

“Forest School and the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto” What makes it different from all the other outside the classroom educations?

by John Cree

There is no doubt Forest Schools fulfils many of the Learning Outside the Classroom (LOTC) objectives. Indeed on the LOTC 'making the case' web page there are strong arguments for “the development of frequent, continuous and progressive learning experiences outside the classroom for all the young people in your school”.

One of the main features of Forest Schools is regular contact with the natural world, preferably weekly throughout the year in all weathers. Forest Schools is even singled out in two of the nine areas highlighted by the LOTC – ‘sense of place’ and ‘early years’.

Also sited on the LOTC website are the research review findings of Rickinson et al (2004) which found the key positive impacts of outdoor learning were;

- increasing knowledge and skills;
- increased social development;
- enhanced self esteem and confidence;
- improved physical and health development;
- and a change in environmental behaviours and attitudes.

I would find it hard not to argue that all these are the goals of a Forest Schools programme – but so would many other environmental/outdoor educators in their programmes. So what is it that Forest Schools does/is that distinguishes it from other ‘outside the classroom educations’?

When asked to define Forest Schools there have been many who struggle to put their finger on it. The definition arrived at by ‘the network’ in 2002 is:

“An inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland environment”.

However, for me, this still does not get to the heart of the strength of Forest Schools and that is the pedagogy it employs – one of child centred/initiated learning.

I recently had a debate with someone close to Forest Schools about whether it is really, *‘just good playwork in the natural world’*

or as some 'serious' classroom practitioners have referred to it as,

"faffing about in the woods!"

"No, no, no" I retorted

"it is a carefully thought out approach to learning that takes its lead from the learners rather than the leaders/practitioners, activities or curriculum. It is an ideal vehicle for developing the capacity to learn and for the learners to take control of their learning on their own terms."

Now this may sound like anarchy, however it is the skills of a good 'child centred' leader that can pull this off – always having the learning and development of the learner at the front of their mind and still fulfilling the curriculum. It is about shifting the power from the leader to a more 'shared' approach that is truly democratic, something rarely witnessed in our classrooms. Many environmental and outdoor educations are teacher/leader led or activity lead – and often they need to be. You wouldn't send a learner on a climbing trip without being lead by a qualified skilled leader. Likewise to learn many of the ecological concepts which govern how life works on the planet and which are often abstract, (you can hardly see energy flowing from the sun to us), it takes imaginative activities designed and led by leaders with the ecological knowledge. However, Forest Schools is fundamentally different in it's pedagogy.

So what does 'child centred' learning mean? It is so easy to say but actually so hard to do!

Many in environmental education would say 'if it is motivating them' and they are 'getting caught up

in the magic of learning in a natural environment' then this could be construed as child centred. Activities that appeal to the child's sense of play, sense of wonder, use their language and utilise their curiosity, are seen as child centred. I for one would agree with this – to a degree. However there is still a good deal of adult/teacher centred learning caught up in the 'activity'. That is not to say it isn't a good thing, but we are fooling ourselves if we believe this is 'true' child centred/initiated learning. Play has been quoted in the past as the 'purest form of learning' (Bruce, 1991) , Forest Schools is more than play. It takes a 'significant other', the Forest Schools leader and helpers or even peers, to help learners achieve their full potential and realise the knowledge and skills that they couldn't otherwise realise without the 'leader'. I actually prefer the term Forest Schools facilitator.

One of the key features that distinguishes Forest Schools from other outdoor educations is the role of the leader as 'observer' – if you let the learners explore 'themselves' the most amazing things can be seen. I have been involved with Forest Schools for the past eight years and more recently taken up the training banner. One of the most inspiringly simple actions that has seriously challenged teachers and 'outdoor/environmental' educators alike is that of observation. It takes great courage to stand back (actually I prefer sitting back as it is less threatening and is on the same level as the learners) and take on the responsibility of not interfering but observing and letting the learning flow. In fact I would agree with Mary Drummond (2003), this is probably an educators most awesome responsibility.

According to Alexander (2006), one of the chief architects of the current primary review, classroom discourse is



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'overwhelmingly monologic' in form. Teachers typically offer children opportunities for making only brief response to their questions, in fact some studies (Moyles et al, 2003) have shown that up to 80% of the talk in classrooms is teacher talk – even from those that claim to be 'interactive'. Far too often, I have observed learning outside the classroom following a similar pattern. Frequently on the FS training I have conducted over the past 18 months teachers and practitioners openly admit they find it hard not to interfere and shut up! So a real distinguishing factor of Forest Schools is the role of the leader to facilitate child centred learning through prolonged observation.

One other real key distinguishing factor of Forest Schools that enables this to happen is the regular prolonged nature of Forest Schools, which should be at least once a week throughout the year. This enables the children to take more control once they are comfortable and the practitioner to be 'on tap', not 'on top' and sensitively intervene when there is a learning opportunity. The implications this has for classroom practice is phenomenal. Just last month I was assessing a trainee leader, Laura, in a Dudley reception class with predominantly 'English as an Additional Language' pupils.

Laura started the session off asking the children to explain to me the rules of Forest Schools and what they had done the previous weeks. She then asked them what they wanted to do, this was their fourth session. They formed their own groups and off they went, while Laura, her assistant and I watched the ensuing play. After approximately 10 minutes a small person grabbed me by the hand and here is the dialogue that ensued;

CHILD "Jon come and look at my new home" (he had been working on a shelter the previous week)

ME " Great.....its a bit cold in here"

CHILD "Yes it's wet and drafty" (this was a cold, windy, wet West Midlands day!- but I did think to myself - good language)

ME "mmm". 15 seconds silence (this is important, teachers on average give maximum 5 seconds thinking time – (Kontos, 1999))

CHILD "I need a door"

ME "have you any door shapes in mind"

The next exchange was, for me, pure child centred learning and a perfect example of this 'on tap' approach. Laura had been listening in while sharing a mud castle being made by two of the children on one of the mole hills.

At least a minute's silence, wandering around and thinking had gone on.

LAURA "do you remember the shapes we were looking at last week in the class"

CHILD "ahh – a rectangle. That's the one with two long and two short".

The child then went off to find two long sticks and two short. He then mused a long time and came over to me again.

CHILD "not sure how to join these"

ME "would you like me to help"

CHILD "yes"

ME "do you have any ideas on how to join them"

CHILD "mmm", (more silence) "string!".

And low and behold without any prompting from either me or Laura he asked her for string, which she asked her assistant to get from the classroom. The child ended up making a door he was very proud of (still drafty, mind!).

While this may seem a small incident, for Laura, who is clearly a skilled early years practitioner, it was symptomatic of a huge shift from being 'on top' to 'on tap'. She admitted she had to fight all her instincts to intervene and show him what he might do. The resulting learning from her point of view, and the child's, was far more powerful. What he had done was take ownership of the learning, invested his own thoughts into the door and applied learning inside the classroom to a real life situation outside the classroom – exactly what the LOTC manifesto is espousing. What, for me, was so gratifying was watching Laura observe our interaction and intervene with just one small but powerful memory jogger and being 'on tap' for the string!

The study carried out by O'Brien and Murray into Forest Schools (2005) did show up some of the distinguishing features of Forest Schools from other 'outdoor educations'. Ie

- the use of a woodland setting
- a high ratio of adults to pupils
- learning linked to the National Curriculum and Foundation-Stage objectives
- the freedom to explore using multiple senses
- regular contact for the children with Forest School over a significant period of time



It is my belief, however, that the principle power of Forest Schools is its capacity to encourage a greater disposition for learning through a truly child centred approach. It is the creativity of a natural woodland environment and the intrinsic empathy humans show for the natural world, as espoused by the biologist E O Wilson (1979), combined with a skilled 'FS facilitator' that makes this 'the best place' for child centred learning. ■

Author's Notes

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