

ARISTOTLE AND VYGOTSKY WENT FOR A WALK



Some reflections about an Outdoor Journeys pilot study

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Aristotle and Vygotsky went for a walk:

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Introduction

Within the formal Italian school curriculum, outdoor learning exists only as some dated tradition that has little academic worth in the 21st century. This is rather strange, as in Italy there are numerous climatic, pedagogical, curricular, and cultural reasons to go outside. That's why trying to "import" this important knowledge from abroad seems to be coherent within present national educational conditions, in its broadest sense.

To achieve this aim, I've found it useful to develop relationships with Outdoor Education faculty at the University of Edinburgh's School Education. Through following their programs, I witnessed a wide range of ways in which an educator can deliver cross-curricular outdoor learning programs. Within those different approaches, I became "expert" on the Outdoor Journeys program (Outdoor Journeys, n.d.), which enabled me to use knowledge I had absorbed during my PhD work, where I had analyzed outdoor educational aspects of Italian schools (Bortolotti, 2009), both from didactical and theoretical points of view. In my modest opinion, Outdoor Journeys (OJs) as a concept has particular resonance with the outdoor learning "soul", because of its adventurous nature. It contrasts with conventional classroom teaching, as it looks at local phenomena that are not predetermined – this is, in itself, quite an unusual teaching habit.

This paper describes a pilot study that can be considered the first Italian OJ Project – one that I had the opportunity to run in a Primary School in Casalecchio di Reno, near the city of Bologna. I aim to describe the process, rather than the results; that's why it is presented as a Case Study, which can be considered "a study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activity within important circumstances ...that draws from naturalistic, holistic, ethnographic, phenomenological, and biographic research methods" (Stake, 1995, p. vi). I also find it absolutely essential to introduce and justify my chosen methodology, and follow Stake's assertion that

I seek to make sense of certain observations of the case by watching as closely as I can and thinking about it as deeply as I can. It is greatly subjective. I defend it because I know no better way to make sense of the complexities of my case. (...). p. 76-77

Qualitative data were gathered through field observations, teacher and parents' comments collected during special meetings (organized to implement the OJ Project), pupils' informal comments, and pupils' written tests. The latter were specifically requested from teachers, in order to have a sort of "narrative evaluation" of the program that would enable us to draw "a splendid palette" (Stake, 1995, p.136). Further reflections on OJ educational values which arose from the field work, and which match existing pedagogical theory, will also be discussed.

Some theoretical aspects about “Italian OJs”

It is not my intent, of course, to outline all aspects of outdoor learning and of OJs. I will only remind us precisely and briefly which of them were most important within this project:

- ❑ OJs are basically seen as an extension of classroom study, like an inter-disciplinary method that intertwines various subjects, and not a subject itself.
- ❑ It is used to meet pupils’ needs, as a tool to support their curiosity; teachers, avoiding traditional teaching intervention, have only to facilitate and help their pupils’ researches.
- ❑ Effective Teaching and Learning processes are place-based, and strive to catch both socio-cultural and geo-physical main issues of the local landscape where children live.
- ❑ Giving pupils opportunity to experience and learn about other people who, within the local community, may be older and/or less able, become one way that pupils can make meaningful connections beyond their normal social circle and to “know the world”.
- ❑ It doesn’t require specialist equipment, expert instructors, nor complicated risk assessment. Rather, and perhaps most importantly, pupils should make their own assessments of hazards and come up with appropriate management strategies before each journey outside the school grounds.

Anyway, due to both teachers and pupils having practically no experience of teaching and learning outdoors, respectively, we had first to introduce the method through structured, “quasi-playing” activities. Those first activities also served to win over some teachers’ resistance, which in my opinion was absolutely justifiable: a teacher could hardly feel sure about a method s/he didn’t even know the existence of just relatively few days before s/he had to work with it!

OJ activities description

The Italian OJs project has been organized like this: we had lesson every two weeks throughout the entire academic year -- alternating a journey outdoors with work indoors. So, every month we had two lessons: the journey outdoors and the research indoors.

When the Project ‘proper’ started, we followed the three-phase model (see *Outdoor Journeys*, n.d.; Beames, Atencio & Ross, 2009). The first phase involves Questioning, where pupils, observing the landscape, had to ask themselves what they didn’t know about it. These questions about the human and non-human aspects of the landscape are then narrowed down and posted on the classroom walls. In the second phase, with adult help, pupils researched information to answer the questions that came up from their curiosity in phase one. Afterwards, pupils shared their new knowledge with their classmates in fun, creative ways. At the Project’s end, because of some problems encountered along the way that stopped us for a while (I’ll soon explain), we had twelve lessons in total.

First phase

Due to the minimal outdoor competence (of both teachers and pupils), on going outside for curricular reasons (as opposed to recreational ones), I had to use the first phase to introduce the outdoor learning (OL) theoretical framework and, specifically, the OJs approach. That means I had to spend time first conducting a number of meetings (mostly with teachers and parents) to explain OJs methods, aims, times, phases, and so on; and then in doing a didactical introductory work with the class. From a pedagogical point of view, we carried on a school garden “re-appropriation”, in order to introduce a different and credible educational experience. We spent some lessons doing educational games, and some semi-structured activities as means to initiate teachers and pupils with the concepts of outdoor experiential learning.

Usually, the custom is to go outdoors just for recreational reasons or traditional teaching done outdoors. With the latter, it usually means transmitting what is already in the teacher’s head into the pupils’. After these first approaches, enjoyed very much by pupils, we could start with the real “Italian Outdoor Journeys” Project. The initial Outdoor Journeys questioning sessions took place in the school grounds, where there was plenty to discover and learn about.

Getting serious

Once everyone understand how OJs worked, we decided to have our pupils in three different work units, in different outdoor learning zones: school grounds, local neighbourhood and day excursions (Beames, Higgins & Nicol, 2011, p. 6). Each team would go through each of the three phases in their ‘place’: questioning, researching and sharing. Pupils, both outdoors and indoors and with teachers’ help, were requested to move around the local landscape, observe it, and develop a question that was interesting to them. They then looked for the answer in printed media, the internet, and by asking people. Finally, pupils were tasked with creatively sharing their new knowledge through any medium (drama, graphs, poster, speech, podcast).

About the first phase (questioning), we, the two teachers and me, didn’t have any big problems at all. Maybe sometimes the pupils’ curiosity led into ingenuous issues that were linked to very local topics and debates. The phase also offered adults opportunities to discover (or confirm) pupils’ personalities, learning styles, cognitive levels, and personal interests. What we witnessed here were opportunities being presented for teachers to help pupils develop their own capabilities, which is consistent with Vygotsky’s concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (1978). Viewed through the ZPD lens, the first phase of OJs research is particularly interesting. First, the approach allows a great range of freedom. Consequently pupils are quite free to choose their goals and follow their interests – just like in play. As a result, they can take part in research activity in which they are interested and which has an appropriate level of academic challenge. For this reason, teachers can support pupils exactly “where they are”, which Vygotsky would argue is best for child development.

The project was slowed by a number of challenges, such as: difficulties managing pupils' indoor research (e.g. strange questions and hard to find information); minimal resources (poor PC laboratory, library, specialized books); and pupils spending varying times working on their OJs project at home. The big problem, however, surfaced when teachers discovered that a couple of boys, during their web surfing research, had visited a pornographic site. Due to that event, we had to stop all project activity and talk to pupils and parents separately. We needed to communicate not only what happened, but also provide a more general warning to all parties about the hazards of the internet. Through analyzing that episode from an educational perspective, we learned one huge "lesson" from this unexpected outcome: the risks were much more indoor than outdoor.

Anyway, after that incident, OJs could begin once again -- faster and stronger than before, as despite the encounter with the dark side of the internet, teachers and parents still supported the project. When an event opens a way to discover new issues and to strengthen people, that experience can be considered educative at the end of the day, even if what happened was negative in itself. As the saying goes, experience is not what happens to us, but what we do with what happens to us. Something was learned that through this episode that went on to influence school and family policies on internet usage.

Outcomes from the pilot study

After analyzing data gathered in the field, we say with some conviction that useful findings have been made. Much of this data came from pupil research, which allowed them (and us) to gain knowledge on subjects as diverse as physics, optics, history, economics, and literature (see below, Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Some pupils' questions

During the second phase pupils posed a number of questions -- so many, in fact, that it's impossible to list all of them. I've highlighted some of the most important ones that we decided to work on.

- * Why, when we look far away to the hill, is it usually foggy?
- * Why is it so easy to slip on ice? (observation in winter time, photo n. 5 and 6)
- * Why was our school built here?
- * What "Iron Cross" mean? (it was urban graffiti)
- * Which are the tasks of a "Handicraft Trade Union"? (from a sign in a public building)
- * What was here before Villa "Dall'Olio"? (a building inside the park near school, photo n. 7)
- * When and why was the "Dall'Olio Social Center" started? (photo n. 8)
- * When was the railway next to the public park built? (the railway connects Bologna to Pistoia, Tuscany, photo n. 9)
- * When town's main bridge built? (photo n. 1)

In one teacher's opinion, however, the best area of pupil growth probably occurred on a meta-cognitive dimension. To be more precise, the teacher felt that pupils had been given a method to "catch" knowledge:

Analyzing pupils written tests, we can realize that the first ones came out with just play aspects, something like: "How nice, we get out and we don't have an indoor lesson!". As time went on, this thing about play didn't come up, but quite the contrary. It's been a very nice experience because they could reflect on the reality that is around them, and overall they could ask themselves questions for which they had to research answers by themselves. I've been impressed by the boys and girls: they have done some very good elaborations. I thought they just would describe what they had done. Instead they had "picked up" the project's heart, understanding that there were different phases: observation, research and communication.

Figure 2. Some pupils' statements about OJs

1. Alessandro is a researcher who gives lessons in a different way -- not like the usual teachers who keep us sitting. With him we go to the garden and, even though we talk about scholastic topics, we play. I'm looking forward tomorrow: we're going to enjoy our time!"
2. Alessandro gave us one warning: when he came, even if it was raining or snowing or other things like this, we had to go out. I'm curious to discover what he's going to introduce to us next time.
3. Unfortunately Outdoor Education is finished. If I could do it again I would be very happy; if I could do it, is because I discovered new things about nature and about school.

Pupils were also requested to choose their own title for each individual written story, so it's interesting to recognize a sort of "evolution" on that level also. To give a title, actually, is not only a functional procedure but, much more important, it is a way to indicate and understand the "sense" given by pupils to their activity, in this case the outdoor learning context. For instance, we started from titles such as: "Looking for... geometrical shapes" or "First adventure with Alessandro", and we finished with: "A garden lesson" or "An outside school laboratory". Where in the first story it's easy to find play and adventure sense, in the final ones an interpretation of Outdoor as 'learning place' emerges. I think that those simple, but not banal, acknowledgements are symptomatic of a new way pupils (and teachers behind them) interpreted the method and thus the local landscape.

Risk management

Managing hazards remains a huge issue and concern in late modern society (Beck, 1992), and is an important part of any OL lesson. I think in the educational field there are at least two different dimensions of risk to keep in mind and use in practice: one is “pedagogical” and the other one “alive”. It’s important not to be confuse matters by mixing them. The first one focuses on teaching/learning process, which is never absolutely guaranteed: failure is all the time “around the corner” for number of factors: cognitive, affective, social, practical, and so on. Irrespective of whether the educational approach is traditional or progressive, it is crucial for the teacher to highlight the main educational OE tasks to parents and pupils, in order to reduce possible misunderstandings. The OE facilitator has to explain this active learning approach can offer pupils to learn knowledge that is real and applicable, as it has been learned in an authentic learning context (Beames, Higgins, & Ross, 2011).

Learning outdoors is not the answer to all of education’s ailments, however. Of course, some topics are probably best kept to the classroom, and teachers need to be encouraged to use their judgment to determine when it is best to have pupils outdoors and in. All educational decisions need to be justified by the teacher and learning outdoors is no exception. In this field, OJs is able to give important for children to work together in a curious, collaborative, and exploratory manner. It is this shared responsibility (an inherent feature of co-operative learning), that may help teachers let their pupils explore within a supportive institutional network that is managed by rules, boundaries, and adult supervision.

The other risk dimension is more “alive”; it focuses on bodily danger and needs, which is an increasingly problematic issue in our modern and “pre-scheduled child” society. Before any Journey, I ask children to indicate danger they might expect on the way. Usually, they mention cars, falling down, animals/insects, but we have had no problems at all. As an example, during the last journey on a public garden near Reno River (photo n. 10), the 18 pupils saw seven insects, and three children fell down (photo n. 11), but without any significant consequence. I can say that in our experience, physical danger has been a “non-issue” – except sometimes when we’re indoors, as I mentioned earlier.

Educational conclusions

I have come to believe that there are few differences between children of the same age in different cultures. Creating good “learning outdoors” habits through the pilot study, meant that when the main project began, I had won over teachers’ initial resistance. I was then able to effectively helped to construct a culture within the school, where pupils expect to go outdoors, and are open to novelty, like being able to follow their curiosity. Now, most pupils appear to love studying in this active, outdoor way.

Before finishing, allow me a few words about the reasons why Outdoor Journeys works, and why it’s suitable for teaching and learning, both in formal and informal contexts. I like to imagine the surreal scene of two ancient Masters, such as Aristotle and Vygotsky, talking together while going outdoors for a walk.

Aristotle: *Dear Lev, it's true that I've founded my Peripatetic school because I wasn't a citizen of Athens. This meant that I could not have a building and, therefore, could not teach indoors. Notwithstanding, I'm sure the best way to learn is just to go around observing the world, and ask ourselves "why" and "how" at what we see in front of us. Then, when a pupil is motivated to learn "why", I could better explain the "truth".*

Vygotsky: *Dear friend, you are absolutely right in affirming that walking around keeps you active and concentrated -- much more than staying sitting down indoors. I also agree with you that play is really important for child development. And I really love your "question-and-answers" method. But, let me say that, at the end of the day, in your Lyceum you are the only "knowledge owner", and your method runs the risk of being the only "right one" – which is very good, but unique. I think there's another way to get to ideas: let pupils work upon their real curiosity, to learn new things and follow them without immediately giving them the "right" answer. Thus, their knowledge will be more authentic and effective. I think it's more appropriate for young people to develop where they really "are". Maybe I will call this " Zone of Proximal Development" or something similar...*

Coming back to reality, I want to emphasize that through my ongoing outdoor learning research, I have come to firmly believe that Outdoor Journeys is universally applicable. This is because it's a methodology that not only allows pupils and teacher to keep concentrated on their work, but crucially, is able to help discover pupils' ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978) – the discovering and scaffolding phases, in particular. First, as there are prescribed question-and-answers, OJs merely attempts to stimulate and follow pupils' curiosity, interest and capacity, and help "discover" exactly where each pupil "is", in terms of their level of learning capability. Second, after the questioning phase, the teacher can use scaffolding to meet the needs of the pupils that their developmental level and accompany them from the ZPD "central point" to their being their best.

Apart from the cognitive benefits of the Outdoor Journeys approach, one must also consider its contributions to personal and social development, and to physical and mental well-being. But, I'll save that discussion for another paper.

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