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The changing world of outdoor learning in Europe

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BOOK REVIEW

The changing world of outdoor learning in Europe, edited by Peter Becker, Barbara Humberstone, Chris Loynes and Jochem Schirp, London, Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group, 2018, 283pp., £115 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-138-04766-2

This anthology discusses changes in the field of Outdoor and Adventure Learning (OAL) in Europe over the last few years, a period that, according to the editors, has seen a number of significant developments in, and increasing social relevance of, the field. It represents a timely publication given the still broader societal developments across the continent that are alluded to, such as the rise of popular nationalism and emerging schisms in formerly transnational institutions and values, with Brexit providing a looming spectre to the book. Had it been completed a few short months previously it might not have had this currency.

However, it is important to provide a further context for the publication, namely the stimulus of the twentieth anniversary of the founding of the European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential and Learning (EOE). Founded in 1996, this represents the pre-eminent European network of professionals in the field. EOE therefore represents the key driver of the publication, which is reflected in the list of authors, who are active members of the network. Furthermore, the book represents a decade-long follow up publication to *Other Ways of Learning* (Becker and Schirp 2008), itself published as a consequence of the 10th anniversary of EOE. The two publications bear comparison since they share the same stimulus and purposes; two editors and several authors; and a number of stylistic characteristics. Taken together, they represent interesting companion pieces that trace important shifts in emphases in the field in Europe over the last twenty years. Further comparison will not be attempted here, save the noticeable difference in production values, the recent publication having been published by a larger, international publication house, namely Routledge. The more professional and 'establishment' appearance of the current publication could perhaps be seen as an indication of the greater status and maturity of the field of OAL generally, and EOE as an organisation specifically.

Following the Introduction, written by one of the editors (Becker), the book has three sections: Section 1: 'Sociopolitical and environmental contexts'; Section 2: 'Structures and agencies'; and Section 3: 'National perspectives'. Each section is provided with an introductory commentary piece (effectively a short chapter) by one of the three remaining editors (Humberstone, Schirp, and Loynes respectively). Section 1, in particular, foregrounds more recent progressive developments in OAL in terms of a broader sociopolitical and post-Enlightenment critique of 'outdoor culture' (Chapter 1); greater gender awareness and an emphasis on women's contribution to the field (Chapters 3 and 4); and environmentally responsible practices and advocacy (Chapter 5). Section 2 focuses attention on various contextualised 'pedagogical fields of action', namely Early Childhood Education (ECE: Chapter 6), outdoor centres (Chapter 7, with UK providing an exemplar context), and Higher Education (Chapter 8, recounting the creation of an international Masters Programme). Chapter 9 discusses an increasingly pertinent issue to the field, namely the balance between 'danger', 'safety', 'risk' and 'benefit'. The section closes (Chapter 10) with an analysis of thematic trends in the

Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning (JAEOL), an international journal which is produced by the UK-based Institute of Outdoor Learning (IOL), which is closely affiliated with EOE.

Section 3 provides a series of chapters on specific national contexts, namely Sweden (Chapter 11), UK (12), Ireland (13), Slovenia (14), Finland (15), and the Czech Republic (16). As implied by the title, the focus of the book is on Europe. However, by its own acknowledgement, and as the list above indicates, it is not wholly representative of the continent. There is a dearth of contributions from 'Southern Europe' which, according to Chapter 1, reflects a broader, 'north-south' sociopolitical divide discernible across the continent. However, I feel it is also partly accounted for by EOE being the driver, and therefore contributions are necessarily drawn predominantly from those active in the network, and reflects their perspectives and preferences. EOE is predominantly 'northern' European in character, and it is safe to say that the network's *lingua franca* is English, which might represent further barriers to inclusiveness (whilst some chapters have benefitted from a translator, most authors appear to have written in English). It is perhaps also pertinent to note that the four editors contribute between them to seven of the eighteen chapters, again perhaps restricting the range of 'voices' appearing across the publication. A welcome strategy to broaden this aspect was to invite a non-European, namely Canadian, commentary and perspective (Chapter 17) to provide a comparison or counterpoint to the European experience.

Despite these qualifications, the book presents a diversity of perspectives and themes, with twenty-four authors contributing across eighteen chapters. As might be expected, this has also resulted in a range of presentation styles. Generally, chapters are structured in an easy to follow format typical of anthologies such as this, with subheadings helping the reader negotiate the text. Some chapters are also judiciously accompanied by boxes, tables, figures and footnotes. An anomalous style is found in the contributions by Becker, one of the four editors. In the introduction to the whole book and Chapter 1, the author adopts a structure more typical of philosophical writing using Roman numerals instead of subheadings. These chapters might prove harder to negotiate than other chapters, but the reader is rewarded with a rich, deep and stimulating discussion. Becker also contributes to the final chapter or 'endpiece' (Chapter 18) which, again, is anomalous in being presented in the form of a verbatim email exchange between himself and his co-author who was unable to contribute otherwise through ill health. Its inclusion is warranted and welcome given the discussion that follows from two seminal contributors to EOE. However, it does jar somewhat with preceding chapters.

Almost without exception, I found the chapters to provide an informative treatment of OAL, although I felt that Schirp's chapter on youth policy was more implicit than explicit in its relevance to the field. I also found Chapter 15 a little challenging to negotiate, a reflection perhaps of the writing not being in the mother tongue. However, I still learned much of value on the Finnish context. Somewhat pedantically, I also noted an erroneous non-alphabetical placing of a reference in the list for Chapter 4 which one might have hoped would be avoided by a publisher of this repute. Notwithstanding these minor criticisms and potential shortcomings, this is a broadly accessible, comprehensive and timely anthology which represents a very valuable contribution to an increasingly important field of educational practice and research. Whilst the book has an avowedly regional focus on Europe, it has international, indeed

global, relevance given the international literature drawn on, and the attention given to a wide range of themes germane to the field and broader societal developments in the contemporary, increasingly interconnected world.

Reference

Becker, P., and J. Schirp, Eds. 2008. *Other Ways of Learning*. Marburg: [bsj Marburg](#).

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