

Towers, Daniel and Lynch, Jonathan (2017) What kind of outdoor educator do you want to become? Trying something different in outdoor studies in higher education. *Journal of Hospitality, Leisure, Sport & Tourism Education*, 21 (A). pp. 117-121.

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What Kind of Outdoor Educator Do You Want to Become? Trying Something Different in Outdoor Studies in Higher Education.

Abstract

This paper seeks to explore a way of responding to tensions present in formal education and outdoor education in UK higher education. Separation of the doing from the knowing could perhaps be limiting students' ability to become reflective practitioners and respond creatively to an ever-changing modern world. A different way of organising the curriculum through the concept of 'occupations' was the innovation and basis for an action research approach, with data gathered through the authors' observations, logs and diaries. Findings suggested that not only is the connection between education and experience important, the relationship with the landscape that it takes place in is central, in conjunction with the social context. Implications are that agency and autonomy within the learning experience leads to increased motivation and understanding that the process can be open and emergent and about change.

Keywords: outdoor education; experiential learning; higher education; employability; occupations

Introduction

Reading academic books on outdoor education is all very well and good but how do they fit into my practice? Which bits do I use, and why? Will it make a difference? These were thoughts swimming around our heads after we had read Quay and Seaman's (2013) book on 'John Dewey and Education Outdoors'. In the book these authors helped us to understand some of Dewey's educational ideas and how we might use these to good effect in organising the planning and enactment of learning through outdoor studies in higher education. The book primarily explores a solution to a central tension that has been present in the organising of formal education and outdoor education. The tension is between the fundamental aspects of organising learning; do we privilege the 'process' (how we teach) or the 'content' (what we teach)?

In his book *The School and Society*, Dewey (1915) discussed the educational issue of separating the method from the subject matter, the doing from the knowing, and emphasised the importance of maintaining balance between the practical and intellectual phases of experience. Garrison, Neubert and Reich (2016) note the continued relevance of Dewey's educational philosophies and suggest that the tension caused by dualist thinking in higher education has encouraged a split within the intellectual experience, not only leading to an imbalance between the perceived importance of subject areas and methods but also advancing the hegemony of capitalist values.

In education, we can observe a corresponding economisation that depends on measuring small items, turning them into smooth components like credits, and employing them as resources in a game of cost and outcome (Garrison, Neubert and Reich, 2016, p.23).

Suleman (2016) examined the employability skills of higher education graduates and suggests that although modern employers do value mastery of 'subjects' and content such as written and IT skills these are only pieces of a puzzle that are connected with team working and interpersonal skills. Indeed, employability of students is a topical issue in HE institutions in the UK (Beaumont, Gedye and Richardson, 2016). It is particularly topical due to the current necessity for the economic viability of universities (Miten and Forsyth, 2014; Olssen and Peters, 2005) with an emphasis on adding 'extra value' to degree programmes (Stott, 2007). Interestingly, Suleman (2016) also notes the importance of other, perhaps harder to measure, skills such as the ability to adapt and innovate. Beames and Brown (2016) agree that an important role of education is to help learners to more easily adjust within an ever-changing modern world, although the increasingly predictable, standardised and commodified

nature of education, and outdoor education, is perhaps in opposition to this (Loynes, 1998; Beames and Brown, 2014).

The issue of how universities can enhance employability skills is markedly relevant to outdoor education due to the changing nature of outdoor education provision in an HE context, with increasing focus on attaining theoretical knowledge through the curriculum and acquiring practical knowledge through extra-curricular activities, such as gaining National Governing Body Awards (Barnes, 2006; Stott, 2007). Barnes (2006) has observed a move from the experiential/practical origins of outdoor education in HE to an increasingly lecture-room-based focus, partially due to growing financial constraints and a new and dynamic market place. Interestingly, a concern noted by Williams (2006) is that abstract/theoretical knowledge may not be what outdoor employers are looking for and instead, technical competence and qualifications are seen “as the benchmark for professional practice in the modern outdoor industry” (Williams, 2006, p21). However, Williams (2006) also highlights the potential for outdoor education courses in UK higher education establishments to meet the requirements of the industry by allowing individuals to construct meaning from their experiences in a considered manner, enabling students to become reflective practitioners.

Reflective practice is considered to be crucial for educators (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993) and central to the process of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984; Williams, 2006) which is a common pedagogical approach in the field of outdoor education (Peart, 2006; Dickson, 2008). Furthermore, such reflection on experience can transform learning and practice in higher education to generate new ways of thinking and doing (Ryan, 2013). It seems vital for us as educators to challenge our approach and understanding of our practice (Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993) but additionally it is important for outdoor education students in HE to experience what it is that they will provide in their professional occupations (Dickson, 2008; Ryan, 2013).

In this paper we will take a key idea expressed in Quay and Seaman’s (2013) book, that of Dewey’s concept of ‘occupations’ and we will explore how ‘occupations’ can help us to navigate out of the central tension of educational organisation; do we privilege process or content? In doing so we aim to challenge the (and our) common practices of outdoor education in UK higher education and allow knowledge to be generated from experience, applying some of the principles to the organisation of learning in the ways Seaman and Quay (2013) suggest. This study is a brief exploration of how two outdoor educators in higher education, working with postgraduate outdoor studies students, put these ideas into practice to gain knowledge and skills from the world around, people, places and tasks. These are our reflections on action and the potential consequences for future practice. We hope this account is useful to other outdoor educators and to those who are interested in how to practically employ Dewey’s ideas of education into their work.

Methodology

An action research approach will be adopted to allow us to incorporate the concepts put forward by Quay and Seaman (2013) into our practice and then reflect upon the effectiveness of the changes we made. McNiff (2016) suggests that such reflective practice can develop the researchers into agents for personal and social change, therefore allowing us to examine both the way we organise learning within our specific context but also the effect it may have with regard to responding to the challenges of a changing world. This study is intended as an initial cycle of our action research and focuses on information gathered through our (the authors) observations and our personal logs and diaries. The key implementation into our practice was the organisation of the curriculum through ‘occupations’.

Occupations – what are they?

In their book, Quay and Seaman bring Dewey’s idea of ‘occupations’ to the task of understanding the ‘ways of being’ we are concerned with in education. ‘Ways of being’ are deeper than learning, it’s about the people we can and do become through education and learning; a subtle point but a far

reaching one. The ambiguous concept of ‘occupations’ is worth exploring and explaining more deeply, we do this next giving particular thought to how we can use occupations to organise learning.

An occupation is a living aesthetic whole, which has a structure that organises the doing and the knowing; the method and subject matter. We can (if we want to) understand our lives through occupations; we change as we change occupations, we take on new ones as we grow.

It is through the occupation we are living at any moment in time that we comprehend the people and the environment around us – what they mean (Quay and Seaman, 2013, p 92).

Quay and Seaman note that Dewey advocated that we encourage people to discover these occupations not dictate or push them onto others.

An occupation concerns being a certain type of person, which involves doing certain tasks, and knowing certain facts/knowledge. It is the teachers’ work to bring all three aspects together. This does not mean prioritising any one above the others but addressing all three (Ibid, p 95).

Importantly Quay and Seaman (2013) note very clearly that the meaning of the term ‘occupations’ is not simply about vocational learning, and suggest that this has created confusion about this construct and in understanding Dewey’s work in the past. They write that ‘occupations’ are something that Dewey would have called the ‘organisation’ of the school – which is how the school connects to the larger community and social life. In the context of our application of these ideas in this article, this is about how the education we are organising links to the outdoor studies students’ professional life and their ongoing, developing, outdoor studies practice. Occupations are rooted in aesthetic experience, which is holistic and emotional in nature. If we think of the organising principals of education as not just method or subject but in these occupations that is how Dewey saw it. According to Quay and Seaman (2013), occupations contain three elements:

1. Holistic, about self, others and environment – but in an aesthetic way, not in a reflected way but as immediately felt. These are thus ways of living in the social world; different ways of living and being are not individualistic and always embrace others and the environment.
2. Occupations are associated with doing – a historical dimension that extends beyond the individual and is a continuous activity with purpose. The long term occupations are likely to be the most meaningful such as being a father, a teacher, or an outdoor educator.
3. Occupations are about knowing – they organise our experiences and directions for growth, not simply just subject matter. Occupations then, in many ways, are themselves organising (in terms of the planning and enactment of learning).

We really liked these ideas regarding ‘occupations’ and wanted to try them out in our educational practice in higher education because they appear to align with the experiential pedagogy present in the origins of outdoor education in HE (Barnes, 2006), and value the co-construction of knowledge of occupation rather than the learner being “spoon-fed knowledge others believe they should have” (Williams, 2006). In doing so we knew we were trying something different with regard to how education and learning is organised in formal (especially higher) education and some expressions of outdoor education. In formal education learning is often conceived of as something that develops from a set of aims, objectives, and associated teaching and learning activities set and chosen by the educator (as ‘expert’). These formats are found in the literature in formal education as linear-rational models of curriculum planning advocated initially by Tyler (1949) and have resonated strongly in education and in our experience of higher education (see for example Biggs, 2003). The pull of this linear-rational approach to learning can also be seen in some literature on outdoor education (Priest and Gass, 2005; Bunting, 2006; Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin and Ewart, 2006). The university modular curricula, sympathetic to such linear-rational pedagogical design is a dominant force in the pedagogical design of some courses (Bunyan, 2006) in outdoor studies in higher education.

As educators ourselves we felt we wanted to use the Quay and Seaman (2013) position to dissolve the power dynamic of this established dominant position of educators as expert and student as mere recipient of knowledge, and return to the question of what kinds of educators are we supporting people to become? Learner autonomy in this respect may encourage the ability to adapt and innovate, noted by Suleman (2016) and also valued by Beames (2016) in order to prepare young people for multiple occupations within a lifetime and agency regarding occupation. We were particularly struck by Quay and Seaman's (2013) question: "what ways of being a person centrally involves the outdoors, and what does it take to knowledgeably participate in these activities?" (2013, p. 78). We adapted this question to pose a simplified version to the students, we asked them "what form of outdoor educator would you like to be and therefore what knowledge do you think you would need to possess to become that person?"

The 'Teaching'

The location for the week was a bunkhouse in the Ennerdale valley in early September. The students were an international group of postgraduate students studying on the Trans-Cultural European Outdoor Studies Masters programme of which the University of Cumbria delivers a third of the teaching. The rest of the teaching that is split across three semesters is delivered in partnership with Philipps University at Marburg, Germany and The Norwegian School of Sport Science, Oslo. The week long module was set out to introduce the students to the Lake District (the wild valley of Ennerdale being a fitting selection), and the concepts of working educationally outdoors with groups. The week contained options for lake canoeing, mountain walking/scrambling, bush craft, creative outdoor learning, history, geology, star gazing, and storytelling.

At the start of the week it was explained to the students that we intended to explore a version of how learning is 'designed' in outdoor education, inspired by the work of Quay and Seaman (2013). This introduction was further developed to put forward the concept that we were not working towards set learning aims but organised the learning in line with the concept of occupations by asking the students to think of the kind of educator they felt they wanted to become. This focus had important implications for the students in that they were challenged to think about what knowledge they then needed so they could be helped to become that particular outdoor educator. The details of the week were many and unfortunately beyond the scope of this paper, however we explore some of the personal reflections of two of the educators who worked that week, who were trying to organise the learning in this way described.

What we found out?

So in practice working with the 'occupations' of "what form of outdoor educator would you like to be and therefore what knowledge do you think you would need to possess to become that person?" left us as educators feeling quite set free. As we are far from the first educators to try this approach our sense of 'freedom' was every bit as liberating as we had heard through other educators who have done the same. The sense of freedom was short lived though as the responsibility around 'so what do we teach them' started to build as the week came upon us.

1. The starting point of 'what kind of person (outdoor educator) do you want to become' places a significant burden on you as an educator as there are only so many options that can be offered. Even with the excellent contribution from the students we couldn't offer them every choice of experience that relates to outdoor education they may have wanted. So inevitably we had to set a boundary around what we could offer, which felt a little leading.

2. We found at some stage it is useful to revisit the discussion of what sort of knowledge do people feel they need to know or want to know? Again this is challenging and relates to the types of outdoor educators that the students know can/should exist. It also relates to the type of education that

the students had previously experienced as many found the concept difficult to comprehend, particularly due to language/cultural differences and often sought direction from us ‘the teachers’.

3. Not only is the connection between education and experience important, the relationship with the landscape that it takes place in is central, in conjunction with the social context. There seemed to be distinct value in allowing the students’ various understandings of ‘outdoor education’ to emerge, adding to the collective social meaning. The cultural diversity did help to destabilise established views of what OE is amongst those with an already part developed professional identity formed within one cultural frame.

How might this be of use?

Thinking about what we found out and how it could be useful to other educators we wish to offer a few points for consideration and for future practice. Firstly, if we were to do this again, as a further cycle of action research, we feel the students would benefit from reading excerpts from the Quay and Seaman book, especially the section around what Dewey called ‘occupations’. This may support the students through the transition from formal education as stated earlier (Tyler, 1949; Biggs, 2003) to an education organised around occupations. As noted in point number three in the previous section, it’s not just enough to think of ‘direct experience’ it helps to think about it as being situated, somewhere, and thus the place it naturally occurs is important. This goes some way to addressing the process vs content tension highlighted in the introduction as we see these ‘occupations’ as having distinct settings (water, crags, and forests for example) depending on the knowledge sought. Perhaps to further address the problems we noted in point 1 above would be to take account of place (for deeper explorations of this see Mannion and Lynch (2016). In our example, if we ran this again we might have to involve accommodating/working with place into the concept of ‘what kind of outdoor educator do you want to become’ by first specifying ‘within Ennerdale’.

Secondly, by returning to the third key element of ‘occupations’ listed previously in the section ‘occupations - what are they?’ - that they are an organising principle - we could imagine a future outdoor education course for young people at school arranged in this way. Imagine if we planned a week’s residential course with the organising principle to be focussed on the occupation of: ‘to be a competent member of a successful expedition team’. In this we might enable the pupils to organise their learning accordingly via the knowledge they would need to value and acquire to meet the occupation as set. In this pursuit the week might involve the students having to ‘inhabit’ what certain key terms mean such as ‘competent expedition member’ and they would need to set out to understand which competences they need to succeed. This would include how to acquire them at the centre, and from whom (store person, then instructor then themselves perhaps) and where. The ‘where’ might be an orienteering course where they learn to read a map via their instructor and also ‘through’ the landscape? What the expedition aspect looks like will be determined by the young people, their surroundings, the equipment and the knowledge they are able to gain from the centre staff. The organising principles of the ‘occupations’ are around the students realising themselves and finding out the knowledge they need to know as oppose to instructors setting them tasks and experiences that originate from predetermined learning outcomes. Similarly, for a successful expedition they will need to establish what a successful expedition ‘looks like’ again engaging staff and teachers perhaps. Fundamentally the students are working towards a shared idea of the person they need to ‘become’ that is not decided for them and then forced upon them via a suite of experiences pre-determined and planned.

Thirdly, the format of the week in Ennerdale encouraged the students to take on the occupation of an outdoor educator which we see as a possible career option for graduates of outdoor studies. Although the students had chosen an outdoor studies course and therefore might view the occupation of an outdoor educator in the Ennerdale valley as a valuable one, we still wrestled with the leading nature of this process. It was through returning to the writing of Osberg and Biesta (2008) that we realised the multi-layered nature of the ‘occupations’ the students were discovering. It was the messiness and

unpredictable aspect of this experience that seems to have held the most educational value. Perhaps, it helps to revisit the notion of occupations as immediately felt and in constant flux. This means that whilst we were trying to facilitate an experience which we deemed to have future value for the students, we also created 'spaces of emergence' (Osberg and Biesta, 2008) that allowed the students to live through an occupation, giving direct relevance to each learner's situation and opportunities to develop that occupation in a way unique to them. Some students became interested in the identification of trees, whilst others developed a fascination with canoeing and particularly journeying on Ennerdale Water. These examples of dendrology as an occupation and 'being' a canoeist are of course only a couple of examples from many occupations that the students took on during the week and they both provide huge areas for practice and study. Importantly though, Quay and Seaman (2013) suggest that the longer term occupations such as 'outdoor educator' tend to be most meaningful and the activities given primacy by the educator will develop and change as their educational philosophy develops and changes. Therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge both the 'being' and the 'becoming' in this situation. The lived experience is an important occupation in its own right but it is not static. As the students' interests develop in a certain way so do their occupations. Perhaps learning experiences organised in this way will encourage young people to develop a skill set enabling them to thrive in a fast paced modern world (Suleman, 2016; Beames and Brown, 2016)?

Conclusion

Our concluding thoughts are that we should be mindful of the types/forms of outdoor educator that our teaching (in higher education) allow or facilitate to emerge in the early stages of people setting out to imagine the outdoor educator they want to become. Additionally, the actual organisation of the 'learning experiences' becomes the participants' choice and as a result their motivation is high – a worthwhile starting point for successful learning. Finally, there is great worth in thinking of the 'becoming person' as something in flux and allowing the idea that the becoming will be open and emergent and about change. This has implications as what they start off wanting to learn may not be what they feel they want to learn later in the process.

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