

Learning Beyond the Classroom: Outdoor Pursuits

Introduction

I have been fortunate to be involved in many of the different outdoor activities that we offer our pupils at Blundell's. From Ten Tors on Dartmoor, to the highest mountain on Borneo, I have been placed amongst pupils putting themselves outside of their comfort zone more times than I can remember. I've had the opportunity to observe the rapid development of skills and character that these uneasy times can cause, and the enjoyment of watching individuals grow in these conditions provides endless motivation to keep organising the next opportunity.

In an era when education is often benchmarked by examination results and league tables, it is easy to forget that opportunities for learning can be found well beyond our school campus. Our pupils can often be found in some of the worst conditions imaginable, with freezing rain flying full in their faces, with difficult terrain to navigate or with emergencies to deal with. These moments often teach them the most about themselves and represent an important opportunity for Blundellian's to develop during their time with us.

Although these experiences often require a large investment of time, both on the part of pupil and teacher, I have never come away from an event feeling that time has been wasted. Outdoor opportunities are education in its richest form. They offer a powerful approach to fostering our pupils to develop skills of empathy, resilience, curiosity, a spirit of collaboration, and a strong sense of purpose. In this essay I am looking to reflect upon five developmental areas that I believe are important to our school and demonstrate how these areas are supported by our Outdoor Education offering at Blundell's.

I. Moral and Emotional Intelligence

In a world that often celebrates confidence and ambition, there is quiet strength in those young people who lead with kindness, humility, and respect. These areas are not usually the first aspects of development that come to mind when thinking about outdoor pursuits. More commonly the first thought would be to physical development. But in the unrelenting day of an academic timetable, rushing between classrooms to get to the next subject to be studied, we can often lose sight of helping others navigate their way through the challenges of life. Opportunities away from the frenetic pace of the school day can often provide improved chances of addressing these areas of development.

Over the past decade, under the management of Mr Dawe, the school has built a reputation of being one of the most successful Duke of Edinburgh providers in the southwest. The scheme, at its heart, is designed to help participants make principled decisions, show empathy, and take responsibility for their actions. Through volunteering, participants engage directly with their communities, gaining insight into the needs and challenges of others. This nurtures compassion and a sense of moral duty, as pupils are often placed in unfamiliar contexts that require them to act ethically, consider the consequences of their actions, and reflect on their role in society. By contributing meaningfully to causes beyond themselves, pupils begin to form a stronger moral compass, rooted in service, fairness and respect.

In addition, the Duke of Edinburgh scheme helps young people build emotional resilience and self-awareness. The physical and expedition sections of the award are designed to challenge pupils in ways that test their perseverance, patience and ability to manage emotions under pressure. Working in teams, often

in remote or demanding environments, requires pupils to navigate conflict, support others and regulate their own emotional responses. This leads to greater maturity, as they learn to stay calm in adversity, empathise with teammates and recover from setbacks. These experiences collectively enhance pupils' emotional intelligence, preparing them for personal and professional relationships later in life.

With over 70 per cent of pupils in Year 9 at Blundell's achieving their Bronze award, 40 per cent in Year 10 achieving their Silver award and 10-15 every year achieving the most prestigious Gold award, a significant number of pupils are leaving us having grown in many of the areas that the Duke of Edinburgh scheme hopes to nurture.

It is not possible to "teach" these skills in a classroom and as a teacher involved in the award, as well as a parent of children at the school who have achieved Gold and Silver awards, I am incredibly impressed by the empathy that all involved in the scheme show upon completing it.

2. Critical Thinking and Intellectual Curiosity

Education should aim for more than exam success. It should inspire pupils to question, reflect, and engage deeply with the world around them. While qualifications open doors, it is critical thinking that allows young people to navigate those new spaces with purpose and integrity. Our responsibility as educators is not only to teach content but to nurture curiosity, encourage thoughtful dialogue, and help pupils understand their agency in shaping the future.

For nearly ten years, I have had the opportunity to run and embark upon expeditions around the world with my colleague, Mr. Olive, together with the organisation, World Challenge. Their trips encourage pupils to engage deeply with unfamiliar environments and cultures, prompting them to consider how different communities live and interact with the world around them. Through immersive experiences, such as collaborating on sustainability projects, navigating remote terrains, or working alongside local organisations, pupils are exposed to a range of global issues including poverty, climate change, education inequality, and conservation. These encounters challenge preconceived notions, broaden perspectives, and encourage pupils to critically reflect on the social, environmental, and economic factors that shape the lives of others around the world.

By actively participating in the planning and execution of their expedition, pupils are required to think independently and take ownership of complex decisions, from budgeting and logistics to teamwork and leadership. This process fosters self-awareness and helps pupils evaluate their own impact, both during the trip and more broadly in their everyday lives. As they confront real-world challenges and see the consequences of action and inaction, they are made to think critically about their responsibilities as global citizens and how they can contribute meaningfully to a more equitable and sustainable future.

Our international experiences involving nearly 100 pupils have seen us visit many parts of the world. We have been to the dense jungle of Borneo staying with communities in longhouses, we have taken in the cultural marvels of Machu Picchu and the Colca Canyon in Peru and, most recently, experienced Southern Africa in all its beauty, including visiting Kruger national park and the stunning beaches of Mozambique. Whilst taking in these famous wonders, pupils are very much led on a path of engagement with local people, far from the tourist trail.

The development of pupils on these trips is profound, as many experience poverty and different cultures for the first time. Confronted with unfamiliar environments, pupils are encouraged to question their assumptions and reflect on their own values and lifestyle. Encountering communities that thrive despite limited resources prompts thoughtful comparisons with life back home, challenging simplistic narratives around wealth, happiness, and success.

Whether navigating a local market, working on a community project, or listening to the stories of hosting communities, participants are constantly required to adapt, analyse and respond thoughtfully. This kind of experiential learning fosters critical thinking in a way that few classroom experiences can replicate, leaving pupils not only more worldly and empathetic but also more inquisitive and independent in their thinking.

Many pupils will remark upon the curiosity that these expeditions have given them about the world around us. I am incredibly heartened to hear of story after story from returning Old Blundellians of further adventures that they have had around the world, inspired by the first taste of travel that they received at school.

3. Perseverance and Self-Awareness

As Mr Wielenga has written, failure can be seen as something to be feared or avoided, but in truth, it is an essential part of meaningful learning. When pupils encounter setbacks, they gain more than just experience, they develop resilience, humility, and a deeper understanding of themselves. Embracing failure as a natural part of growth helps build the character and determination needed not only for academic success but for life beyond the classroom.

We are exceptionally fortunate in the southwest to have the Ten Tors challenge on Dartmoor right on our doorstep. It is an opportunity for pupils to develop an awareness of the need to support others in a way that is unique to outdoor challenges.

Although team sports on offer at Blundell's provide an opportunity for individuals to work together, the individual nature of performance in sport can see players focusing on themselves rather than supporting others to achieve a collective goal. The Ten Tors challenge is a tough and physically demanding event where individuals cannot be substituted. If the teams are to succeed, they must all succeed together.

In the May event, those taking part are grouped together in teams of six and given around 20 hours over two days to walk 35, 45 or 55 miles over the unforgiving terrain of Dartmoor. Teams must be self-supported and be prepared for all possible weather conditions, which in May has included snow, heatwaves, torrential downpours and floods and times of zero visibility. This results in almost unbearably heavy backpacks before the challenge even begins.

The training for the event is extensive and requires pupils to commit to many weekend training sessions for a period of up to eight months before the event. Pupils must ensure that they work together and support each other through difficult conditions and physical stresses. It really is a more intense version of the Physical and Expedition sections of the Duke of Edinburgh scheme.

Having run Ten Tors for several years and now watching it being skilfully managed under the watchful eye of Mr Dawe, I am acutely aware of the frustration that is caused to pupils who do not quite make it to

the final weekend. The risky nature of the event means the organisers must, understandably, place limits on the number of places on offer. It is a greatly oversubscribed event.

The most difficult part, by far, of running the challenge for the school, is the moment when you must tell individuals who have given their all, that they haven't quite made the cut for a place on a team. We are very fortunate at Blundells that we can choose from a pool of individuals, all of whom could complete the event if they have completed the training.

Whilst Year 10 pupils often see this moment in time as a 'failure', many return two years later, absolutely determined to give it a go again. To put themselves through another eight months of training and win the opportunity to be able to say that they completed Ten Tors. This tenacity is remarkable and greatly beneficial to the future success of our charges.

All pupils who take part in Ten Tors should be immensely proud of the physical demands that they are putting themselves through, whether they make it into the final teams or not. Watching pupils return to school visibly tired the day after a training walk or after the main event, we as teachers look on with awe at the commitment that they have taken on to put themselves in significant discomfort, albeit temporary.

4. Collaboration and Community

At its best, education shapes individuals who look beyond themselves, who value community, care for others, and measure success not just by personal gain but by the wellbeing they help foster in those around them. Schools should nurture a sense of responsibility and service, encouraging pupils to contribute meaningfully to the lives of others. In doing so, we prepare young people not only for careers, but for citizenship grounded in empathy, cooperation, and purpose.

All the outdoor education opportunities that we offer help young people develop a strong sense of community and a willingness to serve others. These experiences take pupils beyond the classroom and place them in situations where teamwork, resilience and mutual support are essential. Whether navigating Dartmoor in challenging conditions or contributing to a community project abroad, pupils learn to rely on and care for one another. They begin to appreciate that their actions can have a direct impact on the wellbeing of those around them, and that shared hardship often builds stronger, more compassionate communities.

Through these programmes, pupils also broaden their understanding of success. While physical endurance, problem-solving and independence are all fostered, what often stands out most is the collective achievement, reaching a summit together, completing a trek as a team, or making a difference in a local community overseas. These shared experiences help pupils recognise that personal growth is enriched when it contributes to the good of the group. Outdoor education, in this way, supports the school's aim of shaping individuals who not only strive for excellence themselves but who also support others in their journey.

5. Purpose and Meaning

In the rush to measure progress, we can lose sight of education's deeper purpose. Beyond the metrics lies a profound mission: to help young people discover who they are, what they value, and how they might lead meaningful lives. True education nurtures character as well as intellect, guiding pupils not just toward achievement, but toward purpose, integrity, and a sense of what it means to live well.

All of our outdoor education experiences come together to help us achieve this goal. The Ten Tors Challenge fosters resilience, self-reliance and teamwork, qualities that help young people find purpose beyond academic achievement. When pupils navigate difficult terrain on Dartmoor, they develop inner strength, perseverance and a sense of responsibility for themselves and others. These challenges build confidence through experience and show participants they can overcome obstacles through commitment and collaboration, nurturing a deeper belief in their own potential and purpose.

The Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme provides structured opportunities for pupils to engage in service, skill-building and physical activity. Each section of the award encourages young people to give back to their communities, learn something new and commit to personal development. Through volunteering, for example, pupils learn empathy and compassion, fundamental traits of good people. The scheme gives pupils space to grow into reflective, socially aware individuals who take pride in contributing positively to the lives of others.

World Challenge expeditions take pupils outside their comfort zones and immerse them in unfamiliar cultures and environments. These experiences foster global citizenship and cultural sensitivity, helping pupils understand the broader world and their role in it. Whether contributing to community projects or budgeting and planning for their expedition, participants develop leadership, integrity and a sense of shared humanity. Such experiences prompt young people to reflect on what matters most, guiding them towards lives filled with meaning, service and purpose.

I have had the pleasure of seeing many pupils develop through these three avenues of opportunity, but I also have to acknowledge that there are many other small scale outdoor pursuit offerings that many of my colleagues deliver across the school, as activities, for individual year groups or for tutor groups. While I cannot name each example here individually, all of them have one common aim: to provide those in our care with opportunities to find purpose. Even more than this, they help pupils to understand what matters most to them, to feel grounded, motivated, and connected to the world around them.

Challenges and Implications

Of course, Outdoor Education presents obstacles. It requires time, resources, and careful planning to ensure safety and inclusivity. It may be perceived as non-essential or elitist. But to sideline it is to ignore one of the most powerful tools for holistic development. Schools must be intentional in how they design, fund, and integrate these experiences, viewing them not as extras, but as essentials.

We are very fortunate at Blundell's to have the flexibility in our curriculum, as well as the support from leadership, parents and pupils alike, to be able to run outdoor pursuits as an integral part of our education provision. Countless pupils have left the school greatly enriched by their involvement in activities outside of the classroom and many have returned to reflect on how these experiences have defined their future careers or inspired them to go on to further impressive achievements in their lives.

When individuals return like this, wanting to tell their tales of the positive impact that involvement in outdoor activities at school had on them, that is when you can be reassured that you are on the right educational path.

Conclusion

Outdoor Education is not a luxury or an indulgence; it is a vital part of forming intelligent, purposeful learners. It enables pupils to grow in ways that classrooms alone cannot achieve. In resilience, empathy, critical thought, collaboration, and reflection, they find not only themselves, but a deeper sense of what it means to live wisely and well. As a school, our responsibility is to provide such opportunities and to value the learning that happens beyond classroom walls. We are fortunate to have support for this principle at Blundell's and an outstanding outdoor pursuit offering as a result.