

# PROFESSIONAL MATTERS

## Describing Outdoor Learning



As many representative and membership organisations in the sector explore even closer working relationships and collaborative projects, having a shared understanding about terms used across the field has become ever more critical. Recent times have seen greater public awareness and use of a wide number of descriptive terms from across the sector, with Outdoor Learning, Outdoor Education, Adventure Tourism, Outdoor Therapy, Environmental Connection and Forest Schools being some of the more prominent. New audiences are looking for clarity and understanding of terms used in the sector, including for example, the recently formed All-Party Parliamentary Group for Outdoor Learning or new Apprenticeship training providers. Questions are being asked about whether Outdoor Learning can be defined and where the overlaps and connections are beyond the sector to outdoor recreation, leisure, community and competitive sport, countryside or farming.

Outdoor sector workforce development in the UK has taken massive leaps forward over the past few years. Employer-led, work-ready occupational standards are informing qualifications in the sector, and professional recognition and new Trailblazer apprenticeships in England have all contributed to a greater number of school leavers, students and volunteers wondering what career opportunities Outdoor Learning might have for them. In parallel, providers and members of the workforce are being asked by policy makers and funders to talk even more about Outdoor Learning and the outcomes, benefits and impact it can bring. A clear frame of reference for the term 'Outdoor Learning' can also prove helpful for all providers, practitioners, educators and researchers in the field who are setting

out a context for their work and interests. For organisations like IOL, the frame chosen can shape the boundaries for its work, and representation.

This article describes an approach to describing Outdoor Learning that honours the term's historical roots, is informed by researchers in the field, offers clarity, and responds to individuals, organisations and stakeholders asking:

- What opportunities are there in Outdoor Learning?
- Is what I/we do Outdoor Learning?
- Why should we bother about Outdoor Learning?

### History of the term 'Outdoor Learning'

Although the term 'Outdoor Learning' was in limited use in the 1990s, it was the setting up of the Institute for Outdoor Learning in 2001 that established its place in the language of the outdoors. The emphasis on Outdoor Learning was a conscious attempt to broaden the more traditional view of Outdoor Education, with its focus on high-cost, high-adventure activities, and to reflect the opportunities presented by non-school providers as well as schools using a wider range of activities and approaches, such as Forest Schools (1, 2). Shifting the emphasis from 'education' to 'learning' also reflected a cultural shift that saw a rise in formal and non-formal adult learning, teaching becoming redefined as facilitating learning, and learners positioned as the consumers of education (3).

Since the introduction of the term, understanding and interpretation of Outdoor Learning has followed two broad pathways, largely reflecting formal, school-based settings and the more diverse non-formal settings. In their influential review of Outdoor Learning research related to formal educational settings, Rickinson et al. drew on definitions of Outdoor Education to suggest that Outdoor learning,

“...can be seen as a concept and practice with a range of different foci, outcomes and locations” (4, p.15).

Further clarification by Dillon et al. recognised,

“...the outdoor classroom as a setting, Outdoor Education as a process in which educators, students and others take part, and Outdoor Learning as that learning which accrues as a result,”

highlighting both the process and outcome aspects of learning (5, p19). More recent definitions have emphasised an activity focus, Passy et al. summarising Outdoor Learning as,

“...practical and experiential learning activities conducted outside in school grounds and other locations such as parks, forests, residential camps/centres or on expeditions; activities can be curricular or noncurricular, focus on different areas of cognitive, social, emotional and moral development, and be related to indoor learning.” (6, p.73).

In Scotland, the breadth of coverage is more simply stated in current Scottish guidance (7) where Outdoor Learning is understood now to encompass,



“...the entire range of learning experiences undertaken outside,”

and incorporates experiences in the school grounds, the local area and further afield on residential and expeditions (8, 9).

Universities with an interest in Outdoor Learning have similarly broad definitions, the University of Cumbria for example defining it as involving,

“...facilitated experiences in the outdoors normally in formal and non-formal education. It includes outdoor and environmental education, adventure, recreation and physical activity for a range of outcomes such as health and wellbeing, personal, social and intellectual development, and enhanced relationships with nature and place.” (10).

Significant in this definition is the emphasis on education and the attendant idea of facilitation, the part played by someone who helps students to learn in an experiential group (11). The inclusion of recreation suggests that learning and development can happen informally as well as in more structured ways, while the specific reference to relationships between people, nature and place highlights a unique aspect of Outdoor Learning when compared with other developmental activities.

Beyond formal education settings in the UK, the non-formal sector includes a wide range of provision including youth groups, church groups, Outdoor Education and activity centres, overseas expedition providers, voluntary programmes such as the John Muir Award and the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, health-related (social prescribing) programmes, and education programmes provided by nature, environmental and conservation charities (12). The differing contexts that these groups operate in and the variety of philosophies and approaches they champion reflect the wide application of Outdoor Learning and the attendant difficulty in attempting to bring together a single unifying description. The traditions and practice of Outdoor Education, for example, are still much in evidence in the UK's Outdoor Education centres (13, 14) but the associated experience and underlying philosophy can be very different to a single curriculum-focused lesson in school grounds.

Outdoor Learning, then, can be described in a number of different ways that reflect the priorities of the person or organisation seeking to define it. A focus on process and outcome reflects a specific interpretation of learning and reflects an education-biased stance. An activity focus shifts the emphasis to the ways that the learning outcomes are achieved, while definitions that seek to incorporate all aspects of Outdoor Learning adopt a more conceptual, umbrella approach.

## Towards a description

Rather like defining sports or the arts, describing Outdoor Learning in an open and inclusive way offers challenges. Being too generalised does not highlight the unique qualities of Outdoor Learning as distinct from outdoor recreation, leisure, community or competitive sport, countryside or farming. Excessive detail can narrow the focus and exclude some of the wide variety of approaches, participants, activities, locations and outcomes in the field.

The IOL has previously attempted to describe an overarching concept of Outdoor Learning, resulting in the somewhat unwieldy definition of it being,

“...a broad term that includes discovery, experimentation, learning about and connecting to the natural world, and engaging in environmental and adventure activities... [involving] the transformation of knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours through direct engagement with the outdoor environment for the personal and social benefit of individuals, families, society and the planet.”



The aim of this piece of work has been to offer a description that has been simplified as much as possible and yet also include the key elements that can describe and differentiate Outdoor Learning. The description is best considered a soundbite and a starting point for further conversations.

## Consultations

Building from a generic definition held by IOL, in 2016 Neal Anderson first began exploring a simpler, direct description of

### SEE READER RECOMMENDATIONS

Readers share resources which have supported their professional practice on page 3.



Outdoor Learning to aid in negotiations with government departments and sector partners on workforce standards and establishing pathways to becoming a Chartered Institute.

The current thinking and approach complements and builds from the work of both John Crosbie (2014) and Dave Harvey (2021) in their respective PhD research projects. Starting with a research-informed description, over the past 12 months members of the Institute for Outdoor Learning, Scottish Outdoor Consortium, Outdoor Alliance Wales and others have been instrumental in exploring the need and benefits of a new way to describe Outdoor Learning.

Over 300 people directly contributed to consultations and they consistently requested a description that encompasses the rich breadth of responses to five questions designed to reveal the nature of Outdoor Learning as it is provided (see figure two),

**How does the learning happen?**

What methods, approaches, pedagogy or andragogy describe the way you are providing Outdoor Learning and underpin the theory of change for programmes?

**What activities and experiences?**

Which specific challenges, adventures, woodland skills, environmental education, field studies, camps, expeditions, outdoor sports and activities, etc. do you use?

**Where does it take place?**

What are the locations and habitats where you offer Outdoor Learning on the land, sea and in the air?

## HOW DO YOU DEFINE OUTDOOR LEARNING?

Feeling inspired after reading this article? Want to shape the future of the sector?

Mull over your thoughts on how to define Outdoor Learning and then email Neal to join the discussion:  
neal.a@outdoor-learning.org

# Developing a description

When studying for my PhD, I struggled to find a meaningful definition for Outdoor Learning in the literature. The model that was frequently quoted was the Higgins and Nicol overlapping circles of Outdoor activities, Personal and social development and Environmental Education (15). I have always considered this model to be flawed, as not all Outdoor Learning scenarios are in the natural environment, nor do they have the environment as a clear focus.

I ended up defining Outdoor Education, in the context of my PhD, as:

“The use of the natural environment or adventurous outdoor activities as a medium to gain greater benefit than that of pure recreational enjoyment.” (16).

This definition was received well by my supervisor, Professor Higgins, as well as a number of the teaching staff at Edinburgh University. However, I still considered that it was lacking, both in terms of missing the input from tutorial staff and in the context of IOL's professional accreditation.

Our sector's lack of a credible definition has been challenged on several occasions by those outside the sector and may be detrimental to us as organisations in associated fields come closer together (e.g. UK Outdoors). Having thought about the 'missing' element, I now consider that it is the input of ourselves as session deliverers or Outdoor Learning organisations that makes an essential difference to participants.

Hence, the following model of Outdoor Learning developed in my mind and was presented to members of the IOL Trustee board and

**Who is participating?**

Are you working with participants from a specific school, organisation, age range, community, location, need, etc.?

**Why it is of value?**

What are the intended and actual outputs, outcomes and impact of the Outdoor Learning you provide?

The description below provides an inclusive and accessible description of Outdoor Learning.

**Outdoor learning is an umbrella term for actively inclusive facilitated approaches that predominately use activities and experiences in the outdoors which lead to learning, increased health and wellbeing, and environmental awareness.**

**Facilitated approaches**

Whereas outdoor recreation can be described as a self-led approach for leisure purposes, Outdoor Learning is seen as a planned and



staff in 2018. Like the Higgins and Nicol model, my definition of Outdoor Learning is the overlap of three concepts: Outdoor activities, Personal development and Facilitation (see figure one).

**Outdoor activities:** Outdoor activities covers the usual range of activities in our sector, including field studies, problem solving and outdoor adventurous activities. Even if the last of these may take place indoors, they still have their roots in the outdoors for example, climbing walls. Without the outdoor element, and the associated challenges, the activity becomes indoor learning and falls into classroom teaching, the likes of management development programmes, or counselling.

**Personal development:** Personal development provides 'greater benefit than pure recreational enjoyment' and could be Mortlock's "awareness, respect and love of self, others or the environment" (17).

Alternatively, it could be in any of the fields that benefit from Outdoor Learning, namely: academic, physical (health), psychological (affective), social (interpersonal) or societal (16). Without the planned personal development element, the activity becomes sports coaching or environmental / adventure tourism.

**Facilitation:** Personal development needs to be planned and programmed through a facilitator, whether that facilitator is present or located remotely. Without facilitation, any personal development would be serendipitous or recreational in nature.

Being aware that no model is a perfect interpretation of the world it represents, I have found the overlap of these three areas useful to my understanding of the term. I have also found this helpful in identifying the scope of Outdoor Learning, those activities that should

purposeful facilitated approach led by an instructor, teacher, leader, coach, guide, etc. The inclusion of 'actively inclusive' is both a celebration of the longstanding attitude within the field to working with participants, as well as a call to continue to reach out and bring even more members of our communities into direct connection with outdoor activities and experiences.

#### Activities and experiences in the outdoors

In many sports and pastimes, the outdoors provides the essential backdrop or surface that makes participation and play possible. Outdoor Learning goes further. Whilst Outdoor Learning happens predominately, but not exclusively, in the outdoors, learning about the environment in which the activity and experience takes place is often a part of the overall process of participation and learning.

#### Learning and change

The description adopts a broad view of learning that includes self-direction, direct education and all points in between and beyond. Outdoor Learning covers the acquisition or refinement of specific



FIGURE ONE: Outdoor Learning definition model (16)

be considered to be part of the field, as well as those that may fall under the remit of other organisations.

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knowledge and skills as well as the sometimes more subtle changes in behaviours and attitudes that can lead to increased health and wellbeing, and environmental awareness.

#### Customise your description

Whilst the generic definition can be a useful starting point for some, perhaps the strength of the proposed approach to describing Outdoor Learning is the ability for individuals and organisations to customise the description to fit their audience and purpose.

By completing the 'how', 'who', 'what', 'where', 'why' for your work, you can create a description that can convey your unique approach and work in the outdoors.

Some examples:

- We help young people develop a 'can-do' attitude and positive relationships by providing sail training experiences across the North Sea.
- I lead environmental discovery walks along the local canal to



# OUTDOOR LEARNING

An umbrella term for actively inclusive facilitated approaches that predominately use activities and experiences in the outdoors which lead to learning, increased health and wellbeing, and environmental awareness.

## WHAT ACTIVITIES AND EXPERIENCES?

Outdoor sports \* Adventures \* Nature \* Expeditions \* Field studies \* Curriculum \* Play \* Initiative and group tasks \* Ropes, challenge courses \* Forest schools \* Arts \* Bushcraft \* Green crafts \* Conservation ■

## HOW DOES THE LEARNING HAPPEN?

Outdoor education \* Adventure education \* Leisure and holiday activities \* Environmental education \* LiNE (Learning in the Natural Environment) \* Forest schools \* Green care \* Activity/ sport coaching \* Outdoor therapy \* School grounds based \* Experiential learning \* Place based \* Residential \* Expeditions \* Informal learning \* Sail training \* Adventure tourism \* Eco tourism ■

## WHERE DOES IT TAKE PLACE?

School, centre, venue grounds \* Parks, gardens, green space \* Community gardens, allotments \* Beaches, sand dunes, cliffs \* Estuaries, mudflats \* Woodland, forests \* Farmland, grassland, meadows \* Wetlands \* Heathlands \* Uplands, moors, mountains \* Caves \* Rivers, lakes \* Offshore, coastal water \* Jungle, desert, prairie, mountains etc ■

## WHO IS PARTICIPATING?

Children, young people and families (CYPF) \* Adults \* School pupils \* Youth \* Community \* Business \* Military \* Sector workforce ■

## WHY IS IT OF VALUE?

Personal and social development \* Social justice \* Health \* Wellbeing \* Environmental action \* Organisation, role effectiveness \* Academic achievement \* Community development ■

FIGURE TWO: Outdoor Learning

- reduce the social isolation felt by older adults in the community.
- We provide multi-activity residential experiences based at our centre for children and young people using Outdoor Education to boost social development and academic achievement.
- I guide climbing and canoeing activities with individuals and families on holiday, giving them a memorable adventure and appreciation of the local environment.

## Conclusion

The descriptions of Outdoor Learning used in the field have evolved, and will continue to evolve, over time. The aim of this article has not been to limit scope and redefine terms such as Outdoor Education, Adventure Tourism, Outdoor Therapy, Environmental Education, Sail Training, or Forest Schools. These established and valued terms within the field can be included within the generic description proposed.

We encourage readers to continue discussions about the scope of the term Outdoor Learning and welcome complementary or alternative viewpoints. Please contribute your thoughts and input to [neal.a@outdoor-learning.org](mailto:neal.a@outdoor-learning.org) ■

## REFERENCES

Full reference details can be found at [www.outdoor-learning.org/Good-Practice/Research-Resources/About-Outdoor-Learning](http://www.outdoor-learning.org/Good-Practice/Research-Resources/About-Outdoor-Learning). Summary details are as follows:

- |                                    |                                      |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1 Ogilvie (2013)                   | 10 UoC (2021)                        |
| 2 Allison (2016)                   | 11 Heron (1999)                      |
| 3 Biesta (2005)                    | 12 Gordon, Chester and Denton (2015) |
| 4 Rickinson et al. (2004) (p.15)   | 13 Rea (2011)                        |
| 5 Dillon et al. (2005, p.19)       | 14 Cooper (2018)                     |
| 6 Passy et al. (2019, p.73)        | 15 Higgins and Nicol (2002)          |
| 7 Education Scotland (n.d)         | 16 Crosbie (2014)                    |
| 8 Beames, Higgins and Nicol (2012) | 17 Mortlock (1973)                   |
| 9 Education Scotland (n.d)         |                                      |

## FIGURES AND IMAGES

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