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Developing Your Teaching: Ideas, Insight and Action

Knowledge construction in Outdoor Education

An opportunity to develop our teaching arose when we were tasked with organising and facilitating a field trip to a remote (in English terms) valley in the Lake District for an international cohort of masters students studying Outdoor Education (OE). In the UK, the discipline of OE is both process and content ranging across traditional subjects such as physical education and environmental sciences at the same time as foregrounding personal development. The last thing we wanted to be accused of was a neo-colonial teaching of the British 'way' leading to the emergence of a globalised practice in places as far-flung and as different in their landscapes and cultures as Columbia, Kazakhstan and the Philippines. Instead, we sought to problematize the 'occupation' of being an outdoor educator.

Dewey saw 'occupations' in an educational setting as more than just work-related learning, they are epistemological frames for understanding the relationship between the individual experience of the student, the place the learning is situated in and the wider needs of society, such as place-based OE. This means that instead of imposing an idea of a profession envisaged by the teachers, the learning is organised through the students taking on a particular occupation in a specific setting (socially and spatially), then developing that particular occupation to follow their interests and the needs of the world (environmental and social).

By educating through 'occupations' and changing to a student-centred approach, we destabilised the established idea of outdoor educator and enabled the students to co-construct a new place-responsive occupation. They explored how to engage with the valley temporally and spatially, inspired by each other, the skills and knowledge of the staff and the valley's material presence. A walk and talk with the ranger began to develop a deeper interpretation of the valley beyond the material encounter. For example, moving through the forest following the trails created by the herd of almost wild cattle and wading upstream in the unconstrained river were powerful experiences brought fully alive by the observations of the ranger who had the perspectives of a longer time and larger purpose. One such critically engaged encounter opened the door for further explorations of the knowledge about the valley held by others, such as a local farmer who explained how his own occupation had been transformed by the changes in the landscape from shepherding to herding wild cattle. We encouraged the students to explore the valley and the opportunities it offered, notice their own talents, interests and motivations and then consider these in the wider context of the needs of society, both broadly and in their own cultural contexts.

We built on the approach of participative inquiry (Reason, 1994) seeking to involve the students as equal participants in their own educational experience. This method fitted well with our intentions for a critical, reflective and democratic pedagogy and the approach was successful in problematizing the 'occupation' of outdoor educator amongst the students, by changing the often taken for granted occupation of being a student. Dewey (1938) explained that, when learners perceive that being a student is meaningless and uniformity stifles their exploration they not only struggle to engage with their studies, they may seek other more subversive occupations. Our approach had the effect of critically engaging students in constructing their ideas of the occupation. If the purpose of being a student is learning, the organisation of the educational programme through occupations allowed a

more cooperative atmosphere were 'students as participants' developed other ways of imagining what an outdoor educator could or should look like.

References

Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience & Education*. New York: Touchstone.

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Authors

Danny Towers
Lecturer in Outdoor Education
Department of Science, Natural Resources & Outdoor Studies
University of Cumbria,
Lake District Campus,
Ambleside.
LA22 9BB

Dr Chris Loynes
Reader, Outdoor Studies
University of Cumbria, Ambleside, Cumbria, LA22 9BB, UK