

# EVALUATING VCE OUTDOOR EDUCATION: A PARTIAL RESPONSE TO ROBBO BENNETTS

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In *Journeys* (Volume 6, Number 1), Terry Gunn editorialised that Robbo Bennetts' 'What went wrong with VCE Outdoor Education?' should be expressed, is controversial and needs to be considered by all. As the primary developer and Principal Writer (0.3 EFT, 6/87-12/88) of the original VCE Human Development/Outdoor Education Study Design (VCAB, 1990, 1991), my response to Gunn's invitation is partial given the constraints of space and the subjective nature of Bennetts' wide ranging criticisms.

## A Challenge for the Curriculum Historian

A thorough diagnosis and evaluation of VCE Outdoor Education would investigate a wide variety of interrelated issues. These include,

- The variety of policy statements and reports that informed a major educational reform such as the VCE and how they 'trickled down' into the formulation and organization of fields of study like 'Human Development'.
- The peculiar ways in which the flexible notion of Human Development was reinterpreted according to the historical and contemporary interests of Outdoor Education, Physical Education, Health Education and Home Economics.
- The social, political, economic and environmental 'climate' of the time in which the VCE educational reform occurred.
- The historical 'hold' on educational reform and curriculum innovation by

'traditional' understandings and practices, including the politics of key stakeholders.

- The processes of curriculum development and state-wide 'community' consultation and negotiation with various stakeholder organizations and informants.
- The processes of curriculum implementation, including procedures, professional development opportunities and resource availability.
- The processes of curriculum enactment, including the availability and adequacy of curriculum development support materials (CDSM), school-based organization and priorities, resourcing, legal issues and various timetable, personnel and financial constraints, and imposition of assessment regimes.
- School, student and teacher uptake and outcomes of the Design, according to various circumstantial and contextual demands.
- The broader consequences of VCE Outdoor Education for other curriculum developments such as the CSF and for organizations like the VEOA. In other words, the 'place' of Outdoor Education in the socio-ecological fabric of Victoria's educational culture.

A tall order, indeed, but a comprehensive evaluation of the 'old' VCE Outdoor Education is urgently required. Why? Outdoor Education needs a written history, the curriculum innovation is worth evaluating in its own right and any evaluation of the 'old' will provide an appropriate benchmark and highly relevant

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insights into the planning (too late!), implementation (probably too late!), content (problematic), processes (problematic) and evaluation of the 'new' version of 'Outdoor Education and Environmental Studies'. In all, there is a need for Outdoor Education to critically and reflectively monitor itself as an educational practice and discourse; to track its evolution, myths, achievements, problems, outcomes and consequences; and to archive such memories for future reference.

### Institutionalisation and Legitimation Issues

The astute curriculum historian of VCE Outdoor Education will learn that had any earlier formulations of Outdoor Education not been 'open' to revision, or capable of it, within the flexible notion of Human Development, in all probability it would not have survived as a formal component of that curriculum reform. Outdoor Education would have been dispatched yet again to the weekend, as an extra for staff and students, confined largely to private schools and practiced as adventure and/or camping activities, perhaps within Physical Education, if at all. Moreover, it is difficult to envision how these very limited 'alternative', 'distinctive' or 'natural' practices might have survived the 90s Kennett revolution in education. The thousands of students and hundreds of teachers Bennetts acknowledges as having benefited from VCE Outdoor Education would, in all probability, have been denied access.

With these conditional 'facts' about the survival and ongoing viability of Outdoor Education in the post-compulsory years of schooling squarely in mind, Bennetts' conclusion that Outdoor Education was compromised by its inclusion in the VCE 'itself' is troubling. So too is his equating the enhanced 'access' of students and teachers with the pejorative use of the 'mantra of access and success (sic)'. Success was never guaranteed. It is only through the practice of this mantra about enhancing 'access' (for students, teachers and schools) that Outdoor Education

enjoyed a much higher educational and public profile in the 90s. Despite all the policy considerations relevant to the first bullet point, where would Bennetts stand, for example, on the unofficial 'policy' imperative delivered verbally to me in 1987 that '...the inner city Greek girl should be able to participate in VCE Outdoor Education'?

Beyond Bennetts' concern about the 'institutionalisation' of Outdoor Education, be it through the VCE, or because of universities, or through mediums he chose not to mention such as HSC Group 2 Outdoor Education, Camps Branch, VOA, BMLC, VBCE, CAV, OAG, TOE, outdoor education and camping journals/publications and, perhaps, most pervasively legal/safety considerations, the related issue of 'legitimation' warrants brief comment. Like the numerous historical forces contributing to the institutionalisation of Outdoor Education, the processes and consequences of 'legitimation' can also be considered in many different ways. I mention two only.

On one hand, the ongoing legitimacy (and credibility) of Outdoor Education in the curriculum as an *educational practice* is (somewhat) assured, even if the political and educational climate has changed yet again with the 'forced' marriage of Outdoor Education and Environmental Studies. Both of these 'identities' as 'legitimate' bodies of *curriculum knowledge and pedagogical practice* are clearly at risk, notwithstanding the significant 'greening' of the original VCE Outdoor Education Study Design whose *human development* (including growth, adventure, sociability) and *environmental* intentions were to be developed subjectively and perceptually (Unit 2), socially and politically (Unit 3) and historically/ecologically (Unit 4) through the nexus of socially just/equitable (Unit 1) outdoor experiences and classroom 'theory'. Astonishingly, a decade later there is some mention of 'Critical Outdoor Education'!! Put differently, this 'socially-critical' (Bennetts is

reasonably accurate there) but 'humanly developed' greening of VCE outdoor education avoided resort to 'disciplined' bodies of knowledge like Geography, Psychology, Biology and Environmental Science. This is not to say that the editing and reprinting of the originally published Design (VCAB, 1990 and 1991) and the consequential publication of CDSM's did not flag the disciplinary contribution to the educational processes and outcomes. In addition, practicing VCE teachers may have found that the use of established bodies of knowledge was appropriate to their pedagogical objectives, as interpreted from within the Design.

This latter exemplification of a socially-critical greening process of VCE Human Development/Outdoor Education introduces a second form of legitimation in educational discourses and practices—that of what knowledge counts, is appropriate or useful and is practically, ethically and politically viable, even if controversial. The Human Development/Outdoor Education Study Design, and others, marked a significant shift from prescriptive to descriptive curriculum documents. That Bennetts concludes 'practitioners were faced with the difficult task of carving something out of precious few words in the study design...became like a holy tablet requiring interpretation by high priests or priestesses' would have, I thought, been cause for celebration rather than criticism. While any curriculum reform has limits and constraints (and boosters and critics), a descriptive curriculum document (re)stores a degree of (government and bureaucratic) faith in the professional capacities, knowledge and interests of schools and teachers, as well as acknowledging the contextual circumstances in which the curriculum and pedagogical transaction occurs between teacher and student, and vice versa. Conversely, a prescriptive curriculum document (unethically and depoliticising) treats schools, teachers and students as technicians, a recipe, a mere instrument or receptacle.

So within the double dilemma of institutionalising and legitimising Outdoor Education, a flexible notion of Human Development, its reinterpretation within Outdoor Education and development via a more descriptive Study Design partially sanctioned a degree of teacher control and resistance while heightening a different sense of ethical and political reflexivity about (outdoor) educational purposes and practices. There is also a pedagogical case to argue (and evaluate) that the conceptualisation of VCE Human Development/Outdoor Education strongly anticipated and encouraged an educational praxis consistent with what is now referred to as 'social constructivism', but with the 'ecological' greening outlined earlier.

Undoubtedly, there will be critics of these institutionalisation and legitimation processes and outcomes of VCE Outdoor Education. Some outdoor educators at the time felt their flexibility was eroded and views about outdoor education devalued. Others felt it undermined some notion of 'experience' that very few could articulate. Others revelled in the challenge and saw it as a professional adventure, a risk worth taking and of benefit to students, teachers, the environments they used (and sometimes abused) and the field of Outdoor Education in general. At the time of formulating and writing the Study Design, I can safely recall that all of the curriculum writers in the Human Development FOSC were acutely aware of the numerous tensions between the then 'new' and the 'old'. These tensions recycle as the new now becomes the old.

If VCE Outdoor Education is to be pre-emptively evaluated for what went *wrong*, as seems to be the case with Bennetts' highly subjective 'evaluation', a simple question still needs to be asked beyond the comprehensive framework I have loosely described in the opening paragraphs of this response. What assumptions and interests, including educational objectives, does that evaluator bring to the conduct of his or her

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work? Bennetts' views are relatively clear. Perhaps they, too, should be evaluated. But let us be clear about a framework and the criteria upon which any evaluation might proceed. Let us also not fall into the 'people living in glasshouses shouldn't throw stones' trap that an increasing number of armchair deconstructionists in educational and curriculum 'theory' are guilty of.

There are numerous other issues Bennetts raises, some of which I can agree with such as the problematic administration of outdoor education by the Department/Ministry and in schools, and the arrogance, dogma, censorship, evangelism of some elements in the field. They, too, require investigation if our collective memories are to be well served.

More generally, however, a considerable amount of research has been generated on curriculum histories, policy, implementation, enactment and evaluation. The research findings consistently

point to the complexity of curriculum reform, that possibilities, problems and pitfalls can be expected. Any systematic evaluation of VCE Outdoor Education will not only endorse that complexity but also reveal various contradictions. Moreover, any evaluation of a specific curriculum area probably should be located in a judicious assessment of the bigger picture. For me, despite some major reservations I have about some of the claims and practices of Outdoor Education, the thousands of students and hundreds of teachers who have experienced and learned from VCE Outdoor Education is a formidable measure of success for a curriculum practice that bordered on forced extinction, at least in the VCE reform. Let's not be too precious! Nonetheless, having a vested interest in the outcomes of a major curriculum innovation in which I was involved nearly 15 years ago points yet again to that need for an 'objective', comprehensive and systematic evaluation.

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## PROGRAM ACCREDITATION IN AUSTRALIA 22nd May 2001.

*An open letter to the Outdoor Education Profession in Australia  
Alistair McArthur, Odyssey Consultants, Melbourne.*

*We need Program Accreditation in Australia. The community should be assured that an Outdoor Education Program meets agreed upon standards and guidelines (common practice) for our profession. Currently, the only arbiter of good practice (common practice/best practice) in this country is the Coroner's Court. We need to combine forces with other like-minded organisations and develop a national Program Accreditation scheme.*

### 1. WHAT IS PROGRAM ACCREDITATION?

"The Accreditation Process is a voluntary method of self-regulation for adventure education programs sponsored by [a national association]" Quote from Association for Experiential Education (AEE).

Program accreditation has been defined as

*"accrediting the programming practices of competent adventure programs". This concept was an outcome of years (1970's & 1980's) of debate and discussion around issues of safety, leadership and competence.*

Currently, in Australia we have accreditation programs for people and facilities. Now we need comprehensive accreditation for programs.