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## **Finding New Ways: developing a time and place responsive approach to Outdoor Learning**

**Danny Towers and Dr Chris Loynes**

Place responsiveness in international outdoor education is a 'hot' topic that came to the fore for staff at the University when we were faced with an international cohort of masters students. 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.

Would it be possible to overcome all the traditions, training and expectations of the UK's iconic outdoor education practices, from adventure activities to environmental sciences, in order to develop a practice largely inspired by the place itself?

We took inspiration from Quay and Seaman's recent book 'John Dewey and Education Outdoors' in which they propose Dewey's concept of 'occupation' as an organising principle for a curriculum.

*By 'occupation' Dewey did not mean just a work role but*

*.....any role in society such as student, parent, activist, carer, etc.*

Dewey proposed this as an organising principle for learning, something like a thematic approach but based around an 'occupation'. He also proposed that these 'occupations' should be Real World and relevant to the current life of the student, not based around developing them for some future 'occupation' they may or may not do.

Most importantly, Dewey said students should learn from experience, gaining knowledge and skills from the world around them: from people, places and tasks, and then transform the learning to suit their own attributes and aspirations.

We then took the students to a remote (in English terms) valley and posed them the question

'What kind of Outdoor Educator could you be here, in this valley?'

We hope our experiences might help others considering how to lead place responsive field trips and adventures whether in higher education or with other groups.

### **The field trip design**

We chose a week in the valley of Ennerdale because, as England's first rewilding project, it is already challenging the norms to be found in English landscapes, their appearance, the activities that take place and the way it is managed. We hoped this would give us a head start in challenging any expectations the students might have about how outdoor education *ought* to be practiced.

After outlining examples and critiques of British outdoor practices being adopted abroad we asked the students to think of the kind of Outdoor Educator they felt they *wanted to become in this place*. The intention was to encourage the students to explore the valley and the opportunities it offered, notice their own talents, interests and motivations and consider these in the wider context of the needs of society, both broadly and in their own cultural contexts. Could each student find their own way to bring the opportunities afforded by the valley together in a way that met what they considered to be the needs of society?

We used Valerie Hannon's thought provoking keynote from the IOL National Conference 2016, 'What is Outdoor Learning For?', to think about the bigger picture. This, we hoped, would lead them to explore what knowledge and skills they needed so that they could be supported during their course to *become the particular outdoor educator they wanted to be with the abilities to adapt their practice to different people and places*. The students' prior experience of what an outdoor educator *should* 'look like', if they had any, is significant in this instance, and, likewise, their emerging understanding of Ennerdale. The important thing to us was to raise awareness of these influences so that the students could move beyond the limits of any previous practices to create a new practice that attempted to balance the three dimensions of the place, their own interests and talents and the needs of society.

### **Dewey's concept of occupation**

'Occupations' are not simply about vocational learning. Dewey's intention was to connect 'education' to the 'occupations' of community, family and social as well as working life. The experience of 'occupation' is holistic in an immediate and aesthetic sense. The concept can be seen as an organising principle, providing a lens through which to explore a wider range than typically highlighted in education including embodied and felt knowledge.

Historically, teachers as the 'keepers of knowledge' or the 'expert', determine what particular knowledge learners need to know. We hoped 'occupation' could help to change these power relations. We anticipated that the experiential doing and knowing would engage the students in using their experience to construct knowledge valid to them and give their sense of place a voice in the group and, ultimately, professionally.

In seeking to develop a place responsive education outdoors we wanted to put less emphasis on the 'occupation' as defined by the professional world. Instead, we sought to foreground the place, its landscape and culture, together with the individual professionals and their values and interests in determining the form the 'occupation' took. To our minds this could produce a more place responsive approach and a more politically engaged education.

### **What happened**

Initially, the students developed a long list of knowledge and skills drawing on their experiences and imaginings of what an outdoor educator did and why. This list was challenged by us to bring it down to skills and knowledge that could be developed in this place, an affordances approach. This led to an exploration of the valley and the hills around on foot and by canoe. The river, the lake, the forest and the surrounding hills became the centres of attention as students explored them and, in many cases, developed new skills in order to do this. The night became a focus of interest, either around the fire, on night walks or on overnight camps out in the forest, a first for a number of students. Interests were diverse.

At one point we watched a group of students at a gorge in the river. People were picking blackberries for supper, bouldering on the rocks of the gorge, swimming and jumping into the plunge pools, chatting by the riverside and sharing a way to listen to the sound of the river as it flowed underwater using the stems of nearby rushes. Meanwhile others were exploring how far they

could walk round the mountain ridge surrounding the valley and others were learning to canoe sail on the lake.

Students were exploring how to engage with the valley temporally and spatially. They developed a wide range of approaches inspired by each other, the skills and knowledge of the staff and the valley's material presence. Engagement was sensual and embodied rather than intellectual. Social opportunities were often a central focus although some solo walks and overnight camps did take place.

What, to us, was missing was a way to engage the students with the deeper environmental knowledge, and social and political aspects of the valley, the knowledge held by 'experts' such as the occupations of the rewilding officer and the farmer. We were only encountering the valley through a narrow lens. Orchestrating these other views in a short time frame and without assuming our mantles as experts was challenging.

A walk and talk with the rewilding coordinator began to develop a deeper interpretation of the valley beyond the material encounter. 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 rewilding coordinator who had the perspectives of time and a larger purpose. She could point to the green fuzz of regenerating trees or tell how, in the last heavy rainfall, this valley was the only one not to flood as the water was held and released in the naturalised valley so much more slowly. She could stand with us on the riverbank and tell the story of how the removal of a bridge had caused the return of several species of fish to healthy populations now their spawning grounds were restored. One such critically engaged encounter opened the door for further explorations of the knowledge about the valley held by others.

## Conclusion

Our instinct was perhaps right in that a different outdoor educator can emerge when the norms of practice are withheld or challenged. The approach was successful in problematizing the 'occupation' of outdoor educator amongst the students. Our 'occupation' as *lecturers-as-experts* never fully reasserted itself. Instead we became *lecturers-as-facilitators*, one source of knowledge and, even more enjoyably, a listening post for the emerging new knowledges of our students. They reported that it helped them to explore their own interests more confidently throughout the remaining two years of the degree programme and to be alert to their personal, professional and cultural contexts. They became a learning community. To us, time seems crucial. Short visits do not allow more nuanced narratives of a place to emerge, the unfolding of the seasons, encounters with others, sightings of wildlife, a familiarity with things and events. Longer visits and repeat encounters become important. Place responsive outdoor educators needs to experience a landscape in space, over time and with others to develop their own 'occupation'.

Hannon, V. (2016) What is Outdoor Learning for? IOL National Conference 2016.

Quay, J., & Seaman, J. (2013). *John Dewey and Education Outdoors*. Rotterdam, Netherlands: Sense Publishing.

Wild Ennerdale: <http://www.wildennerdale.co.uk>

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<https://teachingfocusedgeesnetwork.wordpress.com/2016/10/05/the-field-trip-and-the-occupation-of-outdoor-educator-developing-a-place-responsive-approach-to-professional-development-in-he/>

Picture captions

1. A sensory exploration of the valley at different scales
2. Examining the new woodland from the perspective of the rewilded cattle
3. Exploring the rewilded River Lisa from the river's point of view
4. Finding time to be with the forest and its other inhabitants
5. Telling the geological story of the valley from the pebbles in the river
6. Tales of the forest – the human interpretation