John Dewey and Education Outdoors

Making Sense of the ‘Educational Situation’ through more than a Century of Progressive Reforms

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In this book we take the reader on a journey through the various curriculum reforms that have emerged in the USA around the idea of conducting education outdoors – through initiatives such as nature-study, camping education, adventure education, environmental education, experiential education and place based education. This is a historical journey with an underlying message for educators, one we are able to illuminate through the educational theories of John Dewey. Central to this message is a deeper understanding of human experience as both aesthetic and reflective, leading to a more coherent comprehension of not just outdoor education, but of education itself.

Whether we knew it or not, all of us interested in the field of education have been waiting for this book. John Dewey and Education Outdoors is the tool we need to help understand and explain experiential education in general and outdoor education in particular. This is an expertly researched and written account of how and why outdoor education has developed, and been such a vital feature in exemplary educational practices. Because of this work I will no longer have to stumble through some inadequate explanation of the history and philosophy of outdoor education, I can now simply point to this book and suggest that everyone read it.

—Dr. Dan Garvey, President Emeritus, Prescott College, Former President and Executive Director, Association for Experiential Education.

John Dewey and Education Outdoors is a well-researched book that explores the tenets of Dewey within the contexts of progressive reforms in education. The authors provide detailed explanations of Dewey’s thoughts on education while exploring the historical intersections with outdoor education, camping, and environmental education. While situated within a historical perspective, this book provides insights relevant for today’s discussions on new educational reform possibilities, learning focused on the whole child that includes out-of-school time experiences such as camp, and the development of 21st century skills needed to navigate our global society.

—Dr. Deb Bialeschki, Director of Research, American Camp Association.
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Collaborating on a book from different sides of the world has not been a simple undertaking, yet both of us have enjoyed immensely the intellectual stimulation and the challenge of working through our differing perspectives that have been features of such a process. The end product fulfils the old cliché of being much more than a sum of the parts.

We initially planned to get together in a physical sense to do much of the thinking and discussing necessary for such a project; however, while these plans did not eventuate we were able to use many of the advancements in communication technology available to us to forge a successful writing relationship. In Dewey’s day such an undertaking would perhaps have been much more daunting or at least more time consuming, but today we feel part of the mainstream of online communication.

A book written in this way requires the support of family, and both of us would like to warmly acknowledge the understanding of our wives and children who had to deal with the numerous face-to-face online meetings conducted at odd times – usually at early hours of the morning or in the evening – in order to overcome the time differences between our physical locations. These times of the day are busy family times when children are involved and there was always a lot going on in the background during our conversations.

We would also like to acknowledge the many, many people whose lives have been entwined with the histories that we unfold through this book. It was never our intention to provide an exhaustive account of all the many important twists and turns that make up such histories, so numerous important persons will not have been mentioned directly in our specific argument. This argument, supported by our interpretations of Dewey’s work, is illuminated by particular historical developments in outdoor education, which necessarily have required some selection. Other developments may have been just as important, but escaped our gaze.

Finally, we would like to thank those who helped us in our search for the photographs that adorn the text, particularly Cliff Knapp, who shared photos from the era of school camping, Jim Garrett, who provided photos from early Outward Bound days, Arlene Ustin, who sourced archival photos of Kurt Hahn, and Deb Bialeschki, who facilitated access to early summer camp photos. These images put faces to some of the names and add insight to some of the initiatives that many of us have heard mentioned when reading and talking about outdoor education in its many guises.
FOREWORD

Be prepared to do some deep and reflective thinking as you read this book. You are about to probe a topic that is close to my heart. I have spent more than 50 years teaching people of all ages about the importance of learning outside the four walls of the classroom and school. Of course, I have taught inside classrooms and schools too, but my focus has been to investigate the knowledge gained by extending education into the community and beyond. The authors of this book have done their homework and written about a field of study labeled ‘outdoor education’ and how different people, including the philosopher/educator John Dewey, have interpreted the meaning of that and related terms. They hope to give you a better understanding of how learning outside classrooms has changed over the years and what may lie ahead in the future. Fortunately, I have met many of the people quoted in this book, so I had a nostalgic journey throughout the pages.

You may be thinking that there is nothing new or surprising about this kind of teaching, and that you’ve known it as an excursion or field trip away from the school. If you were lucky, your teacher took you outside the classroom in elementary, middle or high school, and even in college, and when you think back over these experiences, you may still remember some of what you learned when you left the classroom. This is because these activities are designed to reinforce concepts, skills, and values through direct experiences in local contexts and to actively engage students so that they are motivated to learn and retain what is required in the curriculum. In order to communicate this way of reforming education to others, educators decided to describe it by placing the adjective, ‘outdoor’ (meaning outside the classroom) as a prefix to the word ‘education.’ As time passed, different words have been used to describe the ‘how’ and ‘what’ of this type of school reform: nature education, camping education, conservation education, environmental education, adventure education, experiential education, earth education, bioregional education, ecological education, place-based education, and more. I have compiled an ever-expanding list of terms, currently at 78, that have been used to label these fields of study designed to reform education by expanding the concept of ‘classroom.’

As you will read, schools were not the only institutions to initiate programs of learning in the local or surrounding areas. Recreational facilities such as parks and nature centers joined the movement into the outdoors. Scouting, YMCAs, 4-H, and other service groups and hospital therapeutic programs sometimes took advantage of special environments to promote their goals. Also, Outward Bound, National Outdoor Leadership Schools, and wilderness educators started programs of outdoor adventure using canoes, kayaks, and backpacks. Because diverse groups with various
goals and objectives adopted the term, ‘outdoor education’, confusion sometimes arose about what the term meant.

On October 15, 1859 Henry David Thoreau, a leading spokesperson for nature education in America, wrote in one of his journals:

We boast of our system of education, but why stop at schoolmasters and schoolhouses? We are all schoolmasters, and our schoolhouse is the universe.
To attend chiefly to the desk or schoolhouse while we neglect the scenery in which it is placed is absurd. (Thoreau, 2001, p. 500)

John Dewey, renowned as a leader in the Progressive Education Movement in the United States and abroad, also promoted the idea of outdoor education in a film produced by the March of Time in 1937. The film, Youth in Camps: Life’s Summer Camps, showed how L. B. Sharp wanted to reform camping education. Dewey (as cited in Sharp & Osborne, 1940, p. 236) said:

The average American child seldom comes in direct contact with nature.
In school he learns a few dates from books, to press a button, to step on an accelerator; but he is in danger of losing contact with primitive realities – with the world, with the space about us, with fields, with rivers, with the problems of getting shelter and of obtaining food that have always conditioned life and that still do.

He also wrote:

The teacher should become intimately acquainted with the conditions of the local community, physical, historical, economic, occupational, etc., in order to utilize them as educational resources. (Dewey, 1938, p. 40)

The fact that early educators taught lessons mostly confined to inside classrooms, prompted a growing interest in opening the school door and going outside to learn some of the required subject matter when it made pedagogical sense. Thoreau’s and Dewey’s directives were not always followed in the ensuing years and therefore outdoor education, in its varied forms, was introduced into the curriculum under different labels. The criticism that many educators today limit their teaching to the indoor classroom prompts repeated attempts at school reform. Some contemporary educators believe that youth are alienated and separated from many essential outdoor experiences and that they need outdoor education more today than ever.

Perhaps the time will soon arrive when educators will drop the many prefixes, (such as outdoor, environmental, nature, adventure, and experiential), to describe the type of education they think is important for youth. Maybe the only prefixes that will be used will be ‘good’ or ‘effective’ and we can close the book on confusing meanings of other educational terms. I wonder if I’m too much of a dreamer and idealist to ever see that come about? Now you are ready to delve into the story of
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how John Dewey and other educators influenced the idea of learning in the broader classroom known as the community and surrounding open spaces.

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CHAPTER 1

WHY BE CONCERNED WITH OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

Although garnering attention most recently due to the identification of “nature deficit disorder” in the early 21st century (Louv, 2008; see also Cooper, 2005), concern for children’s contact with nature has actually influenced education for many years. In response to these concerns, various forms of so-called ‘outdoor education’ have appeared throughout the 20th century. Looking back, one can now see that outdoor education functions like other reform monikers – as a seemingly simple label that actually carries a range of meanings, and is often mobilized by different reformers to achieve different purposes. Some may view unpacking these meanings as a mere semantic exercise, but, in the world of educational reform, labels and their meanings are more than that: in practice they represent a range of educational values and priorities that sometimes overlap but can also contradict one another. Practitioners and scholars alike should therefore be alert to seemingly consensual terms that mask cultural conflicts and historical changes, as outdoor education has done for over a century now. We believe that scrutinizing how the term outdoor education has operated over time is more than an exercise in semantics; it can help uncover some of the deepest and most longstanding problems with education itself.

On its face, the term outdoor education doesn’t sound any alarms – what could be more natural than children learning in the outdoors? As we will show, however, fierce controversies have arisen over the term – including the significance of hyphens as with the term nature-study! The first decade of the 21st century has seen a resurgence in calls for more contact with the outdoors both in and out of schools, some even reaching crisis proportions (Mueller, 2009). But these calls echo prior movements and can benefit from a critical look at what the term outdoor education has meant throughout the past century.

Given the variations in meaning over time, such a look will require attending to what John Dewey (1931, p. 1) called “educational confusion.” Outdoor education has a history as long as institutionalized schooling itself and it therefore provides a compelling case study of how reform movements typically follow cycles as they introduce exciting new practices but ultimately tend to succumb to the forces they were meant to overthrow. To be clear, we are not suggesting that reformers themselves were confused in the sense of being disoriented and vague about what they were trying to accomplish. Indeed, as we will show, like Dewey’s contemporaries they often argued very forcefully and precisely about what outdoor education ought to involve.
If we do not intend confusion to mean the mental state of specific reformers and their allies, how do we mean it? We use it throughout the book as Dewey himself did: as a way to characterize the contradictions and paradoxes that recur within the seemingly never-ending debates about proper educational priorities and approaches—including the desire to get children outdoors more regularly. A main issue that preoccupied Dewey over many years, and the one we take up in this book, is the persistent dichotomy between method and subject matter, or as Dewey famously put it, child and curriculum. So, while specific outdoor education reformers were often very clear about their own meanings and the programs they wanted to see implemented, one can see in retrospect that the larger debates in which they were embroiled bear the tell-tale marks of this dichotomy. Through a Deweyan lens, one can read these recurring debates as an indication of a more pervasive confusion about what education fundamentally is. As Dewey wrote in 1900, already the tendency was to emphasize technical details and lose sight of the broader societal function of education—to miss the forest because one is focusing on the trees, so to speak:

Whenever we have in mind the discussion of a new movement in education, it is especially necessary to take the broader, or social view. Otherwise, changes in the school institution and tradition will be looked at as the arbitrary inventions of particular teachers; at the worst transitory fads, and at the best merely improvements in certain details. (Dewey, 1900, p. 20)

Although it was not his intent, we believe Dewey does a fair job here of forecasting the next century of outdoor education reforms (among many others—see Kliebard, 2004 for an excellent overview of the history of school reform). Rather than fundamentally changing education, reforms can get caught in dichotomous ways of thinking that wind up reproducing the dominant structures of institutionalized schooling that marginalize important initiatives like outdoor education. In other words, because the larger educational conversation is itself confused, reforms such as outdoor education that engage on its terms often contain the seeds of their own undoing right from the start.

Although its advocates might like to believe that outdoor education is somehow special, its history evidences what educational historians David Tyack and Larry Cuban have called “tinkering toward utopia” (1995)—their name for the process by which innovative and sweeping reforms become absorbed by schools, improving conditions for specific children for a time but ultimately changing the overall shape of the institution ever so slightly if at all. But we do believe outdoor education is somewhat unique in its history of tinkering and therefore deserves special attention. Because it has always straddled the boundary between classroom-based and out-of-school learning, it provides a compelling test case for closely examining and then moving past the educational confusion that bedevilled Dewey.

On the surface this is a book about outdoor education, an array of compelling progressive reforms whose history has yet to be satisfactorily written, its pioneers and trendsetters unrecognized side by side in one volume. Practitioners and scholars of outdoor education should therefore find this aspect of the book valuable.
WHY BE CONCERNED WITH OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

Beyond that though, the deeper purpose of the book is to provide a framework for thinking about curriculum theory that does not reproduce the problems inherent in prevailing ways of thinking – in which the method/subject matter dichotomy usually, but often subtly, dominates.

To tack back and forth between the specifics of outdoor education and this broader theoretical concern, we use three devices that we want to make obvious to readers at the outset: (1) providing a historical narrative of outdoor education in the USA, in which we profile prominent reformers and the programs/ideas they represented; (2) tracking explicitly how this history has operated in a series of cycles in which similar issues and themes arise; and (3) invoking John Dewey throughout and especially at the end, where we elaborate on his theories where the “social view” (1900, p. 20) is made central to education. A brief word on each of these will help orient readers to the rest of the book.

The unfolding story of outdoor education from early beginnings in the 1800s provides the core of the book which journeys from its initial form in what came to be called nature-study, to a present which embraces what Clifford Knapp described in 1997 as “a list of more than 50 terms that fit under the umbrella describing our field” (p. 4).

When I began my career, we used only a handful of terms: outdoor education, school camping, conservation education, nature study, nature recreation, and outdoor recreation, to mention a few. Now we have added many more including: earth education, ecological education, energy education, expeditionary learning, environmental and environment education, adventure and challenge education, outdoor ethics education, bioregional education, science-technology-society education, global environmental change education, and sustainable development education. Just look in any professional conference program for some of these terms and for the variety of activities offered. (Knapp, 1997, p. 4)

How can one term refer to so many values and programs? Wouldn’t they sometimes come into conflict with each other, while in other cases echoing one another? The answer is yes, and these echoes and conflicts provide telling insights into the ways school reforms reflect broader cultural priorities. But what is also revealing is the way in which these specific reforms have interacted and supplanted one another over time, a pattern that is only discernable once one moves beyond the seemingly homogeneous term ‘outdoor education.’

Our historical narrative will therefore reveal that the process of introducing new forms of outdoor education has occurred in a cyclical fashion. This is the second structural feature of the book we want to point out to readers. The cycle we identify is one of ongoing curricular reform, where anxiety among teachers, itself driven by children’s dissatisfaction in schools, leads to the introduction of educational initiatives that could be described as student-centered. This, for instance, is how nature-study initially developed (in tandem with nostalgic concerns over a declining...
agricultural economy). The cycle works roughly like this: initiatives like nature-study become gradually more popular among teachers and students as word spreads of their seeming ability to capture students’ attention because of their emphasis on the child. But rather than remaining satisfied with student centeredness, ultimately some people start to voice concerns about the role of subject matter in these new initiatives. When this happens, subject matter or curriculum content can become the focus, gradually shifting the character of the original initiative and rendering it open to becoming a ‘regular’ school subject. In this vein, nature-study – as one example – very easily morphed into school science, and then even more specialized subjects such as botany.

Once the outdoors can be studied indoors in the form of science, children start to spend more time in classrooms and again become disenchanted with school. This creates a need for new educational initiatives to fill the void that has been reopened. Yet another ‘new’ student-centered initiative gradually takes shape, usually with a new name. As this nascent initiative gains significant traction, it slowly but surely falls victim to the same forces; the cycle starts again. And the invariable result is that outdoor programs, rather than being coherently and systematically incorporated into education, become isolated and jostle for position in an already ‘crowded curriculum.’ This trend was already being recognized as widespread by reformers in the late 1800s (e.g., Dewey, 1896; Rice, 1888; Strong, 1889), well before outdoor education had proliferated in the way Cliff Knapp describes.

When one becomes aware of this cyclical movement, unfolding over extended periods of time and usually resulting in ‘crowding’ rather than fundamental reform, it begs the question: ‘Why does this keep happening?’ To try and answer this question we developed what is the third important structural feature of this book: an analysis based on the educational philosophy of John Dewey. Here Dewey’s awareness of educational confusion – and, more importantly, his admittedly complicated attempts to end it – guide us in presenting a case for understanding why this cycle exists, and also how we might move beyond it by reimagining the relationships between core concepts. And although we focus on outdoor education per se, we believe Dewey’s lessons apply to education more generally.
JUST WHAT IS OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

A CONFUSED EDUCATIONAL SITUATION

In the USA, the specific term outdoor education began to be used as early as the first decade of the 1900s (Curtis, 1909). At this time outdoor education simply meant a form of education that wasn’t indoor education. Reformers used the terms out-door, or out-of-doors: hyphenated terms communicating a sense of being active in settings other than classrooms. To be involved in out-door education one had to exit a literal door into the school yard, the school garden, the community past the school fence, and perhaps even the woods beyond.

The juxtaposition between education conducted in-doors and out-doors, indoor education and outdoor education, defined outdoor education early on, and it made sense – if one accepted the idea that the two distinct forms of education could, or should, be marked off from one another. School-based education was primarily conducted indoors, the literal door also marking a figurative boundary between two different worlds, one more real to young people because it connected directly with life beyond school, the other connected to their lives only remotely.

This was the educational situation that Dewey encountered at the turn of the 20th century, where ‘outdoor education’ for many children still involved learning through firsthand work in agricultural trades (see 1902a), and as reformers tried to implement programs that leveraged these familiar practices. He observed and wrote about this in his small text titled The Educational Situation. Such a distinction, then characterized by indoor and outdoor education, indicated to Dewey a broader and more deeply conflicted and confused educational situation. But rather than seeing the conflicts between these two forms of education as indicative of two truly different ‘educations’ – as his contemporaries argued – he described their interplay as a historical condition of the “the wave by which a new study is introduced into the curriculum” (p. 14). This was a time when school was overtaking traditional community activities as the main site for children’s learning on a mass scale, and when new initiatives, some of which would eventually be labelled outdoor education, were entering schools as part of an enthusiastic wave of reforms:

Someone feels that the school system of his town is falling behind the times. There are rumors of great progress in education making elsewhere. Something new and important has been introduced; education is being revolutionized by it; the school superintendent, or members of the board of education, become somewhat uneasy; the matter is taken up by individuals and clubs; pressure is brought to bear on the managers of the school system; letters are written to the newspapers; the editor himself is appealed to to use his great power to advance
the cause of progress; editorials appear; finally the school board ordains that on and after a certain date the particular new branch – be it nature study, industrial drawing, cooking, manual training, or whatever – shall be taught in the public schools. The victory is won, and everybody – unless it be some already overburdened and distracted teacher – congratulates everybody else that such advanced steps are being taken. (Dewey, 1902a, pp. 14–15)

But this was never the end of the story, for “the next year, or possibly the next month, there comes an outcry that children do not write or spell or figure as well as they used to” (Dewey, 1902a, p. 15). And more than this, “that they cannot do the necessary work in the upper grades, or in the high school, because of the lack of ready command of the necessary tools of study” (p. 15).

We are told that they are not prepared for business, because their spelling is so poor, their work in addition and multiplication so slow and inaccurate, their handwriting so fearfully and wonderfully made. Some zealous soul on the school board takes up this matter; the newspapers are again heard from; investigations are set on foot; and the edict goes forth that there must be more drill in the fundamentals of writing, spelling, and number. (Dewey, 1902a, p. 15)

While Dewey’s simplified tale is more than a century old, his message about confusion – in which ‘traditional’ and ‘progressive’ reformers push and pull, and programs wax and wane – still rings true today. Then, Dewey (1902a, p. 20) attempted to cut through the confusion by asking a provocative question: “Why do the newer studies, drawing, music, nature study, manual training; and the older studies, the three R’s, practically conflict with, instead of reinforcing, one another?” Dewey deliberately represented the conflict in education as chiefly involving two sides, calling them “sects” or “schools of opinion” (1902b, p. 4). “One school fixes its attention upon the importance of the subject matter of the curriculum as compared with the contents of the child’s own experience” (p. 7). While for “the other sect … the child is the starting point, the center and the end” (p. 9). Therefore the child’s development and growth “is the ideal. It alone furnishes the standard. To the growth of the child all studies are subservient; they are instruments valued as the serve the needs of growth” (p. 9). In shorthand Dewey described this as “the case of the child vs. the curriculum” (p. 5).

Expressed in another way, this is the confusion in education between method and subject matter, where “method is ultimately reducible to the question of the order of development of the child’s powers and interests” (1897a, p. 79); and “curriculum” is the “subject-matter of instruction” (1897b, p. 356). In Dewey’s analysis, which he elaborated throughout his decades-long career, most of the educational confusion he observed stemmed from this persistent dualism, which most reformers neglected to question and therefore tacitly maintained.

Importantly, Dewey did not limit his analysis to schooling; he was, after all, a philosopher chiefly interested in education as a historical and cultural force and not as a technical matter of getting children to internalize a greater volume of content,
or learn it more effectively. He argued that the method/subject matter distinction could be traced to how people described the most basic aspects of human existence. He maintained that “reflection upon experience gives rise to a distinction of what we experience (the experienced) and the experiencing – the how” (1916, p. 196). And “when we give names to this distinction we have subject matter and method as our terms” (p. 196). In other words, assuming an actual distinction between subject matter and method was a philosophical mistake stemming from a misunderstanding about lived experience and its relation to reflective thinking.

This mistake influenced how most people thought about education and it shaped reform debates of Dewey’s day. Too often, educational reformers based their conceptions and thus their initiatives on this mistake and not the basic existential condition within experience – that subject matter and method are unified, or, in Dewey’s language, they are “continuous” (1916a, p. 196; see also 1938). Throughout his career Dewey was vexed by this mistake, which he referred to as a false conflict between new and old, progress and tradition, method and subject matter, how and what, and child and curriculum. Figure two illustrates the usual way of conceiving of ‘sides’ of this debate as it is played out in education.

This division also points into the heart of how outdoor education has evolved over the century since Dewey first discussed it, and is evident today in terms such as student-centered vs. teacher-centered, process vs. content, pedagogy vs. curriculum, constructivist vs. didactic teaching, and emergent vs. standardized curricula. The persistence of these debates or even the occasional victory of one side over the other suggest that reformers have not significantly moved past the confusion Dewey wrote about as early as the 1890s, failing to develop a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of education.

Our central argument in this book is that the persistent conflicts (what we will henceforth call confusion, as Dewey meant it) created by struggles over this
CHAPTER 2

![Diagram illustrating Dewey's distinction between progressive and traditional education](image)

**Figure 2. The two sides Dewey saw involved in educational conflict, confusion and compromise.**

differentiation between method and subject matter, can be seen in the evolution of outdoor education in the USA, where advocates have vacillated between questions such as ‘Is it a unique method?’ or ‘Is it a distinctive content area?’ Debates over these questions have raged for a century. In a Deweyan sense outdoor education suffers from the same confusion as other reforms; it will likely remain so until advocates move beyond the dualism Dewey tried so hard to abolish.

FROM OUT-OF-DOORS TO ENVIRONMENT TO PLACE

When outdoor education first emerged as an educational term and movement in the early 1900s, its contribution was primarily on the child side of Dewey’s distinction, as a new method that better tapped into children’s natural interests and enabling traditional areas of subject matter to be encountered in more engaging ways. Predecessors to this version of outdoor education included nature-study, school gardens, and agricultural education. Camping also came to be considered outdoor education, leading to the spread of school camping in the mid-20th century. But in all of these new offerings the main emphasis remained on method – getting outside enabled a different way of teaching; this was the point. No major claims were made about curriculum, thus there was no apparent confusion. The educational situation of which Dewey wrote had not yet become a significant issue for most outdoor educators, who were mainly concerned with offering an alternative to staid, classroom instruction. Thus the distinction was often portrayed as a positive one by progressive educators who highlighted the problems with indoor education and schooling in general.

Various questions were, however, raised about the role of subject matter even in the earliest forms of outdoor education, starting with nature-study. The result was a continual process of adding new educational offerings that prioritized method, many of which then made a steady migration to the other side of the equation because they introduced new possibilities for subject matter – which of course had to find
a place amidst already existing topics. This contributed to the growing problem of the “crowded curriculum” (Dewey, 1896, p. 9), a problem that most readers will recognize within schools today.

The first historical details of this spiral-like process are outlined in chapter two, which runs from the early 1830s with nature-study (although at this time the actual term nature-study had not yet appeared) to the 1960s. But of course the reform cycle is observable up to the present. In chapter three we cover the 1960s to the 2000s. It is at the junction of these two chapters, however, in the 1960s, that confusion about the meaning of the term outdoor education really begins to compound. Prior to this time, agreeing upon a definition for outdoor education amongst those involved was not particularly pressing, although attempts were definitely made. But as more scholarly articles and books began to appear and as other reforms competed for prized space in the curriculum, the need to claim a definitive answer to the question ‘What is outdoor education?’ became more urgent.

The 1960s was therefore something of a watershed decade for outdoor education as its varieties proliferated. Growing concern for the health of the environment began to influence public discourse and outdoor education was not immune to these forces. In fact, outdoor education was seen by many as an ideal educational response to environmental issues. The heightened focus on the environment brought with it a subtle but powerful shift in understandings of the term outdoor as applied in outdoor education. From its beginnings as a new method of education that advocated for being out-of-doors as opposed to indoors, outdoor education was developing into an area of education concerned mainly with the environment (primarily the natural environment), and this concern heightened the focus on subject matter in addition to the existing emphasis on method.

With the cultural focus on the environment gaining momentum through the 1960s (leading, for example, to the first Earth Day in 1970), talk turned to conservation education and environmental education. Outdoor education emerged as a prominent and possibly overarching label among the array of educational responses to the environmental crisis. The increasing meaning for the outdoors as environment raised the possibility that knowledge about the environment could be the main subject matter for outdoor education, which meant it could finally be recognized as distinct and legitimate. Some, including Phyllis Ford (1981), argued that this academic domain should be called outdoor/environmental education. None of this debate, however, was new; just as nature-study had steadily become botany and other specialized sciences, outdoor education was becoming a subject area focused on ecological understandings.

Thus the reform wave Dewey wrote about had an ebb as well as a flow. Yet again, a new progressive initiative that was introduced as a way to appeal to young people’s interests became transformed into traditional disciplines as subject matter was distilled and codified as important knowledge about nature. This pattern is most evident with nature-study and again with environmental education in the 1960s. But while all this was occurring, others began to focus again on outdoor education as method.
Hence we also see in the 1960s a delineation from environmental and conservation education the new terms *experiential education* and *adventure education*, which – as we will show – were, in Dewey’s terms, chiefly directed toward the child. Thus the question ‘What is outdoor education?’ became even more confused in the 1960s, starting yet another cycle and representing, but not reconciling, both sides of the method/subject matter dichotomy.

Adventure educator Simon Priest (1986) attempted to quell the confusion among these various areas by positioning outdoor education as an umbrella term (as it had been originally), but this time proposing two branches: environmental education and adventure education. These then split into four possible areas of relationship: ecosystemic (environment), ekistic (people-environment), interpersonal (people-people), intrapersonal (self). Environmental education, Priest argued, was primarily concerned with ecosystemic and ekistic relationships; adventure education dealt more with interpersonal and intrapersonal relationships.

Although it was an orderly and useful attempt, Priest’s framework did not end the confusion. It instead cemented method and subject matter as distinct categories. Priest’s concept of relation was intended to be the connecting link, but the different forms of relation were now cast as different forms of education: environmental education focused more on relations between person and subject matter (i.e., knowledge of and attitudes toward nature), and adventure education focused on interpersonal relations, without specification of any crucial subject matter or curricular sequence. There appeared to be some hope that environmental education would more explicitly embrace experiential – i.e., constructivist, learner-centered – methods, however, because of the necessary commitment to subject matter, the methods often embraced within environmental education involved field work that recapitulated existing scientific ideas, such as testing a fact or theory, as would a science experiment in a classroom or laboratory.

An emerging conceptual and practical way forward beyond this confusion between method and subject matter in outdoor education has gained popularity since Priest’s proposal: place-based education. Author David Gruenewald (2005) claims that place-based education is not simply a method, that it also contains subject matter concerning the notion of place itself, which should be interpreted broadly. Gruenewald, however, is also very aware that place-based education has yet to be widely incorporated into more traditional forms of education, suggesting it is at the start of the method/subject matter cycle, and could experience the ebb towards institutionalization as subject matter curriculum. Will it escape the seemingly inevitable confusion? Time will tell, and the analysis we present throughout this book should provide a useful tool for making such forecasts and imagining ways forward.

**SUMMARY**

In this chapter, we have argued that outdoor education can be characterized as ‘confused’ in the sense that Dewey used this word, meaning it has vacillated between
JUST WHAT IS OUTDOOR EDUCATION?

the two poles of method and subject matter, occasionally trying to overcome, but ultimately reproducing this dualism. The persistence of this confusion results in predictable reform cycles, sometimes starting out as new methods for engaging children but eventually being asked to specify and serve subject matter goals as they expand and become institutionalized – a phenomenon which usually distorts the original methods. This is not the fault of ill-intended or incompetent reformers, but rather, in our Deweyan view, a dynamic that stems from the pervasiveness of educational confusion more generally. This further indicates that outdoor education, no matter how far away from the classroom it gets, is subject to the powerful forces that shape school reforms – dynamics that Dewey spent his career trying to change.

If this situation has been around for many decades, are reformers simply resigning themselves to its continuation as they strive to create new forms of outdoor education in the 21st century? For much of his life Dewey was intent on overcoming this confusion. He even presented a lecture at Harvard University entitled *The Way Out of Educational Confusion* (Dewey, 1931), which, despite its pointed title, unfortunately did not settle the issue in the broader education landscape. Nonetheless, we believe that the core of Dewey’s pedagogical argument, which has not seriously been considered in the outdoor education literature, offers a potential way through the confusion.

In the remainder of the book, we carry on with Dewey’s project and use outdoor education as a kind of case example of (a) how persistent educational confusion is evident in reforms that attempt to overcome it, and (b) a compelling arena where an alternative and non-dualistic – or if you like, a ‘non-confused’ – pathway forward can be imagined. In the next two chapters, we provide a more substantial outline of the history of outdoor education reforms, supporting our assertion that confusion reigns. In chapter five we propose a way of understanding Dewey’s philosophical work in light of this problem. Much of this revolves around his concept of experience (which, significantly, he later redefined to mean *culture*) and particularly his sense of “education through occupations” (1916a, p. 361). We outline these concepts in considerable detail in chapter six after discussing Dewey’s radical philosophical solution to the recurring method/subject matter problem.

NOTES

1 As was standard practice in the period during which Dewey was writing, the use of the pronoun ‘he’ was accepted as referring to all people. We therefore retain the masculine pronoun in Dewey’s original text, while in our own we also variously use ‘she.’