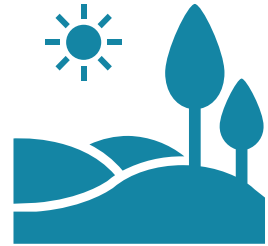




# Outdoor Learning

'**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**.



Rather like defining sports or the arts, describing outdoor learning in a concise and inclusive way can be a challenge. 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.

This current IOL description includes the work of volunteers, part-role, and full-time professionals and providers across the sector:

## **Facilitated approaches**

Whereas outdoor recreation can be described as a self-led approach for leisure purposes, Outdoor Learning is seen as a planned and purposeful facilitated approach led by an instructor, teacher, leader, coach, guide, etc. The term 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 key 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 knowledge and skills as well as the sometime more subtle changes in behaviours and attitudes that can lead to increased health and wellbeing, and environmental awareness.

## Informed by research

The descriptions of Outdoor Learning used in the field have evolved, and will continue to evolve, over time. The aim of the current IOL description is not to limit scope and redefine established and valued terms within the field but to include them and celebrate the rich breadth of outdoor learning as it is provided in the UK. Outdoor Education, Adventure Tourism, Outdoor Therapy, Environmental Connection, Forest Schools, and other similar terms are all seen as part of Outdoor Learning, each with their own distinct history, approach, and purpose.

The current thinking and description have been informed by research and UK wide consultation. Read the [2021 Horizons article](#) by Neal Anderson, Dave Harvey and John Crosbie for:



- History of the Term Outdoor Learning
- Insights from two doctoral research projects
- Scale of 2020-21 consultations informing the IOL description

## Life-long progression

If people are to form a healthy, developmental, and sustainable self-led relationship with the natural environment they need a mix of outdoor learning experiences. This is true for any age.

- Experiences made possible by others are the first step in inspiring self-led or independent adventures and connections with the outdoors.
- Instructed, taught or guided experiences can provide frontier adventures and memorable moments when benefitting from the skills, knowledge, and experience of outdoor learning professionals.

### Describing a childhood progression in outdoor learning

The Institute has completed an initial [map of the range of outdoor learning interventions](#) across the UK that are designed to enable children and young people to form sustainable self-led relationships with the natural environment, and engage more effectively with education to benefit from better health and well-being (2015).



# 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 ■

## A Personalised Description

Whilst the generic definition can be useful for many, the ability for individuals and organisations to customise the description to fit their audience and purpose is when it can be most beneficial.

The starting point is answering five questions:

<b>How does the learning happen?</b>	What methods, approaches, pedagogy or andragogy describe the way you are providing outdoor learning and underpin the theory of change for programmes?
<b>What activities and experiences?</b>	Which specific challenges, adventures, woodland skills, environmental education, field studies, camps, expeditions, outdoor sports and activities, etc. do you use?
<b>Where does it take place?</b>	What are the locations and habitats where you offer outdoor learning on the land, sea and in the air?
<b>Who is participating?</b>	Are you working with participants from a specific school, organisation, age range, community, location, need, etc.?
<b>Why is it of value?</b>	What are the intended and actual outputs, outcomes and impact of the outdoor learning you provide?

By completing the how, who, what, where, and why, professionals and providers can create a description that can convey their unique approach and work in the outdoors.

Some examples:

*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."*

*"I lead environmental discovery walks along the local canal to reduce the social isolation felt by older adults in the community."*

*"We help young people develop a "can-do" attitude and positive relationships by providing sail training experiences across the North Sea."*

## Benefits of Outdoor Learning

Whether an outdoor learning activity or experience is for a few hours, over a weekend or lasting many years, the chosen location, equipment and people involved can make each event unique.

Research shows that people benefit from outdoor learning in all areas of life. Outdoor Learning provides a highly effective way of addressing some of society's key challenges:



### *Lifelong activity and learning*

**At the intrapersonal level:** strengthening self-confidence through engagement with activities and the environment leading to lifelong participation and outdoor competence. Learning through experiences and developing skills, knowledge, character, resilience, and a positive approach to risk-taking.



### *Appreciating and valuing differences*

**At the interpersonal level:** providing a safe and supportive setting to enhance social skills, appreciate and value difference. Making time to meet and interact with peers and role models from outside the home, school or work environment. Encouraging meaningful relationships across generations that foster tolerance, respect and kindness.



### *Sense of place and community*

**At the societal level:** providing space for spontaneous, in the moment events that are driven by the needs and interests of self and others. Developing a sense of place leading to greater engagement with the community and an appreciation of the opportunities available to live, learn and work in the local area.

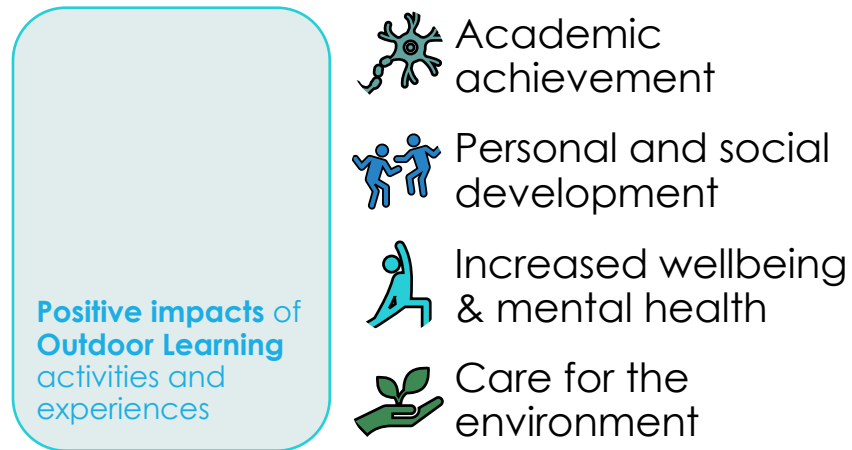


### *Care for the worldwide environment*

**At a global level:** giving people a chance to 'unplug' and foster a connection that leads to respect and care for the natural world, an appreciation of biodiversity and sustainability, and pro-environmental behaviours.

## Making The Case for Outdoor Learning

Research, reports, policy documents and news items in support of Outdoor Learning impacts can be found on the [Outdoor Learning Research website](#). There is strong evidence<sup>1</sup> that Outdoor Learning activities and experiences can have positive impacts on:



In addition, the 2015 Blagrove report on [The Existing Evidence-Base about the Effectiveness of Outdoor Learning](#) found:

- Almost all outdoor learning interventions have a positive effect.
- The effect attenuates over time: the effect as measured immediately after the intervention is stronger than in follow-up measures after a few months.
- Evidence for the value of longer interventions. The systematic reviews found that overnight and multi-day activities had a stronger effect than shorter ones.

### Theory of change



The Institute recommends providers use their own [theory of change](#) model to describe the thinking (theory) behind how a designed programme or service will lead to beneficial outcomes and impacts for participants.

The theory of change can be described and presented in many ways – the best way is that which is most appropriate to your audience.

## Resources

### *Horizons articles*

- [H94 – Describing Outdoor Learning, Neal Anderson, Dave Harvey, John Crosbie](#)

### *Outdoor Learning Research website*

- <https://www.outdoor-learning-research.org>

### *1Evidence for positive impacts of Outdoor Learning*

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## **IOL Professional Development**

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