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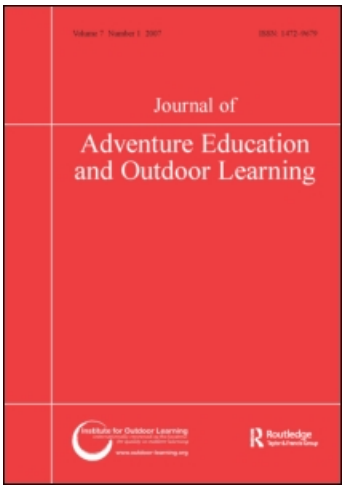

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Recontextualizing the role of the facilitator in group interaction in the outdoor classroom

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The traditional role of the facilitator in outdoor education is frequently seen as outside the group of participants, either in a position of power over the participants or detached and passive. Following an ethnographic study at a residential outdoor centre, an in-depth analysis of the facilitation process was carried out, which revealed that the facilitator is always part of the group, and that the type of influence that the facilitators have on the outdoor learning process depends on the way that they approach their role within the group. For the purpose of this paper, the term 'facilitator' is used to refer to both centre staff as well as visiting teachers accompanying the school groups. This paper addresses critical questions regarding the effectiveness of the outdoor learning process when a position of power is adopted. The paper will also show the impact that recognizing the facilitator as a member of the group has on the learning experience in the outdoor classroom.

Introduction

Traditionally, in outdoor education, facilitators are viewed not as part of, but separate from the group of participants or clients that they are leading/instructing/facilitating. By reviewing the literature on the role of the facilitator in outdoor education, I have uncovered that there appears to be a dual position of the facilitator: either in control of the participants' learning experience (Hart, 1991, 1992; Sharp, 1992; Parry, 1995; Priest & Gass, 1997; Bendaly, 2000) or as a passive witness to it (Chapman, 1995; Joplin, 1995; Sugarman, Doherty, Garvey, & Gass, 2000). The former places the facilitator in a position of power (Hayllar, 2005), in the latter, it is argued, power is shared between learner and facilitator (Joplin, 1995).

Brookes (2004) argues that outdoor education texts tend to have an individualistic view of education, which does not consider education as socially constructed. According to Williams (2003) the concept of shared learning between facilitator and participants is a

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relatively new concept in outdoor education. There is some research that has recognized its existence and potential. For instance Higgins (1997) pointed out that the facilitator and the participants could share a common learning experience. Also Gass's (1999) review of research literature suggested that the facilitator and the participants may be 'co-learners'. Brown (2001) uncovered through his research that the facilitator has a central role in the learning experience of the participants involved in outdoor activities. He argues that: 'The collaborative role engaged in by all participants to interaction means that we cannot position the facilitator as merely a bystander' (Brown, 2001, p. 123).

Moreover, Brown (2005) points out that in spite of there being extensive literature on the theory of facilitation and guides to conducting outdoor activities, there seems to be a limited amount of studies, particularly from an ethnomethodological perspective, providing an in-depth analysis of what takes place within facilitation sessions. Tucker (2002, p. 388) also emphasizes that 'an understanding of the social environment and context, from the interactions that take place, the structuring of a course to the communication and negotiation skills of the trainers' seem to be given little attention within the literature.

This paper addresses the above-mentioned issues by discussing some of the findings of an ethnographic study that aimed to uncover and understand the outdoor educational process and by looking at the interactions within groups of primary school pupils involved in outdoor activities at a residential outdoor centre. More specifically, this study revealed issues surrounding the facilitation of outdoor activities and the impact of the facilitator approaches on the outdoor learning experience of the pupils. This has shed light on the role of the facilitator within the group interactions in the outdoor classroom.

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The power relation between the facilitator and the group of participants in outdoor education

There are many terms used to describe the person responsible for conducting the activities in an outdoor educational setting, such as instructor, teacher, facilitator and leader. For the purpose of consistency, I have mainly used the word 'facilitator', but other descriptors may appear based on the use in the literature. According to Bee and Bee, the word 'facilitator' comes from the Latin '*facilitas*', meaning 'easiness', and 'to facilitate' means '*to make easy, promote, help forward*' (1998, p. 1, original italics). Thus, they define facilitation as 'holding out a helping hand, removing obstacles and generally creating a smooth pathway for the delegates to pursue their learning journey' (Bee & Bee, 1998, p. 1).

Another definition sees the facilitator as 'the person responsible for guiding a group through a process in order to accomplish a specific task or achieve a specific goal' (Bendaly, 2000, p. 3). Bentley (1994) describes facilitation in similar terms, when stating that facilitation is:

> the provision of opportunities, resources, encouragement, and support for the group to succeed in achieving its objectives, and to do this through enabling the group to take control and responsibility for the way they proceed (p. 12).

Heron (1999, p. 1) puts it simply when defining the facilitator as 'a person who has the role of empowering participants to learn in an experiential group'. My intention was not to evaluate the accuracy of these definitions, nor to adopt any single one, but rather to give an overview of how the terms 'facilitation' and 'facilitator' have been used in the literature. I will point out, however, that with the exception of the definition given by Heron (1999), these definitions appear to place the facilitator outside the group that he/she facilitates. According to Brown (2001, p. 123) because of the central role that the facilitator has 'in creating and limiting opportunities for discussion, for evaluating student contributions and in collaborating with students to construct and articulate acceptable "knowledge" ', facilitators cannot be seen as simple 'bystanders'. Rather facilitators seem to be part of the learning experience, as they are involved in the interaction with the participants.

Not only that, but facilitators appear to be, at times, at the epicentre of power (Brown, 2001), where power is conceptualized as the exercise of authority (Hayllar, 2005). According to Hutchby (1996) power represents the shifting distribution of resources enabling participants to achieve interactional effects unequally. He conceives power 'as a discourse phenomenon in terms of participants' differential potential to enable and constrain one another's actions' (Hutchby, 1996, p. 483).

When deconstructing Priest and Gass's (1993) five generations of facilitated learning from adventure experiences, Dickson (2005) brings to the attention of the reader the dominance of the facilitator and the submissiveness of the participant. She suggests that this stems from the focus on the central role of the facilitator in controlling the experience of the learner. The model of the five generations seems to imply, according to Dickson (2005), that:

> a well-designed process (the questions) will ensure that the inputs (the people) will achieve the appropriate outputs (their own learning), but it seems that the participant can only achieve 'their own learning' through the intervention of the instructor (p. 236).

The metaphor used by Priest and Gass (1993) is that of a production line, where the participants are the inputs or the resources; they are submitted to a process, i.e. activities, reflection, debriefing, in a manner that the facilitator, acting as production engineer, sees fit, in order to achieve the predetermined outputs or outcomes, for example, learning. According to Dickson (2005, p. 236), assumptions about power and control, predictability and quality control are made within this metaphor, however 'People are not inputs and experiential learning is not a mass production line'.

Priest and Gass (1993) put the burden solely on the facilitator, allowing the participants to take very little responsibility for their own learning, and not considering the possibility that learning may not take place when and where it was expected by the facilitator. This places the facilitator in a dominant role having to ensure that the whole group achieves the learning. Dickson (2005) argues that the control of the learning situation by the facilitator can be compared with the oppressive nature of Freire's (1972) banking concept of education. This concept describes the traditional teaching as the depositing of information in the pupil's head, arguing that education is used to manipulate and prevent pupils from becoming fully human (Freire, 1972).

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Consequently, the issues of power are also present in the formal educational setting. Delamont (1983) puts power into the centre of her analysis of the role of teachers in the classroom, arguing that teachers have control over their pupils, as they have the right to monitor and correct the pupils' talk and behaviour in ways that are very different from the norms of everyday conversation. The teacher's power over the pupils is also recognized by Pollard (1985) who describes it as a multipurpose tool often taken for granted by the teachers themselves, but which is a potential hazard for the pupils.

Bernstein (1996) sees power and control as operating at different levels of analysis and suggests that they are analytically distinguished; however he argues that they are empirically embedded in each other. In Bernstein's (1996) view, power divides people in society:

> Power relations, in this perspective, create boundaries, legitimise boundaries, reproduce boundaries, between different categories of groups, gender, class, race, different categories of discourse, different categories of agents. Thus, power always operates to produce dislocations, to produce punctuations in social space (p. 19).

Robinson (1994) emphasizes the importance of the teacher's role within the group, when she states:

> The *facilitative* role of the teacher is a recognition that the teacher has something unique to offer the group, but also that he or she does it from within the group, as a member of the group, not from a power position above the group (p. 158, original italics).

According to Robinson (1994) through the reciprocal act, the children and adults become involved in a dialogue, which allows the exploration of paths of knowledge unknown before. Dialogue is a process that actively involves the participants in liberating learning, it is not simply a method by which content is taught, it is the whole network of interactions and relationships that comprise learning.

I believe it is important to look at outdoor education as well as formal education, as this paper deals with both, since the research on which this was based involved staff at a residential outdoor centre, visiting primary school groups and their teachers. Therefore, when I refer to the 'facilitator', I mean not only the centre staff, but also the visiting teachers, who were involved in conducting outdoor activities themselves, either in the presence of centre staff or not. The term 'outdoor classroom' is used in order to describe the research setting. Below, I will briefly explain the meaning behind it.

The outdoor classroom

The term 'outdoor classroom' was used by Rickinson et al. (2004) in their meta-analysis of research on outdoor learning, where they emphasize among other things the need for a deeper understanding and more reliable research evidence of the teachers' conceptions of 'the outdoor classroom', as well as the curricular aims and pedagogical strategies that are seen as significant for effective teaching therein. I found this term to be appropriate for my study, as it reflects both the setting, i.e. the outdoors and the phenomenon I was exploring, i.e. the educational process.

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Recent policies in the UK, such as the 'Learning outside the classroom manifesto', launched in November 2006 by the Ministry of Education, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), emphasize the importance for young people to learn 'through experience in the world outside the classroom'.[1] This manifesto states that there is strong evidence to support the idea that 'good quality' learning outside the classroom enhances the learning inside the classroom, and that these experiences provide opportunities for learning in various areas, such as 'general and subject based knowledge; thinking and problem-solving skills; life skills such as co-operation and interpersonal communication'.[2] Moreover, residential visits at outdoor centres, which are the research setting for this research, are seen as 'a powerful way of developing key life skills, building confidence, self-esteem, communication and team working'.[3]

However, it is not clear from this document, on what kind of research they base their statements. They argue that learning outside the classroom is beneficial in many respects, but they appear to assume that such learning always occurs and that it always lead to educational benefits, which may not be true in practice, since 'well-planned' and 'inspiring' activities do not guarantee the desired outcome (Dickson, 2005). Moreover, the manifesto refers to 'meaningful', 'good' or 'high quality' learning experiences, without making it clear whether there are any differences between these experiences, and if so what those differences are, and what each entails, which can lead to unclear and possibly unrealistic expectations.

Although outdoor activities are often seen as non-formal education (Festeu & Humberstone, 2006), they can also be part of a formal-education programme (Rickinson et al., 2004). Siurala (2006) defines non-formal learning as

> a voluntary, situational and experiential learning process which is not easy to break down into measurable didactic phases leading to a clear-cut quantifiable certificate or a learning result (p. 12).

Moreover, according to Siurala (2006), non-formal education is learner-centred, emphasizing intrinsic motivation, the usefulness of knowledge and critical thinking. He also argues that non-formal education can be an autonomous field of learning, but it can also be used as an alternative to formal learning or as complementary learning.

The outdoor educational process I observed combined elements of formal and non-formal education, as there were elements characteristic of a formal educational setting, i.e. the pupils, the teachers and a structured programme, which used non-formal learning as a complementary form of learning, with no formal evaluation or accreditation. In this light, the term 'outdoor classroom' seems to be an appropriate description of the learning environment under study.

Methodological overview

This research[4] was carried out at a residential outdoor centre, set in the rural surroundings of the English countryside. The centre offers educational programmes for children, young people and adults. I have conducted fieldwork over two periods.

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The first was conducted in the summer of 2005, between the beginning of June and the end of July. The second was conducted in 2006, and it started in May and ended in June.

By adopting an ethnographic approach, I intended to gain a better understanding of the outdoor educational process, by paying close attention to the interactions within the group during outdoor activities and the impact that the facilitator approaches had on the learning experience of the participants in the outdoor classroom. Before describing the study in more detail, and looking at some of the findings, I will explain the methodological approach.

What is ethnography?

Ethnography has been widely used in educational research, highlighted by the numerous ethnographic studies done in schools and universities (Delamont, 1983, 1984, 2002; Hammersley, 1983; Pollard, 1985; Wolcott, 1988; Fetterman, 1989; Robinson, 1994; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Massey & Walford, 1999; Walford, 2001, 2002; Sparkes, 2002; Conteh, Gregory, Kearney, & Mor-Sommerfeld, 2005). The ethnographic approach is sensitive to the individual and to the social processes (Willis, 1977; Davies, 1984; Griffin, 1985). Griffin (1985) sees the qualitative analysis of ethnography as a means to understand the experience of individuals in a group context.

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) point out that ethnography generally assumes an emergent design. The ethnographer himself/herself is the primary source of data (Woods, 1994), consequently subjectivity is an inescapable reality of the research act (Walford, 2001).

Walford (2001) argues that the ethnographer must be involved in a constant review of how his/her ideas have evolved. I have attempted to do this through reflexivity, by keeping a fieldwork diary where I would put down my thoughts for the day, sometimes considering the reasons behind my reactions to certain situations or the reactions of the participants to myself, to the environment or towards one another.

Practical methodological issues of the research

As part of my ethnographic study, I have used participant observation and semi-structured interviews in order to collect varied data. The interviews were conducted toward the end of my fieldwork periods, when I had built a strong rapport with the staff at the centre (Walford, 2001). I chose not to interview pupils or teachers because of their limited time at the centre, and therefore I did not want to be too intrusive and take away from their experience. I found that my rapport with them was not as strong as it was with the staff, due to their short stay at the centre.

Throughout my fieldwork I made use of pen and notepads to record my field notes, and a tape recorder for the interviews. I observed a total of 14 different school groups, during the two phases of data collection at the centre. The pupils were aged

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between 6 and 12 years, and each group was accompanied by at least two teachers from the visiting school.

There was only one school group staying at the centre at any one time. I observed each school group when they were involved in activities; however, when I thought it was relevant or important, I recorded incidents or discussions I had with participants during break times, or in between activities. Each school group was divided into smaller sub-groups of 10 to 12 pupils when participating in the activities at the centre. I usually followed the same sub-group throughout their visit at the centre, as this helped with building rapport with the participants, and also allowed me to observe how the group progressed during their stay.

To make the data easily retrievable, I made a chronological record of the events. I described the context of the situations and I specified the gender of the participants, their ethnicity and social background where possible, whether they were a pupil, a teacher or a facilitator, for example I used Pg for a female pupil, and Pb for a male pupil, and Pg1 and Pg2, if there were two girls talking, Pgs if there were more girls saying the same thing in unison, or Ps if there were pupils of both sexes saying the same thing at the same time.

In this paper I tend not to use the initials of the names of the participants, but rather use the whole pseudonym where possible, when conveying the dialogue between participants, in order to allow the reader to have a more natural feel of the conversation. This is also the reason why, when I refer to a particular pupil who plays a significant part in a specific example, I tend to use a pseudonym, rather than Pg or Pb. It has to be noted that all of the names used in this paper are pseudonyms in order to protect the anonymity of the participants and ensure confidentiality.

In order to be able to retrieve data more easily, I also numbered the pages of each fieldwork notebook, and numbered each notebook, writing the period in which the data was recorded on the cover, e.g. Field notes V, 23.05–06.06.2006.

Any interpretations I made about what was going on at the time, I put in square brackets ([ ]), as it is illustrated in the example below:

> Pb: I don't want to do it!
> Tf: If you don't do it, then the team won't do it, we will have to stop the activity. Do you want that?
> Pb: I don't want to go on! [very upset] (head down) (Field notes I, pp. 229–230, 28.06.2005).

Therefore I considered that when I described the boy as 'very upset', I was aware that this was an interpretation on my part and not what could be considered a fact. I do not see my interpretation as final, but rather an informed one based on my knowledge of the context.

I used regular brackets to add any description of the participants' behaviour accompanying the dialogue, since I considered this information to be a significant piece of data that allowed for a better understanding of what was going on. I have used '[. . .]' in order to mark that there was something missing, i.e. some parts of the conversation have been left out.

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Locating the study within the educational context of the outdoor centre

I have not used the real name of the outdoor centre where the research was conducted in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants. I will refer to it as simply 'the centre'. Below I will present the aims and objectives of the centre, and the perspectives of the facilitators on the educational process in order to allow for an understanding of the ethos behind its work.

The aim of the centre is to facilitate the particular needs of different groups. By providing, what is in the centre's view, a flexible approach, and comfortable and accessible surroundings, the individuals are encouraged by the centre 'to learn new skills, build confidence and share their time in an enjoyable way'.[5]

The visiting schools are involved in choosing the activities and putting together their programme. Some of the activities are facilitated by the visiting teachers. The centre has its own philosophy largely promulgated by the deputy director, Paul, who manages the team of facilitators. For Paul, group work is very important and the centre's service is about teaching children to work together.

All the facilitators interviewed seemed to share similar perspectives regarding the educational process. They all proclaimed to share the philosophy of the organization, placing importance on team building, and on the participants' learning to work together. Furthermore, the staff placed considerable importance on the pupils having fun, and enjoying what they do.

Susan, a facilitator at the centre, stated a number of learning opportunities available to the children coming to the centre, which included developing confidence, learning new 'transferable' skills and making new friends. Other facilitators commenting upon what they felt facilitators should provide, emphasized the notion of building confidence in the pupils as well as getting them to work together, through 'sharing' communication. Some facilitators indicated it was important that they provided opportunities for all pupils to learn to communicate.

From the interviews with the facilitators it became evident that there was some consensus regarding the qualities that, they perceived, make up a 'good' facilitator. For all the staff, communication and pre-planning were significant. While Jane also mentions confidence: 'I think they [facilitators] need to be confident //' (5.06.2006, Interview 10), Gary highlights a sense of humour as important, but only with knowledge of the activities and what they are about.

The emphasis on the importance of communication skills for 'good' facilitating, illustrates the social aspect of the outdoor learning experience. Therefore social interaction is an essential part of the process and it does not only refer to the interaction between pupils and pupils or pupils and facilitators, but also to the interaction between pupils and teachers, and teacher and facilitators.

Examining the role of the facilitator in context

Although the research that I have conducted is not generalizable, due to its specificity to one particular setting and the reduced number of participants in the study, 'naturalistic

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generalisations' (Stake, 2000) may be arrived at by the reader, as a result of the 'rich' and 'thick' descriptions of the phenomena (Geertz, 1973). Brown (2005, p. 241) calls for 'a fine grained analysis' of the facilitation process, which can only be achieved using a sensitive qualitative method of research. As I have shown above, ethnography is able to provide a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the process under study, and what follows is an in-depth look into the outdoor educational process, focusing particularly on the approaches adopted by the facilitators taking part in this research, and the impact that such approaches had on the outdoor learning experience.

On the basis of the emerging data, I decided to examine three main approaches that had a more significant influence on the group interaction and the educational process, and which, I believe, will help to shed more light on the role of the facilitator in relation to the group that he/she facilitates. Hence, I will first explore the effect that the detached approaches that some of the visiting teachers and centre staff have adopted had on the outdoor learning experience of the pupils. I will then look at how the controlling approaches that put the facilitators in a position of power over the pupils have impacted on the way they learned. Finally, I will consider how the approach that recognizes the facilitator as part of the group influences the learning process within the group in the outdoor classroom. I will then conclude that the facilitator is never outside the group, and that he/she is always an important part of the group, without whose support and guidance the group may not succeed in achieving the desired outcome.

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The detached facilitation approach

In some cases, the facilitators adopting detached approaches did not manifest an obvious interest in the activity, failing to motivate the pupils to get involved in the activity. Their lack of interest could cause the pupils to lose interest themselves in the activity, as pupils often appeared to rely on the facilitator's support. Thus, it seemed that when the pupils were struggling with an activity, having the support of their facilitator was important for them so that they should not give up on the task all together. In the following example, the pupils were involved in toxic waste,[6] a low-risk problem-solving activity. The group was accompanied by a female teacher and a male facilitator, Jimmy.[7] It was a really hot day and there was no shade in the activity area. The teacher sat herself on the grass, without paying too much attention to the activity. She would shout out some instructions or suggestions from time to time, such as: 'Let others have a go!' or 'Get together and discuss it!'. As pupils were struggling with the task some of them abandoned taking part in the activity and joined the teacher on the grass:

> Now it is just the boys that are involved. The girls are chatting to the teacher. There is only one girl that is still with the boys.
> Pb1[8]: It's not working!
> Pb2: Ok, we'll try once more, than we give up!
> Pb1: No, never give up! [very determined].[9]
> Pb2: No, I mean this idea. [apologetic] (Field notes I, p. 181, 23.06.2005).

Although the facilitator accompanying the group, Jimmy, tried to help the group by giving them hints, most pupils manifested little interest in the activity and preferred to spend time chatting to their teacher. It seemed that without the teacher's support and encouragement, the pupils were not motivated enough to get involved. This shows that Chapman's (1995) approach to teaching in the adventure education paradigm may not be so effective. Chapman (1995) sees teachers as coaches who 'are largely removed from their roles as interpreters of reality, purveyors of truth, mediators between students and the world' (p. 239). Such an approach does not seem suitable in this instance, since by acting removed from the group, the teacher alienated many of the pupils from the activity, despite the facilitator's interventions (Jimmy):

> Jimmy: I think you had it before, but maybe you have to use more than one elastic, just to make it stronger.
> The teacher is still talking to the girls. [They are not interested in what is going on.] They are not looking, their backs are turned (Field notes I, pp. 181–182, 23.06.2005).

When the teacher manifested some interest, by urging them to get involved: 'Tf[10]: Come on you lot, you're not giving up, are you? It seems that only two people are doing something' (Field notes I, p. 182, 23.06.2005), more pupils became interested in the activity. Thus with some encouragement from their teacher, pupils seemed more motivated to take part in the activity:

> As this idea fails, they listen to Jimmy's advice and try the previous idea again.
> Tf: Come on you lot, get together and work as a group!
> The girls get up and join the boys.
> Pb3: Come on, Jack, let's get involved!
> Pb4: But I don't know how. [Disconcerted]
> [. . .]
> Tf: It seems to me that it is only Ken that is thinking things through. Why don't the others come up with an idea?
> Pb1: I told them my idea, it was the only idea I had!
> They try again (Field notes I, pp. 182–184, 23.06.2005).

Here the teacher criticizes the pupils for not participating, but offers them little encouragement when some show a lack of confidence in their capabilities. After this intervention, she makes no other attempts to offer her support to the group. When the teacher stopped interacting with the pupils who were actually taking part in the activity, the children's interest seemed to fade, as can be seen below:

> Ken has a rest. More join in the rest. Four pupils are working on a plan.
> Pb5: Ok, I'm going to need at least four people.
> Two girls get up immediately.
> Pgs: Ok!
> The others continue their rest and chat. One girl (the one that was with the boys before) sits separate from the group, she is not involved in anything, but she watches those working on a plan. [. . .]
> [It is a very hot day, maybe they are not in a mood for thinking.] The boys have another go. Nobody else is interested in what they're doing (Field notes I, pp. 185–187, 23.06.2005).

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The extract above shows how the pupils do not appear to support their peers in accomplishing the task. There was no cheering, no encouragements, and no suggestions from those pupils sitting on the grass. Most pupils appeared to follow the example of their teacher and not get involved at all.

The facilitator continued to interact with the pupils carrying out the task, by giving them some assistance. Then the girl who had been more involved in the activity joins in again. However, all the others were sitting in a circle chatting to the teacher and another facilitator who joined later, this was Tom. After a small success in the activity, Jimmy took a step back, telling the pupils that they were on their own. He ended up joining the chat along with the girls, the teacher and Tom. In the end only two boys and two girls were still carrying on with the activity. When they finished, there was little cheering and no clapping.

As they all walked away from the activity area, most of the discussions that went on regarded the disco that they were going to take part in that evening and what they were going to wear. There was little or no mention of how they had got on with the activity, whether they had enjoyed it or not.

Towards the end of the activity there was no attempt on the part of the teacher or the facilitators to encourage pupils to participate in the activity, but rather the facilitator that had been helping some of the pupils with their plan, stopped giving them the support and joined the chat. These pupils not only lost the support of the adults, but they also gradually lost the support of their peers, who probably perceived that having a chat with the teacher was more important.

However, many teachers remained detached even if they were interested in the activity, because they wanted to take a step back and let the pupils do the task on their own. Nevertheless, this lack of involvement did not last and the teacher usually became more involved, as will be shown further on.

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The controlling facilitation approach

At times, by using control and adopting a position of power over pupils in order to achieve their own disciplinary goals, the facilitators were unable to take a step back and allow the pupils to work together toward solving the task. Thus, it happened, on occasion, that the team-building goal could not be achieved, because of too much intervention on the part of the teachers/facilitators. This happened even during very low-risk activities such as orienteering. During orienteering, the pupils were usually grouped in twos or threes and allowed to carry on with the activity on their own after being explained the purpose of the activity and where they were allowed or not allowed to go. I observed a school group, where the teachers were following each and every move of their pupils. All the teachers in this group accompanied the pupils throughout the whole of the activity:

> I asked two boys if I can follow them, they said it was ok. [They seemed more concerned with their activity.]
> The teachers will help them with the first checkpoint.
> Pb1: Ok, where is number 1?

> Pb2: Number 1? I think it's over there.
> The teachers lead them to the first checkpoint. Tm[11] reads the first question. [. . .] They are still all together for the next checkpoint. They are not allowed to run off. The teachers are helping them find their way.
> [I don't think there's any point in me following just one group. They all do it together. The ones that are holding the map or the checkpoint sheet seem to be more interested in what is going on. The others are distracted, they are not really listening to the questions. They look around the surroundings, they chat, or they just wander off (not too far, they stay quite close to the group)].
> The teachers are helping them with the questions. The teachers say that the questions are too hard for the children (Field notes I, pp. 103–104, 20.06.2005).

The extract shows that the teachers took control over the activity from the very beginning. They decided which course the pupils should follow and wanted to supervise the pupils closely by not allowing them to run off. Another form of control was exhibited when the male teacher read the question himself. These controlling approaches took away ownership of the activity from the pupils (Robinson, 1994; see also Williams, 2006), which resulted in many of them starting to lose interest in the activity by becoming distracted and not paying attention. The teachers seem to question the ability of the pupils to carry out the activity, which may justify their tendency to take control over the activity. Spontaneity was not encouraged and the control of the teachers grew as the activity progressed:

> They all run off, leaving the Tfs behind. When they think they have found the way, they call out to the teachers. They are waiting for them [the teachers] to proceed. One boy finds it, he calls out, pointing to the check point.
> Pb4: I found it! I found it, it's over here!'.
> Tf1 reads out the question.
> Tfs are keeping an eye on the children, making sure they don't wander off or misbehave. One of the boys in the group I had chosen is keeping away from the others, he is not listening to the question, he is looking at a little girl's colourful bracelets.
> They run off to the next checkpoint. Teachers following them, Jimmy also joined. Jimmy shows two girls a tree, telling them to look around. Others join in the search. Once they found it, they called out.
> Pb4: I found it!
> Pg1: We found it!
> Pb4: No, I found it. [angrily] (Field notes I, pp. 105–106, 20.06.2005).

From the above it appears that the pupils became reliant on the teachers' instructions, as they waited for them to catch up and to read out the questions to them. Any attempt at independent actions seems to be stopped by the teachers, as it can be seen below:

> They run off again. They are stopped by a teacher. Others are left behind. [They are more independent now. They start looking by themselves.]
> Tf1: Off the road please!
> Tf2: Off the road!
> They think they need to cross the road. Tf1 stops them telling them to look at the map (Field notes I, pp. 106–107, 20.06.2005).

Although the group of boys I had planned to observe in the beginning, seemed quite eager to take part in the activity and explore on their own, they were absorbed by the

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whole group, with the teachers giving them specific instructions as to what they had to do. It was the teachers that were making the decisions and the pupils were constantly waiting for their approval. There were some attempts to gain independence, especially when encouraged by one of the facilitators, but the teachers soon took this independence away. The result was that many of the pupils lost interest in the activity.

In the extract above there appears to be a lack of dialogue between the participants on how the task should be solved. Furthermore, by not allowing the pupils to make their own decisions may have left the pupils feeling powerless, since they had no choice. Collaboration and co-operation were not encouraged, since the pupils were not given the opportunity to work together on solving the task, they were simply told what to do and where to go at all times, thus failing to create the space to work as a team.

According to Proudman (1995), such an approach raises some critical questions with regard to whose experience this is, whose definition of success is used, what the pupils' goal for the activity is, or whether the facilitator is interested in guaranteeing a certain outcome for the pupil. Proudman (1995, p. 243) points out that in too many cases, facilitators 'allow their unconscious conditioning to interfere with opportunities for student self-discovery'.

During my research, it often happened that the facilitator would direct the participants before starting the activity, telling them what the experience was supposed to be about, for example: 'This is a team building exercise'. An example of this is when Gary, one of the facilitators at the centre, introduced the low ropes course to the pupils by saying:

> Gary: The key to today's exercise is teamwork (Field notes IV, p. 59, 22.05.2006).

Gary did not create the space for any other opinion to be voiced, except for his. The facilitator was in control at all times, as the pupils were told what to do and what not to do, as it happened during this low ropes session:

> Gary: What you need to work on as a group is to decide where everybody is going to stay on (Field notes IV, p. 60, 22.05.2006).
> Gary: You need to work out how to get the rope in the middle. Andy, you cannot reach for it because you might slip. Ben you cannot jump, because you may miss it and fall, and Kevin, you cannot throw sticks at it 'cause they don't exist. [. . .]
> Gary: When you swing here like this (he swings), you need to help people and hold them so that they don't fall in the water (Field notes IV, pp 61–62, 22.05.2006).

When the pupils were struggling with the task, Gary became frustrated:

> Gary: Try and hook it! (to the boy trying to get the rope from the middle). Come on! Oh, this is appalling! Come on, hook it! (Field notes IV, p. 63, 22.05.2006).

The pupils did not manage to finish the whole course in time. Gary spent a lot of the time giving them instructions and the pupils had few opportunities to work on their own. Consequently they relied on Gary's instructions, instead of coming up with their own ideas, which possibly prevented them from finishing the activity in the allocated time.

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At times, the pupils were told what they should have learned from the activity, which Gary did with another group that had just finished the low ropes course. He did not allow the pupils to express their own opinions about the activity, and expressed his own instead, which is evident in the extract below:

> Gary: Ok guys, what you were supposed to learn about was to work together, help each other, try and have your own initiative. You've done that. Unfortunately, we've run out of time (Field notes III, p. 57, 16.05.2006).

Gary assumed that the pupils learned what they were 'supposed to learn', but without an open dialogue, it is unclear whether they did learn anything at all. Estes and Tomb (1995) warn against the increasing emphasis on leader-directed processing in adventure-based learning, which may devalue the learning experience and the promotion of self-reliance among participants. They consider over-processing as being potentially problematic since it is the facilitator, rather than the pupil who decides what is learned and its relative value.

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The 'part-of-the-team' facilitation approach

According to Boyes (2005, p. 220) teachers working in the outdoors have the important task of providing and facilitating meaningful learning experiences without endangering the physical and psychological safety of the participants, which often means that they have to try to find a balance between providing enough cognitive and physical challenge to stimulate the learners and ensure their safety. The example below shows that the facilitator was able to achieve not only the kind of balance that Boyes (2005) refers to, but also made it possible for the pupils to learn how to work as a team on their own terms, as she allowed them to be independent and responsible.

The facilitator in the example that follows was a teacher accompanying a visiting school group, who appeared to be sensitive to the pupils' needs and was able to evaluate the level of intervention needed during the activity. The group was taking part in poisoned ground,[12] which was a medium risk activity, as the pupils had to wear gloves and lift wooden planks. Before the activity began, the teacher encouraged a discussion on what a team means, with very little involvement on her part. One of the girls had taken part in the activity before, so she was given the responsibility to be the one to explain the purpose of the activity and the rules. When the discussion on how to solve the task started, the teacher urged the pupils to share ideas among themselves, giving them independence.

After the initial discussion, the teacher took a step back, and allowed the pupils to get on with the activity. She continued to watch with interest, giving them some suggestions, such as: 'If you've finished, go and encourage the others!' (Field notes I, p. 227, 28.06.2005). When the pupils appeared to be struggling, and started shouting at each other, the teacher stepped in, and initiated a dialogue with the whole group about what makes a good leader. The pupils put forward several ideas:

> Pb1: Support each other!
> Pg: Encourage people that have good ideas to share them!
> Pb2: The leader has to stand up and speak up! (Field notes I, p. 228, 28.06.2005).

As they started working on the task again, they were quieter and they listened to each other more. The teacher intervened again when the pupils became upset because they had lost their 'lives'. She tried to encourage them and to keep up their morale, as a result the pupils resumed their work on the task. The teacher stepped in once more when one of the boys refused to take part in the activity any longer. She had a quiet talk with him, trying to negotiate the situation, while the other pupils continued to be involved in the activity:

> Pb: I don't want to do it!
> Tf: If you don't do it, then the team won't do it, we will have to stop the activity. Do you want that?
> Pb: I don't want to go on! [very upset] (head down) (Field notes I, pp. 229–230, 28.06.2005).

In the end he did join in. Instead of dismissing the pupil, the teacher explained what the consequences of his actions would be and gave him the opportunity to choose what he wanted to do. The pupil was put in a position where the activity would have stopped because of him, however the teacher did not put any more pressure on the pupil and gave him the space to make the decision on his own. None of the other pupils seemed to have noticed the incident and the boy joined the activity with no further protest. The teacher included herself in the group by using 'we'.

After this incident, the teacher became detached again, but ready to step in when there was an argument:

> Pb1: Don't argue! [angrily].
> Pb2: Go on Shawn!
> Pg1: Oh, you're so strong! [mocking].
> Pb2: Shut up!
> Pb1: Yeah, shut up! It's your fault we lost a life!
> Pb2: Yeah, it's your fault!
> Pg1: Yeah, it's my fault! [resigned].
> Tf: Ok, we're not singling people out! (Field notes I, pp. 230–231, 28.06.2005).

The teacher, although detached until that point, included herself in the group again, by using 'we', also avoiding singling out the two boys. If she had said: 'You're not singling people out!', she would have been in an accusing position. By using 'we', she reminded them that they were all part of the same team and that team members should not point the finger at each other. The pupils managed to complete the task.

After finishing, the teacher reviewed the activity by engaging the pupils in a discussion about their experience, encouraging and welcoming the pupils to express their feelings and thoughts:

> Tf: We learned a lot! **I** learned a heck of a lot!
> Pb1: We worked as a team, it was good!
> Pb2: The teamwork slipped up.
> Tf: So what happens when the team splits up?
> Pb2: We argue and we cannot concentrate!
> Tf: What else happened that we didn't like?
> Ps: Mocking, arguing.

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Ps: Blaming.
Tf: So how does it make us feel when we are blamed?
Pb3: We feel really bad!
Tf: We have to work as a team, we are a team at school, at work, in life! (Field notes I, pp. 231–233, 28.06.2005).

In this discussion, the teacher allowed each pupil to express his/her opinion. She identified herself as part of the team as she uses 'we' and 'us' throughout the whole discussion. She enabled the pupils to come up with their own ideas about teamwork and built the discussion together with them. I asked some of those pupils, if they were usually encouraged to express their opinions. The pupils said that they were always given the opportunity to choose. After observing the teacher together with the same group of pupils during other activities, I could see that her approach did not change.

The teacher in the example above created an environment for the pupils to think about what they were doing, about helping each other, and supporting each other, rather than telling them what to think and what to do. She saw herself as part of the group, encouraging communication and co-operation among the participants in the learning process, which is seen by Rosa and Montero (1990, p. 80) 'to be a tremendously effective instructional strategy'. Moreover, through the open dialogue with her pupils, they learned together how to work as a team, and be critical about themselves.

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Concluding remarks

The examples above have shown that the kind of influence that the facilitators/teachers have on the outdoor learning process is conditioned by the way they approach their role within the group. Table 1 summarizes the main characteristics of each facilitator approach discussed above, showing the differences between them. The detached and the controlling approaches share some similarities, in that they both lack flexibility and an interest in the process of the activity. The controlling facilitators/teachers are focused mainly on the outcomes of the activity, i.e. they want the pupils to accomplish the task itself, rather than to focus on how pupils communicate, and whether they work well as a team. They were not flexible because they had their own preconceived ideas about what the children should learn and how they should carry out the task.

The detached facilitators/teachers had no interest in either the outcome or the process of the activity. They were completely removed from the learning experience of the pupils. Their lack of flexibility translates in their failure to adapt to the needs of the group and offer the support and encouragement that the pupils may have needed in order to accomplish their task.

Thus both of these approaches have an unbalanced involvement in the activities, either too much or too little. Moreover both approaches fail to engage in encouraging the pupils and offering them support during the activities. The findings of this research have shown that this support can contribute to achieving effective learning, as it could be seen in the example presented in the last section of the paper that

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Table 1. Analytical characteristics of facilitator approaches

Approaches	Involvement in the activities	Involvement in the decision-making process of the group	Level of encouraging/ praising given to the group	Level of physical assistance given to the group	Number of clues/ suggestions/ instructions given to the group	Level of flexibility	Level of interest in the outcomes of the activity	Level of interest in the process of the activity
Detached	Limited/None	Limited/None	Limited/None	Limited/None	Limited/None	None	Limited/None	Limited/None
Controlling	High	High	Limited/None	High	High	None	High	Limited/None
Part-of-the-team	Balanced	Limited/None	High	Balanced	Balanced	High	Balanced	High

examines the 'part-of-the-team' facilitation approach. The latter approach is flexible because it allows the facilitator/teacher to find a balance between getting too involved in the activity and stepping back.

The teacher adopting this approach created a learning environment where the pupils could freely express themselves and be supported whenever they needed it. Some activities required more or less intervention from the adults; knowing when to step in and help and when to stop interfering, was essential for the learning experience of the pupils. This was illustrated in the example presented in the last section where the female teacher was able to open a dialogue with the pupils, allowing them to express their opinions and thoughts, intervening only when the pupils appeared to be struggling with the task, when there was a conflict within the group, or when the pupils were upset and needed comforting. For this teacher the process through which the pupils were going through appeared to be more important than solving the task itself.

Consequently, a facilitation approach that places the facilitator inside the group and that recognizes that learning is constructed through social interaction, where the facilitator and the participants share the learning experience can be an effective teaching strategy (Rosa and Montero, 1990). Williams (2006) argues that outdoor educators should be wary of separating themselves from the experiential learning process, arguing that recognizing that this is a shared experience 'enhances the development of the group as an interdependent entity in which the facilitator has an important role to play as part of the group, rather than someone who exists outside and is peripheral to the group development process' (Williams, 2006, p. 33).

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Notes

1. Quote taken from the 'Learning outside the classroom manifesto', retrieved January 29, 2008 from http://www.outdoor- learning.org/external_affairs_policy/lotc_manifesto.pdf.
2. 'Learning outside the classroom manifesto', p. 1.
3. 'Learning outside the classroom manifesto', p. 1.
4. This paper is based on qualitative research conducted as part of a PhD study.
5. I am not sourcing the website or any other documents that I have used to provide information about the centre in order to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the participants.
6. This activity takes place in an enclosed area, where there is a big circle made out of string tied to small pins in the ground with a big black plastic bucket in the middle. Around the bucket there are six black plastic tubes. The children are given four pieces of string and thick elastic-type bands and are instructed to put the plastic tubes into the bucket without entering the circle. This exercise cannot be done unless there are at least four participants and therefore requires group interaction.

7. The name is a pseudonym.
8. Pb1, Pb2 refer to male pupils and the order in which they talked, i.e. the first, the second, etc.
9. The use of the square brackets '[ ]' marks an interpretation made by the researcher.
10. Tf refers to a female teacher.
11. Tm refers to a male teacher.
12. The activity is made up of a rectangle, inside which there are three platforms that are approximately half to one metre away from each other and the wooden ridge of the rectangle. The participants are given two long wooden planks and gloves and they have to cross the length of the rectangular without touching the ground. They can only use the planks and the platforms. The participants have to first find the solution to the problem and then have to work together to solve the task.

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