

## Section 3: Reflective Reports

# Introspective... in a field study centre

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### About the Author:

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It is difficult to launch into a new week, beginning with a programme planning meeting with the rest of the staff without some clear conviction that your operation is heading in the right philosophical direction. Arbury Park Outdoor School is S.A.'s largest field study centre and as such has an educational challenge and professional obligation to provide the best possible programmes in Environmental Education. But these sorts of centres often settle for teaching basic Ecology and never provide frameworks for developing the critical attitude and action components implicit in Environmental Education.

The only major research on field study centres conducted in Australia, was published by the Australian National Parks and Wildlife Service in 1980. The work was carried out by Joan Webb from Kuringai College of Advanced Education, and comprehensively reviewed the role of field study centres and recorded contemporary practice. Field centres have to determine their priorities as to whether they have programmes which provide a service to schools and teachers, or a service to students as the adults of the future, whether they act as a service to the total environment. Establishing these priorities quickly flushes out the classic pragmatism/principle dichotomy (previously the practice/philosophy choice of emphasis). Unless a centre is completely independent for its funding, then it is bound to cater to the system which provides its succour.

On with the meeting. The Year 6 and 7 level students arriving from an inner-city school will be in residence for five days. The five day residential programme allows for a developmental approach. Initial activities relate to orientation to the site and include orienteering games. There could be a value-loaded question at each checkpoint, but there isn't. The following morning will be a pot-pourri of Ecology-based activities. One group will study Bees through practical sessions at hives, and learn first hand the function and interrelationships which occur in the routines of bees.

Another group will study Plants through gathering nuts for seeds and by practising the sequential skills of plant

propagation in the plant nursery; they will conclude their activity with a habitat enhancement planting in a gully. Another group will participate in the Bird-Banding programme which is a long term population study of local avifauna. Student involvement develops greater awareness of birds as animals, a sense of their interrelationship with plants and other animals, and a recognition of the value of data gathering skills for analysis and action. A fourth group of students visit the pond, complete with nets, jars and microscopes and a waterbug data sheet. They discover what sorts of strange bugs inhabit this small ecosystem, and they share their findings together.

What comes of all this? A bit of fun, a level of excitement, a sense of "learning by doing" and perhaps a greater commitment to specific environmental concerns? The programme proceeds by rotating groups through these activities, and then adding a bushwalk. The latter takes students through a greater range of landscapes and ecosystems, and provides settings for the earlier studies. After dinner a nocturnal visit to a nearby wide-range sanctuary, where students meet water rats, potoroos, bettongs, possums and the like.

The next day we add some sessions from the Acclimatization programme to fine tune the senses. These activities are part of the Earth Education philosophy and develop more empathy for the life cycles around us. Then a wide game called Survival which provides herbivore/carnivore roles and emphasises the food and water hunt, against risks such as predation, disease and the hunter. An evaluation afterwards assesses student reactions to the game, e.g. fear, scratches, accelerated heartbeat, timidity, aggression, hunger drives, value of habitat. A bit of quiet time follows, with some music and a chance for creative writing/artwork.

Is our practice beginning to match our objectives? Is the motivation ecocentric or anthropocentric? Is the methodology theoretic, technical or practical? Are students clarifying values and developing attitudes? Are they developing political literacy and having opportunity for positive action in the programme? It seems effective to

develop from the simple and familiar approaches initially to more challenging and authentic methodologies as the programme develops. After all, these are new learning styles for students.

The final morning. The students are handed coloured headbands. A Departmental memo is read to them explaining that the Outdoor School is being sold to Resort Developers Inc. as part of a rationalization programme. The colours denote the Local Residents Association, the Arbury Park Outdoor School, the Tourist Bureau, Flag Inns Consolidates, the Mt. Lofty Ranges Conservation Society and the Unemployed Workers Collective. The student groups now develop special interest positions, and present them to a moderator who then organizes a referendum. Rational arguments, emotive stances and loaded values soon surface, and the final debriefing session highlights the possible compromises and the polarized positions. Some theatrical ploys including the commitment of the adult characters, enhance the strength of the simulation. This simulation has strong values/action elements and draws on concepts and feelings developed through the week-long programme.

An evaluation conducted on the students before they leave indicates a high level of satisfaction and a high level of priority given to the "game type" activity such as the survival game and the conflict game. This may well say something about the methodology which is substantially student-centred or it may indicate the high level of understanding developed in earlier activities during the week that were specifically appropriate to the games and empowered students to make satisfying decisions and have productive experiences in the problems posed by the simulations.

The question is always raised as to whether an assessment made in the short term is of any real significance as attitude development and opportunity for future action will only come over a longer time period. **However, the indicators are there that if students are given more open situations for gathering and presenting information and developing their own convictions through practice, then the accumulative effect in both the short term and the long term would be significant. It is only the professional negligence of the past, blinkered by traditional approaches and expectations of the system that have limited the learning of students to the recall of capital cities, the spelling of "diarrhoea, the memorization of chemical equations and the current sequencing of the British laws of Parliament that extended universal franchise".**