

Other Ways of Learning

Book Reviewed by Michael Young and Jayson Seaman

Becker, P., & Schirp, J. (Eds.). (2008). *Other ways of learning: The European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning 1996–2006*. Marburg, Germany: BSJ. ISBN 978-3-940549-03-7

Other Ways of Learning both introduces readers to a number of established European scholars and offers a provocative external view of North American Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE). As its subtitle indicates, the book chronicles the “childhood” phase of the European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning (p. 8). While this suggests that editors Becker and Schirp are optimistic that the institute has a long life ahead of it, many of the authors describe “other forms of education” as already threatened by “economic instrumentalizations” and “increased demands for standardization” (p. 9). The negative results of such threats, a number of authors in the book suggest, are apparent in North American OAE.

The book contains three sections—Part I: “Historical and Political Dimensions”; Part II: “Other Ways of Learning”; and Part III: “Keynotes and Programmatic Statements From Conferences of the European Institute.” A strong critical orientation runs through each section and is the focus of this review.

In the first chapter, Becker traces the origins of the European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning. His chapter exemplifies an understanding of events and ideas as situated within specific cultural and historical moments, a perspective represented throughout the book. Becker, who is featured prominently in the book, offers broad sociological and psychological hypotheses, construing OAE’s emergence in Europe as a potential response to an increasingly unhealthy modernistic overemphasis on predictability and rationality.

Chris Loynes’s chapter, “Social Reform, Militarism, and Other Historical Influences on the Practise of Outdoor Education in Youth Work,” outlines the development of OAE in the United Kingdom with an eye toward its socio-historical context. He tracks the militaristic and preparatory trends within the field through both World Wars, and highlights a more recent shift within “informal” youth development from the improvement of society and community, to a more atomistic approach emphasizing the development of individual youth. While Loynes ultimately advocates for OAE work with youth, he keeps a critical eye on its history, which arguably separates his approach from much North American OAE scholarship.

Schirp’s first chapter turns the analytic gaze to European OAE practices, describing the potential for OAE to assimilate the language and the values of current European youth development trends. While he explores the practical benefit of catering to these interests (cozying up to EU funding priorities, for example), he critically adds that such assimilation could jeopardize OAE’s liberatory potential and could instead render it an “instrument” of the powers that be.

This critical awareness reaches its height with Steve Bowles’s provocative and polemical chapter, which appears in Part III. Bowles playfully challenges modern modes of scholarly writing, arguing both substantively and stylistically that OAE in Europe and elsewhere has already become too mainstream and thus does not offer an “other” way of learning. One example: “I give you the quicksilver games that pollute to social-body-politic and I give you the wan and pale, gaseous rhetoric of the priestly guardians of OAE truth claims for sale to the highest bidder” (p. 261). Such thinly veiled references to canonical American works are openly contemptuous, which can be distracting, but his piece as a whole certainly made us pause and reflect upon much of the outcome-driven work that is arguably dominating U.S. scholarship. In *Other Ways of Learning*, Bowles is not the only author to bristle against an overly instrumental or standardized OAE or to describe North American (particularly U.S.) practice; these perspectives can also be found, for example, in chapters by Becker, Festeue and Humberstone, and Greenaway, which appear in Part II.

Although one would be justified in wanting to dismiss some elements of the book out of hand (e.g., some of Bowles’s caustic hyperbole), ultimately the work deserves a thorough reading by North American audiences, not just to gain a fresh perspective on American OAE, but also to introduce the reader to contemporary European themes. A stunning example of this is the chapter by Kristi Pederson, “Norwegian Friluftsliv as Bildung: A Critical Review.” Pederson discusses a unique Norwegian approach to OAE (Friluftsliv) and introduces a German notion of education/development (Bildung) to unpack its historical assumptions. She does so with a careful eye toward the influences of social class and gender, skillfully exposing the reader to another cultural approach to OAE.

Pederson’s chapter, like many others, employs a rigorous style that is attuned to socio-historical influences and power relationships as inherent to all outdoor education, a way of examining “other ways of learning” that seems to distinguish current European approaches from those typically used on the North American side of the pond.

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