

Learning outside the classroom – Making it happen

In the next three editions of the e-newsletter Martin Smith, Chairman of the Outdoor Education Advisors Panel, explores how schools can develop, plan and implement effective experiences

Learning outside the classroom (LOtC) is not about a discrete piece of work that is compartmentalised from other school activities and learning. It is a key learning component that provides a complementary and stimulating environment to support learning throughout the school and across the curriculum.

So what is learning outside the classroom?

LOtC does what it says on the tin, involving first-hand learning away from the classroom – indeed many staff undertake LOtC without realising it. However, some do not realise the full potential of what they are doing. A useful summary exploring the range of learning that can take place outside the classroom can be found on the www.lotc.org.uk/getmedia/28559f0f-4350-484e-a98b-599efe4010c5/1.0-What-is-Learning-outside-the-Classroom.aspx.

LOtC can take place a few feet from the classroom or a few thousand miles from the school. At the Foundation stage it could be part of a regular 'expedition' across the school field to a wooded corner of the site as part of a Forest Schools programme. These experiences are as challenging and exciting to younger children as organising a Duke of Edinburgh Award Silver expedition trip is to older pupils. LOtC takes place in many locations - from a school allotment or local library to a place of worship, art gallery or visit to the seaside. By themselves these will be exciting and stimulating activities. However, their true value lies in the learning that comes from the experience and how it is applied throughout the rest of the curriculum. In this sense, LOtC should be a seamless part of learning *inside* the classroom and not separate from it.

Why do it? (Making the case)

It is important to place the following discussion in context. A huge amount of excellent teaching and learning takes place within the classroom that is challenging, engaging, imaginative and creative - I am sure we have all facilitated memorable learning experiences within a classroom setting. However, LOtC is recognised as adding value to the learning experiences of young people along with other components of learning, such as events and extended hours settings as well as through changes in routines and timetabling. Such learning is just part of a bigger picture of how we want to develop and create a more flexible and meaningful curriculum for the young people we work with.

In recent years a wealth of research and support has been published highlighting the impact and value of LOtC on young people. Many of us will be familiar with the links between LOtC and improved motivation, self-esteem, behaviour and engagement. Increasingly we are also becoming bolder in highlighting the value of LOtC in terms of raising attainment. Indeed, this was brought together in Ofsted's excellent report, ([www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Leadership/Management/Learning-outside-the-classroom/\(language\)/eng-GB](http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Browse-all-by/Education/Leadership/Management/Learning-outside-the-classroom/(language)/eng-GB)). Here there is a clear recognition in the report of the need to carefully integrate planning for LOtC within the curriculum:

'When planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils' personal, social and emotional development.... Learning outside the classroom was most successful when it was an integral element of long-term curriculum planning and closely linked to classroom activities.'

The curriculum reviews have provided the opportunity to develop greater flexibility in curriculum design. They will encourage greater thematic and cross-curricular based work, providing a framework for more creative and engaging curriculums as well as an excellent means of effectively integrating LOtC. Indeed, many secondary schools are already reconstructing their curriculums and timetables to incorporate opportunities for LOtC. The Primary review recommendations will also provide greater flexibility for schools to take real ownership of their curriculum and how it is taught, providing a ready opportunity to integrate LOtC better across the curriculum. This issue will be addressed in a future newsletter article.

As part of the QCDA's 'Big Picture' description of the curriculum a variety of 'components' for learning are identified, all of which will contribute to the learning experience of young people. Within this context LOtC also provides an excellent tool to support the development of Personal Learning and Thinking skills (www.qcda.gov.uk/libraryAssets/media/PLTS_framework.pdf) and as part of any particular learning experience.

The support for LOtC doesn't end there. In response to an Education Select Committee report, the DCSF developed the (www.lotc.org.uk/getmedia/42c7c3e7-7455-43cc-a513-d6aef9654846/1.0-Learning-Outside-the-Classroom-manifesto.aspx). This commitment has followed by the establishment of the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom and www.lotc.org.uk to promote and support LOtC experiences.

Breaking down the barriers: The only limit to achievement is your own imagination

All of this should give staff the 'mandate' they need to fully utilise opportunities for LOtC. Why not go outside as part of a numeracy lesson and present the results of a survey as a 'human bar or scatter graph'? For many it may well bring alive the concept of what a graph is all about if they actually become part of one! (For this and some other excellent ideas on Learning Maths Outside the Classroom go to www.ncetm.org.uk/resources/9268). Staff should not be afraid to add value to learning by breaking up the way they present lessons for young people and getting young people outside the classroom. It should complement learning throughout the curriculum and be a key tool in school improvement.

Over the past few years a number of barriers – both real and perceived – have limited the development and integration of LOtC into the curriculum of many schools. A 'fear of safety' has often hindered and restricted LOtC. Today there is a much more realistic view on what we need to do to effectively plan and manage young people while outside the classroom. The Health and Safety Executive emphasise the need to take reasonable precautions in terms of safeguarding young people while working away from their desks, stating:

'The overwhelming majority of educational visits are carried out safely and responsibly by teachers who take the time and effort to get things right. The benefits of such trips to pupils can be immense. Exposure to well managed risks helps children learn important life skills, including how to manage risks for themselves. The Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto aims to ensure that all young people have a variety of high quality learning experiences outside the classroom environment.'

www.hse.gov.uk/schooltrips/index.htm

School staff manage and control groups of young people on an on-going basis throughout the school day and are more than capable of extending this good practice beyond the classroom. If they are not already doing so, this approach should begin to give staff the confidence to work more regularly in the outdoors in support of the curriculum.

There is a lot of support and training available for staff wanting to extend their horizons but who are still feeling uncertain. Each school should have a trained Educational Visits Co-ordinator who will have an understanding of policy and procedure relating to off-site visits of both the school and the Local Authority. Many Local Authorities also offer training programmes to support staff with planning, managing and developing LOtC opportunities. Such programmes are usually organised through the Outdoor Education Adviser and range from general 'visit leader' training to specific

National Governing Body awards for more adventurous activities. Training in 'developing and leading' activities around the school site can be delivered through the Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel's 'Outdoor Learning Cards' programme, which can be accessed through your Adviser. If you are not sure who your Adviser visit www.oeap.info

In the past many people have been deterred from organising more LOtC because of the level of 'red tape' and paperwork that may have been needed to gain approval for such activity. Together the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, DCSF and the Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel are working towards new employer guidance to streamline the planning and approval processes that surround LOtC. This work includes the development of a planning framework that will enable staff to develop a proportionate level of planning – for example looking at the nature of activity or distance from the site.

The new LOtC Quality Badge has reduced a good deal of the paperwork and burden involved in looking for external providers of LOtC. The Quality Badge is awarded to providers who engage in an ongoing process to sustain good-quality learning outside the classroom and who are managing risk effectively, demonstrating that they meet six quality indicators. For further details of the scheme go to www.lotc.org.uk/The-LOTC-quality-badge/The-LOTC-quality-badge

The other barrier to LOtC has been 'cost'. In part this can be addressed by maximising the use of the school grounds or local resources such as parks and open spaces, places of worship and libraries etc. However, 'broadening horizons' is often an aim of LOtC which necessarily means transport costs as well as any entry fee. In Nottingham, we have addressed this issue by using our schools swimming transport contract to lever in some excellent deals with the coach companies during any 'down time'. We have combined this purchasing power to develop LOtC opportunities with venues throughout the city and beyond; this 'Why Nott!' programme is proving extremely successful. Some of the external organisations we work with have also accessed external funding to support subsidised or free LOtC, e.g. Youth Hostel Association, Field Studies Council – Eco Challenge programme, Nottinghamshire Wildlife Trust and 'Take one picture' at the Nottingham Castle Gallery. A good site through which to access both ideas and support of LOtC is the growing schools website www.growingschools.org.uk.

Next Steps

There has never been a better time to begin thinking about making the most of LOtC, in the next article I will outline how we can begin effectively plan for and integrate LOtC throughout the curriculum and increase our 'Value for Learning'.