

# **Why Geography Matters**

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**Summary of PhD study “People, Process, Place: The Geographies of Outdoor Education in The Outward Bound Trust**

August 2020



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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## RESEARCH PROJECT

This research was conducted as part of a PhD in human geography at Loughborough University, supported by a Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Dudley Stamp Memorial Award. The three year project explored **why the environments of outdoor education are so important**, and **how young people experience them** through an outdoor education course.

Taking The Outward Bound Trust (OBT) as a case study, this research project addresses some timely debates on the features of outdoor education which impact on experiences and are significant for participants, and contributes to academic discussion on informal education and youth citizenship.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The project addressed the following research questions:

1. How are the social and physical spaces of The Outward Bound Trust constructed and used to produce an outdoor learning experience?
2. How are the key concepts and beliefs of The Outward Bound Trust embodied in its staff, and how does this contribute to the outdoor learning experience?
3. How do young people experience nature and the outdoors through Outward Bound programmes?

## RESEARCH METHODS

The project employed a qualitative methodology using a range of research methods.<sup>1</sup> There were six components of original fieldwork, conducted between October 2016 and June 2017:

1. Site visits and participant observation at each Outward Bound centre
2. 25 semi-structured interviews with Outward Bound centre staff (including managerial and instructional staff)
3. Four 1-week ethnographies<sup>2</sup> with four separate school groups on an Outward Bound Adventure & Challenge course, at either the Aberdovey or Ogwen Cottage centres
4. Use of participant directed photography with these school groups
5. 23 semi-structured pair interviews, following up with young people from these school groups
6. 'Moodboards' created by young people in their interviews

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<sup>1</sup> For full details of the methodology, please see publications (p11)

<sup>2</sup> Ethnography is a methodological approach that focuses on understanding the culture of a specific group. It involves a range of methods including participant observation, immersion in and engagement with the chosen group, interviews and informal conversations, to help build up a narrative account of that culture.

## SUMMARISED KEY FINDINGS

### PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

- The **physical site of the centre** and its **surroundings** are **essential for creating an outdoor learning experience** through:
  1. Attracting and motivating instructors; having an immediate visual impact and creating contrast to young people's everyday lives;
  2. Providing access to a range of learning environments and opportunities to up/downscale activities according to need; and
  3. Purposefully designed centre grounds to encourage the flow of activities, independent working and spaces for reflection and immersion in nature.
- Young people feel that their **experiences with Outward Bound are wild and adventurous**, facilitated by the relatively **large-scale** and **remote environments** they are in. Their enjoyment of their course is often mediated by their confidence and competence in outdoor environments.

### SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

- The Outward Bound Trust has a very strong organisational ethos characterised by its goal of developing people. It provides staff with **flexibility** and **autonomy in their working practices**, and benefits from **close social ties** and the **sharing of knowledge**.
- Outward Bound Instructors play a key role in **designing courses for impact**, through the use of **play and performance** to **engage young people**, and **planning courses** to include **'wow' moments, fun and reflection**.
- The overall ambitions of The Outward Bound Trust are combined with the goals of their clients, and the ideas and experience of individual instructors, to create courses that are **tailored according to the needs of participants**.
- One of the most crucial aspects of Outward Bound courses for young people is the **social experience**. The opportunity to spend time with, and build stronger relationships with, peers is highly valued.

## **CASE-STUDY & RESEARCH CONTEXT: WHY DOES GEOGRAPHY MATTER?**

The Outward Bound Trust is a UK-based leading educational charity which provides bursary-assisted outdoor learning. Founded in 1941, they are a stalwart of British outdoor education, and today they continue to strive to equip young people with the skills they need for “education, work and life”. The Trust’s core values still align with founder Kurt Hahn’s vision, represented in their mission statement “to unlock the potential in young people through learning and adventure in the wild”.

The popularity of learning through the outdoors has increased notably in recent years. Accordingly, outdoor education has been the subject of much empirical research over the last few decades. This includes studies focusing on the intended and perceived outcomes, the challenges of ensuring long-term impact, and measuring skills and effects which are seemingly immeasurable. More often than not, this research has focused on proving the worth of outdoor learning.

At the same time, a growing body of research has critically considered the ‘geographies of education’ – acknowledging that education and learning happens in a diversity of places and seeking to understand the impact that these places have on (young people’s) lives and learning.

The Outward Bound Trust have a strong focus on learning and personal development within their courses and have adopted a unique pedagogical approach. This is encompassed in the notion of the three ‘Ps’: ‘people’, ‘place’ and ‘process’ – whereby their impact is achieved through “skilful people working in an inspiring and challenging environment and applying an effective process” (OBT Strategic Framework 2016-2020). This pedagogical framework provided a neat entry point for the project, and the research sought to examine these three interrelating elements of Outward Bound courses, whilst bringing the outdoors centre stage as a significantly under-researched ‘place’ in this geographical work on education.

The Outward Bound Trust is a critically reflective organisation, seeking to improve the work they do in order to have maximum impact. It conducts internal evaluations led by their own Evaluation Team, as well as utilising external companies to evaluate their work. In their latest strategic framework The Trust outline ‘three areas of experimentation’, which include seeking to make better use of external research to inform their practice.

### **KEY FINDINGS**

The project’s key findings can be summarised under the following key headings:

1. The significance of ‘centre geographies’
2. A powerful organisational ethos
3. Instructor roles: play, choreography, and individualisation
4. Outward Bound as a social experience
5. Young people’s expectations and experiences

## 1. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 'CENTRE GEOGRAPHIES'

The research data highlights that The Outward Bound Trust make use of a very specific 'centre geography' – the combined **physical** and **social elements** of the places they chose to work from. There are four aspects to this, which are important for attracting like-minded staff in order deliver their aims, and for the impact of their courses on young people.

Firstly, research interviews and time spent with instructors demonstrated that they perceive Outward Bound centres to be in superior locations in terms of access to the physical environment for both instructing and personal use. For employees, the opportunity to work in these locations, especially when they enable them to carry on participating in activities they enjoy, with like-minded people, is something that often attracts them to the organisation and/or particular centres. Being in places which align with the personal values and interests of staff is necessary to motivate and enthuse them and create a positive and connected working community.

Secondly, the project found that The Outward Bound Trust are able to create an **environment that strongly contrasts with young people's everyday lives**, and this is perceived as **necessary to create more effective courses**. This contrast is produced through the visually impressive centre buildings and surrounding landscapes; the generally long journey time to centres which adds to the sense that they are 'far away'; and the slow-pace of courses and lack of distractions. The benefit in this contrast is seen to come through **disrupting normal attitudes and patterns of behaviour** and **pushing young people's comfort zones**.

Thirdly, the research shows that having access to a **range of environments** is important for providing experiences which **appeal to all young people**, as well as for up/downscaling the level of challenge where necessary. The surrounding environments are used for **immersive experiences in nature** and creating a sense of **physical journey** in order to **generate feelings of progress and achievement**.

Finally, the layouts of the centres themselves are **purposefully designed** – to encourage feelings of immersion in nature, and to facilitate particular learning outcomes, such as independence through having the freedom to move around the site unsupervised.

## 2. A POWERFUL ORGANISATIONAL ETHOS

The Outward Bound Trust is an organisation geographically spread out across England and Scotland, but robust social networks tie individuals and centres together. The research revealed that these networks play a crucial role in embedding overarching goals and good practice within the organisation. In particular, interviews with staff highlighted the value that individuals place on having access to **specialist knowledge** and **expertise**, shared through these networks. The **strong culture of sharing and subsequent knowledge transfer** was observed as playing a part in the continuation and success of The Outward Bound Trust.

This research found that these social networks are also important for creating a sense of community and belonging with The Outward Bound Trust. Across the organisation there is an acknowledgement that everybody is working for a common cause, which acts to unite employees, and help them to feel that they are supported in their work.

As well as enabling a sense of belonging and community, employees discussed the value they place on the amount of autonomy and flexibility they are afforded in their work. The Outward Bound Trust trusts its instructors to **take ownership over their work** and encourages them to make use of the **technical skills, qualifications** and **experiences** that they have in order to **deliver high-quality courses**.

This 'high-trust' culture within the organisation is noteworthy, as it means that staff perceive themselves to have a great degree of freedom in their day-to-day practices. The research found that this has two important implications. Firstly, it allows courses to be **specifically tailored to the needs of young people** as instructors are allowed to **build their own knowledge and expertise** into course delivery. Secondly, it plays an essential role in maintaining enthusiasm and motivation amongst staff. Consequently, this autonomous and independent working environment is seen as a great asset by employees.

### 3. INSTRUCTOR ROLES: PLAY, CHOREOGRAPHY AND INDIVIDUALISATION

The ethnographic fieldwork revealed the strategies that Outward Bound instructors employ to help participants get the most out of their course. **Play and performance** formed a large part of what instructors 'do' to **engage young people** and **encourage interaction and conversation**.

Instructors showed **resourcefulness** - using folklore, various pieces of equipment, or the landscape, to **play games, generate enthusiasm, and lift spirits**, as well as teach their group about the **local environment, flora and fauna**. The follow-up interviews with young people showed that it is often these **playful interactions** with instructors and peers that are **most memorable and important in their experiences**, on top of the **structured outdoor activities**.

As the previous section has hinted, through having the autonomy to shape courses, Outward Bound instructors are instrumental in the experiences that their participants have. Firstly, as well as playful interactions, the research showed that instructors seek to **actively 'choreograph' courses** to create **meaningful experiences** for young people. This choreography takes many different forms, for example building in a **reflective moment on a summit** with a spectacular view, the linking of activities to build in a **sense of physical journey** or using a team-building exercise at a critical moment to **spark a positive group dynamic**.

Secondly, the data revealed that through this autonomy instructors are able to prescribe diverse aims to their work, as they see necessary. This means that **Outward Bound courses are a collaboration**: between the overall goals of The Trust, the needs of the client, and the personal values-base of the instructor and what they deem to be important for the young person standing in front of them.

Furthermore, Outward Bound instructors have a social role to play. Through the interviews it is clear that they are invested in building relationships and trust with individuals in their groups and managing group dynamics to ensure the Outward Bound experience is as enjoyable as possible for all young people.



## 4. OUTWARD BOUND AS A SOCIAL EXPERIENCE

The Outward Bound Trust are an organisation concerned with individual growth and helping young people to reach their full potential. However, the idea of outdoor education as an environment for **building interpersonal relationships** was evident throughout the research process.

The research found that one of the **most highly-valued aspects of Outward Bound courses** by young people was the **opportunity for socialising and strengthening peer friendships**. Through their interviews, young people explained that despite spending significant amounts of time in school with friends, they often lacked opportunities to 'hang out'.

The Outward Bound Trust provides a **very different social space to a school** and the residential element in particular was found to place a crucial role in **facilitating young people's relationships**. Spending time together in dormitories and having unstructured time; taking part in group-based unconventional tasks; eating meals together; showing fear and bravery in front of one another; and giving encouragement, all provided opportunities for **strengthening friendships and building new ones**.

The **unique and challenging experiences** that young people go through together in Outward Bound courses also play a role in relationship building. The research highlighted that the sharing of **emotive experiences** (intense, scary, funny, exciting, and so on) helps to **build a group identity throughout the week**, and these **shared memories continue to bring young people together long after their Outward Bound course has finished**.

The above research finding demonstrates the **value of using Outward Bound courses as part of school or workplace transitions**, in order to facilitate year group or team bonding.

## 5. YOUNG PEOPLE'S EXPECTATIONS AND EXPERIENCES

Young people in the research project were overwhelmingly positive about their Outward Bound experience, based on narratives of **fun, adventure** and **friendship**.

In particular, the research found that young people felt that their Outward Bound course provided a **truly wild and adventurous experience**. This was often based on their past experiences of outdoor education, the remote environments of the centres and the immersive nature of the activities (see also Section 1). Participants often discussed how they did not expect it to be **quite so physically challenging**, but this generally created **greater feelings of reward** on completion of tasks.

The ethnographic fieldwork illustrated that for some young people, taking part in Outward Bound activities was an **empowering experience**. It gave them confidence in new environments and enabled them to show off skills that they would not normally have the opportunity to demonstrate.

However, the data also revealed that Outward Bound can be an environment for **potentially disempowering experiences**. For some participants in the study – often those who were most **unfamiliar and 'uncomfortable' in outdoor environments**, the Outward Bound activities acted to **reinforce this unfamiliarity**. In these instances, young people appeared to make significantly less progress in their mindset across the week. The case study groups used in the project suggest that these **more negative experiences** were often a **consequence of socio-culturally-based perceptions of nature and the outdoors**.

The above research findings highlight the fact that The Outward Bound Trust is often successful in its mission to empower young people, through the creation of powerful experiences in wild places. However, it also demonstrates a need for them to continue to work towards understanding diversity within their organisation, in order to ensure that these experiences can be beneficial to a greater diversity of young people.

## CONCLUSIONS: WHY GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

This research project has adopted a geographical approach to the study outdoor education, taking The Outward Bound Trust as its case study. The Trust has a commitment to making use of external research to inform its practice, and this research has contributed to a greater understanding of its core interlocking components: 'people', 'place', and 'process'.

Given that there are reinvigorated calls for engagement with the outdoors in the UK, it is important to understand what role the natural environment plays in young people's learning experiences. Despite this, the outdoors is a hitherto under-researched 'space' in the growing body of work critically focusing on the 'geographies of education'.

The key findings from this project demonstrate that The Outward Bound Trust's *people* – its instructional staff and participating young people; *places* – its centres and surrounding the surrounding environment; and *processes* – the experiential learning approach the Trust adopts, create an educational space with a distinct *geography*. There are some unique physical and social factors that come together in the formation of Outward Bound courses.

### PHYSICAL GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

- The physical site of the centre and its surroundings are essential for creating an outdoor learning experience through attracting and motivating instructors; having a visual impact and creating feelings of wilderness and adventure; and enabling creative course design.
- Young people feel that their Outward Bound experiences are wild and adventurous, facilitated by the relatively large-scale and remote environments they are in.

### SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

- The Outward Bound Trust has a very strong organisational ethos characterised by its goal of developing people. It provides staff with flexibility and autonomy in their working practices, and benefits from close social ties and the sharing of knowledge.
- In course design, Outward Bound Instructors play a key role in designing courses tailored to individual young people's needs. The overall ambitions of the Trust are combined with the goals of their clients, and the ideas and experiences of the instructors
- One of the most crucial aspects of OBT courses for young people is the social experience. The opportunity to spend time with and build stronger relationships with peers is highly valued.

The Outward Bound Trust is often successful in its mission to empower young people, through the creation of powerful experiences in wild places. However, this research demonstrates that young people's enjoyment is often mediated by their confidence or competence. There is a need for the Trust to continue to work towards understanding diversity within their organisation, in order to ensure that these experiences can be beneficial to a greater diversity of young people.

## PUBLICATIONS

### PUBLISHED TO DATE:

Hickman Dunne, J. (2022). The (re)creation and (re)storying of space in outdoor education: gyms, journeys and escapism. In T. A. Smith, H. Pitt, & R. A. Dunkley. (Eds.). *Unfamiliar Landscapes: Young People and Diverse Outdoor Experiences*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

**Hickman Dunne, J.**, von Benzon, N., & Whittle, R. (2022). Facebook as a platform for collecting women's birth stories: supporting emotional connections between researchers and participants. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 42: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.emospa.2021.100863>.

Pimlott-Wilson, H., & **Hickman Dunne, J.** (2021). Moodboards and LEGO: principles and practice in social research. In N. von Benzon, M. Holton, C. Wilkinson, & S. Wilkinson (Eds.). *Creative Methods for Human Geographers*. London: Sage. p87-99.

**Hickman Dunne, J.** & Mills, S. (2019). Editorial Introduction: Educational Landscapes: Nature, Place and Moral Geographies. *The Geographical Journal*, 185(3): 254-257.

Hickman Dunne, J. (2019). Experiencing the outdoors: Embodied encounters in the Outward Bound Trust. *The Geographical Journal*, 185(3): 279-291.

Electronic or hard copies of publications are available on request via the contact details at the end of the report.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**My sincerest thanks go to all participants who took part in the research – both within The Outward Bound Trust and case-study schools. I am grateful to all of the individuals who engaged with my research activities with such interest and enthusiasm.**

My thanks go to the funding provided by the Loughborough University studentship, and the Royal Geographical Society (with IBG) Dudley Stamp Memorial Award which allowed me to complete my fieldwork.

Finally, special thanks to Emma Ferris and Martin Davidson at The Outward Bound Trust for their unwavering support, and to Dr Sarah Mills and Dr Rachel Sandford, who supervised the project.

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