A playful approach to learning outdoors

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In this session I will adopt a playful approach to explore learning outdoors for young people, utilising a fictional story to engage delegates' attention. I will outline the core concepts of informal learning and consider the importance of emotions within this. These concepts are then applied to outdoor learning experiences through an interpretive, hermeneutic process of asking questions and suggesting possible answers. Delegates are invited and encouraged to consider their own interpretations of the story and to consider its potential application within their own practice.

The session starts and ends with a gentle challenge to delegates from one of the characters within the story, aiming to make this an interactive, thought-provoking experience, whereby attendees reflect on their own experiences and begin to engage in the wider debate of how to support others to develop an awareness and appreciation of the world around them. I promote the use of creative, playful activities within outdoor learning and the value of storytelling as a method of engagement. Arguably one of the most dominant underlying assumptions in outdoor learning is the need to be challenged to 'step out of your comfort zone'. This session offers an alternative perspective and invites you to come into a comfortable, safe discursive place and join in a playful exploration of learning outdoors.

This session is innovative because I am eschewing the traditional, conventional presentation format to share my doctoral research findings through more creative, participatory activities. The session will work as more of an open-space/workshop session, than panel discussion or master-class - the specifics of its progress and endpoint will be determined by the participation of delegates as we set out on this adventure together. Within my research I have made extensive use of reflection to develop new ways of working with children, young people and families in outdoor settings that are more appropriate for the 'now' rather than the 'then'. This resonates with the approach taken by BERA[1] - my approach is also evolutionary rather than revolutionary. At previous conferences I have been praised for challenging the conventional methods of presenting findings by offering an alternative, interactive and playful style. This is an unintended outcome as I did not set out to challenge conventions; however my commitment to making my work accessible to practitioners and interesting to an audience has resulted in this different approach.

Benefits to attendees: I am responding to the conference organisers' invitation for sessions that create more opportunity for audience participation. By the end of my session we will have explored a number of pedagogical concepts in a light-hearted, imaginative way and attendees will have some ideas of how to put this into practice in their own contexts.

[1] https://www.bera.ac.uk/beraconference-201

Additional information and Background to presentation/presenter

This presentation will introduce the broad scope of my PhD thesis entitled 'Making sense of nature: a qualitative, creative exploration into young people's relationship with the natural environment made through facilitated programmes'. I am concentrating on the voice of young people: what do they think about nature, what they enjoy doing outdoors, how 'connected' do they feel, and does this impact on their perception of their health and well-being or on their desire to look after natural spaces.

This is a multi-disciplinary research project, employing a hermeneutic ethnographic action research paradigm, and engaging in a dialogue with a range of disciplines - social sciences and natural sciences, plus a healthy dose of humanities. My practice as an environmental youth worker, and as a teacher of youth/community workers, has led to my concern at the lack of/inadequacy of training provided for workers in this area. My research aims to inform (and improve) practice for the benefit of young people, the people who work with them, and the wider community.