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Eliciting nature and landscape writing through outdoor experiences

Heather Prince

Department of Science, Natural Resources and Outdoor Studies, Faculty of Health and Science, University of Cumbria

Abstract

Nature and landscape writing includes creative writing about wild places. However, most authors have a literary background and are not outdoor ‘educators’. Using a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, the reasons suggested are a lack of framing of outdoor experiences for this intent, the need for learning the skills of interpretation and lexicon and the offer of prolonged, powerful experiences and time for creative thinking and responses, such as an extended solo. It is suggested that outdoor educators may be too busy ‘experiencing’ to write, that they do not go ‘slow’ enough or that they are encapsulated in the ‘edginess of existence’ through adventure and just pass through their surroundings rather than connect with them. Outdoor educators have much to offer as they experience metaphorical or literal journeys comprising ‘flow’ rather than episodic encounter through lived experience to create rich embodied stories with ideological and social aspects so often overlooked in narrative.

Keywords: nature writing, landscape writing, outdoor education, slow, lexicon

Introduction

Nature writing is a phenomenon rooted in tradition which includes creative writing about wild places and nature in prose or poetry and the relationship between ecology and literature (writers such as Aldo Leopold and Gilbert White). Some consider that there has been a transformation into landscape writing this century developing as a ‘*democratic art*’ (Crown, 2012) with the works of authors such as Kathleen Jamie, Roger Deakin and Robert McFarlane. Ramaswamy (2012) suggests that the field has broadened in recent years to include travelogue, reportage, memoir, psychogeography, simple profundity, watchfulness and imagination.

There is no doubt that the majority of outdoor educators find many wild places exhilarating, inspiring and magical. There is much writing about lived experiences and personal narratives of journeys and adventures through landscapes and nature, “... human experience in all its personal, social and environmental complexity is unpredictable, and, in many cases, unspeakable.” (Higgins & Wattoo, 2013:30). Outdoor educators have contributed to research on developing place consciousness and understanding place identity. However, it is not clear why we do not

seem to elicit more powerful, creative writing through outdoor education or by outdoor educators? We need to instil observation, capitalise on curiosity, value ‘slow’ outdoor experiences and encourage reported reflection.

Methodology

The research undertakes a hermeneutic phenomenological approach which seeks to co-construct meaning through the interpretation of texts. It examines how people interpret and record meaning in their experiences in outdoor environments through lived experiences. It is an interpretivist approach in which interpretation and meaning making are embedded features of experiences (Findlay et al. 2012) away from conscious knowing. Hermeneutic phenomenology privileges artistic forms of expression through cognitive and non-cognitive constructionism. It differs from content analysis which examines how language constructs phenomena, not how it reflects or reveals it. The range of underlying reasons for the dichotomy of outcomes through co-construction are rationalised and questioned.

Outdoor ‘educators’ and writing

Journeying is a key experience through which outdoor ‘educators’ have tried to parallel creative writing and lived experience leading to poetic and/or descriptive writing (Higgins & Wattchow, 2013; Haluza-Delay, 2001). Reflections on outdoor experiences have led to successful narrative and poetic representations. However, for many, it would seem that outdoor educators are as much out of their comfort zones as literary writers are in their undertaking of a multi-day journey or being in an outdoor environment for prolonged periods of time. “After walking the Pennine Way a couple of summers ago, I swore I’d never do it again ... it was a 21-day slog across saturated uplands, most of it in a blur of lead-coloured mist.” (Armitage, 2013). There is a definite differentiation between literal and metaphorical journeys.

Such writing is often retrospective: a journey is undertaken and subsequently used as an experience to reflect on but not set up with that intention. However, from early childhood, outdoor experiences provide contexts for speaking and listening and, often in primary schools, for writing. Sound educational pedagogy comprises primary and secondary (reflective) components (Dewey, 1981). It is hard to achieve some learning outcomes in literacy without a context and experiences can be enhanced through the use of personal narrative. “The outdoor experience gives students something immediate and deeply felt to write about.” (Bennison & Olsen, 2002:241). Latosi-Sawin (2004) echoes this sentiment by his research on the inspiration felt by a group of higher education students during an outdoor semester towards creative writing about wild places and nature.

Perhaps it is the more prolonged or intense experiences which can elicit powerful responses by outdoor educators because anything less in a temporal or diffuse sense is the ‘norm’? Campbell (2010) for example, describes the responses produced by a group of students during a five day

solo in unfamiliar terrain in the Cantabrian Mountains of northern Spain. It was not only their verbal and person-centred responses to such a challenge and her management concerns as a tutor which are interesting but, for the purposes of this paper, the outputs in terms of the level of creativity and critical thinking or personification of the environment which were more powerful, polished and thoughtful than anything produced in the classroom or valley campsite. This and the development of place consciousness (Asfeldt et al., 2009) argues against spontaneity (Higgins & Wattchow, 2013).

Psychogeography may support spontaneous creativity since it defines an approach based on playfulness and drifting, focussing on the behaviour and emotions of individuals. Coined originally in an urban environment, the *dérive* (or drift) is defined by Situationists as the technique of locomotion without a goal (Plant, 1992). It is exciting for some as a rather inductionist approach whereby an individual is drawn to the attractions of terrain and encounters found therein. Certainly, this term has now been extended beyond the urban to make meaning and reflection of range of environments (e.g. Self, 2007). It has not been directly attributed to explorations by outdoor educators although this is not to prohibit such ‘saunterings’ or ‘wanderings’.

Martin (2005) suggests that describing experiences of human inter-relationships is far easier than seeking a lexicon to mantra human-nature relationships, since the latter are less contemplated and less familiar. Lived experiences rely on intuitive feelings rather than melodrama or close encounters and thus, perhaps need a period of learning to interpret such subconscious reactions. A scarcity in appropriate language in human-nature relationships is also acknowledged although cognition and linguistic development are parallel phenomena without a strong causal relationship (Goodluck, 1991).

Successful writers such as Jamie (2005) offer ‘queer’ and disparate subjects (Crown, 2012). Through an outdoor lens, they vary from Orkney in midwinter, to a pair of nesting peregrines to 21st century flotsam on a Hebridean strandline, usurped by a visit to the basement of a hospital and its pathology laboratory (Jamie, 2012a). She has established an essay form and content which is precise and crafted but with room for play and imagination not without concern about its place in literature, “We had a horror of it turning up in the ‘body, mind and spirit’ section of the bookshops” (Jamie, 2012b).

Findings

The masters of literary writing appear to enjoy being in the natural environment. Perhaps they choose their environments to write creatively about them; to revitalise the familiar and engender fresh curiosity? Some of these environments would not be selected by outdoor educators and the resulting works are often lacking in the flow that would be exhibited by a journey. It is suggested that outdoor educators are usually in natural environments to experience them rather than to report on them or if there are stories to tell, these are descriptions of ‘doing’. They might take

photographs for others or for a travelogue. A by-product is reflection, often processing the experience to make meaning of it or through an intrinsic aesthetic response such as art, sculpture, poetry or prose often in the form of an image of personal feelings rather than any detailed observation of the landscape. Critics of nature writing see it as celebrating nature as a restorative and regenerative force, positioning it often uncritically as a central object of study ('ecocentricism'). It might omit the social or ideological aspects of narrative by placing nature writing in an aesthetic or psychologising framework (Armbruster & Wallace, 2001). Outdoor educators are well placed to combine the social with aesthetic dimensions.

Thus, it might be necessary to frame an outdoor experience with the intention of eliciting landscape and nature writing (or some other creative response) rather than subsequently through reflection; to present powerful but not melodramatic experiences of nature and landscape; to allow for learning in terms of the skills of the interpretation of such experiences in words; and, to offer prolonged experiences and time in which to allow creative thinking and responses, through iteration if required. It is possible that we need not venture far from home to connect with nature and landscape (Dewey, 1981).

Are outdoor educators connecting with nature or just passing through? Although there may be a subconscious effort to internalise thinking and appreciation, outdoor educators are too busy 'experiencing' to write about their environments or encapsulated in the 'edginess of existence' through adventure to concentrate on self-actualisation. It could be that they just do not have the words to capture the image of the landscape or that they just do not go 'slow' enough. Outdoor adventurers and explorers do have something to offer because they usually have an objective and undertake a journey which encapsulates a continuous experience. Multiple observations of place can provide rich and powerful writing (e.g. Sprackland, 2013) and a psychogeographical approach has currency, but movement through a landscape gives the potential for change and spatial difference. There is some evidence to suggest that a prolonged or solo experience enhances the level of creativity about an environment but there is a need to find words which appropriate towards a response and which are not always easily forthcoming.

Conclusion

It is suggested here that outdoor educators have much to offer and that they should read and explore the vocabulary and lexicon of landscape and nature writing. Through adventure or being in nature, they experience a metaphorical or literal journey, or both, whereby there is 'flow' rather than episodic encounter. There is often an objective or target making for a rich embodied story, with ideological and social aspects so often overlooked in narrative (Kollin, 2000).

Outdoor educators often encourage reflective and creative writing as part of the facilitation of outdoor experiences for others, particularly young people. It is important to extend this to themselves as professionals and to create a rich and inclusive interface and legacy through writing.

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Codicil

Describe gannets fishing and/or watch,

http://www.bbc.co.uk/nature/life/Northern_Gannet#p007yyly

Write about what you have seen.

Compare this to Jamie (2012b), p. 85

“Gannets glitter. They’re made for vision, shine in any available light, available to see and be seen. Their eyes are round and fierce, with a rim of weird blue, and they are adapted to see down through the surface reflections of the sea. There, they take what they need and what they don’t. Less patrician poet, more bargain-hunter”