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HERG Postgraduate Reflective Essay Competition 2015

Essay title: Developing an academic identity: What's the time Mrs Wolf?

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Abstract

The wolf embodies the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch, "...in which human society is acknowledged as having become the greatest force shaping planet earth" (RGS, 2015). Understanding this new epoch demands a 'more-than-human' mode of theorising. Utilising metaphors and symbolism, and applying the hermeneutic tradition of 'questionableness' (Nixon, 2014), my reflective essay offers a creative interpretation of my life experiences, inviting readers to join in a playful exploration of what it means to become an 'academic'. I draw on an amorphous body of literature, from diverse sources such as children's author Enid Blyton; Jungian psychologist, Pinkola Estes; and Children's Geographies, long recognised as a place that utilises creative methodologies, resulting in interdisciplinary work that is challenging creative and exciting (Kraftl, Horton and Tucker, 2014). I pay homage to, and further develop that tradition, whilst embracing concepts of playfulness (Bateson and Martin, 2013) and transformational learning (Eyler and Giles, 1999). I have gained a growing awareness of my own identity, of how it has been shaped and influenced by others over the years. This has been accompanied by a flourishing of confidence in my academic abilities. I have learned how to howl.

190 words

Keywords

Anthropocene; Metaphors and Symbolism; Reflection; Academic Identity; Playfulness; Transformational Learning; Blyton; Pinkola Estes; Children's Geographies; Wolves.

Setting the scene



Figure 1: Canis lupus (Nomadic Lass, 2011)

Wolves are some of the world's most charismatic and controversial animals, capturing the imaginations of their friends and foes alike. Highly intelligent and adaptable, they hunt and play together in close-knit packs ... Once teetering on the brink of extinction ... wolves have made a tremendous comeback in recent years, thanks to legal protection, changing human attitudes, and efforts to reintroduce them to suitable habitats...(Mech and Boitani, 2010)

In many ways, the wolf embodies the impact of the Anthropocene, the current geological epoch, '...in which human society is acknowledged as having become the greatest force shaping planet earth' (RGS, 2015). Understanding this new epoch demands a 'more-than-human' mode of theorising, for example by utilising metaphors and symbolism and applying the hermeneutic tradition of 'questionableness' (Nixon, 2014). This essay offers a creative interpretation of my life experiences and invites the reader to join in a playful exploration of what it means to become an 'academic'¹. My essay draws on an amorphous body of literature from a wide range of disciplines including children's geographies, which itself has a diverse foundation and has long been recognised as a place that utilises creative methodologies, resulting in interdisciplinary work that is challenging creative and exciting (Kraftl, Horton and Tucker, 2014). My essay pays homage to, and further develops that tradition, whilst also embracing the concept of playfulness as a way of generating new thought patterns in a protected context (Bateson and Martin, 2013).

For me, the wolf has come to symbolise the development of my academic identity, counter-balanced by my wider identity as embodied within my relational roles of a wife, a parent and as a child (Burke and Stets, 2009). The most recurrent question within this process has been “*who am I?*” I have often found it easier to say what I am not, than to say what I am. As identified by Eyler and Giles (1999: 133), ‘Transformational learning occurs as we struggle to solve a problem...we are called to question the validity of what we think we know or to critically examine the very premises of our perception of the problem’. What happens when the problem we perceive is ourselves? In this essay I interpret my inner dialogue by linking the emotional and cognitive processes (Mezirow, 1990; Theodosius, 2012) that have occurred as part of the transformational process whereby I have come to be the person I am: ‘It is in relationship – in the interaction of the inner person with the outer world – that experience occurs and it is in and through experience that people learn’ (Jarvis and Parker, 2005: 1). My learning has been troubling and unsettling (Meyer and Land, 2003) and I share this with you as a way of encouraging you to consider how you have come to be the person you are. And then to consider in what ways this may impact on your relationships with the world around you.

To structure this essay I am utilising a Map of Reflective Writing (Moon, 2004) as it effectively captures the ongoing, exploratory nature of my reflections. To paraphrase Owens’ (2010: 25-26) discussions about the work of C.G. Jung, a reflective map is a conceptual tool, useful for signalling the prominent spatial and temporal landmarks, translating what I have learnt from my travels into tools of discovery that may be useful for deciphering human experience. Within the map are key stages: setting the context through description of events; feeding in of additional ideas; reflexive thinking relating reflection to actions; acknowledging learning; moving on to more reflection and review of purpose (Moon, *op.cit.*). In folklore and mythology the wolf is symbolic², taken to represent keen intelligence; deep connection with, and expression of instincts; appetite for freedom and a feeling of being threatened, lack of trust in oneself or others. I have often felt silenced by others, unable to express myself through my ‘outer voice’ and as a result have developed the ability to listen and attend to my inner voice; through reflexivity I have learned how to weave these together. Writing this has been an emotional experience, resulting in learning, knowledge and understanding: perhaps most important of all, it has proved empowering.

I describe myself as an accidental youth worker (Hayes, 2013a): after graduating with BSc in Natural Sciences I wanted to educate and inspire others about the natural environment, to share my enthusiasm and sense of wonderment. I began working with young children, families and adults, then realised that young people were being inadvertently excluded by not offering opportunities that were accessible, relevant or attractive to them. Resolving to help change this, I qualified as a youth worker, before moving on to social science research

for my doctorate. Pausing to reflect on my transformation from natural to social scientist raises the question: does there have to be a distinction or is this a false dichotomy based on traditional methodologies? Over the last three years I have found a home within the RGS, particularly the Geographies of Children, Young People and Families sub-group. Does this mean that I am a geographer? Or is this yet another facet of my increasingly complex, identity, something that has always been implicit in my approach to learning and is now becoming explicit as I shine a reflexive light upon it? To understand this I need to go back to my beginnings ...

As a young child

I love reading, especially about nature. From a very early age I have buried my nose in a book; however the kinds of books I read, and the knowledge embodied within them has changed over the years. I reflect on my books as I question how did I come to be the person I am? What tales do my books have to tell about me? Where did my fascination for wolves come from, and how does Enid Blyton³ fit in all of this: two apparently disconnected questions that in my world have become imperceptively intertwined. The second question is one I have been pondering since a conversation with a colleague, getting to know each other through swapping stories of experiences from childhood, growing up into adulthood, failed past relationships and happy current ones. I admitted: *“Enid Blyton made my childhood”* in an attempt to explain my approach to outdoor learning – an approach that embraces thinking like a child, emphasising the concepts of playfulness, imagination and stories (Hayes, 2013b). She responded: *“Me too!”* We laughed, acknowledging that it was not ‘cool’ to admit this! For her it was the boarding school stories, midnight feasts and mysteries that appealed; for me it was the magical folk, enchanted woods and faraway trees, and the overwhelming sense that life was an adventure. I spent many happy hours playing with my twin sister in our back garden, looking for pixies, pretending to be a fairy, concocting magic potions from petals and rainwater. The world described by Blyton came alive in our garden and in our imaginations; however it was quickly outgrown, and then forgotten as I moved on to more ‘grown-up’ books, with an ever-decreasing focus on nature and an increasing focus on relationships with people (especially boys)...

Growing up

My parents didn’t believe in higher education for girls. “A waste of time and money, you’ll only get married and have children. No need for university, best get a job until you find a husband.” I married young, only 19 years of age and over the next few years produced four wonderful children. We grew up together: barely out of adolescence, I embraced the opportunity to continue playing, read children’s books and have adventures outside. We made use of outdoor spaces such as gardens, woods, fields and parks to have adventures. Reacting to my own gendered upbringing, I resolved to be different as a parent and

eschewed Blyton's books in favour of less 'girlie' books; along with my dolls they were donated to charity and I began investing in more grown up reading on bird watching, gardening and cookery. My children grew older, providing space for me to begin to study: I registered with the Open University⁴ and after six years successfully achieved BSc (Hons) in Natural Science – 1st Class! I started volunteering for a local conservation charity, helping with groups designed to encourage families to explore nature; then I was employed to organise the groups. My book collection grew wider: art, crafts, poetry, identification guides and scientific surveys all made their way on to my shelves. A postgraduate certificate in education for sustainability added yet more weighty tomes!

I moved on to environmental youth work, and continued to study: first a certificate, then a Masters in Youth Work and Community Development - more books! And journals and study guides. The children's books were packed away: the favourites carefully boxed and stored; the others passed on to charity shops and gifted to friends with younger children. Then I started learning to teach, and following an introductory course in 'Philosophy for Children'⁵ restarted buying children's books: I began to understand that these books have an ability to convey important messages in a concise, succinct, understandable way. On holidays to the Lake District I discovered a new love for Beatrix Potter⁶, and treated myself to a collection of her books, plus toys to match! However it was not just the stories that appealed to me, it was the author herself: I drew many parallels between her life and mine, her experiences resonated with mine. Like Beatrix and her Cumbrian husband, my new husband and I shared a love of being outdoors and especially being outdoors in Cumbria. We holidayed in Scotland and I encountered wolves – real, live, howling wolves – trapped in a wildlife park. I wanted to set them free...

Becoming an academic

My youngest child left home. We moved to the Lake District, books were shed along the way as we attempted to downsize to a smaller house. However within a short space of time even more studious books were added to my collection. Alongside these more children's books crept in: Aesop's fables⁷, Icelandic fairy tales and various nursery rhymes, bought with the intention of helping to bring to life my oral and written presentations (Hayes, 2014a). One day I awoke with a story in my head, soon followed by several more. My subconscious was making sense of my research findings and my experiences, weaving them together through a creative, interpretive process. I attempted to explain this to my doctoral supervisors, it was not something I had planned to do, it just seemed to happen. I openly acknowledged that I drew inspiration for my writing from Rachel Carson⁸, who had written a fable to demonstrate what would happen to the natural world if people continued to use pesticides. I liked her approach, it is markedly different from those who use scare tactics to attempt to change behaviour; she has been described as a 'gentle subversive' (Hamilton-

Lytle, 2007). However, her work still differed from mine in that it seemed to be planned, a result of conscious effort to write, whilst my creative writing felt sub-conscious: it mostly happened when I was not expecting it. Whilst most of my stories were about people, other characters crept in: Boggarts, bunny rabbits and bears (Hayes, 2015) - lots of bears!

I began sharing my stories at conferences, cautiously at first, expecting to be rebuked as non-academic (Hayes, 2014b). That did not happen; instead I was praised for being different, for making my work accessible and understandable; they became part of my methodology (*ibid.*). But what to do with them next, what was their purpose? And perhaps more importantly (to me anyway) why was my brain working in this way? The first question was relatively easy: I developed a concept called 'Adventure Bears'⁹, a small handmade fabric teddy bear designed to be played with outside which I gifted to recipients with a short story making the links to playing outside. One year later I had made over 80 of them and had begun selling them to raise funds for charity. I determined to address the second question, as to why my brain was working this way by using the metaphor of reflection as looking into a mirror whereby I look into myself (Uzat, 1998). I can see me surrounded by my experiences, people, places, objects; my mind is alive with images (Parker, 2013) and metaphors – which help to capture '...the essential nature of an experience' (Lawley and Tompkins, 2000: 6): my book collection becomes a metaphor for the different phases of my life, as I have grown and developed into the person I am now. One book catches my eye: Enid Blyton's *Nature Lover's Book* (1944); a book purchased with the aim of helping me to develop inspiring and engaging activities for families and young children. I have not looked at it for years. I open it and began to read: the words feel familiar, memories stir deep within me. The lilting, sing-song text speaks to me, calling to the little girl within...

Back to today...

"Enid Blyton, really? But I thought you were a youth worker? Wasn't she a sexist and a racist? She had some very bigoted views...and I hate to mention it, so very middle-class!" A colleague's comment at the mere mention of Enid Blyton. I have to acknowledge that Blyton has proved to be a controversial figure (Tucker and Reynolds, 1997), and that arguably she was all of those things, but she is of a certain time and place, a socio-cultural construction (Jones and McEwan, 2000). This is reflected in her stories that appear quaint and old-fashioned amongst more modern children's literature. However her work helped to shape and guide my childhood: rereading the stories and poems I realise that I have absorbed them into my subconscious, they have imperceptibly affected the way I think and write. I determine to find out more about her, to justify her inclusion in my research, and to consider how this impacts on my practice. I buy more books, then decide the best way to approach this is to reflexively write my story.

So where do the wolves fit in all this? They crept into my life un-noticed. I remember reading *White Fang*¹⁰ as a child, but the book was lost as I grew up. My 40th birthday was marked with a gift of a toy wolf (a present from the wildlife park) along with homemade cards decorated with wolves; these were enjoyed, and then quietly packed away in my treasure box. In 2013 I was invited to join a leadership training programme, aligned to my doctoral research. This proved to be a pivotal, threshold moment in my life: surrounded by confident, outwardly more successful professionals, I crumpled into a mass of insecurity; I felt a fraud and a fake, out of my depth. Each night of the four-day course I returned home, howling at my husband “Who am I? What am I doing here? What’s my purpose?” I was deep in the pain of self-doubt, mired in a liminal space... ‘a place of ill-defined purpose ... of transition ... a state of mind that is blurred such as that between the state of dreaming and being awake’ (Wilson, 2012: 32). This process of self-discovery proved to be a threshold moment, a rite of passage (Norris, 2011). One afternoon we played a game; unseen by the others, we had to choose a picture of an animal to enact in the woods. Without conscious thought I sprang across the room first and silently pocketed the picture of a wolf. I felt myself come alive in the game: one minute I was stalking prey; the next I was leading the others in a hunt; then silently observing the group from a distance. Afterwards the others expressed their surprise and delight at my performance. The week finished with a group exploration of the impact we thought we had had on each other: this was torture for me. Wracked by self-doubt I had been unable to relax and participate fully within the group, something they openly acknowledged: they wanted more of the Tracy they had experienced in the game. I came away with a determination to find her...

Discovering my inner wolf

I bought a book. “Healthy wolves and healthy women share certain psychic characteristics: keen sensing, playful spirit, and a heightened capacity for devotion” (Pinkola Estes, 1992: 2) The words resonated deep within me, but as someone unfamiliar with psychology, this was not an easy read; I lingered over each chapter, using it to reflect on my life and experiences. I gained a growing awareness of my own identity, of how it has been shaped and influenced by others (real and fictional) over the years; this was accompanied by a flourishing of confidence in my academic abilities. I have learned that identity is a socially-constructed, continually evolving state (Jones and McEwan, 2000); it has multiple dimensions and is an embodied reflection of lived experiences. Jones and McEwan (*ibid.*: 412) exhort us to ‘listen for how a person sees herself’ if we want to understand them. I openly acknowledge my inner wolf, a metaphor that represents my instinctive, intuitive, primitive emotions I contain within. I am now able to release these to help me survive the wildness of the (academic) world: I understand my need to play (Pinkola Estes, 1992: 365); I have found my voice and learned how, and when to howl (Appendix I).

Parodying the quote that started this essay, wolves can symbolise a group of academics who gather in packs at conferences, in constant need of nourishment and mental stimulation to maintain their academic identity. With recent changes to academic funding, many fear the academic world as we know it, may be teetering on the brink of extinction. I have a role to play in this, as a researcher and as a lecturer I have meaning and purpose. I have learned how to hunt down opportunities, to carefully observe and contemplate the world around me before pouncing into action. I have developed a sense of trust in myself and my abilities. I relish the chance to relax by a fire and recuperate after a long day of work and most of all, I understand the need to folic, play and socialise with others. As I conclude this essay, I imagine Enid playfully asking me the question, "What's the time Mrs Wolf¹¹?" To which I firmly reply, "It's MY time."

2,920 words (excluding abstract, keywords, endnotes, references and appendix)

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Appendix I: General Wolf Rules for Life

From Pinkola Estes, (1992: 461)

1. Eat
2. Rest
3. Rove in between
4. Render loyalty
5. Love the Children
6. Cavil in moonlight
7. Tune your ears
8. Attend to the bones
9. Make love
10. Howl often

Appendix II: Endnotes from my essay to provide further information on the items mentioned.

¹ In this essay I am employing 'academic' as a noun to represent a teacher or scholar in a university or college of Higher Education. Definition available at <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/academic>

² For more on the symbolism of spirit animals see <http://www.spiritscienceandmetaphysics.com/the-top-5-spirit-animals-what-is-your-spirit-animal/#sthash.j28nCoEZ.dpuf>

³ Enid Blyton was an English children's author; her books have been among the world's best-sellers since the 1930s. More information about her is available from: <http://www.enidblytonsociety.co.uk/index.php>

⁴ The Open University's mission is to be open to people, places, methods and ideas. More information is available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/>

⁵ Philosophy for Children is a movement that aims to teach debating skills such as reasoning and argumentative skills to children. More information is available from: <http://www.philosophy4children.co.uk/>

⁶ Beatrix Potter was an English author, illustrator, natural scientist and conservationist best known for her imaginative children's books, for example The Tale of Peter Rabbit, which celebrated the British landscape and country life. More information is available from: <http://beatrixpottersociety.org.uk/>

⁷ Aesop's Fables is a collection of fables credited to Aesop, believed to be a slave and storyteller who lived in ancient Greece. More information (and variations of the fables) is available from: <http://www.umass.edu/aesop/>

- ⁸ Rachel Carson was an American marine biologist and conservationist whose book *Silent Spring* (1962) and other writings (including *Sense of Wonder*, published posthumously) are credited with advancing the global environmental movement. More information is available from <http://www.rachelcarson.org/>
- ⁹ Adventure Bears – For Examples: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOn2pOmQw9o>
- ¹⁰ *White Fang* is a novel by American author Jack London first published in 1906. The story explores complex themes including morality, redemption and how animals may view humans. It is predominantly told from the viewpoint of the titular canine character and offers an alternative perspective.
- ¹¹ What's the time Mr Wolf? This is a children's game: it is a form of tag and is played worldwide, under a range of different names including 'What time is it, Mr Wolf?', 'Grandma's Footsteps', '1 2 3 Piano' and 'What time is it, Mr. Fox?' For the basic rules, as well as regional variations see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What%27s_the_time,_Mr_Wolf%3F