

‘Why are we here?’ Taking ‘place’ into account in UK outdoor environmental education

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‘Place’ is an under-researched and poorly documented element of UK outdoor environmental education. In the international literature, North American and Australian researchers and practitioners show considerable attention to ‘place’. Yet UK outdoor environmental educators and researchers seem to have neglected this area despite calls for increased attention to this element of education in the outdoors. This paper starts from an example of environmental education practice and develops various questions around the role of ‘place’. Investigating the epistemology and ontology of place-based education, the paper draws on the considerable and diverse non-educational literature on ‘place’. Action research is put forward as a suitable fit in the search for an appropriate research methodology for place-based education, and a further set of pressing questions are raised.

Welcome to Staoineag

Clouds of midges. Literally millions. They have formed a living ball on my rucksack strap outside the tent, and the grass around it is brown and moving with insects. The other instructor and I agree that in our (quite extensive) experience working in the Scottish hills, this is the worst that we have seen. That evening, listening to the screams and giggles of the group in their tents, we stop and I wonder why we are here at Staoineag. Why here, in this place?

The underlying assumption of the week-long programme I had been asked to co-deliver is that ‘wilderness’, or at least a remote area of wild land, would provide the location (and content) for an experience which delves into questions of personal relationship with nature, and commitment to environmental activism. There are many points on which to debate this assumption: the question of ‘wilderness’ (Nash, 1982; Turner, 1995), the validity of a ‘significant life experience’ approach (Payne, 1999), or how it

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could be said that this week ‘works’ (Allison & Pomeroy, 2000). However, the question I want to ask is ‘why were we there, in that particular place?’

At Staoineag, this query had its immediate forms—‘what am I doing here in this midge-infested moor?’ and ‘how do I/the group cope with this?’. Furthermore, it took the form of more general questions: ‘what have the Scottish hills got to do with environmental/cultural issues such as climate change, recycling, sustainable futures?’. Equally there were grounded forms of this question such as ‘what is there about this particular tree that we might learn from?’, ‘what is the nature of the relationship between ourselves and this place?’, and ‘what can being here, at Staoineag Bothy, as opposed to anywhere else, contribute to the group’s learning?’. These questions have both practical and research dimensions: how might the education I am providing relate to this place, what are educationally significant elements of this place, and how might I research the effects of this approach?

That these questions resonate beyond this particular project can be illustrated by critically examining two responses to these enquiries about Staoineag, from the perspectives of deep ecology and eco-psychology. I have recently worked on several projects based on these understandings, which might indicate a growing awareness of such views in the UK. These schools of thought have also provided inspiration for my outdoor education practice and formed some of the unwritten basis for the project in question. Simply put, an argument from deep ecology might state that the group are exploring wild places with the aim of developing an ‘ecological self’ (Bodian, 1995; Fox, 1995b; Naess, 1995; Sessions, 1995) which will move them towards a different, and perhaps more sustainable, way of being.

In fact, as Arne Naess, ‘father’ of deep ecology, tells Bodian, the process of ‘identification’ moves from local places towards identifying with the universe, (Bodian, 1995, pp. 26–27) thus seeming to become more abstract and less ‘placed’. Fox discusses this lack of concreteness, but fails to grasp the epistemic hole in which this puts deep ecology (Fox, 1995a). While the global sense of ecological care advocated in deep ecological ‘identification’ might be congruent with the aims of the project I describe, it doesn’t answer the question of *where* this process might start. While this framework produces some educational tools (Seed, Macy, Flemming, & Naess, 1993), these seem to focus on global issues: their relevance or relationship to specific places is unclear. To rephrase this point, deep ecology doesn’t provide illumination on the process or concepts which might enable environmental education to engage with a bothy in the middle of the west highlands of Scotland, or any other specific location.

If deep ecology can’t help us to answer the question of ‘place’ educationally or conceptually, then perhaps eco-psychology (Roszak, Gomes, & Kanner, 1995) can achieve this, being closely related (Bragg, 1996), and arguably less philosophical and more practical in focus. An eco-psychologist might argue that the group are forming healthy relationships with the environment around Staoineag, providing a chance to access deep feelings about themselves and this place, and understand its significance in their lives (there are many examples of this practice: Birrell, 2001; Horesh, 1998; Rogers, 2000). Yet, while these authors maintain the eco-psychological idea of healthy relationships between people and places (Conn, 1995, p. 163), what is the

nature of this connection? What relationship have ‘my’ group really got with *this* bothy, *this* glen?

The group will be at Staoineag for two days and then, most likely, will never return. Comparing the relationship with this place to a relationship with a human sheds light on this problem. While we all might recollect meeting someone very briefly who had an impact on us, is this the metaphor that we want to build an educational project on? Martin and Thomas (2000) suggest that if we use this metaphor, time and effort are needed to develop a sense of connectedness, and that relationships need to be allowed to progress from acquaintance to intimacy, to result in care for places. This implies that one trip simply isn’t enough. Furthermore, Martin’s research with some of these approaches, provided testimony from one student who, being asked to feel ‘at one’ with nature before getting to know it, compared this to a one-night stand (Martin, 2004, p. 25).

The questions of time and breadth of relationship with place are not dealt with in the majority of the eco-psychological literature. This discipline, largely, can be seen to imply a relationship with ‘natural’ places based on very brief, possibly intense feelings, without any context or other forms of knowledge. Thomashow relates his experience of eco-psychological approaches that are limited to subjective or emotional understandings:

as I observe and participate in a sampling of these gatherings, I notice the glaring absence of any attention devoted to basic ecology and natural history. People who are delighted to open their sensory awareness to a beautiful tree or landscape often have an extremely limited understanding of the natural history of the site, thus totally lacking an ecological context for what it is they are looking at. The risk here is that their impressions of the landscape and ecosystem are projections and fantasies, filled with whatever idiosyncratic or group-constructed unconscious contents are at their disposal. This may be great for cultivating the spirit of imagination or opening the gates to deep personal issues, but it is ultimately anthropocentric, neglecting the rich natural history tapestry that nourished a deep sense of place (Thomashow, 1998, p. 284).

Deep ecology and eco-psychology have a lot to offer outdoor environmental education, but the brief discussion above shows that they have yet to develop meaningful responses to the question ‘why’, or, ‘what about’, here? More importantly they draw out the discussion of one example of environmental education (at Staoineag bothy), to imply wider questions and clarifications. These queries involve epistemology: what ways might we come to know places—how much time would we spend, and with what approaches? How might we know what has happened? They also involve ontology: what is the nature of the place we are engaging with; a physical location, a way of being somewhere? As should be clear from the foregoing discussion, these debates are not purely conceptual but have a strong impact on research, practice and practitioners.

Existing literature and practice

These questions aren’t without precedent. Considerable time has been spent theorizing, and increasingly, researching with participants, the role of ‘place’ in outdoor

environmental education. Within the English-speaking world,¹ this writing can be largely divided into two areas: American ‘place-based education’ (Bishop, 2004; Gruenewald & Smith, 2008; Knapp, 2005; Orr, 1992; Smith, 2002; Sobel, 2004; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2001), which is focused on educational institutions embracing the local community and environment as part of the learning context. The second area consists of considerable Australian and Canadian writing on ‘place’ in outdoor environmental education (Brookes, 1998, 2002a, 2002b; Curthoys, 2007; Gough, 2008; Henderson, 2001; Preston, 2004; Preston & Griffiths, 2004; Slattery, 2001; Stewart, 2003, 2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2008; Wattchow, 2007, 2008). The focus of this writing is on outdoor educators and the presence, or lack, of place-responsiveness in stand-alone environmental education programmes. This deals predominantly with the places which are visited as part of these programmes, but are not necessarily lived in by participants or facilitator.

The aim of this paper is not to provide a review of this literature, but to look at the epistemological and ontological framework that underpins this approach, moving towards the question of appropriate methodology for researching place in environmental education within the UK. Therefore a brief sketch of some of the projects described in the above literature will be sufficient to outline the place-based practice of environmental education.

In Australia, Lou Preston describes a project that she undertook with higher education students, where the students visited a chosen special place within the local area a number of times:

Each experience in our particular place was framed with a specific intention in mind, for example, to explore the place experientially, to discover the European history of the place, to identify the flora, to paint a picture of the place, or to search for Koorie food plants (Preston, 2004, p. 15).

These experiences were recorded in diaries and other media. Again in Australia, Andrew Brookes writes about a project which involved students regularly visiting a local woodland and exploring the lifeforms in the hollows of trees. Each return visit built up an understanding of the area, and also a process of naming (Brookes, 2002a).

In America, David Sobel describes a project where a school took on a ‘neglected tract of weedy forest’, in their locality and turned it into a learning laboratory. Their studies were practical, engaging in ecological, community and design issues (Sobel, 2004). For Sobel, place-based education *is* environmental education (Sobel, 2004, p. 9). Sharon Bishop writes of her project with high school English students:

I chose stories as the centerpiece that would direct our study of place . . . Reading would lead us to exploring our area through research, interviews, writing, and photography. The sources would be the students, community, and land (Bishop, 2004, p. 66).

The students went out and visited the prairies described in the local authors’ work, and developed their own stories of their place. Evidence for the purpose and success or otherwise of the projects described mostly involves quotations from student journals and written work, and observations by the facilitators.

Despite these minimal descriptions, and while acknowledging that there are many different approaches within this field, the literature implies that place-based environmental education usually consists of:

- a series of visits to one locality;
- a diverse, and increasingly participant-directed, experiential approach to understanding the place—through ecology, cultural history, geology, geography, place-names, story, interactions with local community, work projects and more. This results in a variety of ways of recording and linking these experiences to wider issues—discussions, journals, artwork. Building up a body of work to which participants and community members contribute; and
- an action research approach, where students direct and shape their own learning, contributing to the place in various immediate or long-term ways.

Adapting Lucas's (1979) approach to environmental education, this can be summarized as 'in', 'about' and 'for' place.

David Gruenewald describes the key elements of place-based education as 'natural history', 'cultural journalism' and 'action research' (Gruenewald, 2003a). For Gregory Smith, place-based education involves 'cultural studies, nature studies, real-world problem-solving, internships and entrepreneurial opportunities, and induction into community processes' (Smith, 2002). However, the above model seems to capture the widest description of the core process as described in North American and Australian literature.

During my work and PhD study, I have come across a small but growing interest in this model of place-based practice within UK environmental education. The Carnegie Commission for Rural Community Development has called for rural schools to engage in place-based education (CarnegieUKTrust, 2007), and with the Eden Project and the Sensory Trust organized a conference on place-based learning in September 2009. This interest is also bearing fruit on a practical level, where Forest Schools take children regularly to one place to learn outdoors, and a recently-commissioned study into the possibility of forest kindergartens in Scotland, inspired by Scandinavian practice, mentions place-based education in its appendices (Robertson, Martin, Borradaile, & Alker, 2009). Other examples include the author's work (www.openground.eu), Dr Simon Beames's development of and research on Outdoor Journeys (www.outdoorjourneys.org), the Bishop's Wood Centre (<http://worcestershire.whub.org.uk/home/wcc-edu-bishops-wood.htm>), 'grounds for learning' (www.gflscotland.org.uk), and www.placebasedlearning.co.uk.

To a great extent these programmes fit into the practice of place-based education described from the literature above, however there are two pressing issues: the first is that often these programmes are only incidentally place-based. The majority of justifications for regularly going out to an area outside the school, for example, are those which are commonly applied to all outdoor learning: increased physical activity, building confidence, increasing personal and social development, e.g. Robertson et al. (2009). Significantly a greater understanding of place is often not mentioned at all.

This leads to the second point, which is central to this paper: when specific attention is given to the question of place, there is very little research to draw on from inside the UK.

Given the strong dialogue on place in outdoor environmental education publications in North America and Australia, it is surprising that there is little research apparent within the UK.² Ten years ago, with regard to 'place' in outdoor environmental education, Nicol and Higgins stated that 'the outdoor literature in the United Kingdom is conspicuous by the absence of any treatment of this relationship' (Nicol & Higgins, 1998, p. 53). Very little has changed since then; the two UK papers which deal with this (Nicol, 2003b; White, 1998) are very hard to access, and rarely cited.

Clearly a methodology for research into UK place-based environmental education is required. Furthermore there is little deep reflection about such methodology in the international research on education in place.³ For example, US place-based education literature tends to rely on descriptions of projects and participant testimony, e.g. Sobel (2004): and Gruenewald calls for more theoretical development (Gruenewald, 2003a, 2003b). In an Australian context, Preston's two papers on her project (Preston, 2004; Preston & Griffiths, 2004) do not ask why action research is an appropriate methodology nor do they explore some of the deeper epistemological and ontological questions which could be raised. The questions might be 'what is "place"?' or 'how do we come to know places?'.

It is clear that researching 'place' in UK outdoor environmental education and an ontological and epistemological framework for such an effort are important issues: they will form the focus of the rest of this paper. Searching for an appropriate methodology will draw on the wider non-educational literature on place. The small amount of critical literature in the field of place-based education draws on human geographical writing on place (such as Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974, 1977), and phenomenologists such as Heidegger (1971), Merleau-Ponty (1968) and Casey (1993). However anthropological and environmental psychological writing (for example Feld & Basso, 1996; Schroeder, 2007) also has bearing on the role of 'place' in environmental education. The approach in this paper is to draw from these disciplines where they either help to elucidate distinctive features of UK relationship to place, or where conceptual development proves useful in articulating a theoretical framework for education in this area. More concretely, I will draw on my practice as an outdoor educator in Scotland and use these examples to relate the discussion to practical concerns.

Discussion: an ontology and epistemology of place

We are up at the shieling ground, half an hour's walk from the estate house. It is the last of six Friday visits to the glen behind the school, and the children have voted to return to their favourite location. Even the boy who had grown up in the glen, the son of the estate manager, had expressed his interest in the shieling ground. He had never been there before the project, and found it amazing that so many people had used this place through time, bringing their livestock up from the settlements for summer grazing.

The foundations of the shieling huts are visible on the flat ground, and the group are sitting on the walls of an old animal enclosure. We discuss what we have learned over the trips and plan the upcoming presentation evening where members of the community will have a chance to share in what the students have done. There was the 'field of the favourite places', the drumlin where they learnt about rocks and glaciers, the mountains around the glen for which they had invented new gaelic names, the barn where they got to comb the bull, and of course the shieling where they had acted out the story of 'the field of the hamstrung cattle'. The children also made plans to show the poems and stories they had written, and the maps filled up every week with each new adventure.

Along with these discussions was time to relax and explore, time to sit in the sun and eat lunch, and time to ask me what they would do with their Fridays now the project was coming to an end!

This is a description of a recent project I ran called 'Learning Landscapes' with a rural school in Argyll, Scotland. The glen we explored is visible from the classrooms and was just 10 minutes drive from the school. The project was inspired by ideas from place-based education and fits with the model described above. I will use this example to provide context for the questions I want to ask.

The need to develop an epistemological and ontological framework and an appropriate methodology for research, can be seen through the above story. This takes the form of various enquiries: What is the purpose of this project? Will this project help the pupils to live better in their places? Who's viewpoint are we looking at, the student's or the educator's? Also, how would we research the effects of this project?

Why?

Talking with teachers, parents, the staff of the estate, the local member of the Scottish Parliament and others, it was clear that they felt the project was important. They said that understanding the local landscape and history was beneficial for the children. The literature confirms this and develops the claim that place-based education helps us to live better where we are. For example, David Orr writes that place-based education works by:

re-educating people in the art of living well where they are . . . Good inhabitation is an art requiring detailed knowledge of a place, the capacity for observation, and a sense of care and rootedness (Orr, 1992, p. 130).

In this context, Bob Henderson writes about moving from ways of knowing towards ways of being:

a way of belonging that allows us to be engaged with the place as home, as a meaningful and alluring place which not only offers comfort but also demands responsibility (Henderson, 2001, p. 15).

There are various words that are associated with this 'way of being' such as 'sense of place', or 'place-attachment'. The Gaelic culture of the west coast of Scotland where this project took place has a rich concept of similar meaning which signifies a 'sense of place' and hereditary connection to landscape: 'dùthchas' (Mackenzie, 2002, 2006a;

McIntosh, 1999, 2001; Murphy, 2009).⁴ In the field of environmental psychology, considerable quantitative research has been conducted into measuring 'sense of place', 'place-identity', and 'place attachment' (Hernandez, Hidalgo, Salazar-Laplace, & Hess, 2007; Krupat, 1983; Sarbin, 1983). This quantitative research provides measures of these indicators and also evidence of ways in which people and places form complex and dynamic relationships which can prompt ongoing learning and constitute a locus for responsible action (Rogan, O'Connor, & Horwitz, 2005; Schroeder, 2007).

However, the key question for any educational research into sense of place, is whether the process of learning, the trips that we took out into the glen every Friday, are converted into this way of being. If, as many philosophers and geographers argue, 'place' is a 'co-creation' between people and a physical venue (Mackenzie, 2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b; Malpas, 1999; Massey, 2005), then what a 'place' is, its ontology, is in fact a relationship between us and our surroundings: a way of being. We can then put the question of effectiveness another way: if we know about the place, will we live well in it? Does the epistemological lead to the ontological? While the environmental psychologists cited above may measure people's sense of place, and what that leads to, research into place-based environmental education needs to look at the previous step: what promotes a sense of place? Only then will we be able to say that a programme was effective (if its goal was indeed increased 'sense of place').

A further goal of environmental education is to understand global issues and processes, and to comprehend how our actions affect ecosystems (Havlick & Hourdequin, 2005; Higgins, 1996). If it is to meet this challenge, place-based environmental education needs to reach out to more than one place (Orr, 1992, p. 131), again this is both an epistemological and ontological challenge. The epistemology requires knowing about other places and relationships between these places.⁵ With the school children on the Learning Landscapes Project, we identified which things they learnt that were just about the glen, and which things could be applied elsewhere. We also investigated ecological systems bigger than the glen, and the time in class between trips developed some of these themes. However the ontological challenge is harder: if the outcome is healthier living within these wider ecosystems, then place-based learning needs to help the students acknowledge their agency in the ongoing story of the wider ecosystems that they are in.

This challenge is deepened by the fact that many of the places where environmental education and place-based approaches occur are not the places where the students live (e.g. projects such as those described by Preston (2004) and Brookes (2002a)). Again this implies both that the learning can take account of other places, and that the end result is care for these distant areas. When as educators we get in a mini-bus and drive our students to a venue, for example in the Scottish Highlands, can we still do place-based education? Young develops this question in a philosophical direction, pointing out the contradiction between the Heideggerian idea of dwelling in, and authentically speaking for our home places (Heidegger, 1971),⁶ with wanting to speak for endangered and threatened places around the globe: places where we

are not 'at home' (Young, 2002). Young concludes that to avoid the abstraction of talking about places far away, we need to experience and creatively 'open ourselves up' to them.

This theme is also investigated by Szerszynski, who characterizes the different ontologies, or 'ways of being', of newly settled and 'local' people in Northern England (Szerszynski, 2006). He contrasts the 'aesthetic' approach of newly settled residents who describe the place in terms of its beauty, with the 'relationship' orientation of people who have lived in that place all their lives, and concentrate on their relationships with people. These ways of being offer an interesting possibility for place-based education if attention can be drawn to the contrast between what it is like being at 'home' and what it is like 'away'. Both this research and Young's arguments support the idea of place-based environmental education away from home, but imply different place-responsive practices for 'home' and for 'away' and the need to develop links between the two.

Who?

The question of whose perspective both the practice and research of place-based education reflects is a difficult one. The extent to which the facilitator chooses the subject matter of the project and its approach, will determine what understanding of the place is developed. However, this will be adapted as the young people bring their own sense of place to the project. The ability for students to shape their own learning and direct study towards their own interests is reflected in the call for an action research approach to place-based learning. Both these factors will affect research findings.

There are positive reasons, as a facilitator, to directing the learning. As someone who hasn't been living in the area all my life, I was on a similar journey as the school children in the Learning Landscapes Project. I was also learning about the glen, its history and geography, and was able to seek out the support of local experts. However I was acutely aware that, as implied by Szerszynski's research, the perspective of an 'incomer' can be different to a 'local'. The differences in sense of place between 'incomers' and 'natives' have been researched by environmental psychologists (Hernandez et al., 2007), and geographers (Relph, 1976; Tuan, 1974) and the implication for place-based environmental education is that the ontologies, or the ways of being, of these two different categories will be reflected in different epistemologies and approaches to learning.

This issue is dealt with by the Scottish historian James Hunter. In his book *On the other side of sorrow*, Hunter describes the ways in which Highland and environmentalist conceptions of the Scottish landscape developed and, more recently, clashed (Hunter, 1995). Hunter analyses the root of viewpoints on the Highlands which see a beautiful landscape and yet fail to acknowledge the often tragic human history. This view of the land as a purely natural place often follows the fault-line of 'incomer' and 'native' (Mackenzie, 2006a) and is prevalent in outdoor environmental education in the UK, as White's research shows (White, 1998). White contrasted

the views of those who lived and worked on the land with the views of outdoor educators, calling for them to become much more aware of the culture in the landscape (White, 1998, p. 2). Implicit in these ideas is a respect for different viewpoints on place, yet a call for people to step outside their usual perspectives.

These questions also form an integral part of land politics in Scotland. Fiona Mackenzie has spent considerable time recording testimony from community land buy-outs in Scotland (Mackenzie, 2002, 2004, 2006a, 2006b). She theorizes place as a process through which communities negotiate their sense of themselves and the politics of the land. Significantly she highlights the community practices which break down the 'native *versus* incomer' barriers, practices which include learning about place and creating artwork together (Mackenzie, 2002, 2004). In contrast to White, Mackenzie's work implies that the categories of 'incomer', and 'native', might not always hold. Interestingly this also implies that an epistemological approach has the ability to alter ontological status. For place-based learning this might mean that all involved deepen their understanding of a place, sharing different perspectives, but in the end develop a rootedness in place which transcends these categories.

A possible research methodology

The discussion of 'why' engage with place-based approaches to environmental education implies a research methodology that does not simply measure sense of place, but looks at how it is developed, investigating the relationship between epistemology ('place-based learning') and ontology ('a sense of place'). Furthermore, with regards to care and responsibility for more distant places, the research method requires the ability to move across different scales, negotiating what Malpas calls the 'nested' character of place (Malpas, 1999): the glen, the watershed, the region, etc., and follow the interconnections of modern life. Enquiring into 'who' place-based education and research is about, also implies certain constraints to a research methodology. The voices, perspectives and backgrounds of both the learners and educators need to be recorded, as does the development of these elements over time. Also, the project described at the start of the discussion involved a variety of types of learning: from story-telling and interpreting the landscape, to learning plant and gaelic place-names: these ways of knowing need to be accounted for in any possible research methodology.

Action research is mentioned as a part of place-based education (see for example Gruenewald, 2003a), but also seems to be a suitable candidate for research *on* place-based education. Action research is fundamentally a learning process that records different perceptions, feelings and experiences over a period of time, and engages the participants in reflecting on these and shaping their own projects and research (Reason & Bradbury, 1999). As such it is an approach which could become part of the place-based learning process, as well as producing research findings. Furthermore, action research has an ontology which fits well with the idea of place as 'co-created' (Ladkin, 2005; Reason & Bradbury, 1999). I have argued that a sense of place is a dialectic between humans and their environment,⁷ and as such it involves both values

and things, subjectivity and objectivity. Reason describes the ontology of action research, the ‘participatory world view’, in a similar way:

The participative perspective sees a world not of separate things, as a positivist view would have, nor as a socially reinforced construction of the human mind as held by the various relativist perspectives, but rather of relationships which we co-author (Reason, 1998, p. 157).

Action research also describes an epistemology which could account for the richness and dynamism which are part of the place-based projects described here. Reason’s ‘extended’ epistemology captures a variety of different ways of knowing: ‘experiential’, ‘presentational’, ‘propositional’ and ‘practical’ (Reason, 1998; Reason & Heron, 2008). This epistemology allows differentiation between direct personal experience of things, representations of these experiences, various bodies of theoretical knowledge that we might bring to bear, and practical understanding. These are not isolated elements: for example, this extended epistemology might account for a visit to the shieling (experiential knowing), and a variety of forms of expression of this visit—drawings, discussions, memories (presentational knowing). Different conceptual developments of that experience are possible: an understanding of the practice of transhumance, or of Gaelic place-names associated with shielings (propositional knowing). It might inspire action grounded in this understanding: the ability to spot other shielings in the hills, taking someone else to see them (practical knowing).⁸ Further work needs to be undertaken to see how this extended epistemology impacts research processes.⁹

Concluding questions

In response to a lack of UK research into place-based environmental education, and the need for deeper analysis of the epistemological and ontological implications of this approach, I have used examples of my practice to develop the discussion. The implications for an appropriate research method are many: the need to understand the relationship between learning about places and living well in them, the role that our identity plays in shaping our experience of place, and the fluidity of both this identity and environments themselves. I have shown how action research might be a suitable candidate for researching these issues, however this paper gives rise to more questions than it answers; for example, is action research the only method, will its open approach clash with set curricular requirements?¹⁰ Also, does this ask too much of the practitioner—do they also need to be the researcher?

Having referenced place-based outdoor environmental education practice which seems to have developed congruently to, but sometimes with very little concern for, the philosophical questions investigated here, the query arises ‘what is the point of all this theory?’. Educators who do research and researchers who do education may ask: having developed an ontology and epistemology of place, what kind of research would have an impact on that theory, rather than just being inspired by it?¹¹ There are more questions: What sort of evidence might justify a place-based learning

project, would it solely be provided by humans or might there be environmental data also? What academic writing styles and logic might reflect this knowledge of place?

I have not put place-based outdoor learning into a wider context: the impacts on sustainability education, mental and physical well-being, personal and social education in the outdoors, community development and more are beyond the scope of this paper and my research. However, the implication is clear: there is a rich vein of research and practice yet to be tapped within UK outdoor environmental education.

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Notes

1. There is considerable anthropological research into non-western understandings of place (Basso, 1996; Feld & Basso, 1996; Seamon & Mugerauer, 1985), and also an interest in how indigenous ways of understanding places can inform environmental education (Shiva, 1993; Takano, 2004; van Damme & Neluvhalani, 2004), yet how to *develop* a sense of place seems to be a question typical of 'western' cultures.
2. However, it is not within the scope of this paper to investigate the reasons behind this apparent neglect.
3. Some of the literature asks these questions, for example Stewart (2003), and Wattchow (2007). Pivnik (2003) writes about 'topos' as a guiding principle for research methodology, but doesn't venture onto conceptual territory.
4. This concept offers the potential for further research linking education with Scottish senses of place.
5. Something that geographer Doreen Massey analyses in depth (Massey, 2005).
6. A question which arises in this context is whether there ever was a time or place where people dwelled 'authentically' in one locality. What is clear from writing such as Doreen Massey's is that modern life involves complex interconnected relationships between places (Massey, 2005) and implies that place-based education is about *places* rather than *one* place.
7. This fits with wider philosophical attempts to understand the nature of subjective experience (Kidner, 2001; Lukenchuk, 2006; Malpas, 1999; Merleau-Ponty, 1968), which do not fall into the dualism of postivism vs constructionism.
8. Nicol has already applied this epistemological framework to outdoor environmental education theory and practice (Nicol, 2003a). However, the particular applicability to how we understand places remained implicit.
9. This forms the focus of the author's continuing PhD research—sense of place in an Argyll context and Action Research with educators looking at place-based education practice in their work contexts.
10. Some of these questions have been asked (Gibbs & Howley, 2001), in a US context. Also, Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence seems to promote a cross-curricular approach congruent with place-based education, see www.LTScotland.org.uk.
11. Would the idea of praxis, as the critical interaction of theory and practice (Collins, 2004; Cotton & Griffiths, 2007; Meyers, 2006), be realistic for a practitioner?

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