

Outdoor education and school curriculum distinctiveness: More than content, more than process

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Abstract

For many years now, those of us engaged with outdoor education curriculum work in Australia have been debating questions which orbit around the issue of defining outdoor education. We claim to be doing so in order to clarify what we are pursuing educationally, our purpose, not only for ourselves but for others, so that we can legitimately stake out our position, our own little piece of educational turf, amongst the other subjects in the school curriculum. However, this debate has never been easy and any attempts to bring it to a resolution inevitably, it seems, settle some issues while heightening tensions in other areas. In this paper I explore two of the more recent approaches to the question of outdoor education's positioning in the school curriculum: the question of distinctiveness and the question of indispensability. Then, through an historical excursion involving Australian and US curriculum history, I highlight some of the difficulties created by shifts in language use. Finally I argue, using definitions of outdoor education that emerged in the United States in the 1950s, that the distinctiveness of outdoor education lies in neither a body of knowledge (content) nor skills and practices (process) but in a deeper level of educational understanding which emphasizes ways of being.

Key words: outdoor education, curriculum, history, subject, Australia, United States, definition

Outdoor education in the curriculum (or not)

Two major questions have been raised over the last 20 years which attempt to draw outdoor education discourse into a broader discussion of curriculum, not just outdoor education curriculum but curriculum *per se*, as this informs how schooling is organized. One of these questions raises the issue of how outdoor education may be distinctive in this broader curriculum discourse, and how it may be different from the subjects that are currently in the curriculum (Gray & Martin, 2012; Lugg, 1999; Lugg & Martin, 2001; Martin, 2008; Martin, 2010). The other question tackles the same problem from a different angle, asking after the indispensability of outdoor education or why, if it is in the curriculum, it should be (Brookes, 2004). One question searches for outdoor education's universal distinctiveness; the other challenges the universality of this distinctiveness while maintaining the need to find some way of considering outdoor education in curricular terms. In the first part of this paper I revisit both of these questions with the aim of finding a way to move the discussion forward so that any distinctive contribution of outdoor education can be perceived.

A school curriculum question: Is outdoor education distinctive?

Prominent amongst the questions asked of outdoor education in curricular terms are those seeking a definition. "What do we mean by the term "outdoor education"? Is there a common understanding and vision for this area of the curriculum? To what extent is outdoor education a subject in its own right with distinctive content and processes?" (Lugg, 1999, p.

25). These are questions that Alison Lugg asked in this journal close to 20 years ago, at a time when the school curriculum in Victoria, Australia (from preparatory to year 10) was undergoing review. While foregrounded within the context of the curriculum review, these questions were premised on a long-standing awareness of "the lack of clarity about the purpose and content of school outdoor education, even amongst outdoor educators" (p. 25). Lugg went on to argue that as a consequence, "we need to be able to clarify what it is that makes outdoor education distinctive. That is, what makes it significantly different to other subjects" (p. 25). Clarity in this regard is about positioning within a curriculum as a subject, requiring determination of a distinctive body of knowledge, which makes up the subject matter of *this* subject, outdoor education, and no other. If this could be achieved, Lugg believed it would provide capacity to develop legitimate arguments for compelling schools and education institutions "to include outdoor education in the curriculum of the 21st century" (p. 25) — expressly as a standalone subject in the middle school years, to supplement the already existing range of cognate subjects offered at the senior school levels in most Australian states (see Martin, 2008).

Standing in the way of clarifying this distinctiveness is anything that draws attention away from articulation of subject content. Indeed, "if the school community does not see outdoor education as having distinctive content," then "it may be more difficult to justify as an essential component of what is often perceived as a 'crowded' curriculum" (Lugg & Martin, 2001, p. 44). By way of a survey of Victorian schools in relation to outdoor education, Lugg and Martin (2001) concluded that it was perhaps