

## THOUGHTS ON FIELDWORK

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### ABSTRACT

There are three main areas in which children progress when involved in residential field, outdoor, or out-reach activities. The first is in learning across the curriculum. Then there is the social education imposed by the very process of living together in a close environment, very different from home for some children. Lastly there is the physical challenge of the environment. I would hope to see an element of this even during an A-level ecology course and an element of environmental learning in every “outdoor” course.

The four broad stages (play, adventure, frontier adventure and misadventure) discernible in outdoor pursuits apply just as much to field studies where the challenge is *intellectual* as well as physical. I want to see most learning in out-reach work at stage 3, backed by skills learning at stage 2—as it is in many places. I do not believe that the requirements of syllabuses and the National Curriculum in any way should be inhibitive. My hope is that the potential of fieldwork should, whatever its immediate aim, contribute to a synthesised understanding of our environment.

### INTRODUCTION

GEORGE AND CO.

I met George in Wales. It was at a centre belonging to his secondary school, the latter in the East end of London. He was large for this second year class of English boys and girls and Bengali boys—at this stage, the school had not managed to convince the parents to send the Bengali girls. He was not a great performer in class at school and nothing there seemed to have gripped his attention—a job as a “minder” was his most likely destination. Socially, he had much to learn to his own advantage, and certainly to that of others.

But, here, thrown into challenging activities, learning things like map reading, cooking on small stoves and managing his equipment, face to face with the environment in all weathers (it was February), he was involved, learning the value of his colleagues both female and of different races, and his horizons were extended. When I later visited the school, apart from being greeted by cheerful English and Bengali friends made at the centre, George dragged me off to his Guildmaster saying “Tell him I done well in Wales”. His outdoor/field experience had made a different person of him.

All the classes in the first two years of this school spend a week each year at the centre which, at that time, had three of the school staff up there all the time. ‘Work’ was a subtle blend of outdoor activity and environmental learning, perhaps mercifully untrammelled by the National Curriculum but which could be fully justified within it.

Two other points are worth making. An awkward girl, who dominated at school, was found wanting when her group got lost on an orienteering expedition of some eight miles to a camp site. She found that, in such a situation, real values applied. (They went the wrong way and the shadowing tutors let them go far enough for their inconvenience, but not too far). Secondly, it was good to see the success of the Bengali boys and their sharing of their delight with the environment with their English peers. I sat with a mixed group by a stream and we all talked of Bengal and Wales.

The example, I hope, illustrates the concept that there are three main areas in which children progress when involved in residential field, outdoor, out-reach activities.

The first is in learning—I hesitate to call it academic because it is so varied—across the curriculum. George and Karen and Ranjit had real experiences to draw upon, both immediately at the centre and later at school. Some of these were deliberately planned, others were inadvertent. The learning comes in different ways. A girl from a down-town Bristol school, at her school centre, surrounded by flowers and butterflies in a sunken lane, and later meeting a group of heifers who rumbled over to meet the group (“Will they talk to I?” she said) was as much in a learning situation as the sixth-former, deep in a stream and applying the latest techniques required of A-level students, under their tyrannical/arrogant/friendly (or with all three characteristics) FSC tutor.

Then there is the social education imposed by the very process of living together in a close environment, very different from home for some children. Shared experiences and some hardship brought out the best in the London group. At a centre (hotel, ski station, cruise ship) students are responsible for their own actions, from the trivial to the fundamental. Many a tutor, or accompanying teacher, has seen the changes in students during such a week and can look back on this progress with pride. Many older people remember such experiences more vividly than other things which happened when they were at school.

Lastly there is the physical challenge of the environment. Some centres and out-of-school trips are only about this—if this is possible. I would hope to see an element of it during an A-level ecology course and an element of environmental learning in every “outdoor” course.

#### STAGES IN LEARNING

All this has been said many times before, but what I would now like to explore is the way in which fieldwork makes it possible for more children to experience “Stage 3” learning. Let me explain. The outdoor education people, specifically through Colin Mortlock, identified four stages of activity in ‘adventure’. He has written:—

“To adventure in the natural environment is consciously to take up a challenge that will demand the best of our capabilities—physically, mentally and emotionally. It is a state of mind that will initially accept unpleasant feelings of fear, uncertainty and discomfort, and the need for luck, because we instinctively know that, if we are successful, these will be counterbalanced by opposite feelings of exhilaration and joy.”

Twenty years experience of putting people, of all ages, into a wide variety of activities and noting their reactions and comments, has led him to believe that there are four broad stages discernible in any outdoor journey. The person involved, whether a beginner or the most experienced of performers, would seem to be in one of these stages at any particular moment. I want to take this further and assert that the same stages are discernible in learning across the curriculum, at school but particularly in the environment. The same stages apply when the challenge is intellectual as well as physical.

#### **Stage One: Play**

This is the level in the activity in which the person is working considerably below his/her normal abilities\*. The response to this level of activity will range from ‘pleasant’ and ‘fun’ to ‘boring’ and a ‘waste of time’.

\*In the text that follows, the feminine versions—“she”, “her”, “herself” etc. are as equally applicable as the masculine form printed. It would be too cumbersome to print both versions on each occasion.

**Stage Two: Adventure**

The person feels in control of the situation, using his experience and abilities to overcome a technical problem. Fear (of physical harm or intellectual derision) is virtually absent, because the person is in control.

This is the level where the teacher tends to work in skills learning. The pupil can apply himself as the problem set is a challenge to his particular technical abilities. He is not disturbed by feelings of boredom and lack of involvement, nor by the psychological stress of the next stage.

This stage is of crucial importance as preparation for anything more demanding

**Stage Three: Frontier Adventure**

This is the stage beyond, and often only just beyond, stage 2. The person experiences fear (of physical harm or of intellectual insecurity), and physical or psychological stress, and no longer feels complete mastery of the situation. He feels, however, that he can, with considerable effort on his part, overcome the situation without accident (physical or intellectual). He accepts that his skills are about to be tested. He is conscious of a definite degree of uncertainty as to the outcome and feels, as it were, poised on a knife-edge between success and failure. If he succeeds, he has experienced 'frontier adventure' or learning. He has found himself in a situation which becomes firmly etched in his mind, perhaps for ever—the learning is real, intensive and lasting. He has feelings of satisfaction, or elation, about the result. The degree of satisfaction and pride is proportional to the scale and intensity of the experience.

**Stage Four: Misadventure**

This is the final stage, when the challenge is in every way beyond the control of the person. Characterised by physical and/or intellectual desperation, it is, on the whole, to be avoided.

**DISCUSSION**

Physical examples are easy to give; and it is readily apparent that what is stage 2 for one person may be stage 4 for another. Fieldwork examples are more difficult to define, but the concept immediately raises discussion about teaching approaches.

For example, pupils can be taken on a guided tour of a particular area and shown the various rocks present on site. They may write down what the teacher says about them, refer to a prepared sheet of information, or fill in the gaps on a work sheet. I think most people would be working at stage 1.

Alternatively, they might be introduced to rock types in the classroom and then be taken to a range of sites where they could match the characteristics learned in the classroom to rocks in the field. They might use a key. They are learning a skill in a secure way with not too much intellectual demand. This seems to be an example of stage 2 learning.

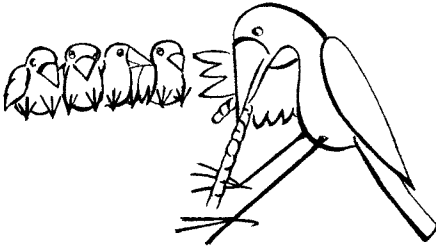
Another group might be asked to look at the rocks outcropping in a given area, to describe the differences between them and, perhaps, relate rock type to topography. There is more challenge and insecurity in this approach. Have we reached stage 3?

If they were told to go out and make a geological map of the area they would be way into stage 4!

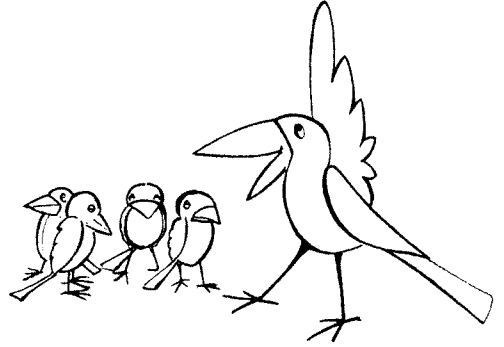
I do not want to labour through other examples. I want to see most learning in out-reach work at stage 3, backed by skills learning at stage 2—as it is in many places. I

**Stage one?**

Are you paying attention?  
Today I am going to tell you  
how to catch worms.



OK kids! There's worms out there,  
lets go and discover them together.

**Stage three?**

Sorry kids but discovery methods  
are in, from now on you find your  
own worms.

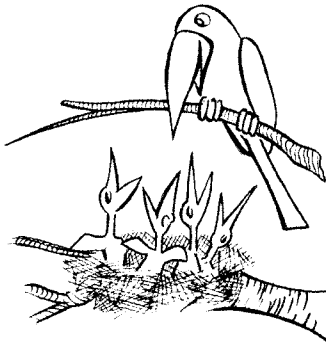
**Stage four - for this  
age of bird?**

FIG. 1.  
Examples of staged learning.

am sure it was what the early FSC Wardens, in their instinctively effective work, were doing. I do not believe that the requirements of syllabuses and the National Curriculum in any way should be inhibitive.

**ENVIRONMENTAL UNDERSTANDING FOR ALL**

I am not convinced that pupils and students, in spite of many brave attempts, finish their education with any sort of synthesis of environmental education. Somehow, we ought to be helping them towards this and towards some clarification of environmental concern,

value judgements and environmental action through their life styles. They need a local, national and global view of these matters.

Some of the difficulty lies in the complexity of the interrelated matters of environmental systems, human populations, consumption, technology and economics. But much more lies in the nature of institutions. There is a failure to recognise the major (but not the sole) reason for subject-based learning is to promote understanding of the world; its biodiversity; its human population; its resources;—their uses and abuses, and uneven distribution. Cross-curriculum aspects of the syllabus—such as environmental education, economic understanding and citizenship—are important components: not a nuisance which complicates achievement of the ill-integrated National Curriculum.

There is practically no fieldwork activity that does not lead from the local to the National and global perspective.

- Studying the drainage systems of an area, or some detailed features within them, raises the topic of the importance of water to the nation and to the world.

- Looking at the ecology of a woodland, a grassland, seashore or freshwater stream leads to consideration of agriculture/forestry (together with soil erosion, fertilisers, pesticides, consumption habits, world economics) biodiversity, waste and pollution—and to the whole issue of the use of world resources. It should raise issues about human populations and sustainability.

- Any study of local industry and land use has environmental implications far beyond the study area.

Orielton Field Centre, in a National Park but with oil refineries on one side and beaches receiving trans-Atlantic marine waste on the other, has many useful starting points—let alone the source of some Stonehenge components nearby.

Exploitation of the experience which often has, by necessity, narrower objectives, needs close co-operation between school and Field Centre. Much of this follow-up has to be within the (carefully-planned) cross-curricular work back at school—but started by discussion in the field. There is no part of the fieldwork that needs closer co-operation between school and centre staff.

I suspect that there has been most success in this area through FSC initiatives related to the curriculum development in geography, over the last few years, and within the discovery type of environmental activities used with 15-16 year-olds on residential TVEI courses.

My hope is that the potential of fieldwork, characterised by intense work and learning (at stage 3 as defined above) should, whatever its immediate aim, contribute to a synthesised understanding such as I am trying to define. There are two questions.

- Is everyone involved in out-reach work trying to fulfil this hope, at least amongst their existing clientele?

- Can we get George (and the wild Greek boy nicknamed Rambo who turned up at Malham on a TVEI week) through to a level in which such a hope is not miles into stage 4 for them?

#### SUMMARY

So we are looking for schools and out-of-school providers (including FSC) to plan their out-reach work as an integral and progressive part of the curriculum together to:

- Give a balance of curriculum learning, social education and physical education.
- Challenge pupils at stage 3 level.
- Provide a synthesised understanding of the world.

If, in doing this, we are not meeting the needs of specific examinations or attainment targets of the National Curriculum, we must change those. But let us hope that the examinations and curriculum requirements remain in sympathy with these deceptively simple aims.