

OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND VIRTUAL REALITY. NATURE VERSUS TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract

www, the shortcut from World Wide Web, has become the universal communication formula that allows access to information in a continuously changing and expanding space. The answer to any question is available to all and often the dialogue is reduced to the indication of the source – search on Google, check your email, etc. Etymologically, web means “network of fine threads spun by a spider or some other spinning creature; fig. complex series, network” [Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary p.1446], and the world, as an adjective, means “found on or affecting the whole world” [ibid. p.1476]. In translation, World Wide Web would be defined as a technological, informational, communication network at a global scale. And if, the world is designed as a spider web, then each of us become or should become the spider to survive, able to use the network or to create more. Through a spider web, nature offers a model of development and creation, which, today is translated more and more into the technological world. What is the relation between nature and technology, what can be the links between new communication technologies and creativity, socialization, personal growth, reflection, emotion, discovery; these are the main challenges for designing an educational outdoor programme, benefiting from the advantages of the virtual spider.

Keywords: education, environment, new technology of communication

Outdoor Education. Content and means

The Outdoor education offers – through a specific didactic approach - a change of context, moving into a nonformal and informal context, thus expanding the perception horizon of self development. The simultaneous re-definition of oneself and of the others adds to the changes of the typical learning environment – beyond the classroom. The direct experience, as a relation between the reality and Ego, becomes contextual learning.

In a broader sense, according to the theory of knowledge, any act of perception is contextual. Knowledge is perception-based, and perception is continuously changing. “The representation of the world and of the Ego is based on personal perception of what is said and seen, as well as of what might be said and seen” [Reich, 1998, from Siebert p. 117].

Outdoor education proposes a perception based learning, which can be defined as an intentional, goal-orientated, organised and systematically, voluntary led activity. Enhancing the learning capacity is rather an extension of perception angles than an increase of the volume of knowledge.

The difference between spontaneous perception and observation is reflected by the intensity level of action, expressed through various feelings: to see become to watch, to hear becomes to listen, to touch becomes to feel. Own perception are directed towards a profound world of representations of time and space. "Many psychological researches have demonstrated that perception is a selective and creative process of previous emotions, experiences and expectations rather than a mere reflection of events". [Roth, 1987, from Siebert, p. 139]

From a different perspective, the neurolinguistic programming, developed in the '70s, integrates the perception into a complex program aimed at influencing the human behavior, which is basis of efficient communication. The senses represent the starting point of perception. We can perceive the outer world and build our own reality through 4 systems: visual, kinesthetic, additive, olfactory. Using the main communication channel we can easily make him understood; using another channel may block the communication. The entire neurolinguistic programming system is based on the different perceptions of different people. But "different people perceive specific things because they have a meaning for them (...). A change of context would mean a change of the habitual way of differentiating and defining the world that would lead to a new interpretation" [Haye/Kleve, 1998, p.83, after Siebert, p.183]. It is this reframing that can define the Outdoor education, which implies action and reflection abilities thus one can differentiate among perceived/understood/expressed perceptions.

People do not simply react to the environment. They do not exist on the bases of unconditional/conditional reflexes, according to the initial thesis of behaviorism. Almost everything is culturally mediated, almost everything is consciously interpreted. Modern anthropology defines man as a synthesis of biological, psychological and cultural dimensions, which represent the "basics of educational ability" [Antonesei, 2001, p.18]:

1. slow biological development of human being
2. prevalence of intelligent and educated behavior over the instincts
3. the essential role of socialization

The analysis is focused on the correlation of the three components of the Ego, which are inseparable. There is no soul without mind and there is no mind without soul. Outdoor education aims to create a space for this trinity: mind, soul and body. The open context includes several stages: experience – knowledge – awareness.

Methodological structures

Outdoor education implies a specific environment, as a basis for a continuously changing perception. The development process should be sustained by an environment that would facilitate the perception, thus leading to reflection. Nature has been identified as this specific environment for outdoor education. Through direct experience, nature offers various perspectives, a genuine environment for discoveries. The methodological structure focuses on active methods that encourage the learner's implication through discovery. Outdoor education targets the learner; therefore, the methodological system should be based on the learner's previous representations of the world. Only if it builds on this base, can a didactic methodology become useful.

The more we value the previous experience, the more necessary the interdisciplinary approach becomes. In most of the cases, the methods are not used separately. They create a complex structure to sustain the interdisciplinary dimension. The aim of outdoor education is to underline the formative value of nonformal and informal learning by employing specific methods based on discovery theory of learning.

According to the constructivism perspective, the learning process is an act of selection only in the first stage, as the learner has his own decision making capacity. Learning becomes a self-creative process, which cannot be influenced only from outside, even though it takes place in a specific environment. Due to this direct interaction between the learner and environment, the quality of the learning process becomes both individual and social responsibilities.

Virtual reality – means and resource of outdoor education

Outdoor education aims to replace the classical way of conducting the education process with formative contexts in order to stimulate the creative and self-directed learning process. As complementary to the learning context, exclusively linked to the environment, the new communication technologies broaden the perspective.

Due to the virtual reality, the learner becomes even more active, he is not only an observer. Outdoor education gains an added value thus the correlation between the formative and creative value of the natural environment with the proactive attitude of the learner.

“Learners do not learn what has been taught; they learn things that have not been presented or that have not been included in the curricula” – said Schaffter (1998) related to the constructivism paradigm. The new

technologies developed a communication context, in response to these challenges.

Web 2.0 is a trend in the use of World Wide Web technology and web design that aims to facilitate creativity, information sharing, and, most notably, collaboration among users. These concepts have led to the development and evolution of web-based communities and hosted services, such as social-networking sites, wikis, blogs, and folksonomies (the practice of categorising content through tags). Although the term suggests a new version of the World Wide Web, it does not refer to an update to any technical specifications, but to changes in the ways software developers and end-users use the internet.

PDA (*personal digital assistant*) and GPS (*global positioning system*) are another two examples of instruments of new communication technologies which facilitate the learner's access to knowledge in the outdoor education context. The learners in the real forest can carry a PDA with GPS. They can continuously obtaining their positions by receiving GPS signals. Therefore, they can find out their positions anytime while exploring the forest. At the same time, position information is continuously recorded in the log file. When the learners come in the area where some information on nature is prepared to be shown, it will appear on the display of PDA. Such type of information can be provided as a quiz. Furthermore, the learners can put the communication tag on the map according to their actual position and input their discoveries, observations, questions, comments and so on anywhere they like. They can also add a reply, information, and related topics to the tag, which has already been put on the map.

In this way, using the advantages from both natural world and technological world, combining them into learning experiences, the students learning, growth and personal development will be maximized.

Conclusions

Combining the new communications technologies will bring an add value to the natural environment by:

- broadening the perspective, intersecting various multi- and interdisciplinary approach
- identifying the differences
- using the observations and the interpretations of the learners in order to stimulate the reflection
- fighting the universal truth
- reframing, analyzing and evaluating a topic as past of the context.

Therefore, outdoor education has multiple meanings that cross the border to the virtual reality and lead to feelings, curiosity, emotions, discovery, reflection, redefining the (his) world identity. The key is to find ways to preserve the unique benefits of both natural and virtual environment.

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