

Towers, Daniel ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4775-2931> and Loynes, Christopher ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9779-7954> (2016) The field trip and the ‘occupation’ of outdoor educator: developing a place responsive approach to professional development in HE [online blog]. Teaching-focused in HE .

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The Field Trip and the 'Occupation' of Outdoor Educator: developing a place responsive approach to professional development in HE

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By [Danny Towers](#) (University of Cumbria) and [Dr Chris Loynes](#) (University of Cumbria)

Place responsiveness in outdoor education is a big topic. It became more urgent for staff at the [University of Cumbria](#) 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.

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

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'what kind of outdoor educator could you be here?'

The field trip design

We chose [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, notice their own talents, interests and motivations and consider these in the wider context of their cultural ideas of educational purpose. This, we hoped, would lead them to explore what knowledge and skills they needed so they could be helped to *become that particular outdoor educator*. 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 balance the three influences of the place, their own interests and talents and the ideas of nature based education in their cultures of practice.



1. A sensory exploration of the valley at different scales

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

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social 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 of knowledge than typically highlighted in HE.

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 socially 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 and 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.



2. Examining the new woodland from the perspective of the rewilded cattle

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

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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.



3. Exploring the rewilded River Lisa from the river's point of view

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 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.



4. Finding time to be with the forest and its other inhabitants

Conclusion

Our instinct was perhaps right in that a different outdoor educator can emerge when the norms of practice are withheld. The approach was successful in problematizing the 'occupation' of outdoor educator amongst the 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. Time seems crucial to us. Place responsive outdoor educators needs to experience a landscape in space, over time and with others to

develop their own 'occupation'.



5. Telling the geological story of the valley from the pebbles in the river



6. Tales of the forest – the human interpretation

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

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