

# A Pedagogy *of* Place

**Outdoor Education for a Changing World**

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## Chapter 4

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### The Emergence of Place in Outdoor Education

In this chapter we discuss the emergence of place as a pedagogical concept within both broader education and outdoor education discourses. Place-based pedagogies have been discussed in educational literature in North America for some time. As we have already argued, 'place' and 'sense of place' have become popular concepts, and a number of writers and practitioners have begun to explore connections between pedagogy and place. In the process of writing this book we came across several articles in teacher journals where 'place lessons' were presented as 'mapping your neighborhood' style lessons in geography, or 'recording local stories' approaches in history. While these initiatives are encouraging, we argue that they do not yet represent a view of curriculum, teaching and learning where place provides a significant philosophical and pedagogical foundation. Put another way, when an interest in place is 'retro-fitted' to current educational curricula as a theme or a lesson it is likely to be treated as just another topic to cover in geography, history, English or even outdoor education. This approach is unlikely to produce a new educational philosophy or significant reforms to pedagogic practices. It does not represent the kind of fundamentally different way of *doing* education, and of learners *experiencing* their learning in localised contexts that we are arguing for in this book. If place is fundamental to human identity and experience, then it needs to be thought about in ways outside of current, fragmented ways of learning through the disciplines. At the very least within the educational context place must be multi-disciplinary, or better, trans-disciplinary and experiential in character.

Place is not a thing, an object. It is, as we discussed in the previous chapter, an unfolding phenomenon. But it can, at different levels, be studied and reflected upon in terms of how it might influence practice. Therefore, in educational contexts, place is best understood as a meeting of learners' experiences, the ideas and ideals of their group and culture, and the geophysical reality of the site of learning itself. This view of place gives outdoor education practitioners a unique advantage. Arguably outdoor educators

have fewer disciplinary constraints than educators in many other disciplines and perhaps greater exposure to experiential approaches to teaching, guiding and learning. Yet, as we have already discussed in chapter three, there are a number of barriers and likely resistances that will be encountered in any move towards a place-responsive curriculum and pedagogy in contemporary outdoor education. One of these resistances, perhaps the most significant, requires further elaboration here.

It may be all too easy to think of the concept of place as a kind of substitute for nature and/or community in the popular understanding of outdoor education as learning about self, others and nature. We have already discussed the existence of a preference for a romanticised view of wild nature and a Utopian sense of the small-scale community in outdoor education. However, we feel that it is necessary to start this chapter by extending the discussion of how educators' and learners' relationships with the natural world have been represented in outdoor education discourse in recent years, particularly by academics striving to develop and articulate new theoretical and practical approaches to outdoor education. There are elements of this professional discourse that is useful, yet there are also some important differences between these proposals and the case we are making for a place-responsive pedagogy. Therefore we begin this chapter with a discussion about how and why the concept of place-responsiveness provides a distinct pedagogical difference to outdoor education directed towards developing critical and sustainable relationships with nature.

We then discuss the contribution of broader educational discourses on place-based education. There is considerable potential for outdoor educators to both benefit from, and contribute to, the broader debate about the role of place-based and place-responsive learning experiences in education. The last topic we consider in the chapter is the emergence of a nascent body of research literature about place and sense of place in studies conducted into outdoor education practice in Australia, New Zealand and overseas. Several crucial concepts about the potentials and pitfalls of a pedagogy of place are developed which are carried forward as guiding questions into the case study chapters that follow.

## Outdoor education, nature relations and place

In a recent review of the aims and purposes represented in outdoor education textbooks, Andrew Brookes (2004) identified three 'absolutist tendencies':

learning. Second, consideration of the local geography was either absent or regarded as being the same as 'the outdoors' (i.e. a taken-for-granted or considered a 'blank' space in which to perform). We have already discussed how problematic and pervasive the notions of individualism and a universal view of the outdoors as natural space can be in education. Finally, Brookes (2004) claims that the educational aims of outdoor education represented in the texts were largely abstract and based upon broad generalisations. He also noted the lack of any serious attempts to connect with wider educational discourses.

Thus there seems to be an insularity in much of the programming and educational literature of outdoor education (see M. Brown 2008a for a further example of this lack of engagement). Outdoor education is treated, both by practitioners and some of its advocates, as a discipline detached from the rest of the learner's educational journey. To the field's detriment it would appear that all too often outdoor education seems to occur in a bubble, insulated from broader educational debate and discussions about curricula and pedagogy.

Peter Higgins (2003), for example, believes that while there has been an increase in debate among academics about the impact of globalisation and modernity upon outdoor education practice, there has been little representation of this within practitioner-focused journals and associations. In Higgins' view, practitioners may be dangerously unaware of how their practices may be inadvertently subject to these wider forces. Humberstone, Brown and Richards (2003) point out that "old" romanticised ideals of outdoor leisure are becoming reconstructed through the demands of "mass market" consumers for "authentic adventure" (p. 7). Thus the modern outdoor adventure educator sees and seeks nature as 'an assault course, gymnasium or puzzle to be resolved and controlled. It is a resource to be commodified instead of a home to which to relate' (Loynes 2002, 114).

An outdoor education that appears to deny place through the Romantic desire for 'wild' nature, misunderstandings about the corporeal nature of embodied experience, and the erasure of local meanings to form novel adventure spaces, maintains universalist assumptions about knowledge, values and practices that are held throughout education and wider Western culture (Or 1992, 1994; Bowers 1993). The education system, of which outdoor education is a part, has become crucial in the initiation of young people into modern views of knowledge, experience and forms of rationality. Teachers, leaders and guides, through their own education and training, *may themselves have become authorities in this modern and rational*

its establishment, whether it be in the classroom or the outdoors. Such a system silences more basic questions about learners' experiences of particular outdoor places.

The rhetorical shift towards a critical orientation in outdoor education which focuses on the development of sustainable relationships with nature is evident within the professional outdoor education literature and can be traced through a series of academic papers. This discourse dates from the 1990s and we will be discussing the contribution of several of these influential papers in this chapter. Perhaps this critical interest in 'nature' is the latest iteration of the goals and purposes of outdoor education articulated in the Dartington conference and other forums since. Yet this discourse has developed amidst a growing awareness, outside of outdoor education, of the diversity of meanings that Western industrial cultures have for 'nature' (see, for example, Chambers 1984; Heller 1999; Marshall 1992; Schama 1995; Soper 1995; Soule and Lease 1995). This list of possible 'natures' is long and is seemingly inexhaustible: nature as unknowable universe, Magna Mater, wild kingdom, Gaia, pristine wilderness, picturesque landscape, gymnasium, temple, sunship, ecological process, habitat, environment, and so on. Soper (1995) considers that each of these social constructions tends to be representative of two basic views. On one hand there are those that promote a 'nature endorsing' discourse of ecological reality. On the other, are the postmodernists whose 'nature-scepticism' doubts that any such reality can exist beyond its cultural inscriptions. Both perspectives, Soper (1995) argues 'need to be more conscious of what their respective discourses on nature may be ignoring or politically repressing' (p. 8). Lease (1995) offers a slightly different, but equally illuminating perspective on our collective struggle to come to grips with the panoply of views about what nature is or might be.

Western thought had culminated in an impasse regarding nature. Was it the material world of experience, experiences that could be shared, repeated, and tested; or was it the ineffable, invisible, and transcendent world of divine origins, available only to acts of faith ... After wrestling with the notion of nature for well over two thousand years, Western tradition had come up dry: neither an identification of the human species with nature nor a strict dichotomy between the two proved ultimately successful. (pp. 8-9)

In broader terms this impasse has been described by Lakoff and Johnson

myths of objectivism and subjectivism. In the first myth humans believe that objective reality can be proven if the human errors of illusion, perception, judgment, emotion and personal and cultural bias can be avoided. It is believed that words and language, as the main medium through which we express our experience of reality, can have fixed meanings if metaphorical, poetic, fanciful, rhetorical and figurative language is avoided. Alternatively the myth of subjectivism, exemplified by the Romantic poets, proposes that in our everyday, practical activities 'we rely upon our senses to develop intuitions we can trust' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 188). Activities like poetry and art are seen to transcend rationality, taking us to a new level of awareness, a 'more important reality of imagination and feelings' (Lakoff and Johnson 1980, 188). Both myths are wrong, Lakoff and Johnson argue, but need each other. They are a binary pair where each position defines itself in opposition to the other. The impasse occurs when we cling to the belief system of one while rejecting the possibility of the other.

Within the space of this impasse nature has become a contested ground on which opposing ideological interests fight for the ascendancy of particular cultural and social meanings over others (Soule and Lease, 1995). Already we have seen that outdoor educators privilege certain interpretations of nature: nature as an *arena* where students experience personal development through challenging activity; or nature as a *venue* or *landscape* that can be appreciated and encountered aesthetically and for which we should develop some affinity, or nature as an *environment* in need of sustainable management practices by humans.

Brookes (1993) argues that outdoor education practices uncritically treat the 'bush' (a particularly Australian vernacular construction of nature) as a resource.

Seen against an emerging backdrop of environmental degradation as the unintended outcome of subconscious attitudes, any outdoor education practice might appear to be just another form of assault on the bush. What hunting, grazing, mining, clearing, harvesting and the introduction of exotic plants and animals began, outdoor education and its cousin tourism will finish off. (p. 11)

We might assume from the above quotation that Brookes (1993) sees each outdoor education student as extracting his or her experiences from the 'bush', and he asks: 'What's in it for the bush? What's in it for the community?' (p. 11). Later Brookes (1994) characterises such approaches as 'short raids on the "bush" as a resource rather than for sustainable management of the bush'.

place' (p. 31). That outdoors nature in Australia and New Zealand has been perceived as strange to European settlers and their descendants, and the negative consequences for both the environment and traditional cultures that followed as a result, has been well documented by environmental historians and anthropologists (Bolton 1981; King 2003; Lines 1991; McKenna 2002; Park 1995, 2006; Read 1996, 2000; Rose 1996, 2002, 2004; Seddon 1994; Sharp 2002; Sinclair 2001). David Tacey, a scholar of Jungian psychology, argues that the psychic estrangement from nature continues to be a major source of dislocation from place for settler Australians (1995, 2000, 2003).

### Searching for a metaphor: 'Nature as friend'

In searching for a way to encourage and reconnect outdoor educators and their students with nature, Brian Nettleton (1993) suggested that the relationship between humans and nature should be based on friendship. Nettleton highlights how friendship requires a reciprocal, diffuse and multifaceted relationship very different to a relationship of exploitation or distanced otherness.

The natural world is seen as a friend and from the immediacy of daily interaction, and not seen by modernity as from afar, as an object or as an inanimate other; as a whole and not as a composite of clever fragmentary insights painstakingly gleaned from the measurable aspects of nature. (p. 19)

Nettleton's nature-as-friend metaphor should be admired for its sentiment. However, Seddon (1997) argues that while it is 'perhaps corrective for a society that has seen nature as the enemy to be told to see it as a friend ... it is neither' (p. 20). Martin and Thomas (2000) attempted to further elaborate a model for human-nature relationships that extends Nettleton's nature-as-friend metaphor to one of interpersonal relationships. They develop their model based on the theoretical understandings of the constructs of human relationships (skills, concern, interaction, trust, knowing) and present it as a pedagogic tool to be considered by other educators who would like their students to move from a level of 'acquaintanceship' with nature to one of more 'intimate friendship'. Barriers to developing intimate friendship are seen to occur when participants experience fear and uncertainty. The authors conclude:

For programs with a clear intent of initiating human-nature relationships, the activities and places selected need to be those which

being – this may contrast with the high adventure goals and practices of more traditional outdoor programs. (Martin and Thomas 2000, 41)

Martin and Thomas' 'constructs of relationships' seem, like Nettleton's nature-as-friend, to be a little too anthropomorphic, a point the authors concede. When a person develops a relationship with another person they establish, as a result of experience, an intimate knowledge of the other's character, behaviour, idiosyncrasies and unique qualities. One of the difficulties inherent in a discussion of human-nature relationships within outdoor education is the tendency for 'nature' to remain an abstract and universalised concept. Any relationship between an individual person and nature is likely to be a one-sided affair. It is possible that we might feel a love for nature, but is unlikely that it will love us back. Instead, what we might experience is a reflection of our own desire where nature acts like a mirror (Cronon 1996). At its most extreme, the starry-eyed nature lover, like Narcissus in Greek mythology, is in danger of becoming stranded, unable to pull him or herself away from the beauty of his/her own reflection.

A second problem with the self/nature relations approach is that it potentially abrogates the responsibility to develop relationships with actual others in the outdoor places where the educational program is being enacted. Through placing an emphasis on developing an intimate relationship with nature there is the possibility that local people, their experiences and histories will be overlooked. An unintended outcome may be that it provides a cultural licence to pass local people by, not engaging with their often interesting and informative local stories and histories. In addition, we might ask, how might relationships with non-human others be conceptualised, explored and experienced? How do we relate to the chatter and song (two more anthropomorphisms) of birds in the forest as we lug our packs up the trail? Their song is, after all, probably a warning call easily interpreted by all in the forest but us, about the danger of a bunch of sweaty, noisy humans suddenly appearing in their home. People and other life forms do interact in significant and in potentially meaningful ways. The nature writer Barry Lopez (1986, 1988, 2003), for example, has explored this theme extensively.

Lopez has traced the complex interactions of people, animals and landscapes in specific North American locations for many decades. In doing so he draws upon scientific, historical, mythological, and anecdotal sources of information and blends these with his own experiences. Thus his accounts start by being grounded in a place as he draws upon scientific