Seaman, 2013; Sutherland & Legge, 2016). This is still one of the goals of outdoor education in many schools. However, the exact nature of outdoor education has shifted with the times. For example, in Kelsey School Division in The Pas, the outdoor education program has existed for about 30 years. As a "school-initiated" course, it has shifted its focus over time, mirroring the shifts that have happened in the United States, Australia, and New Zealand (Sutherland & Legge, 2016, p. 301). This author has observed that the program has changed in emphasis from hunting and camping to general recreation, and is now incorporating environmental stewardship and beginning to incorporate Indigenous perspectives. This is not an isolated example, but rather is part of a larger trend to emphasize not only camping skills and personal development.

One of the common trends in outdoor education today is to encourage students toward a sense of environmental stewardship. In order to produce students who will take care of the environment, and even work or make sacrifices toward mitigating global problems such as climate change and loss of biodiversity, outdoor educators are taking students outside and providing them with experiences that will help them feel connected to nature. To engender students to care about the environment, they need to feel connected to it (Braun & Dierkes, 2016; Suzuki, 2017). In fact, "environmental attitudes develop early and are harder to modify as children grow older" (Braun & Dierkes, 2016, p. 2), so the work done by educators to connect children to nature is imperative, especially if the children are not getting nature-based experiences in their home life. Children need concrete, hands-on experiences. It is developmentally appropriate to begin this process of engendering environmental stewardship close to home, in local places, rather than learning about far away places like the Amazon Rainforest (Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2005). Not only is it developmentally appropriate to connect with nature on a local level, but it can be damaging in the long run to learn abstractly about the many global environmental problems. Without the initial caring connection developed, children and youth will "tune out" problems they feel disconnected from, or feel helpless to engage in (Gruenewald, 2003; Sobel, 2005). Outdoor educational programing should have the long-term goal of producing students who care about the environment and are active protectors of it.

Another trend in outdoor education is the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives into existing outdoor education programming. This is a trend with at least two aims. The first aim is to aid in the decolonization process of education (Lowan, 2009; Root, 2010). In Canada, the work being done toward reconciliation, addressing the legacy of residential schools, is a part of this process. The concept of decolonization is complex, and can be difficult to develop curriculum for, because it is necessary to recognize the diversity among Indigenous cultures, which vary greatly by region (Lowan, 2009). The decolonization process is multifaceted, but includes the following elements: revitalizing Indigenous languages (Lowan, 2009; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), acknowledging traditional territories and the treaty relationship (Lowan, 2009; Root, 2010; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015), recognizing specific groups' relationship to specific land bases (Lowan, 2009; Lowan-Trudeau, 2014; Root, 2010), acknowledging elders as the keepers of traditional knowledge and involving them in educational practice (Lowan, 2009), and designing programs created from Indigenous perspectives (Lowan, 2009; Lowan-Trudeau, 2014; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The second aim of decolonization is to explore ways for people, as individuals and as a society, to live more sustainably on the land, in harmony with it (Gruenewald, 2003; Lowan-Trudeau, 2014; Root, 2010). Incorporating Indigenous perspectives into outdoor education is becoming increasingly important, especially in light of reconciliation efforts across Canada.

Place-based education is another recent trend in outdoor education. The premise of place-based education is that teachers should focus their lessons on local places that students can relate to. Generally, curriculum documents are developed for widespread use, and tend to be designed with a "one size fits all" approach. This means that they can not be specific enough for teachers to use for a place-based lesson without further research into what exists locally (Greenwood, 2013; Gruenewald, 2003; Tan & Atencio, 2016). Place-based education is going outside regardless of where one lives, whether it is a rural setting or an urban setting, to get to know the local conditions from many perspectives, whether geographic, social, or historical (Sobel, 2005; Tan & Atencio, 2016; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Place-based education strives to move away from abstract, subject-based lessons to practical, local concerns (Quay & Seaman, 2013). It looks different in various locations because it emerges from the attributes of a place and is inherently multidisciplinary (Gruenewald, 2003). Place-based education is a growing movement in outdoor education pedagogy.

These recent trends in outdoor education have natural links that complement each other and support each other's implementation. One such link is that all of the approaches emphasize the need for local connections. Indigenous knowledge of places is by its very nature local knowledge of the place, which, if respected and sought after, has a natural connection to place-based pedagogy (Lowan, 2009; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Another link between these trends is connecting children to nature. Children need local, hands-on connections to a place in order to develop a caring relationship with the environment (Braun & Dierkes, 2016; Lowan, 2009). This is a commonality between place-based education and the goal of developing environmental stewardship. Concern with developing environmental stewardship capacities also has a natural link to incorporating Indigenous perspectives, because "indigenous worldviews already include an inherent recognition of the land and the connectedness of all beings" (Lowan-Trudeau, 2012, p. 115). These are some examples of how recent trends in outdoor education support each other.

Although these approaches have some complementary goals and approaches, there are also areas of tension between these approaches that outdoor educators should be cognizant of and take into consideration when planning lessons. For example, the idea just discussed, that there are natural links between fostering environmental stewardship and incorporating Indigenous perspectives, can be problematic. A traditional Western concept of environmental stewardship would place human beings as custodians of the environment, and is based on the belief that the purpose of nature is for people to use it as they wish. On the other hand, "most Indigenous cultures situate humans as part of the natural world recognizing the web of interdependent relationships between humans and all other creatures" (Lowan, 2009, p. 49). Educators need to be aware of the ethnocentric bias that they, or their students, may have in favour of their own worldview (Root, 2010).

Another potential conflict between traditional outdoor education practices and incorporating Indigenous perspectives is the concept of using nature as a vehicle for "self-improvement," treating it like it is a challenge to be overcome or conquered. This can be viewed as exploiting nature for human gain, rather than living in ecological harmony with it (Lowan, 2009; Quay & Seaman, 2013). Many Indigenous worldviews place man as a part of nature, not above it, but rather in a symbiotic relationship with it (Lowan-Trudeau, 2014). It is important, as a matter of respect toward Indigenous cultures, for educators to think explicitly about how they view nature, and how their view influences their approach to teaching in and about nature.

Another important factor that needs to be considered by outdoor educators who would like to incorporate Indigenous perspectives into their programming is the need to respect protocols around story telling and being on the land (Lowan-Trudeau, 2012; Michell, 2015; Root, 2010). Story-telling is a very effective method for creating connections to the land, and is used in both place-based education (Wattchow & Brown, 2011) and for transmitting Indigenous knowledge about the land (Michell, 2015). An educator must be aware of protocols associated with certain types of stories and which stories are appropriate to share, and when and by whom (Lowan,

2009; Michell, 2015). It is the educator's responsibility to educate himself or herself about "Aboriginal history, politics and culture, while at the same time creating an inclusive atmosphere that welcomes Aboriginal perspectives" (Root, 2010, p. 113). Fulfilling this responsibility may involve the teacher reaching out to local community members, perhaps elders, to learn more about such matters.

There is work being done in the field of outdoor education to blend various cultural approaches and understandings of nature and approaches to being in it (Lowan-Trudeau, 2014). Caution is needed, because to blend approaches without sufficient understanding of both could devalue or under-emphasize the Aboriginal content (Lowan, 2009; Lowan-Trudeau, 2014). It may be more respectful to use the different perspectives interchangeably, so as not to "subjugate" one to the other (Lowan-Trudeau, 2014, p. 354). Teachers should be conscious of how their worldview shapes their approach to outdoor education, and make it explicit to the students. That way, they can examine issues in outdoor education from a different perspective in a respectful way.

The benefits of outdoor education are many. Over time, approaches to outdoor education have changed from a primary focus on camping and personal development to other areas of development, in line with societal priorities and current understandings of how students learn best. Enabling students to become environmental stewards, incorporating Indigenous perspectives, and emphasizing place-based education are the most recent developments in the field of outdoor education. These approaches complement each other in many ways, but if taken out of balance they can also undermine the purposes of each other. As educators, we need to balance these various approaches to outdoor education and be aware that they are not always, in fact, compatible.

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About the Author

Michelle Sabet is a full-time teacher at Margaret Barbour Collegiate Institute in The Pas, MB. She teaches outdoor education, grade 10 geography and healthy living "shops" to grades six, seven, and eight. She is currently pursuing her Master of Education, with a specialization in curriculum and pedagogy.