

Indoors vs outdoors:
**Some reflections on education,
nature and culture**

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What is “outdoor education”?

What is “indoor education”?

The concept of definition

We define **concepts** by attempting to *think* them – that is, by analysing, distinguishing, weighing, and evaluating them.

There is never just one definition, because the context in which we seek it is never singular either.

The concept of *outdoor* education appears to follow that of *indoor* education. Education starts indoor.

Therefore, let's try to formulate a simplified typology of the reasons behind the *emergence of indoor education*.

- a) The school as a “space”, as a “building” is an *objective given, a material reality*.
- b) It is a *social and political given*; a space demanding order and submission.
- c) It is an *epistemological given*; a space dominated by an established *system of knowledge*.

School as a space “behind closed doors” is shaped by the interplay of all three reasons.

They differ significantly and can come into conflict with one another. School is, therefore, at once both carrot and stick.

It is crucial to find ways of balancing the various effects produced by school as an “indoor” environment. It is important making it possible for education to take place on both sides of the “door” – that is, *both indoors and outdoors*.

A case from the past: Aristotle’s *Peripatetic school* (“*peripatētikos*” = “walking about”).

Also *Socratic walks*.

*The school space as an epistemological given: a complex reality that enables the development of what is often termed the *intellect* (again a concept with multiple meanings and interpretations).*

It takes place by “**withdrawing**” the student from the **chaotic everyday experiential world** (the “outdoors”) and introducing them to the **realm of thought and the analytical thinking** characteristic of each teaching discipline (the “indoors”). We introduce students to an understanding of *general concepts* so that, with their help, they can discern the *logos* within the chaotic, sensual everyday life.

Having mastered and internalised this **realm of thought**, the student must be able to return to the **everyday life** – yet as a different, transformed person, ready for active and autonomous action.

An ancient philosophical dilemma (Plato vs Aristotle) with implications for our understandings of education, its aims and its purposes.

*Should the **intellectual realm**, which individuals ascend to through learning and inquiry, be regarded **as hierarchically superior** to the **world of lived experience**? Is the intellectual realm so inherently spiritual that it must be treated as entirely distinct from the chaotic world of the senses? Or must there, in fact, exist some other form of interconnection between the two?*

*“All men **by nature** desire to know.” - “... an indication of this is the delight we take in **our senses**.” - “... **no one can learn or understand anything in the absence of sense**.” (Aristotle)*

The *desire to know* – rooted in *our nature* – initially binds us closely to the sensory, natural world.

Yet *sensory perceptions* in themselves do not constitute *knowledge*.

Sensory experience serves as the *raw material* from which, through the development of *inner reflection*, we gradually construct *general ideas*, i.e. a theoretical understanding of the world and of ourselves. Only this can be called *knowledge*.

This theory looks great.

However, as teachers, we know *a very painful aspect of our profession*: *the natural desire to know*, so clearly visible in young children, *can rapidly wither* in slightly older students or at least devolve into *unproductive boredom*. How is this possible?

This issue brings us to one of the key reasons why *a shift from indoor to outdoor education is both justified and necessary*. However, this shift is neither simple nor unproblematic.

A half-century-old *illustration* that remains relevant. Steinar Kvale wrote (1972) on the problematic nature of higher education exams. At an exam students were given the topic “Conflict and Reactions to Conflict”. The exam took place at a time that was filled with news about various conflicts, domestic and international (“outdoors”), yet the students completely ignored these in their answers, choosing instead to write about the internal conflicts of children having to decide between red and yellow lemonade, or between eating their spinach and going to bed. Just as they heard during the lectures (“indoors”).

At an advanced stage of study, one must make **the leap from “indoors” to “outdoors”**. This can be challenging for both student and teacher, not least because the engagement with the world offers **not only an opportunity to resolve conflicts but can also generate new ones**.

This challenge manifests in many ways; one of them is the ***environmental crisis***.

Schools are increasingly **raising awareness** of the need to protect the environment, while politics, the economy and society at large often appear **completely indifferent** to these issues or treat them in a manner diametrically **opposed to what is taught in schools**.

Today's student can explain the basics of why global warming occurs. *„But why should I concern myself with it or become socially active if it all makes absolutely no difference?“*

New concepts are emerging in relation to the environmental crisis.

A consideration of three such concepts:

- *Sustainability*
- *Anthropocene*
- *Eco-anxiety*

Such a consideration requires **understanding civilisation and culture in general**, and especially our **relationship with nature** – both “external” nature and our own “inner” nature.

The idea of **human dominion over nature** has roots in the past.

At a dawn of new ages, Francis Bacon wrote (1620) that “a quite different way must be opened up for the human intellect than men have known in the past, and new aids devised, so that the mind may exercise its right over nature”.

The *mind* may exercise its *right over nature*?

Four hundred years after Bacon: The supposed “right over nature” has led us into the *Anthropocene* and has given rise to *eco-anxiety*. Etc. Conversely, critical reflection on these phenomena has led us to the concept of *sustainability*.

Sustainability is not merely a matter of “nature conservation” but rather the *self-preservation of civilisation itself*.

A radical rethinking of the developmental path civilization has followed to date has been advocated in scholarly literature for over a century. An example:

*“What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to **dominate wholly both it and human beings**. Nothing else counts. [...] Power and knowledge are synonymous.”* (Horkheimer, Adorno, 1947)

One of the consequences is that ***time** has become **money***. Time is no longer an ***existential category***; rather, it is a ***commodity*** that we buy or sell.

Only the experience of living in the “wild” can give us a sense of time entirely different from the orchestrated time of modern civilisation. - An intriguing challenge for outdoor education?

Our natural abilities, our natural desire to know — and modern technology?

We human beings are living, natural creatures, and **despite all the achievements of civilisation** *we must preserve, foster and develop our innate abilities*. For example, a sense of orientation in challenging terrain is one of them.

Yet we can only preserve and develop these abilities **outdoors, in the social and natural world**; not merely in our minds and not while relying on technological devices (GPS, AI etc.) that assume not only the task of navigation but also responsibility for our very life.

Preserving and developing our innate abilities must also include the capacity for **cooperation, support and empathy** – in short, the capacity for **our social and cultural integration**.

Thank you!