

# CHILDREN LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

FROM BIRTH TO ELEVEN

2ND  
EDITION

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Cover design: Wendy Scott  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

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First edition published 2011 (Reprinted 2011, 2013)

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2016947094**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from  
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-1226-7

ISBN 978-1-4739-1227-4 (pbk)

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# PART I

## THINKING ACROSS THE WHOLE



# 1

## THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM – RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN LEARNING AND PLACE

SUE WAITE AND NICK PRATT

### CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

- A framework for developing a set of personal theories for teaching and learning outside the classroom.
- An awareness of different learning theories that might help to understand learning outside the classroom.
- An appreciation of the complexity of learning in relation to place: psychological, social, cultural, geographical and historical factors.

A headteacher was asked to say why practical science, including the use of the outdoors – apparently under threat from health and safety concerns and science experiment videos – was so important to pupils. How would you have responded?

It might, or might not, come as a surprise to you that the headteacher with 30 years' experience was in certain respects unable to answer the question. She gave a fluent response that pointed to her conviction that 'pupils learn more' because it is 'hands-on', 'experiential' and 'enjoyable and engaging'. But none of these go very deeply into *how* it makes a difference. Actually, such an explanation appears hard to provide; just how does 'the outside' and 'experience' make learning different? To begin to respond to the challenge of making sense of the relationship between place and learning – the central purpose of this chapter – let us return to the headteacher's comments above and think about what they represent. Pointing to practical

science being ‘hands-on’ shows an implicit sense that *embodiment* is important; we use our bodies in practical activities, but why might this be beneficial? The conviction that pupils learn *more* might suggest that practical science is important to raise school outcomes. However, interestingly, it also points to an implicit model of learning that relates to the acquisition of knowledge in terms of cognition and which probably therefore values how much we know (quantity), rather than its form and its worth (qualities). Claiming that pupils learn more does not address the equally interesting question of more ‘what’. The use of the term *experiential* might suggest that the *way* in which we come into contact with phenomena – rather than simply whether we do or not – might have a bearing on *what* is learnt. *Engagement* as the relationship between the learner and the focus of learning is important, and might again point to the need to consider *what* is being learnt and *how*; reinforced perhaps by *enjoyment*.

This analysis demonstrates that any conception of learning, particularly taking account of place and experience, is inevitably complex.

## DEVELOPING A PERSONAL THEORY FOR UNDERSTANDING LEARNING IN DIFFERENT CONTEXTS

In this chapter, we suggest that place plays an active part in learning and that developing a personal theory of learning outside the classroom that includes consideration of place can help planning for rich learning opportunities.

### POINTS FOR PRACTICE

- Consider the ‘places’ available to you for different learning purposes.
- Think about what meanings these ‘places’ have for staff, children, community.
- Consider what sorts of learning opportunities would be well supported by these places.

All the space beyond the four walls of the classroom is not a homogeneous ‘other’ to be regarded as simply in contrast to what happens indoors and generally ‘a good thing’. Although the UK government’s ‘Learning outside the classroom manifesto’ appears to support this view, it does not go on to explain *why*.

Learning outside the classroom is about raising achievement through an organised, powerful approach to learning in which direct experience is of prime importance. This is not only about *what* we learn but importantly *how* and *where* we learn. (DfES, 2006: 3)

In fact, these questions form a useful shorthand evaluation of the appropriateness of place and pedagogy:

- *What* are we trying to teach/learn?
- *How* will this best be supported?
- *Where* is most likely to provide those conditions?
- *Why* is this so?

Different subjects bring particular cultural expectations, applicable regardless of where learning in that discipline takes place, but it might also be reasonable to assume that particular spaces are suitable for different kinds of learning because of the functions and activities that they support. For example, handling different materials can be beneficial in understanding their qualities. If they are brought into the classroom, while the children may learn about some of their features through direct experience, they do not also learn where they occur in the world. Experiences outside the classroom may therefore seem more ‘authentic’ and grounded in ‘reality’ and certainly some of the children in our own research (Waite, 2010a) have talked of knowing that something is ‘real’ in the sense of ‘believable’ through first-hand experience rather than just being told. Perhaps then, reference to ‘reality’ and ‘authenticity’ is understood in relation to *life beyond the educational setting*.

Nevertheless, this does not necessarily mean that the experiences are also ‘relevant’, another common claim for learning outside the classroom. Relevance comes from the meanings with which people imbue objects and spaces and from how activity fits with cultural expectations. Children in the Western world live their lives and learn both in and outside of formal education; perhaps their learning in both contexts is more easily linked and developed if the boundaries between the two are blurred by application of their learning in either context in the other, so that they see a purpose beyond the expectations of teachers as arbiters of their education. In some cultures such a distinction between places for formal and non-formal learning is less clear cut and yet we see ‘relevance’ operating in their play (non-formal learning), where skills later to be adopted in their life are practised in participation (Smith, 2010). But the ‘Learning outside the classroom manifesto’ (DfES, 2006) seems to annex control of education outside the classroom, saying it is about ‘*raising achievement through an organised, powerful approach to learning in which direct experience is of prime importance*’ (p.3, *our emphasis*).

So the opportunities inherent in places for ‘relevance’ and ‘authenticity’ to life beyond the educational setting are sometimes not taken up because of cultural transfers. Julian Sefton-Green (2006) notes that ‘out-of-school learning’ often actually takes place *within* schools in the form of clubs and after-school activities. Many are led by teachers. Although some of these activities are run in a less formal way, the cultural expectations of ‘in-school’ mean that many are simply ‘extensions of the formal curriculum and function like study groups’ (p.4). They are only ‘out-of-school’ in a temporal sense.

Other researchers in outdoor education (such as Brookes, 2002 and Stewart, 2006) argue strongly for awareness of cultural and historical meaning in place-based education. So in addition to emotionally mediated personal responses, students also learn how places have become as they are. However, relevance for the individual, or broader sociocultural understandings of place, are often subservient

to imposed demands, such as raising standards in learning. Yet, Greenwood (2008: 239) believes that the best place-based education ‘emerges from the particularities of places, the people who know them best ... and the people who wonder about all the opportunities that might arise from action-oriented place study’. Such place-based learning refers to contexts that have long-term effects through long association with them. Ward Thompson et al. (2008: 132) in a study about how adults use green places, found that children who had not had access to outdoor environments in childhood, were unlikely to spend time in the outdoors as adults, with consequent impacts on adult health and well-being.

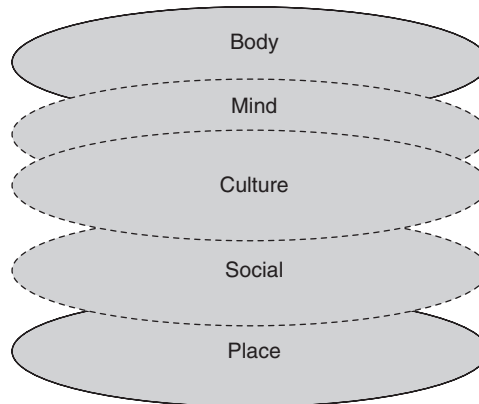
Other ways of learning may be stimulated by novelty and adventure. Min and Lee (2006), indeed, suggest outdoor spaces for learning need a balance between challenge and security, private and public and meeting current and future, as yet unpredicted, needs. This suggests a high degree of flexibility in the resourcing and landscaping of such areas (Armitage, 1999). However, places may be better understood not simply as areas with geographical boundaries, but rather as places with particular social relations and understandings, which transcend time and space. Consideration of intersubjective experiences is vitally important when thinking about pedagogy and place (McKenzie, 2008), and there are several ways that we can consider learning to take account of subjectivity, culture and place.

## CONCEPTS OF LEARNING AND DIFFERENT FOCAL PLANES

Learning may be viewed using different focal planes, offering complementary ways to make sense of this complex process that defies any one single explanation. Zooming in tightly, one sees learning in terms of individuals. This is how the headteacher viewed the acquisition of knowledge by learners and echoes Cannatella’s (2007) belief in the centrality of *self* in engaging with learning. Often, this leads to a focus on the mind and claims that learning takes place through affective associations and (increasingly) reasoned thought, brought about through some conceptual challenge which requires the learner to rethink their conception of something. This is the basis of constructivism and represents a psychological plane of focus.

We cannot look inside the individual but we can take into account what they show us through behaviour. The body is therefore one way we might gain insight into the learning process. How do we know how to adjust our teaching and planning to meet the needs of our children? It is not through X-ray vision of the mental processes of a child but what their behaviour tells us about how that teaching is being received by the children. Are they misbehaving, looking blank, fiddling with something? Beard and Wilson (2007: 5) put forward a psychologically-based explanation of this conceptualisation in the form of a learning combination lock, where a series of tumblers represent the external environment, senses and internal environment as the person is seen as internalising the environment through their senses. Another way of looking at this positioning of self within the world is that through the mind *and* the social we come to ‘know’ and ‘be’ in relationship with our bodies and places and that culture is constructed from the interactions between these. In the model





**Figure 1.1** The embodiment of place: an individual's interaction in the construction of culture in place

depicted in Figure 1.1, this relationship is portrayed in a way that reflects an understanding of place as culturally constructed.

Using different ways of looking at learning in a context-sensitive way, this chapter aims to make more explicit some of the components of the 'holism' claimed for outdoor learning; how terms like *hands-on*, *experiential* and *practical* and the interplay between learning and place might be understood using these planes of focus.

## A BROADER CONCEPT OF LEARNING

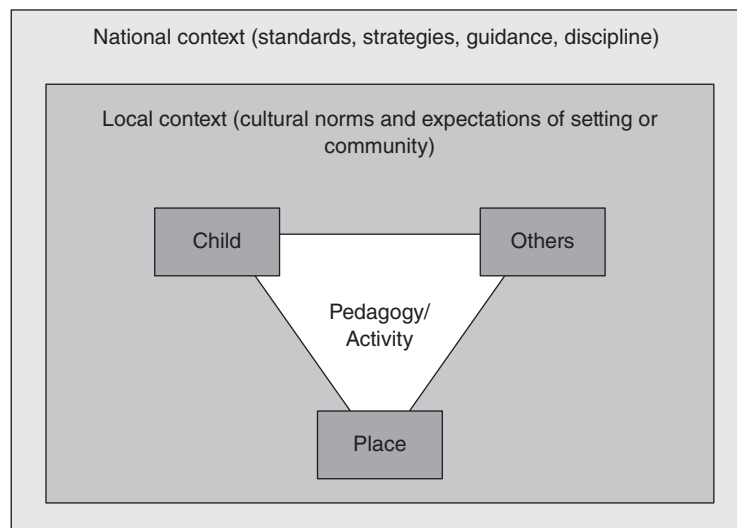
In considering concepts of learning, however, we need to be aware that we are also talking about concepts of education and schooling. Schooling implies a deliberate attempt to learn specific things that are valued within our society, so education can be understood as the manner in which this is organised and managed. Indeed, one of the prime motives for undertaking this book is a desire amongst the authors to unpick something new about how the wider education system has come to shape learning and what contribution 'place' might have to this. More specifically it stems from a shared concern with the way in which 'the classroom' tends to encourage a rather narrow view of what learning might involve and a desire to open up new ideas about this.

## TOWARDS A RELATIONAL MODEL FOR LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

One way of reflecting upon the learning environment considers the interaction between the programme, facilitator, group, individual, culture, environment (place) and activity (Neill, 2008). Figure 1.2 illustrates the relationship between the national context of curriculum, standards and guidance, the cultural norms and expectations of the local context and the child, place and 'others' – mainly adults – involved in their schooling. It is in the white space between these that pedagogic

activity is enacted. Learning opportunities are created in this space through interactions between the three corners of the triangle (child, others and place); all in mutual interaction with the activity. Place will have new meanings and therefore new potentials as a learning context; the child and others will have learnt from the interactions and return to the place with developed expectations. Thus a micro-culture of that particular learning space may be co-constructed. Activity theory is one possible way for working with this conceptualisation. (For further details of activity theory, see Engeström et al., 1999.)

Place in this relational model is an active partner in the learning activities in which the child engages and the pedagogies employed, but this model only captures a snapshot in a dynamic system of interactions. Spaces have particular possibilities, history and associations for children and adults that make them meaningful 'places' and these are constantly being revised by ongoing experiences in them. Repeated visits may result in the establishment of a different set of cultural expectations such as within Forest School programmes (see Chapter 17). Therefore places which offer some novelty and unpredictability may be valuable in exciting a revision of our ideas (Jarvis, 2009). This might be why wild places lend themselves to transformative learning according to some researchers (Senge et al., 2005). If we accept that place contributes to cultural norms, an unusual context may reduce reliance on 'custom and practice' from the more usual site of learning and open another possibility space. Another explanation might be that power runs through teaching and learning, predominately from teacher to taught, but if this usual distribution of power is disrupted in new places, different opportunities for learning may arise. Furthermore, if these places are not regularly revisited or stable, teaching and learning practices in them are likely to be more fluid. We therefore need to be alert



**Figure 1.2** The possibility space in relationship between place, pedagogy and learning

Source: adapted from Waite et al. (2008)

to different sorts of places, what they make possible and how they are likely to interact with learning intentions.

Bourdieu's work on *habitus* and *field* offers useful theoretical foundations for considering this interplay between places, culture and the individual. Habitus refers to the ways of behaving and being that become embedded and invisible within contexts over time; they form part of the rules of the game that a particular social field expects. Waite (2013) extended the idea of *habitus* to develop the concept of 'cultural density' to explain how norms or *rules of the game* within certain social and material contexts work to support or obstruct educational objectives. Density refers to strong existing expectations, such as those that operate within the majority of classrooms in schools. Places unfamiliar to staff and students are culturally light as they bring fewer rules or established ways of interacting to them which offers opportunities to trial new ways. Yet repeated visits can build up new cultural expectations and a cultural density particular to that place as we see in the examples given of Outdoor Journeys in Chapter 6 and as seen in many examples of place-based education (Gruenewald, 2003). Choosing the learning environment with this idea of the cultural density of places in mind can therefore support more creative pedagogies that are co-constructed with children and other adults. We discuss the role and effects of external learning facilitators further in the next chapter and Chapter 19.

### POINTS FOR PRACTICE A FRAMEWORK FOR PLANNING LEARNING OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Using the diagram in Figure 1.2, consider occasions where you have been teaching both in the classroom and elsewhere. Note down how these might be understood in terms of the model, as well as any implications for planning and practice. The questions below will prompt points to consider. Reflect how they cluster around certain aspects of this model. What are the powerful influences on your practice? How might you wish to change your practice to match your values? What theoretical perspectives are you using to interpret your pedagogy?

- What are your teaching intentions?
- Why are these important?
- What places are most suited to this sort of teaching and learning?
- How does the place particularly support the learning?
- What might the place mean to the children?
- What other valuable learning might therefore take place?
- How does this relate to priorities within the setting and nationally?

Review after activity:

- What learning have you observed?
- How has the experience contributed on individual, local and national levels?
- Where to next – in learning and spaces?

We now turn to an example of learning outside the classroom taken from Economic and Social Research Council funded research (Waite et al., 2008) to provide an illustration of how different focal planes allow us to take different perspectives on events and so can enhance our understanding.

### CASE STUDY 1.1 PUSHES AND PULLS: FORCES AT WORK IN THE PLAY PARK

Laura feels some trepidation in taking this Year 1 class outside. As a supply teacher, she does not know the children very well although certain *characters* have already been pointed out to her. The children gather around her on the carpet as she sets out the plans for the lesson on Forces, looking for examples of pushes and pulls in the play park. Nearly all the talking is done by the teacher. In fact, there are over 18 behavioural injunctions, principally about how they should *not* behave and several of these remarks are targeted at the *characters* directly; seven teacher comments are about practical arrangements such as who will hold the clipboard and pencil; a mere six relate to the substantive topic of the activity, why they are going out to the play park, and that they will need to put on their 'science hats'. The children are *very* excited about their trip.

In the play park, the children are in their assigned groups with a leader (chosen by the teacher and indicated by possession of a clipboard) but they are pulled by the attractions of play in this context that they associate so much with freedom. They debate if play is allowed. One child says: 'we must be doing work, because I have a pencil'. Others are not so sure and lark about, making the most of their surroundings. The leader adopts the teacher role, while trying to get them to cooperate in compiling a group list of pushes and pulls in the environment. She herself has to be pushy to try to achieve this, but the interaction is very unidirectional, as it was in the classroom beforehand. 'If I see any silly behaviour!' she admonishes the boys throwing grass. Eventually, she calls on the teacher to reinforce behavioural control in this ambiguous area. 'Right', says the teacher, 'we're coming away from this **play** area because you're all **playing**.' The child replies, 'I'm not **playing**. I'm just looking'. But the leader of the group rejoins, 'You *was* **playing**'.

How are we to make sense of what is happening here? The predominant way of thinking about learning is to consider how individuals make sense of the learning objects (forces in this case) and how interactions with others (usually teachers) can help them to develop this sense making. In this situation though what is most noticeable is that pupils do not engage in the kind of conceptual thinking about forces that the teacher had hoped for. It is tempting to think that this is just misbehaviour, but it is also possible to make sense of it in other terms by looking at it on a wider plane.

Firstly, we might consider why the supply teacher was perhaps more anxious about taking the children out of the classroom. Classrooms are associated with rules (explicit ones certainly, but also many more implicit ones) which allow

teachers to control physical and intellectual behaviour making everyone feel safe, but also strongly affecting what is deemed appropriate for learning. Leaving this haven affords the possibility that the children might ‘misbehave’ and show-up both her and the school in public, perhaps accounting for her heavy emphasis on behaviour in the introduction. She may also have been given the lesson plan. Not only does this mean that she may not have thought through what specific learning points she wanted to support by the experience, but the practice of having ‘plans’ implies that there is specific learning to be achieved – and hence pressure to achieve it. This may then account for her organisation of pupils and resources. In setting up the groups, she chose children she thought would behave in ways that she deemed appropriate for schooling (mini-teachers), based on well established social, cultural and historical patterns of ‘school’ behaviour. Ironically, this left the less motivated children with no symbols of work and perhaps confused therefore as to how this task was meant to operate, leaving them more likely to be seduced by the playful opportunities. Rather than becoming a ‘new’ experience which offered pupils the chance to appreciate forces in new ways, the group work didn’t function as such but became a microcosm of the classroom. Children were not in fact free to engage in novel learning, but were implicitly required to learn in the same ways as a classroom would require. In effect, the class took ‘the classroom’ out there with them – and even increased the number of teachers! As a result, although the activity took place outside, it was not experiential or hands on, and the relevance for the children (play) was seen as counterproductive because of the cultural norms that were carried out there with them. It also illustrates how cultural density can vary for individuals within the context. The supply teacher from another town had no associations with the play area and simply approached it instrumentally to demonstrate scientific principles. However, for the children living in that area, the play park was a place with deep resonances of fun, playful behaviour and spontaneous social interactions, a cultural density very different from the schooling institutional habitus that they were actually being expected to adopt. You can almost hear the culture clash and appreciate the children’s confusion about what they were expected to do (Waite, 2016).

This is just one of many possible readings of the situation. The learning itself does not differ but application of different focal planes, according to our own beliefs about learning and the questions we want to answer, can help make sense of how to set up appropriate learning opportunities. We therefore turn now to a more detailed examination of these various planes.

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL PLANE

*Cumulative* learning refers to situations where there is no prior experience, so it is suggested this is how very young children may learn, like a sponge soaking up knowledge. However, anyone who has spent time with a baby is likely to agree that they are far from passive in their learning, encouraging repetition of actions and events that they find interesting. Although ideas of empty vessels to be filled may still linger in instrumental ticking off of ‘things to be learnt’, the most common form

of learning found in schooling is probably *assimilation*, where the learner (and her teacher) incrementally build on existing knowledge. The knowledge that is taught or skills that are shown do not disrupt the expected progression from an existing and relatively circumscribed body of knowledge. However, *accommodative* learning also comes into play where a greater leap is needed to make sense of the new and is more likely to be present where challenge and complex problem solving is required which calls on prior knowledge, understanding and skills *across* disciplines. It is this type, where the learner makes more prolific and diffuse links with other experience, contexts and knowledge, which may be more easily transferred between situations. This is not to say that a 'piece of knowledge' is carted unchanged from one situation to another but that the many links made enable aspects of the original learning to be re-combined in and for new situations (for more discussion of this, see Illeris, 2009).

Jarvis (2009) argues that after initial experiences the cultural meaning rather than the experience is attended to by the learner, so that assimilation may be more likely. This has particular implications for outdoor and experiential learning which often offers opportunities to approach learning anew through novelty. However, we need to take care that such experience isn't understood as culture-free; even 'new' situations are only understood through reference to the past and anticipation of the future. Accommodative learning, though, is especially important for the rapid changing work/life contexts for which we prepare our children and ourselves, where many situations are 'new' to us. The apparent unpredictability of outdoor contexts therefore may afford a better preparation for real-life problem solving than classrooms conforming to standard regular rituals, including perhaps 'taking the teacher's word for it'!

Reflective practice, which is drawn from one of the most common theories of learning used in outdoor education, Kolb's experiential learning cycle (1984), provides another theoretical vehicle for further engagement of the individual in making a learning opportunity their own. The simplest models of the cycle have been criticised as not taking the situated nature of learning into account and for portraying each 'stage' as discrete (Illeris, 2007: 55); in fact, we are constantly reflecting, planning and doing as we experience. (For further discussion and critique of Kolb's theory, see Jarvis and Parker, 2009: 6–7.) Another aspect of learning which is somewhat overlooked in this tidy model is that sometimes the experience is so out of the normal run of experience that it requires a drastic re-appraisal of what we think we know. A shake up of our existing ways of thinking can lead to *transformative* learning (Jarvis, 2009). These are the occasions where experience or reflection leads to a re-adjustment not only to our previous ways of thinking but also to our understanding of ourselves, a sort of learning often claimed for wilderness experiences and adventure education.

Meanings may also be different for the individual and 'others' and it is therefore important that each child has an opportunity to be active in their learning, so that they can link these prior meanings to their present and to wider social and cultural meanings. If an adult takes control, the relevance to the child may be reduced, as the learning is mediated through the adult's cultural position.

Sometimes local context's culture influences and may be 'imported wholesale' to particular learning spaces as we saw in the case study earlier; this practice jeopardises capitalising on the unique ways in which that place could shape learning. For example, imagine children being expected to ignore the 'distractions' of the outside world and listen to the teacher while they stand at the edge of the pond in order to learn about frogs, when supported direct observation would be a far more effective way of using that place.

We also know from our research that learning outside the classroom often allows the practitioner opportunities for close observation of children's natural behaviour. This is assessment which isn't tied to a particular learning outcome but incorporates a rounded view of social and emotional aspects of learning for children, the holistic aspect mentioned earlier. In child-led activity, the teacher is able to observe and contingently develop the child's own interests enhancing the child's enjoyment. We discuss this further in Chapter 2. This endeavour is worthwhile as *engagement* and *enjoyment* have both been found to be valuable in supporting motivation for learning from early years to higher education (Waite and Davis, 2006).

Another key question which must be asked in planning and observing learning outside the classroom is *what* is being learnt? Adopting a sociocultural plane of focus can assist with this question.

## SOCIOCULTURAL PLANE

A sociocultural plane of analysis is not a common way for teachers to think about their work because of the deeply rooted emphasis in our education system on individual cognition (albeit with some social activity involved). There is no single social theory of learning (Jarvis and Parker, 2009), indeed Pike and Beames (2013) sample many social theorists to examine different types of outdoor and adventurous learning, but the central ideas that we want to focus on here are twofold:

- the notion that people participate in activity that is socially orientated and organised;
- the idea that 'understanding' need not be viewed as an individual affair in which people (pupils) 'acquire' knowledge and carry it around with them, but can be seen as being linked more closely to context and experience.

## SOCIALLY ORIENTATED ACTIVITY

To illustrate further what we mean by activity that is socially orientated, we might ask you a question: have you been behaving normally today? Though we cannot access your answer, the fact that we can ask this and you can consider it, points to the idea that there are 'normal' ways to behave within whatever social context you find yourself in. We go about our life using well established practices/behaviours. These practices are embedded in the social context in which we live and work, and are cultural (what we do round here) and historical (we always do it this way).

Schooling is no different. Pupils and teachers operate in customary patterns; one need only watch young children ‘playing’ schools or consider the behaviour of the leader of the group in the case study above to know this. One way to make sense of classrooms therefore is to think about them in terms of:

- the common *practices* involved (people’s actions);
- the *norms* involved (what is usual practice; what it is normal to do);
- the *discourses* involved (how people communicate meaning, both implicitly and explicitly, through language, action and symbolic means, such as clothing, status etc.).

As part of these ideas one can also consider ‘rules’ that operate within a situation (implicit as much as explicit), the notion of who does what (often referred to as the division of labour) and also the resources one has available to support activity. In thinking then about learning outside the classroom we can consider ways in which taking learning out of the normal environment encourages these practices, norms, discourses, rules and divisions of labour to change in ways that are desirable. If the value of working outside the classroom is in providing pupils with experiences that are different from those inside it, we need a framework and language that allow us to analyse and talk about such experience. So, returning to the class that goes outside to find frogs in the environmental area rather than simply reading books, this may be because we want them to learn to behave in ways that are different to classroom behaviour (as young environmentalists perhaps), as well as to learn ‘about’ frogs.

## UNDERSTANDING AND EXPERIENCE

This example of youngsters learning to behave as environmentalists brings us to our second point about sociocultural perspectives on learning; the idea that understanding need not always be thought of as an individual affair. This is more than simply saying context matters. The argument is that knowledge cannot be separated from the situation in which it is developed. Children learning about frogs through experiencing them around a pond don’t learn ‘more’ or ‘less’ about frogs than children whose access is through books or a video; they learn a qualitatively different thing, a different way of ‘knowing frogs’. This view of learning, which is often referred to as ‘situated understanding’ is not ‘better’ than an individualised, cognitive and affective view but it does offer ways to make sense of learning in terms of context, which is important in thinking about the role of place.

While culture itself is the product of social construction, the meaning of culture is continually being interpreted through our learning and enacted in our lives. So in practice, it is not a question of nailing one’s colours to the mast of sociocultural or psychological/psychosocial theories of learning, but rather of developing a personal theory about how these shed light and operate in the contexts in which one lives and works. Using different planes of focus help us to approach different questions we may have about children’s learning and our own



teaching, but as Wenger (2009: 215) says: 'A perspective is not a recipe; it does not tell you what to do. Rather it acts as a guide about what to pay attention to, what difficulties to expect, and how to approach a problem'. In this book we hope that the stories we tell of practice and the theories we link with these in the following chapters will help each reader make personal sense of what will help and guide them as practitioners.

## USING DIFFERENT PLANES FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES

In terms of learning outside the classroom, our research leads us to think that cultural pressures associated with schooling (such as meeting standards, conforming to agreed targets, following plans) may be more intense where the social and institutional are more established such as *within* schools. After all, where there are guidance documents, strategies and institutional policies, 'culture' is made more manifest. This is not to say that these outward signs are *the* 'culture' in any straightforward, unambiguous way; you probably hold your own views about what elements you agree within these and personal beliefs (invisible culture) will inevitably colour the impacts of these policies (visible culture) on your practice. However, it is possible that novel situations, such as some of those outside the classroom, may represent a greater freedom for personal resistance to and interpretations of general norms. It is worth bearing in mind too that this freedom may not just be experienced by you as practitioner but also by learners. They too bring their own sociocultural and historical values constructed from the histories of their family, community and peer group to the party!

Thus, our responses shape learning inside and outside the formal context of the classroom. Thinking of our own lives and of the children we have taught, we remember very different attitudes being shown to apparently identical sets of resources or places. This awareness of individual response may explain why the idea of 'personalisation' in learning is seductive. It is championed by government in a challenging and sometimes puzzling dynamic with recommendations for more objective-led teaching. Personalisation may be partly attributable to the uniqueness of experience through the distinct psychological understanding that each of us brings to our social and cultural worlds. Clearly it follows that places or learning opportunities are not always viewed in a standard fashion. On a psychological plane, our personality shaped by processes of socialisation throughout our lives means that we all experience events with potential for learning in different ways – what is offered is different from what is received because the learner brings her own past, present and aspirations for the future to bear on that. This personal response may be the 'engagement' that the headteacher spoke of, making links or 'engaging' with the learner's prior experience, and future hopes in the learning of the present and actual. Each child will ask (consciously or unconsciously): 'What does this (experience) **mean to** (in relation to my past and present) and **for** (in relation to my future) me?' Meaning and purpose are

central for valuing what is learnt and, for that learning to be enduring, forging many links with other memories is helpful.

On the other hand, a wider lens suggests a problem with this tighter analysis. Although at the micro level each individual has experiences that are clearly different, at the macro level there is a strong sense of commonality between people, rooted in the social discourses within which they operate. The pupils in the play park mentioned earlier might, on the surface of things, have appeared to be free to 'see' anything they liked, but what is valued, and therefore what is valuable to see, is bounded by the social expectations of schooling, even when the children are not in the classroom. The trip was about forces and schooling dictates that objectives are met; issues of 'playing' therefore are only problematic because schooling is culturally and socially required to be about 'learning' and school learning means making focused, articulated observations about the issue under study. Interestingly, this plane of analysis is also always a political (small 'p') one in the sense that it asks questions about values. This is illustrated in considering notions of 'ability'. The main way we measure ability in schools is in the way pupils write and talk about ideas, but if outdoor learning offers pupils the chance to engage with the world in more tacit, experiential ways, then we need to reconsider this. An expert environmentalist is not expert because of his/her ability to talk about the environment. Rather, it is the ability to *do* the things that are central to expertise in the world of environmental science and indeed many other occupations. This mismatch between measures of achievement and desirable abilities brings into question how appropriate schooling in its current form might be for supporting vocational aspects of learning, but also implies that whilst working outdoors might seem like a good idea, it may conflict with other priorities of teachers' professional life. (See also the next chapter for a discussion of assessment outdoors.)

Returning to our headteacher's explanation for the value of practical learning, being 'hands on' makes learning potentially more direct and less mediated by another's meanings. An important skill as a teacher is in facilitating; after all, no one but the learner can learn *for* them. As learners, we implicitly call on our rich history of associations to forge links to make new knowledge, skills or understandings particularly meaningful, relevant and therefore more memorable for us. Involvement of the body in learning is another way in which more links are constructed. Children in our research have commented that 'hands on' first-hand experience makes the learning more real and believable (Waite et al., 2006b), but whether this leads to learning in a form that is useful for schooling remains an issue – and a challenge perhaps to develop new ways of understanding (and assessing) learning.

Furthermore, the headteacher's idea of 'enjoyment' is not simply a general hope that the learner will enjoy school but is underpinned by empirically evidenced associations, firstly from research into motivation (Waite and Davis, 2006) and secondly from brain research which shows how important affect and emotional loading of memories are in their application in future situations (Waite, 2007). So the fact that children often mention wanting more outdoor and practical activities

should indicate to us that it is worthwhile accommodating their preferences if we want them to remember. It may therefore be helpful to consider both emotional loading (psychological) and ‘belonging’ (psychosocial) in considering how to make learning experiences memorable. And so we come full circle to the value of personal theories employing various planes of focus in negotiating the relational complexity of learning and place.

## THOUGHTS ABOUT THEORY

How do you conceptualise learning: as principally psychological, psychosocial, sociocultural or a mixture of all three? (Your personal theory of learning.)

- Are some aspects more emphasised than others in your setting? (The local context.)
- What aspects of learning do you place the most/least value on? (Your personal values.)
- How could you better accommodate your personal concept of learning in your own practice? (Reconciliation of local context and personal values and theory.)
- What are the implications of this personal view for the way you choose to teach and use spaces beyond the classroom and for changes that might need to be made at the wider policy level of your teaching context? (Your plans.)

## CHAPTER SUMMARY

This chapter has outlined a number of ways in which learning and place can be viewed and encouraged you to consider what your personal understandings are. Using different ways of looking may help to gain a better understanding of how learning in contexts within and outside the classroom occurs and this should support your thinking about how best to facilitate learning for different purposes. Clearly in a short chapter, we cannot hope to address this wide theme in great depth but we have provided pointers to further reading if aspects have caught your attention. The chapter should also be a useful resource to return to as you dip into the chapters that follow and pursue your own interests in supporting learning outside the classroom.

## FURTHER READING

- Jarvis, P. and Parker, S. (2009) *Human Learning: An holistic approach*. London: Routledge. An attempt to bring together different planes of focus in thinking about how we learn.
- Pike, E. and Beames, S. (2013) *Outdoor Adventure and Social Theory*. London: Routledge. A smorgasbord of social theorists and theory with an outdoor learning focus.
- Waite, S. and Pratt, N. (2015) Situated Learning (Learning in Situ). In: James D. Wright (editor-in-chief), *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd edition, Vol. 22. Oxford: Elsevier, pp. 5–12. Highlights theory and contexts of sociocultural and place based concepts of learning outside the classroom.



## WEBLINKS

[www.childrenandnature.org](http://www.childrenandnature.org) – The Children and Nature Network is a great source of international research about the impact of nature on children, building a better evidence base.

[www.slideshare.net/jtneill/outdoor-education-theories-a-review-and-synthesis](http://www.slideshare.net/jtneill/outdoor-education-theories-a-review-and-synthesis) – James Neill brings together some outdoor education theories which make interesting material for reflection.

[www.lotc.org.uk/Out-and-about-guidance/Introduction](http://www.lotc.org.uk/Out-and-about-guidance/Introduction)



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