



Research Paper

Outdoor study in Higher Education: Discussion of some Virtues

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Abstract

This paper explores the benefits of outdoor study as a form of experiential learning in higher studies specifically in West Bengal and India. Drawing upon ancient traditions of Residential learning in Vedic period to Tagore's Shantiniketan experiment, the study acknowledges the value of learning in outdoor environment. From first hand experiences gathered through three instances, from 2008 to 2023 the author through documenting and analysing student experiences during field trips shows that there have been considerable behavioural changes within the students. Outdoor study instils sense of aesthetic appreciation, concern for the environment, lead to the development of leadership qualities and boosts confidence into students. However, it is also mentioned that on the downside the high cost of inclusion of outdoor component into curriculum makes it difficult to be utilised as an effective educational tool in Indian scenario. The paper concludes by suggesting incorporation of outdoor component in higher education supported by the institutions financially, as a means to increase student engagement to academics and reduce stress of the pressure for academic achievement.

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I. Introduction

Return to Nature or Back to Nature is the Mantra that drives the present urban centric world obsessed with consumerism and a zeal to surge ahead of others. In such mode of life everywhere from corporate sector to education sector there is this belief that more we put in terms of work effort more is the productivity. Product and productivity are what we today look at, leading to quick burnout in human service workers (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). This is more true for the educators and teachers who tend to translate their values and outlook onto their pupils. The spirit of excellence at all levels of study and performance is acceptable till a certain limit beyond which it affects performance levels in certain individuals.

Apart from the build-up of stress due to increased performance pressure, the classroom environment that to some extent promotes rote learning somehow throws the learner off the track of true learning. In such situation the model of experiential learning can be useful when used in conjunction with other learning methods. Outdoor study, which is kind of a broad term including Nature study, Wilderness study, Adventure study etc. can promote learning by triggering behavioural changes. (Kuo et al., 2019) Experiential Learning through Outdoor study promotes personal development of learners (Lugg, 2005). Whether Outdoor study can be part of an Education Program or it can be itself a course of study is still a matter of debate (Dyment & Potter, 2015). However, it cannot be denied that even as a part of any education program it does have some positive effect on the learner by promoting reflective learning and bringing about positive changes in the personality of the learner.

Place of the "Outdoor" in Human Society

The tradition of outdoor studies which promotes man-nature relationship is not new to human society. The connection of man to the "Outdoors" is as old as human inception on earth. Man learnt to live and grow amongst nature. Certain qualities in human nature derive a lot from the Nature itself. Human knowledge draws heavily from nature. Early human beings interacted with nature for survival but with the development of human society the nature link weakened and rational, human faculties had upper hand in shaping societies. Surviving in the wild adapting to nature or the outdoor had been the inherent quality of man. But with progress of civilization sedentary life drew human progressively away from nature dampening his

spirits and capacities but at the same time sharpening his wit to cope with the newly emerged social requirements. Over time complexities and intricacies of developed human societies brought in ills into the society as well as low outdoor contact. But it has been amply realized that close contact with nature is required for human development at some point in human life span, in whatever way and span it may be. The importance of learning amidst nature had been well understood with reference to Indian system of ancient education. e.g. In India during Vedic times in the Gurushisya Parampara—pupils and teachers lived amidst nature and drew their knowledge from nature apart from text and other sources (Joshi, 2020). This concept of learning in presence of ‘Guru’ was also envisaged by Rabindranath Tagore in his conceptualization of ‘Ashram’ at Santiniketan. His initial idea was to move education or giving lessons amidst nature, to calm the mind, to promote a spirituality within the person taught, and also to enhance the ties of nature. According to Rabindranath the greatest freedom of man lies amidst nature, be it physical freedom, or be it the freedom of the mind directing it towards spirituality which he termed as “Mukti” (Tagore, 1920/1962).

The Place of Outdoor Learning in Higher Education in Modern Days

The term outdoor study or courses of Outdoor Learning is not part of many higher education program as General Science or Humanities subjects. Yet there is an increasing consensus that outdoor learning not only adventure education or Wilderness study has a lasting impact on the learners and the process of learning. Though there is a dearth of research connecting closeness to nature and learner performance (Ernst & Monroe, 2006). It is sufficiently agreed by researchers that the intimacy to nature and outdoor environment, to be specific out of class environment has a positive effect on the development of children (Maynard et al., 2013) it also has positive effects on older students in higher education (Smathers, 1974). There has been an effort to include Outdoor Education in North American Universities in the later part of Twentieth Century. Some courses are running in American, European, Australian and New Zealand Universities—mostly Outdoor Education coupled with Outdoor Leadership, Environmental studies and other such related fields of study. Though in most places all over the world outdoor study in higher education is still one significant part of the entire course or program of study. This is done in two ways—1) the outdoor part of the program is integrated into the syllabi of the concerned subject and the learners are required to prepare assignments or projects based on the outdoor study part of the course. 2) The other type of outdoor learning or study is collaboration of institutes of higher education with private and commercial contract providers and community-based programs (Passy et al., 2019).

In India outdoor education mostly reach learners as part of a course or program of study mostly basic science, environmental science or earth sciences at school level, at undergraduate and post graduate levels. However, as most subjects are taught in classroom atmosphere majority of College and University going students are not able to get themselves attached to any outdoor study regime in Higher Educational Institutes in India. Outdoor Education as a discipline is still an alien concept (Banchariya, 2018) at all levels of study in India. Outdoor exposure is available to all individuals in India in terms of adventure sports or wilderness camping available through private tour operating agencies e.g., trekking clubs and institutes, nature clubs etc. These programs are in no way related to formal educational scenario but can be availed by individuals of suitable age at their own behest. However, drawing upon experiences of other nations some institutions of Higher study are looking to tie up with private service providers for providing outdoor experience to their students. For example, Outward Bound has set up shop in India since 2005 and many schools and colleges have been working with them to provide outdoor exposure to the students. Such tie ups can be seen at local levels in different institutions.

However, Outdoor study or Outdoor education does not only mean Adventure studies or Wilderness Studies it also includes the exposure to outdoor environment, one which is not familiar, settings where they can experience their own self for “encounter of the whole person” (Hope, 2009).

‘Field Trips’ in present day educational setup

The term field trip is used in relation to established curriculum in several undergraduate disciplines including Natural Sciences (Zoology, Botany) Earth Sciences (e.g., Geology, Geomorphology) and Environmental study. Courses of outdoor education has a larger component of Field Trips, Fieldwork (Thomas & Munge, 2015) or field experiences as these are termed in certain courses. It also forms part of some social science curriculum e.g., Sociology, Geography etc. These field trips form a part of the syllabus of the respective discipline where the students are required to participate in an outdoor program having various time spans. The field visits are made so that the subjects can be learnt through first hand experiences. The knowledge gathered from the field are then systematically arranged, analysed and students are required to prepare reports or make presentations based on that. As mentioned in the earlier part of this essay that outdoor experiences serve to bring in changes in

the pattern of learning in the learner as well as initiate 'critical thinking'. It also improves self-confidence, inquisitiveness (Ernst & Monroe, 2006) and 'Deep Learning' (Hope, 2009). Apart from student experiences the field trips or outdoor learning episodes provides the educators and the teachers unique experiences which help the teaching-learning process in the long term.

Field Trips used as opportunities of Outdoor Learning

As discussed earlier Outdoor learning or Outdoor study is an effective method of learning which improves both the academic learning as well as learning about oneself. Outdoor learning as an entire program of study is still not as popular as other science or humanities subjects in Higher Education. In such scenario Field trips associated with higher education courses are the best outlet for a student to have first-hand experience of the outdoors and integrate that with the traditional classroom learning. Learning about oneself, developing interpersonal skills, handling crisis situations are some non-academic outcomes yet which are useful life skills when imbibed by the learners in the course of field work.

Field Trips in Higher Education in West Bengal, India with reference to Geography: Case Studies

This part of the discussion draws on first-hand experience of the author gathered over 14 years of teaching at Undergraduate level in several institutes of Higher Education in parts of West Bengal and her interaction with the students in both formal and informal scenarios. These case studies outline the student experiences as gathered from interaction within classroom environment and during the field trips.

Case Study: 12008 Uttarkashi All Girls' General Degree College, Kolkata, West Bengal

The study group was comprised of 31 students and four subject teachers and one laboratory attendant. The group travelled to Uttarakhand and the objective of the study was to explore the physical and cultural aspects of a village near Uttarkashi. The travel was a mix of rail and road travel. This was a residential (Hope, 2009) program. Students and teachers were accommodated in the same facility. The students were to collect information through personal interviews using questionnaire schedule. For this task the students collected pre-field information from various secondary sources like maps, gazetteer and other available literature. They prepared the questionnaire schedule under the supervision of the participating teachers, divided in smaller groups of five students and one group formed of six students. These groups were formed by the teachers keeping in mind their interactions and bonding as evident in day-to-day classroom activities. Same group formation was used throughout the course of this 11 days field trip for all activities including on-field surveys using instruments, interviewing members of households of the village, analysing and working on the collected data under supervision and also for other non-academic activities including accommodation in staying facility for the entire period. The trip also included non-academic leisure activities like camp fire and visiting places of interest. Food was provided by hosts of the staying facility and was served in a common eating area. This was the platform where they interacted with the teachers informally about their daily field experiences.

After the completion of the field visit, the students were required to assemble and put together all their findings into a concrete data format which could be used to prepare maps, Diagrams etc. for preparing their final project report on which they would be marked. This was done under the supervision of a senior teacher who merely acted as a guide.

Few notable outcomes of this particular field trip were

- The pre-field groupings of students were dismantled for two groups of five students due to differences that arose between them during the field trip
- Students learned to take care for their fellow students and friends during a event of sudden illness of two students triggered by road travel in mountainous topography
- Few Students who were inattentive and irregular in class developed interest in classes conducted after completing the field trip
- Attendance of students in general (for this group of 31) increased in the classes that were held for processing of the data collected during field
- The already smart students within the group of 31 gained more self-confidence after the field trip that manifested during their dealings with other students as well the teachers for the rest of the course
- Some students took active interest in the rest of the course left, spanning one year and later went onto pursue post-graduation, the decision they arrived at only after going through the field trip and preparing the

related project report

- Those students who had never been to any place other than their native city (this case, Kolkata) had a whole new experience, which they told their teachers during class after the field visit.

Case Study: 22015 Santiniketan, All Girls General Degree College, Howrah, West Bengal

22 students, two subject teachers and one laboratory instructor undertook the field trip for the purpose of exploring the socio-cultural aspects of a village dominated by Santhals near Bolpur- Santiniketan. As in the earlier example questionnaire schedule was used to draw information from the people whereas some elements of the Santhal society of the selected village were documented using photographs. The accommodation and food were provided in ways similar to that described in the first example. The field trip spanned one week over which 22 students divided into two groups of five and three groups of four. This trip was organized for shorter time period hence students had to work harder for assembling the data and information collected on daily basis at the end of each day. The task of preparing the project report was done under supervision of both the participating teachers. The outcomes of the trip were:-

- Few students worked harder in processing data and preparing maps and diagrams as the attendance did not improve after the field trip
- All students were quite shocked and were in a state of fear during an event of fainting of one particular student brought about due to inadequate food intake
- One student failed to complete graduation and dropped out due to financial problems
- Most students were unhappy at the choice of field location as they had expected field visit to a more far-off place. That according to them would have given them more time and opportunity to forge stronger ties with their classmates
- The cartographic skills related to the discipline improved remarkably for the students who shouldered the bulk of the report preparing task. They fared better than the other students in the subject paper that required data analysis and diagram preparation using given data in the final examination

Case Study-32023 Araku Valley, Vishakapatnam, Andhra Pradesh: Co-Educational College, Malda District, West Bengal

The complexion of this field trip is different from the two examples discussed earlier, as this college had a rural campus and was a co-educational institute. This group had 17 students, two teachers (only one from the subject) and one office staff. The student group comprised of 12 male students and 5 female students. Most of these students were first generation learners who have never stepped out of their native village or town in Malda district. Train travel, accommodation in one place, all faculty and student, that was a new experience for all of them. They were required to carry out survey using instrument as well as using questionnaire schedule. This field trip spanned 8 days. The students were divided into 5 groups with two groups having four members and three groups having three members. Five girls were put into each of five groups. This was done to prevent all boys' and all girls' groups. They had collected data in the way that they were told to before the trip began. They had also collected informal information talking to the local people going beyond the questions listed, about things they saw were specific to the local culture and the village. The outcomes specific to the trip were:

- The students had exposure to a different kind of environment 1st time in their lives that promoted inquisitiveness amongst them
- The students bonded better during the field trip than in classroom
- Most students grew an attachment to college and the department faculty after the trip
- They performed the data processing, analysis and map and diagram creation by themselves which boosted their confidence in those skills
- Their attendance improved remarkably.

II. Discussion

The case studies as discussed above point to certain indefinite outcomes which according to the author are the plus points or virtues that comes from being in touch with outdoors.

Increased interest in the subject and enhancement of certain academic skills pertaining to the subject

Field trips engage students in the subject more than any kind of classroom study, as the students themselves collect data through face-to-face interviews; they remember the details which can't be quantified and use such

information while preparing the final report. The students sorted, compiled raw data in the field itself working together as a team. This promotes peer learning. When they process the data gathered in the field back in the classroom environment the students tend to engage more with the subject itself. Since the teacher plays the role of facilitator there is increased co-operation between the teacher and the students.

Shaping of student leaders

The leadership qualities of few students who are confident in the subject comes to the fore. These students generally maintain cordial relation with both their fellow students and the teachers. Their presence in the team ensures academic tasks are performed properly and timely. In crisis situations like the ones mentioned in the first and second case studies, these student leaders act swiftly and show strength of character.

Experience of the outdoor environment

The field trip gives the students an opportunity to experience the outdoor environment. Starting from organisation of the trip to completion of the trip the students are almost on their own. They experience the out of class environment which provides a direct experience (Cooper, 2010) that enhances the sense of emotions and attachment with fellow students and participating teachers. Spending one week or more for carrying out field survey with classmates under teachers supervision increases the ease of access to the teachers. The teachers sometimes become repository of the concerns of the students in this out of class informal environment. In all the cases cited above and other instances that this author has come across the field destinations are often quite different from the students' known environment, sometimes exotic and having aesthetic appeal. The exposure of the students to such environment instils in them the value of aesthetic appreciation. This often is an important aspect that the author found out with her students specially those who come from humble background and are first generation learner.

Sense of duty towards Environmental Preservation

Such exposure brings the students in close contact with nature. After, spending time amidst nature, appreciation for the environment grows in some sensitive students who feel they have a sense of duty of protection of the environment. This however needs to be nurtured when back to their own known environment. The development of this quality however some way or the other has a bearing on the thinking and the future action of the students in helping sustainability of the environment (Dymont & Potter, 2015; Hill, 2013). It can work in some way like this— observing nature from close quarters e.g. the landscape, the human connection to nature, the species of plants, the birds can be a calming experience. Realising one-self to be a part of this whole can bring in the sense of duty towards their protection. The time to reflect upon experiences in natural environment can promote academic learning and skills, making students more receptive to future classroom instructions as well.

Concluding Remarks

These are not exhaustive benefits that come out of outdoor learning, as most researchers agree that more direct research and observation of student / learners are required to understand the entirety of the transformations that are brought about in the individual learner's behaviour, learning patterns, psychological domains. Yet it is acceptable that exposure of college going students to outdoor environment does have positive effects. However, there lies certain limitations in integration of outdoor learning into all disciplines, which had to be worked out by curriculum framers to suit the specific needs of individual subjects. Other limitations include the costs attached to such outdoor trips which in most cases are high which may not be affordable to all sections of students. This is a practical limitation and the author experienced that on several counts and helped needy students financially so that they could participate in the field study program which is compulsory portion of the syllabus taught by the author. This in some cases builds up resistance against the outdoor visit among some students. But once they are roped in and they go through the entire exercise, they can't be thankful enough that they participated. Here, it may be suggested that the institutes of higher learning can allot a part of their developmental fund to the students for their outdoor endeavours which are part of the curriculum. That again is a matter of concern for institutes in developing countries where specifically the need for such outdoor program is of utmost importance where the learners live and grow in most demanding and stressful situations. This perhaps was the reason why except for one student in the second case study who had severe financial problems most

students who were first generation learner and were relatively financially weak felt inspired to put more effort in academic front after their field visit.

Outdoor learning as part of curriculum in Higher Education institutes thus bring upon the student positive effects of many kinds discussed earlier. Where, outdoor education is not a subject itself neither part of the curriculum in institutes in most cases partner with private service providers to make the experience available to their students. This seems a reasonable attempt till outdoor learning can become part of the curriculum or from a broader perspective part of wider social policy. Reflecting on such possibilities in the current scenario becomes imperative as outdoor exposure and travel is being challenged due to health concerns, despite the virtues it has.

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