Nicholas D’Amore

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Advanced Writing

Prof. Christen Enos

A Paradigm Shift in (Outdoor) Education

The definition of the term “outdoor education” has changed significantly in the almost 50 years since its onset. Perhaps this is due to the eclectic composition of the field’s advocates. When we talk about the outdoor and environmental education discourse community we are talking about a group of educators, outdoor and recreational enthusiasts, athletes, camp and program directors, and youth leaders. While outdoor education originally referred to teaching in and about the outdoors, its definition has expanded to signify ways in which educators can use the environment as a tool for teaching those skills that may not need a textbook or a classroom. It utilizes experiential learning methods to conduct naturalistic field studies, challenge students mentally and physically, and to foster critically important relationships both between students and between individuals and their environment.

Some of the primary philosophies underlying the principles of outdoor education are laid out in Simon Priest’s journal article “Redefining Outdoor Education: A Matter of Many Relationships.” In the article, the reader is presented with a few different definitions of “outdoor education” as the term has been used historically. Priest’s goal in this article is to show the field’s evolution and propose a re-viewing of the term outdoor education, such that he may better define its current practices and benefits. The article, in this sense, is necessarily informative. The reader is not presumed to have extensive background knowledge on the subject, so the author quickly cues them in on the common discourse and some of the debates within the community. He discusses in detail things like “adventure education,” “environmental education,” and “experiential learning”—all subcategories of outdoor education that readers may not be familiar with. Priest, who shifts from informative to argumentative, proposes that in more modern practices, the environment acts as a backdrop for learning that is focused on the building of relationships rather than on building skills; and, he supports this claim by breaking down these relationships into four types which he defines: “*interpersonal*, *intrapersonal*, *ecosystemic*, and *ekistic*” (Priest 14). In doing so, however, Priest is careful to note that he is only offering a theory of an alternative educational paradigm—he is not so much declaring as he is proposing a new argument. This places the author inside a debate on the state of outdoor education so that he may propose his own definition and describe his own practices to his reader. In writing an article whose goal is to inspire further debate, Priest makes successful, calculated choices regarding his chosen audience, his formatting choices, and the tone with which he approaches his argument.

Originally published in the *Journal of Environmental Education*, this article appeals to the eclectic community aforementioned: those who might take an interest in outdoor education. Among them are recreational athletes, alternative educators, and experiential program coordinators. Given that the article was intended for a journal, it is likely that some readers are interested in the scholarly side of educational theory and more committed than the casual reader. Thus, Priest is appropriately concise and definitive in his enumeration of six main points defending his definition (Priest 13). His points follow a logical progression from simple axiomatic statements about the environment to more complex propositions of the inherent benefits of outdoor education. That these six points are not simply bulleted is significant. The choice allows him to present and explain his logic as a fluid progression rather than a disjointed list of proposed principles. This is pleasing to an audience who may be reading the article with ideas of their own, as it is subtle and conversational as opposed to rigid and imposing. Throughout this progression, Priest further maintains this scholarly attitude by referencing historical educational practices and including relevant in-text citations that cue the reader into other discourse communities such as that of educational theory and recreational studies. This allows him to hold the attention of an audience that is, in part, an academic one.

But Priest does well to acknowledge those less serious academics as well: outdoor enthusiasts, alternative educators, and other more liberal readers. After carrying the reader through his somewhat dry defense of the outdoors as a worthy “classroom” for learning, he rephrases his argument using an effective metaphor. The metaphor fittingly compares the principles, practices, and benefits of outdoor educational practices to the interactions of a tree with its surrounding environment. If the description of this metaphor is still too dull for the reader, Priest has provided a visual representation of it in the middle of his essay. The graphic helps re-contextualize his theories—with sensory interactions like “sight,” “sound,” taste,” “touch” (Priest 15) as the soil and roots of the system, and the branches and leaves of the tree representing the network of relationships available in an outdoor setting. Of course, this metaphor also establishes a kinship between Priest and his audience of *environmentally* aware individuals. This casual approach is mirrored in his language as well. There is notable lack of critical terminology in this article. When it does air on the side of esoteric, such as when Priest mentions the educational theories of “Comenius, Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Dewey,” (Priest 13-14) he accompanies the reference with a brief summation of these works to bring the reader up to par. This move both establishes credibility for the author and educates less informed readers In broadening the audience with such tactics (of providing visual cues to expand comprehension, of using modest diction, of relating to traditional academic theories), the author seems to be engaging in a larger discourse regarding the state of education in general. We get a sense of this, not just through a meta analysis of Priest’s structural and design choices, but in the article’s content as well.

Throughout the article, the author reminds us that what he is proposing is a biased theory based on personal and, he hopes, shared experiences. To do this successfully, he takes on an inviting, distinctly non-combative persona. Whereas a more aggressive author may lay his arguments out in absolute terms, Priest meagerly offers his own views. In his thesis paragraph, he states “…this author would like to offer a redefinintion [sic] of the term outdoor education” (Priest 13). Both the personalizing of his purpose and the word “offer” make for a palatable, mild phrasing that is inoffensive to readers. He continues to invite readers into a debate in the concluding paragraphs as well when he appeals to other professionals and enthusiasts—noting “environmentalists,” “conservationists,” and “school teachers” (Priest 15) specifically, and contrasting their practices with his. This persona of humbling proposing new ideas holds through the final sentence where the repeated use of the word “if” shows that these claims are up for debate and open to further development. Thus, when reading this article we may benefit by seeing Priest’s tone as mildly critical, but simultaneously encouraging for readers in this ongoing discussion of outdoor educational methods.

Priest allows us to join in on this discussion by appealing to a broad audience of educators, by presenting his information in a succinct and accessible way, and by maintaining a moderate tone. What is at stakes here is not just a definition of modern day outdoor education. This article rather uses a discussion of this small field within education to elicit questions of a macro scale: what is the focus of all education? What should be taught in schools? His argument is targeted to a broad audience and as such, it finds a place among educational theorists and practitioners of all sorts. Priest‘s argument of relationship building over hard skill development is slightly controversial, but he presents it in a judicious fashion. He treads the line between academic and dedicated enthusiast through accessible word choice and intentional formatting decisions. As a result, the experience of reading this piece is not just clear and understandable, but enjoyable and thought provoking.

WORKS CITED

Priest, Simon. “Redefining Outdoor Education: A Matter of Many Relationships.” *The Journal of Environmental Education* 17.3 (1986): 13-15. *JSTOR*. Web. 20 Jan 2015