

How learning in residential settings, outside the classroom and beyond home environments helps young people be the best they can be

At Woodrow, young people have bucket-loads of fun, they enjoy themselves - and they're challenged and learn at the same time. What we do is enjoyable: it is also educational. As such, the programmes at Woodrow High House provide a number of opportunities for learning beyond the classroom.

Talk to anyone who has worked with young people for any length of time and they will speak of the great good that can come from a residential trip. Somewhere between the beginning and end of time away, something starts to glue participants together. Everyone is challenged on a residential – it might be the adventurous activities, or doing the washing-up with someone you don't know, or going a night without enough sleep. The sheer unusualness of such situations brings everybody out of their comfort-zones.

Sharing trials and tribulations is a great leveler, a rite of passage that somehow allows people to be honest with one another and support each other more. The 'safe space' which evolves on a residential provides many seminal moments – the extra inspiration achieving the crucial tipping-point. For example, a Kosovan refugee taking part in one of London Youth's youth action initiatives recently revealed to our staff that the first time he'd felt safe in the UK was during a residential trip with us.

Yet our belief in the value of what Woodrow offers is based not only on our own experience and observation: hard evidence equally attests to the benefits of informal education, beyond the school gate.

'Good quality learning outside the classroom adds much value to classroom learning. It provides a context for learning in many areas: general and subject based knowledge; thinking and problem-solving skills; and life skills such as co-operation and interpersonal communication.'¹

Equally, we know that in addition to academic and technical skills, increasingly employers are also looking for evidence of the ability to work in a team or to manage relationships with others.²

Evidence suggests such opportunities for informal education are at least as significant as classroom based learning:³ In such informal settings, young people 'gain a more sophisticated knowledge of themselves as learners. Learning is active, demonstrating the importance of rules and roles in learning and the benefits of greater self-control and confidence. Young people also gain wider experiences from an expanded peer group and learn how to develop and sustain supportive educational relationships through working with others.'⁴

Certainly, young people themselves consistently confirm preferences for learning outside the classroom, describing it as 'exciting, practical, motivating, refreshing and fun'.⁵ Meanwhile, research also recognises the importance of place: a historic building helps to stimulate learning and bring extra depth to an experience.⁶

¹ Department for Education (then Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2006

² See, for example, The National Employers Skills Survey, Learning & Skills Council and the work of Nobel prize-winning economist James Heckman.

³ 'Learning and teaching in primary schools: insights from TLRP' Cambridge Primary Review 2008

⁴ Department for Education (then Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2006

⁵ Ofsted, 2008

⁶ 'Educational Relationships Outside of School', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2008

Evidence also consistently indicates that the learning and personal and group development achieved during a residential provide a golden opportunity for the forging of stronger bonds between young people and their youth worker or teacher, aiding work back in home communities. For youth workers working with young people over the longer term, the residential is a particularly important development tool and significant progress can often be made over a few days away from the everyday context: 'A period in a residential centre gives youth workers an opportunity to provide both formal settings for learning – such as group discussion and informal support to individuals who may be struggling to reach new understandings of themselves and their situation. Youth workers and young people consistently testify to the value of such residential experiences.'⁷

Certainly, all the available evidence is that young people benefit from skilful interventions and trusting relationships with reliable adults.⁸ Youth work provides just this and equally responds to the articulated need amongst young people for opportunities to take responsibility and make a positive contribution: young people consistently say they value activities and places to go and place emphasis on activities which help them develop skills and self-confidence.⁹ Therefore, learning away from the usual environment that is 'shared with adults in a way that is not possible in classrooms' is shown to be of lasting value.¹⁰

Evidence also suggests informal education to be especially effective at engaging young people disengaged from school. 'Sport, outdoor activities and creative activities such as dance, can all be used as a hook to motivate young people to participate.'¹¹ Young people themselves certainly agree with this view.¹²

Particularly for young people from our member youth clubs, Woodrow offers an 'out-of-city' experience of the natural environment. Whether this is through a night hike, pond dipping, gazing at the Milky Way through the observatory telescope or simply soaking up the atmosphere in the grounds or the woods, many of our young visitors have never experienced anything like it. Common sense suggests outdoor activity and being in the natural environment has health benefits and enhances wider well-being. Extensive evidence backs up intuition.¹³ Simply put, 'being outdoors contributes to higher levels of wellbeing, bringing physiological benefits such as stress reduction.'¹⁴

Woodrow High House then offers education not 'only' in the sense of developing competence but, as importantly, education as a means of changing attitudes and building long-term confidence and character. We help people look at their world in a different way. Arguably this is ever-more important as evidence suggests strongly that successful transitions to adulthood depend increasingly on self-confidence, individual agency and non-cognitive (or 'soft') skills as well as academic or technical attainment.¹⁵

So well beyond sheer fun (important though that is) Woodrow provides a powerful learning experience that will, for many, have a lifelong effect. The value of what Woodrow does for young people can be immense and enduring.

⁷ Department for Education (then Dept of Education & Science) 1987 'Effective Youth Work'

⁸ Feinstein et al, 2006 'Young People's Leisure Contexts and their Relation to Adult Outcomes'

; Margo & Dixon 2006 'Freedom's Orphans'

⁹ Cutting the Cake consultation report, National Youth Agency, 2007.

¹⁰ Department for Education (then Department for Children, Schools and Families), 2006

¹¹ 'Getting back on track' New Philanthropy Capital, 2009

¹² 'Attitudinal barriers to engaging young people in positive activities: DCSF 2009

¹³ For example: 'Be active, be healthy' Department of Health 2009; 'National accounts of well-being: bringing real wealth onto the balance sheet' New Economics Foundation 2009; 'Five ways to wellbeing' New Economics Foundation 2008; 'Wellbeing and the natural environment' DEFRA 2007

¹⁴ 'Children in the outdoors: a literature review' Muñoz 2009

¹⁵ See for example 'Freedom's Orphans', IPPR, 2006 & Feinstein's work at the Institute of Education