

Monday, 31 January 2011

Whole brain learning or rolling down the hill with Frank

- Whole brain, whole body or rolling down the hills



The more we know about the brain and how we learn, the more the idea that everyone learns in the same way is being re-examined. Theorists like **Ken Robinson**, Tony Buzan, **Howard Gardener** and Colin Rose all refer to the different functions of parts of the brain in learning. Their theories explore the ideas that each individual learner has preferences in their learning styles influenced by past experience and biology and that each person learns in a different way.

Schools and teachers are starting to take this on board but to provide the perfect environment where individuals can learn and explore in their own way then there can be no better place than to take it outside and make it flexible and child-centred. I used to work with a group of school age children in an after school club, that met outdoors, all year round. One boy there was the initiator of many of our best ideas. He was bold and adventurous and showed many of the qualities of leadership and imagination that make him an asset to any group. So you can imagine why his mum thought that coming to the club was a valuable experience for him when at school he was disengaged, unenthusiastic and struggling to keep up. The difference in his motivation and achievement was in a greater part enabled by the environment we were in.

Outdoor play and learning supports children's ability to develop because the learning that takes place in outdoor environments doesn't just focus on one way of learning. Rather it involves the whole brain, body and all the senses in the learning. The natural environment is never the same as when you left it the day before. You may see a feather that has fallen in the path, a bird or a flower that has just unfurled. That wasn't there yesterday. There are so many interesting smells, like rich leaf mould or wild garlic, the air is full of the sound of birdsong, the ground underfoot changes texture, now boggy, now springy with pine needles, you put out a hand to steady yourself and feel the rough texture of bark, and if you find some blackberries, wild

raspberries, or fresh new beech leaves, and who can resist having a taste? This multi sensory experience ensures that with support everyone can access immersion and their potential can be extended through activities, which act like springboards into the natural environment and into learning. Learners are actively, physically involved; learning and playing outdoors is not a spectator sport.

The environment is flexible and responds to the children's involvement in it, giving them feedback. The immersion that a learner can experience needs to be followed up with the opportunity to feedback, reflect and evaluate their experience for contextual learning to take place. In any rich natural environment the naturally occurring affordances offer a variety of tasks, and different ways to engage with them, being outdoors allows children to plan, do and review what they have done, all in the here and now. In short many of the factors which are said to be key to accelerated learning occur spontaneously in rich environments for outdoor play and learning.

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