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Rain and Romanticism: the environment in outdoor education

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Outdoor education provides an opportunity to engage with natural environments in ways that are distinct from other physical education teacher education (PETE) courses. This research examines how pre-service teachers (PSTs) within a PETE degree experienced ‘environment’ on an outdoor education camp. Using self-study methodology and drawing on responses of students and my reflections, I sought to interrogate my Romantic assumptions. A particularly rainy camp provided rich opportunities and PST responses to the weather were diverse, because the rain prompted environmental responsiveness in ways that would not have occurred in fine weather. PSTs generally valued the affordances of the outdoor setting which they saw as distinct from daily schooling. However, contrary experiences also emerged, problematising my Romantic framing of the environment and indicating that my approach was marginalising some students. Implications for teachers and teacher educators are discussed.

Keywords: Outdoor education; teacher education; environment; Romanticism; self-study

Introduction and context

The background on my computer screen ([Figure 1](#)) shows a series of ridges, golden tussock glowing in the evening light and disappearing ridge after ridge into the dusky distance with not a trace of humanity. I took the photo a few years ago and enjoy the relief it brings me when I am feeling under pressure at work. The image seems to offer an escape from the everyday, into a remote and different world, where my everyday stresses melt away. (Teacher Educator Reflection)

My reflection on the tussock hillside image offers one example of my view of the outdoors. Examination of this and other reflections show how my view is aligned with Romanticism because I value direct experiences of nature (in contrast to experiences of human-built areas) and this nature represents ‘the way things should be’ (Sauve, 1996). Such Romantic views are common in outdoor recreation where people actively seek uplifting experiences of sublime nature (Bell & Lyall, 2002). In my role as an outdoor education (OE) teacher, I consider the outdoors as an inspiring place where students can learn through their discomfort in the rain and extremes of weather that they have more resilience than they believed possible. Often times, at the end of an OE trip, there are many stories and much laughter about the events and the hardships we endured. Indeed, creating a hero narrative out of overcoming adversity is a central aspect of Romanticism (Rose, 1993). Through examination of my reflections, I realise

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Figure 1. Screen background image.

that such Romantic ideas have framed the way I present OE both in the past as an OE teacher for 11 years and more recently as a teacher educator for 9 years. In particular, for my physical education students, I believe the environment is an inspiring and uplifting aspect of outdoor education.

Physical education (PE) teachers frequently also have responsibility for OE in schools; yet, outdoor education requires an emphasis on the natural environment which is missing from PE (Martin & McCullagh, 2011). As a teacher educator working to prepare teachers for OE within a PE degree, one of my concerns is that the physical education pre-service teachers (PSTs) in my courses may not be used to attending to the environment. Because many of my students are used to highly uniform sports facilities such as gyms and playing fields, the absence of nature from these settings can potentially lead to a blinkered focus on activity and insensitivity to the environment (North & Harasymchuk, 2012). Indeed, there is a high likelihood that the possibilities that environmental settings provide for student learning are not realised when the outdoors is treated as simply a backdrop to the activities (Hill, 2008; Zink & Burrows, 2008). While the tussock ridges in Figure 1 provide me with a sense of peace and calm, I often fear it does little to inspire my students to work with (rather than just in) their surroundings.

Related to these ideas about emphasising the environment in OE learning are concerns about student safety when teachers are unaware of the influence of the environment. Adequate risk management requires that OE teachers not only have experiences of a particular place (Brookes, 2004), but also experiences of variations in conditions so that they develop adaptability and responsiveness to the environment

(Tozer, Fazey, & Fazey, 2007). Therefore, while environment is a central aspect of learning in OE, it is also crucial that OE teachers are sensitive to the environment for student safety.

As an OE teacher educator, I am concerned at the lessons I observe where PSTs transfer their plans from the playing field to the outdoor setting without any recognition of the particularities of the places we go. In addition, my PSTs seem to consider anything but perfect weather grounds for cancelling an outdoor trip. By contrast, I believe that great experiences often happen in what many consider ‘bad’ weather. I see my role as expanding the possibilities for teaching and learning in the outdoors for my PSTs.

Taking students outdoors in inclement weather presents an interesting puzzle of practice for teachers in Aotearoa, New Zealand – a land that is particularly blessed with rain. There is a small amount of literature on the influence of weather on students, children, and teachers. Some studies (not surprisingly) find that when it is raining, teachers do not take classes outdoors (Maynard & Waters, 2007), children are generally less active (Duncan, Hopkins, Schofield, & Duncan, 2008), and in particular younger girls prefer to be indoors (Niklassen & Sandberg, 2010). Wet weather appears to be a deterrent to going outdoors.

However, there are purported benefits to being outdoors in varying weather conditions. In early childhood education, MacQuarrie, Nugent, and Warden (2015) suggest that inclement weather extends the possibilities for learning if the children are adequately prepared. University-aged students on expeditions also benefit by learning about the environment in a direct way through the weather (Mullins, 2011; Paisley, Furman, Sibthorp, & Gookin, 2008). For example, students respond to the weather by considering where to pitch their tents in order to minimise exposure to wind, putting on jackets when it starts raining or sunscreen in fine weather. This is one way in which the weather brings the environment to the fore. In addition, short durations of wet weather appear to enhance a sense of community among students on expeditions (Breunig, O’Connell, Todd, Anderson, & Young, 2010). Hayhurst, Hunter, Katfa, and Boyes (2015) also find that youths who have a more negative perception of bad weather show greater increases in resilience on a sea voyage than those who are less concerned about the weather. The tremendous variability which the weather conditions bring to outdoor education appears beneficial because it requires student decision-making and responsiveness. It seems that there are barriers to participating and learning outdoors in the rain, yet the weather in all its diversity also offers some interesting opportunities for students to learn environmental responsiveness in a very practical and immediate sense.

My focus on environment in outdoor education is based on my experiences both as a student and as a teacher, and more recently as a teacher educator. The personal experiences of a teacher are important in informing practice; however, without exploration, teacher assumptions can limit student learning and create unintended problems (Schön, 1983). I therefore wished to interrogate my Romantic assumptions and compare and contrast them to what students experienced on my outdoor courses and in relation to my teaching intentions.

My concerns about the relationship between my assumptions and student learning are not new, nor are they limited to OE teachers. Munby and Russell (1990) coined the term ‘puzzles of practice’ which itself was derived from Schön’s work which described problem setting as:

the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen. In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as given. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations, which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain. (1983, p. 40)

As such, my Romantic approach to environment in OE was a puzzle which became known to me by its troubling nature. Some of my PSTs' responses to the inspiring and beautiful places we go in OE was frustrating for me. Indeed, a sense of confusion or dissatisfaction often prompts practitioners to reflect (Korthagen, 1992; Schön, 1983). As a result of these reflections, I developed the research question 'What assumptions underpin my Romantic framing of an OE camp?' Through examining my PSTs' responses to my Romantic framing, I might then be able to develop approaches that better align with my students' needs and interests.

Methods

The methods outlined here are designed to highlight how I examined my assumptions and helped to reframe them so that other teacher educators might go about doing the same. According to Schön (1987), framing is the process of naming the things to which we will attend and then framing the context in which we will attend to them. By contrast, Schön considers reframing not finding a new answer, but rather finding a different question to ask and thereby turns the focus of the research back on the researcher. Reframing lies in stark contrast to 'action based on habit, tradition, or impulse' (Samaras & Freese, 2009, p. xiii) and therefore offers a way of approaching researching which requires that we confront our personal theories.

In this study, I begin with my reflections and then draw on perspectives beyond my own to assist with this process of reframing. According to Pinnegar and Hamilton (2009), the defining feature of self-study is 'a focus on neither the self, nor the other, but both as well as the space between them' (p. 77). Through this statement, they indicate that self-study examines self always in relation to the other, and neither self nor other in isolation. The explicit focus on the self-in-practice distinguishes self-study methodologies from autoethnography, which does not necessarily consider the practical implications of the analysis. I draw on my own reflections and the insights from my students to 'hunt my assumptions' (Brandenburg, 2008) and enable me to begin a process of naming and reframing.

At the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, Aotearoa, New Zealand, in 2013, I researched my course which prepared teachers for junior high school OE teaching. Much of the emphasis on environment in my courses happens on a two-day (Sunday–Monday) camp. The camp is about two hours' drive from the campus at a beach with a camping area in a forest. The experience begins with an orientation to the area on the Sunday, and on the Monday, the PSTs teach an OE day program for students from a local school. The camp therefore provides an opportunity for my PSTs to experience OE as learners but also as teachers.

Of the 24 PSTs, six consented to participate in a series of interviews and group interviews. The six PSTs were therefore a convenience sample. The PST sample provided a range of ages (20–42), gender (two female and four male) and ethnicity (three PSTs were born overseas and moved to Aotearoa, New Zealand, one as a child, the other two as adults and two identified as Māori or Pasifika students).

The PSTs also had a range of previous outdoor education experiences. For example, one participant had only ever attended a one-day camp, three had some personal outdoor experiences but limited outdoor teaching, while two had been working as instructors or educators in the outdoors for several years. The demographics and experience levels of the PSTs in the sample covered much of the diversity in the class. I interviewed each PST three times during the one semester course and conducted a fourth interview 18 months later. Interviews followed a semi-structured protocol, ranged from 43 to 90 minutes and were designed to explore the PST's experiences in my course. According to Kamberelis and Dimitriadis (2005), the synergistic effects of group interviews are important in solving real-world problems. As a consequence, I also collected data from the six PSTs two group interviews which allowed the PSTs to respond to each other's perspectives. During the research period, I also maintained a reflective journal on my teaching which had 104 entries from 90 to 1200 words. I used the software 'NVIVO 10' to assist in managing the volume of information and clustering it around puzzles of practice (Munby & Russell, 1990).

I acknowledge my own voice in this research because in self-study research, practitioner beliefs and practices shape the research from the questions, to solution seeking and publication (Brown, 2011). However, seeking to take an informed and enlightened approach to these puzzles of practice required that I gain access to perspectives other than my own. I therefore used the insights from my PSTs to expose and challenge my assumptions.

Ethical issues are always present in research and in self-study research, there is a particular concern about the power imbalance between the researching teacher and the participant learners because ultimately, the researching teacher has the power to pass or fail the learner participants. The learners may therefore feel compelled to provide a filtered account of their experiences in which case, the resulting research may fail to challenge assumptions and become an exercise in vindicating our positions (Hamilton, 2002). Within self-study, a high level of transparency is required as it is the readers who assess the trustworthiness of the qualitative data, re-framings, and analytical interpretations (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). Through this article, I hold my research to these established standards and show how I challenged my personal theories and frame and reframe my view of OE.

Outcomes and findings

As the introduction to this paper shows, I identified my Romantic framing of the outdoors, particularly in relation to the weather, as a problem I wished to interrogate. I was therefore curious to compare my experiences on the camp with those of the PSTs.

Mel was among the least experienced in the outdoors:

Mel: It was almost good that it was bad if you know what I mean, I think if the weather had been fine I don't think we would have got as much learning out of it as we did having to deal with all that stuff the rain and cold wet kids ... for me as a teacher it was good to know that I can get up and I can function and I can do it. (Interview 2)

Mel showed that she valued the challenge of the weather and the opportunities this allowed for her to learn that even after a poor night's sleep, she could not only function

personally, but she had enough resources and energy left to work with the ‘cold, wet kids’. While Mel considered this valuable learning, it was not a pleasant experience for her, but she felt she learnt that she had a higher capacity to cope than she expected. In Mel’s case, the OE camp may have represented an interruption in the habits of our everyday and opened her eyes to the different possibilities that bad weather can offer. Mel’s response aligned with my Romantic ideas about the benefits of exposure to the natural environment. Similar to the findings of Hayhurst et al. (2015) and Breunig et al. (2010), it seemed that Mel appreciated the challenges of camping and teaching in the rain.

Greg, who had spent a great deal of time working in the outdoors was largely unaffected by the conditions.

Greg – in terms of personal comfort, if I don’t shower for weeks it doesn’t bother me. (Interview 2)

Andy also has a great deal of outdoor experience, but as a ‘country kid’ rather than an outdoor instructor:

Andy – I come from out in the country ... and play rugby in the rain, I have played in the snow ... if it had been much worse I would have worried about my students. (Interview 2)

Andy was stoic about the conditions and like Greg felt that it was all within a normal range. He did raise the question about how the school students, demonstrating that he was aware that they could well be having a different experience to him. Peter also picked up on this:

Peter – Maybe the kids now, if they had a lovely sunny day, then they wouldn’t think much about it, but instead they might think remember that day when it was pouring down and we had to run around to stay warm. Maybe it was a good thing? I don’t know because I haven’t talked with them about it. (Interview 2)

Peter was also comfortable with the conditions as he had a great deal of outdoor experience as well as good-quality outdoor clothing. He considered that the student learning may have been greater or at least more memorable than on a sunny day which ties in with Mel’s statement that ‘it was almost good that it was bad’. While I had been concerned that the weather was a constraint on the possibilities of outdoor education, it seemed that for some PSTs, the inclement weather was perceived as either insignificant or even positive.

Troubling my romantic framing of outdoor education

Rob – It was just I didn’t want the cold and I didn’t have a bedroll, I don’t really want to get a sore back, normally I am all for sleeping in tents and stuff but I do like a blow up bed. Cos it was cold, if it was hot I would have been in the tent, but it was freezing that night [I was unaware on camp that Rob decided to sleep in the van]. (Interview 2)

Rob’s comments illuminated my assumptions that like many OE teachers, I considered the outdoors is a good place to be and a useful place to enhance learning (Zink & Burrows, 2008). It was hard for me to understand that not all PSTs enjoyed being

outdoors. Bixler and Floyd (1997) also found that some students considered the outdoors to be scary, dirty, and uncomfortable. The learning for Rob appeared to be more focused on surviving and enduring this rather miserable experience. The idea of Romantically re-storying discomfort and difficulty as heroic adventures and overcoming challenges is a common theme in outdoor education (Bell & Lyall, 2002; Rose, 1993), but Rob did not see the camp as anything other than uncomfortable. Rob's comments were from two weeks after the camp and it clearly shows Rob's opinion had not adjusted the experience of camp to a heroic adventure.

Another PST who did not appreciate the weather was Jenny:

Jenny – I didn't mind staying in tents, and sleeping on the thin mattresses and stuff but then the earthquake happened and it was like camping, we didn't have facilities for months and months and months. (Interview 2)

In 2010 and 2011, Christchurch was rocked by repeated and significant earthquakes which claimed 185 lives. The power, water supply and sewerage were cut off for weeks and in some cases, people still had to use the portable toilets on the street corners, even 18 months later. Jenny revealed that her normal life was full of hardships (perhaps not dissimilar from being on a permanent camping trip) and far from being a refreshing escape to the 'simple life', camping was revisiting an everyday ordeal.

Jenny's perspective is interesting, as it identifies some of the privileged discourses in outdoor education that I espouse. I believe that camps offer opportunities to move beyond the everyday to a simpler way of life and that the outdoors is a great equaliser. (Lynch, 2000) found that many teachers

considered OE to be a great leveller as skills not called for at school became apparent during the novel activities of a camp and otherwise reticent, unsociable, awkward or unruly children were seen to 'shine'. This superficial view of social interrelationships overlooked the real social and cultural differences that existed between groups in NZ society. (p. 32)

My assumptions about the benefits of adversity and challenge were coming under pressure. Jenny's comments helped to highlight my own framing of the outdoors for this camp and how I was overlooking the real differences that exist in society.

I had previously taught in a variety of settings including in some areas with a low socio-economic status. It made me wonder what I was missing about my students' experiences in these other educational settings. For some, perhaps like Jenny, the outdoors may have represented just another hardship to endure. I consider myself a reflective and perceptive teacher, and during my time teaching in that low socio-economic setting, I learnt a lot from my students. I do not believe I was naïve; however, I did not systematically seek to hear my students' voices. In hindsight, I believe, there was much that I may have missed. As a participant in another study stated with regard to discomfort in the outdoors 'I get that every day at home, and I hate it. I work hard to avoid those things, not to look for them' (Rose & Paisley, 2012, p. 137). By contrast, I was able to go home after my OE experiences to the comforts and security of a middle-class life. Far from moving beyond the structures and habits of society, there are many ways in which the outdoors shores up and reiterates everyday life (Zink & Burrows, 2008).

On this trip, I did not consider the conditions worse than damp and I considered them well within the standard outdoor conditions where quality teaching and learning

could still occur. Were outdoor education to be postponed due to rain, it is unlikely that any program could run reliably due to the frequency of rain in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In addition, I believe, there are benefits to experiencing diverse weather conditions. As the PSTs have identified, it required them to respond to the environment more.

For my PSTs, learning about the environment through the weather was a key part of the camp. Tozer et al. (2007) call for varied practice contexts for outdoor leaders and this camp certainly provided some PSTs with weather conditions that they were not used to. Like Mullins (2011) and Paisley et al. (2008), my research shows that the weather on the camp forced PST teachers to respond to the environment in the OE camp.

Implications for my Romantic-inspired framing of OE

The experiences of several participants in my study, in particular Rob and Jenny, did not align with some of my Romantic ideals about camp. While the Romantic movement helped to protect vestiges of some ecosystems around Aotearoa /New Zealand, Romanticism has been implicated in a number of destructive processes too. Conceptualisations of pure and remote environment have been associated with an unhealthy dualism where humans set aside sanctuaries and wilderness areas while despoiling other places (Cronon, 2007; Park, 2006). These authors also criticise Romantics for their desire to preserve the original, untouched, wild nature, an approach that saw indigenous people evicted from their ancestral lands due to the creation of national parks, and other reserves. The logic followed that if nature was wild and perfect, then people were the despoilers. As such, people did not belong in these wild reserves – ironically, this applied to even those indigenous peoples who were currently living with the land and whose presence had helped to protect it. The social injustices perpetrated in the name of preservation of natural areas are extensive and a naïve Romantic view of nature has proven destructive and xenophobic. Romanticism contributed to a situation where colonisers treated the land as an empty space on which they could inscribe their dreams and aspirations in an uninformed and often ruthless manner. This possibility continues in OE today unless educators actively work against it.

Re-framing my Romantic approach

The critiques of Romanticism appear damning. However, there are possibilities within Romantic world views that I believe should not be disregarded. For example, Romantics revitalised the idea of sublime experiences in nature that helped to preserve remnants from the industrial revolution. Romantics also highlighted that experiences in nature can be associated with transformative experiences (Sobel, 2008). While embracing a naïve version of Romanticism is potentially dangerous, I argue that aspects of Romanticism are not without their benefits when handled with caution.

Steering a path between these divergent conceptualisations of environment is challenging. It requires that I am reflective and acknowledge the political and ethical implications of a particular approach and which meanings become privileged and which meanings are marginalised.

Most of the PSTs felt that they would take students outdoors and were inspired by the OE camp. Rob was positive about the possibilities of OE stating:

I didn't realise before camp, utilising simple things like dirt and trees and stuff for a lesson that you could use for teaching and ... different creative ways of teaching. (Focus Group 1)

The camp seemed influential for Rob because camp had opened his eyes to how the environment could contribute to learning and creativity but he preferred day trips. Speaking about the links between the OE course and her teaching placement, Jenny highlighted a particular class she taught outdoors:

Jenny – Another thing [from the curriculum course] was being outdoors to teach, ... We did a selfie-orienteeing, they would get a clue, take a photo of themselves at that location, it was pouring down and they loved it ... they enjoyed it much more than being in the gym, I think it was because they loved getting muddy ... (Interview 3)

Jenny's initial experience of the OE camp had been quite negative. However, here, Jenny provided an example of taking students outdoors for learning despite or even because of the heavy rain. Jenny's enjoyment of this particular session was obvious in the interview. In the final interviews, almost 18 months after the course, Jenny commented that she had felt quite down during the OE camp and those feelings explained her initial reaction to the weather on camp. Schön (1987) shows us how we can frame and reframe our approaches to puzzles of practice, and here, it seems that Jenny has also reframed her experiences. Jenny's initial comments after camp troubled my Romantic framings of camp: does this fresh insight now 'untrouble' this framing?

Significance

I set out to examine my assumptions about how I framed an OE camp and the influence of this framing on my students. The perspectives of my PSTs indicated that experiencing the environment through the weather was indeed a potent aspect of their learning about OE. Many PSTs viewed the rain as a challenge or something that contributed positively to their learning on camp. There were, however, some insights which undermined my Romantic framing of the camp. In particular, some students did not perceive rain as a chance to experience a special challenge, but rather something which reiterated their everyday discomforts.

Samaras and Freese (2009) state that '[w]e found ourselves framing and reframing our understandings of self-study through our teaching and our application of self-study to our practice' (p. 12). Through this self-study, I experienced a series of re-framings. It was helpful to access the PSTs' experiences as they 'yield[ed] a more nuanced understanding of the meanings students themselves ascribe to their experiences' (Zink & Burrows, 2008, p. 263). In this way, self-study methodology which requires that I conduct research in relation to others, played a crucial role in making my initial framing of OE explicit, then allowing me to reframe or reconsider my initial framing.

My Romanticism brought an aesthetic focus on the environment in the outdoors that emphasised the difference to the everyday and the inspiring possibilities of outdoor learning. Yet, this Romanticism also marginalised PSTs who did not find the discomforts of camp uplifting or even different to their everyday discomforts. While Jenny's revised perspective on camp is important, I still consider her and Rob's initial comments as critical in challenging my framing of the camp. 'Recognising

that there are many outdoors can help avoid some of the entrenched and idealised perspectives that potentially limit outdoor education discourses and experiences' (Straker, 2014, p. 249). For my PSTs and for school students, there will be many different outdoors and an outdoor experienced based solely on Romantic framings will limit the relevance of OE for many students.

Aiming for greater equality in education is a worthy goal in my opinion. Educational inequality is maintained at least in part by teachers who teach to the students who are most like ourselves (Feiman-Nemser, 2008). My Romantic framing worked for many of my PSTs who were, arguably, most like me. This left me open to the critic that my teaching was exacerbating societal inequality. It was deeply disturbing for me to discover that my practices might be undermining my beliefs about outdoor education contributing to equality in education. My discomfort was important in spurring me to frame and then reframe my approach to OE. Ovens (2013) argues that teacher educators should 'allow students to undo existing meanings and undermine their confidence in the experienced, given and obvious' (p. 21).

Since completing this research, I believe that I have become more sensitive to the ways in which Romanticism frames OE for me and the strengths and limitations of this framing. This learning is important not just for me but also for future OE teachers. I have now incorporated discussions and explorations into my course to allow PSTs to also consider who gets marginalised and who gets privileged through our assumptions. I argue that such an exploration provides opportunities for exposing our framings and allowing us to reframe them. By exposing and undermining the taken for granted in our beliefs, we have the opportunity to provide OE experiences which recognise that 'there are many outdoors and can help avoid some of the entrenched and idealised perspectives that potentially limit outdoor education discourses and experiences' (Straker, 2014, p. 249).

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Notes on contributor

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