

Training: Outdoor play - Making space

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Childcare students as well as children are taking their learning outdoors at one far-sighted college, as Mary Evans reports.

Early years staff and students at a Harrogate College are taking part in a pioneering project to develop an outdoor play space to use as a training facility.

By chance, the early years and playwork team at the college, which is part of Leeds Metropolitan University, qualified for Centre of Vocational Excellence status and funding at the same time as the play area of their former on-site nursery became available.

'It is one of those rare occasions when things come together at the same time,' says early years tutor Penny Garner. 'We are using the outdoor area of the former nursery and also incorporating an extra piece of land too.'

Early years tutor Annette Trilk agrees on the need for the creation of this space. 'I have worked in a number of colleges teaching CACHE qualifications and BTEC qualifications,' she says. 'They all have outdoor play within their curriculum, but nowhere do you go outside and give the students an experience of outdoor play.'

'Nowhere do they get the idea that good practice outdoors is not just a load of plastic toys. Very often you do not find good practice outdoors in settings. It is very hard to teach about outdoor experiences when you are all sitting inside. This project is something unique.'

According to Professor Pat Broadhead of Leeds Metropolitan University, the aim is to effect a cultural shift in educators' understanding of the potential of outdoor space. 'They are achieving this by building it into the training and the learning process of these students. They are very excited about it - and rightly so.'

'The fact that they identified this demonstrates how innovative they are. The fact that the college is supporting the use of funding in this way is indicative of the value the colleges place on these courses, which is not always the case with early years courses. It speaks volumes to the students about the importance of this space.'

Development days

To make good use of their outdoor space the Harrogate team called on the services of educational charity Learning through Landscapes. Gail Ryder Richardson, one of LTL's senior development officers, led two development days at Harrogate College to help the team think through what they wanted from the space and how to achieve their aims.

'This outdoor facility has the potential to grow and develop and become a really important asset for the college,' says Ms Ryder Richardson. 'Therefore it is important to take time to consult and involve all those with an interest or responsibility for it. By involving as many people as possible in developing the space, we can be sure that everyone's needs and priorities have been taken account of, and that there is a shared understanding of the purpose and use of the space.'

The first day involved college staff carrying out an audit of the space and reviewing syllabus materials. On the second day, the tutors were joined by their students and local providers, who offer placements and work experience, and together they worked towards developing a vision for the space.

'Together we made the key decisions about the basic structure of the space,' says Ms Garner. 'Over the summer, we are clearing the surface, putting in the boundaries and clearing the vegetation so that there can be a natural den. We then want to see where it takes us.'

'I want to see activities that can be done inside, that might not necessarily be directly related to outdoor learning, translated to outside to see how the learners respond. This is a practical way for our students to get the idea that some people learn better in the outdoor environment.'

'What we would like to see is that it is used as an extra classroom so that instead of having four early years classrooms, we will have five.'

Shared users

The team also want to offer the space to local early years managers to use if their settings have limited outdoor provision, or as a training facility for their staff. One of the tutors, Sue Robson, has close links with local childminders and is exploring the idea that the college students could plan and run sessions for the childminders and their children and also do observations.

'Our early years students are doing a project on mosaic tiles and are making their own tiles,' says early years tutor Sally Abbott. 'We would like to incorporate some of the mosaics at random points around the space. We have looked at some ornate gates and are thinking about seeing if our metalwork student in the college could make us some.'

'One of the things I will be working on next term across the college is to see if other courses such as catering or drama want to do some sessions in our outdoor area with their students,' says Ms Garner.

Julie Dodson, manager of Coppice Valley Nursery in Harrogate, who took part in the development day, believes the project will inspire the students. She says, 'Quite often you can get teenage students to join us on a placement who are averse to going outside because they think it will be wet and cold. But these students now are going to be educated to value the learning opportunities of outdoors.'

Ms Dodson says the development day has inspired both herself and her staff. 'It has encouraged us to look more critically at what we do. We are currently extending the outdoor area at our nursery. We are doubling the space and we got lots of ideas from the development day at the college, particularly the idea of not rushing into the planning but to take our time. We are going to involve all the staff, the children and the parents and let it evolve.'

'In our current area after all this rain, we have a muddy patch and the other day we had a group of boys who worked all day around it. They got out some dinosaurs and made a water hole. Boys are such physical learners and this group of three- and four-year-olds were completely enraptured, working together, thinking and planning together. 'She adds, 'We'll be sure to keep the mud patch!'