

Finding New Ways: developing a co-constructed approach to excursions in Higher  
Education

**Background:** Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) in the UK is steeped in tradition. It can be argued that established practices are limiting the ability of outdoor professionals to respond to the global challenges of the modern world through locally relevant ways.

Internationally, Higher Education (HE) is also currently subject to considerable challenges and its continued relevance can be gauged through its ability to become meaningful in a rapidly changing and pluralistic world. If the intention is to prepare educators for the future, OEE within HE could benefit from finding new ways. **Purpose:** We examine the impact of our pedagogical approach to working with international students, developing professional practice informed by one place, set within the context of the needs of the world and framed by the question “what kind of outdoor educator do you want to become?”

**Methodology/approach:** The authors utilize Dewey’s concept of occupations as an organizing principle for the curriculum. Four excursions involving 86 students were facilitated.

**Findings/conclusions:** The norms of traditional OEE practices were predominantly overcome and innovative ways of co-creating knowledge emerged.

**Implications:** If outdoor educators develop their own occupation in the context of wider needs, they can become place-responsive as well as continuously open to change.

**Keywords:** Outdoor Education; Higher Education; Place-based Education

This paper explores the critical pedagogy for an excursion developed by the authors as part of an international Masters degree, Transcultural European Outdoor Studies (TEOS).

Our purpose was to challenge the established norms of the UK occupation of outdoor experiential educator both in recognition of the diversity of human-nature relations and the possibility that, given the current social, economic and environmental crises, a transformed Outdoor Experiential Education (OEE) practice could better meet the current needs of the world. DiConti's (2004) highlighting of the role of experiential education in engaging students in their future professions in creative and critical ways further inspired the project. In order to set the challenge, we reconsidered the occupation of student by asking them to critically engage with the question of what kind of outdoor educator they wanted to become. In our view, experienced practitioners, including lecturers, are not best placed to transcend the norms of their profession and so the occupation of lecturer was also questioned.

Spending time in the landscape in order to know it better has been a core part of Higher Education (HE) pedagogy for a number of subject areas in the Earth and Life Sciences. This has been the case in the UK since Aberdeen University first took undergraduate Geography students into the nearby mountains to study glaciated landscapes in the 1930s (Loynes & Pedersen Gurholt, 2017). In the 1960s the first HE courses in the UK to explore the excursion and its application as a vehicle for personal development began. The focus in this case was on the developmental benefits of multiday adventure experiences, sometimes integrated with scientific enquiry or service activities, in educational contexts. The courses were aimed at the educators of the future who might apply these strategies in their professional work (Humberstone & Brown, 2006). At our university, this includes the undergraduate and postgraduate Outdoor Studies programs to which we both contribute. Diverse activities are used to mediate engagement with a variety of landscapes and module evaluations indicate that outcomes range from the outwardly facing aesthetic responses to and scientific knowledge of the place, to the inwardly facing personal benefits ranging from the practical to the pedagogical (Campbell, Lemmey & Prince, 2006).

Mascolo (2009) argues that engagement with a landscape ensures staff and students gain knowledge through the objective epistemologies of the Earth and Life Sciences blended with more or less of a subjective cultural overlay; the latter being present both in the artefacts and narratives of the place and in the particular views both staff and students hold as they arrive. Mascolo terms this “guided participation” (p. 3).

In this paper, we explore how the immersive approach to excursions was used as an experience of knowledge creation or co-construction. Our intention was to provide a set of experiences as a means to co-create rather than impart professional values and practices that we hoped would find relevance in diverse cultures and in the context of what we claim are changing times. The task we set ourselves was to work with students to seek transformative professional practices that may challenge old pedagogies and encourage new ones that are more suited to the challenges of the place and the day.

Quay and Seaman (2013) examine Dewey’s concerns for the tension that he understood to lie between subject and method in education, the same tension highlighted by Roberts (2012) in the title of his book “Beyond Learning by Doing”. We equate the immersive approach we would claim excursions at our University adopt with what Quay and Seaman claim is Dewey’s idea of a deeper structure. This immersive structure, Dewey claims, is present in experiential learning and transcends method and subject issues. This, we suggest, is not a new idea for experiential educators (see for example Warren, Mitten & Loeffler, 2008) and is embedded in our staffs’ practice. Among other approaches, staff role model what Dewey would call the occupation of outdoor experiential educator whilst teaching students to become outdoor experiential educators.

We used Dewey’s concept of occupation to further guide our approach to the excursion. We found that Dewey’s conception of experience, what Ord and Leather (2011) describe as “the learning that results from (experience), as a transaction between the

individual and their environment...” (p. 13), fitted well with our thinking. This captured for us the quality of the engagement between student and place that we were seeking. In addition, Kolb and Kolb (2005), drawing on Dewey and Lewin’s theories of experiential learning, introduce the concept of the learning space, a framework that fits well with the excursion facilitated as we intended. Ord and Leather also highlight the importance of meaning making which we anticipated would be made more possible by alternative learning spaces that change power relations between teacher and student and offer new experiences that challenge existing norms. Deweyan inspired theories proved helpful to us in our thinking as we sought to enable the students to construct a new and meaningful praxis, a co-constructed occupation of outdoor educator. By introducing this range of educational approaches, it became clear that we were also rethinking our normal approach to the occupations of lecturer and student.

### **Literature Review**

Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is a growing theme in education curricula. Many authors have been commenting for decades that humanity is approaching a time of significant change brought on by the limits to growth (for example see Jackson, 2017). Various authors have suggested how important it is that education address these issues (for example see Orr, 1994; Bonnett, 2004). Higgins and Kirk (2006) describe how Scottish education has introduced ESD as a central curriculum theme. They highlight the part that a number of cross-curricula and informal learning opportunities, including OEE, play in responding to this development. They point out the importance in educating the teachers of the future to work in new ways as part of their HE courses. In a later paper, Higgins (2009) identifies what he considers to be the key contributions of OEE to ESD. These, he suggests, are “independent learning experiences that address the capacities of learners, the value contexts in which they learn, and that taking responsibility for actions should be an important programme focus” (p. 44). However, Higgins also warns of “the limitations to learning

through direct experience” highlighting the importance of combining it with “critical reflection on knowledge, understanding and personal decision making” (p. 44).

Many of the authors above comment that it is difficult at best to anticipate the needs of the future, which is an understandable concern. However, Brown and Beames (2017) take this point further to suggest that education through adventure has not adequately evolved from its militaristic origins to reflect the contemporary needs of our society. Perhaps the preoccupation with character building and personal development that still shapes much of UK outdoor educational practice, which arose from the perceived societal needs of the early 1900s, is not sufficiently preparing young people for the challenges of today or tomorrow. In addition, whilst Roberts (2012) proposes that the diverse streams of OEE practice can co-mingle, others suggest that those steeped in old forms of UK practice (Loynes, 2007), the experienced practitioners, are not best placed to transcend the norms of their profession (Hannon, Gillinson & Shanks, 2013). This may be more readily attempted by those just starting out. However, the history of the field, and its established norms and practices, are powerful influences on young professionals. Whilst OEE may offer many experiences that could contribute to what Rawles (2013) describes as lifeboats to the future, values, skills and knowledge that could be invaluable life savers as the current social, economic and environmental crises unfold, other writers suggest that there is much embedded in our practices that might be considered worth leaving behind in a quest for ESD (Loynes, 2002). Student cohorts such as those we were teaching, with diverse or no view of OEE, provided an unusual opportunity to explore the possibilities of emergent rather than reproduced practice.

Further support for our approach comes from DiConti (2004) who comments that the key skill for a graduate is to be able to respond creatively, reflectively and rapidly to a changing knowledge base, whatever their professional aspiration. However, she claims that the trends in American universities are for graduates to seek an ever more direct link between

their studies and their future employment. This, she demonstrates, has led to a significant decline in liberal arts courses which, in her view, would be the best preparation for a rapidly changing and unpredictable world. She concludes by highlighting the role of experiential education in engaging students in their future professions in creative and critical ways.

Sustainable development has a cultural as well as an environmental context. The transformation of society necessary to achieve a sustainable relationship with the Earth's ecosystems is hotly debated. However, it can be argued that considerable social change requires social as well as environmental equity. In this case, the social learning embedded in our approach would potentially have direct relevance to our aims. Breunig (2005) highlights the potential of combining a critical pedagogy with experiential education in order to develop a purposeful praxis that can work towards a more socially just world. Saltmarsh (1996), discussing the contribution of Dewey's theories to community service learning, identifies five themes: linking education to experience, democratic community, social service, reflective enquiry and education for social transformation. He suggests these themes form the basis of a "pedagogy aimed at the development of democratic values and critical citizenship" (p. 13), a phrase that captures the motives behind our aspiration to work with students to develop a new professional identity for the future needs of the world.

OEE has begun to respond to these challenges. One such area of innovation is place-based or place-responsive outdoor education (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). A place-responsive practice takes the focus of learning away from the skills of the activity that mediate the engagement with the landscape, and from the personal development outcomes most often cited as the valued impacts of the experiences. Instead, the knowledge of and relationship with places is privileged. It could be said that OEE is embracing or returning to a geographical outcome, one that maps an understanding of the world the student is in rather than mapping the inner landscapes of who the student becomes.

### **Dewey's Concept of Occupation as Pedagogy**

We took inspiration from Quay and Seaman's recent book "John Dewey and Education Outdoors" (Quay & Seaman, 2013) in which they propose Dewey's concept of occupation as an organizing principle for a curriculum, something like a thematic approach but based around an occupation. The occupation of outdoor educator has long been held to be strongly linked to personal identity rather than a role. Packer (2001) argues for education to situate the student in their socio-cultural context in order that an educational experience may effectively integrate self, knowledge and society, in this case through co-constructing their occupational identities as outdoor educators. Likewise, by occupation Dewey did not mean just a vocational or work role but, "different ways of living as a person in the social world, as, for instance, one would *be* a rock-climber, an artist, a doctor or a sister" (Quay & Seaman, 2013, p.85). Learning experiences organized in this way enable student agency with regard to the people they can and do become, as the students' interests develop in a certain way so do their occupations (Towers & Lynch, 2017).

In the case of our excursions, arguably four occupations were in play: traditional OEE practitioner, student, lecturer and potential OEE practitioner. We understood the traditional UK OEE practitioner as situated within an established set of practices that, in an international course, might not be relevant to other cultures or, additionally, the future needs of society in the UK or elsewhere. We therefore sort to distance the excursion from any representation of these traditions. In order to do this, we adopted a critical pedagogical approach to OEE (Saddington, 1999; Ord, 2007) by setting up the occupations of both student and lecturer as co-constructors of their knowledge of the place, the needs of society and, ultimately, their various views of the fourth occupation of potential OEE practitioners. This sat well with the pedagogy of the whole program that understood the occupation of student as participant researcher.

Dewey (1899) contends that experience of an occupation reproduces some role in society. This would, at first glance, not be conducive to transforming the practice of a profession. However, in 1915, Dewey suggested that students 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. This does not mean a separation of the doing from the knowing, valuing one above the other, instead occupation proposes a balance between “the intellectual and practical phases of experience” (p. 83). This is a balance that has not always historically been met in UK higher education where the abstract and theoretical may be considered more pure (Moodie, 2008). Dewey (1938) proposed that purposeful occupation incorporates prior knowledge coupled with surrounding conditions (context) and that judgement is the glue that connects them both. Garrison, Neubert and Reich (2016) agree with the importance of context, both environmental and social, and suggest that it only really becomes prevalent when students are presented with a new and unexpected situation. In employing a place-responsive education outdoors, we hoped to put less emphasis on the traditional occupation of OEE as defined by the professional world. Instead, we sought to foreground the place, its landscape and culture in determining the form the occupation took and set this within wider global needs. To our minds this could produce an approach to OEE more culturally, spatially and temporally relevant and more politically engaged.

Student openness to knowledge derived from experience, and reflection upon it, can be affected by their understanding of previous educational situations and what HE can/should look like (Garrison, Neubert, & Reich, 2016). Such bias may develop from the students’ perception of teachers as the keepers of knowledge or the expert, determining what particular knowledge learners need to know (see Towers & Lynch, 2017). We hoped a critical approach to the occupations of outdoor educator, lecturer and student 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.

### **The Case Study: The Field Trip Design.**

We chose a week in the valley of Ennerdale as a learning space because, it is England's first rewilding project. Rewilding is a term used to describe landscapes in which land management is designed to restore natural processes as far as is possible and limit human interventions to the minimum. As an approach to landscape management it is challenging the norms to be found in English landscapes, their appearance, the activities that take place and the way it is managed (Wild Ennerdale, 2017). We hoped an unconventional landscape seeking to reflect wider environmental concerns would give us a head start in challenging any expectations the students might have about how outdoor education *ought* to be practiced.

Influenced by Higgins' (2009) concern for a critical engagement with established knowledge to complement direct experience, we asked the students to think of the kind of Outdoor Educator they felt they *wanted to become in this place*. We encouraged the students to explore the valley and the opportunities it offered, notice their own talents, interests and motivations and then 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 approach to bring the opportunities afforded by the valley together in a way that met what they considered to be the needs of society?

Higgins' (2009) reflection on the limitations of direct experience and the importance he places on taking responsibility, together with Saltmarsh's (1996) observations on Dewey's contribution to a critical pedagogy, encouraged us to alter our approach in the latter two excursions. By introducing knowledge about the needs of the world to compliment the students' emerging knowledges of the place and their responses to it we provided a critical

social and environmental lens through which we invited students to critique the profession. In the latter two excursions, and based on the book by Hannon et al (2013), we used Hannon's (2016) thought provoking keynote from the Institute for Outdoor Learning National Conference 2016, "*What is Outdoor Learning For?*" to think about the bigger picture. Hannon, a futurologist, has applied selected predictions for the future to the field of outdoor education considering how they might impact on practice and what educators can do to prepare for a changing world. This, we hoped, would lead the students 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" (Loynes, 2014). The students' prior experiences and pre-conceptions of what an outdoor educator *should* look like, if they had any, are significant in this instance, and, likewise, so was 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.

### **The Emerging Occupations**

Staff documented all the excursions by keeping notebooks recording observations and informal conversations. After the first trip, students were invited to reflect with the staff on both the outcomes for them on their thinking about practice together with their thoughts about the pedagogical approach at two points during and once after each trip. Notes were kept of these group conversations. In addition, students presented individual summative reflections describing the impact of the excursion on their concept of their practice of the occupation of outdoor educator. Staff also presented their interpretation of the emerging pedagogical approach to students followed by discussion. Finally, between each excursion,

staff reviewed their understandings of the previous trip and made plans for the next one. All these discussions were also documented.

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 (Gibson, 1979). 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 centers of attention as students explored them and, in many cases according to them, developed new skills in order to do this. The students claimed that 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.

Observations and discussions confirmed that 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 reported that they 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 that they claimed were inspired by each other, the skills and knowledge of the staff and a broader interpretation of the valley's physical presence. Our view was that engagement was sensual and embodied rather than intellectual. It appeared to us that 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 local rewilding officer and the farmer. We were only encountering the valley through a narrow set of tasks from only one occupation, that of outdoor educator.

A walk and talk with the rewilding coordinator, undertaken with the second excursion onwards, 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 as though we were fish were reported as 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 naturalized valley so much more slowly. She could stand with us on the riverbank and tell the story of how the removal of a weir had allowed the return of several species of fish to healthy populations now that their spawning grounds were restored. This one critically engaged encounter opened the door for further explorations by the students of the knowledge held by others about the valley. In addition, we discussed with students the changes in their practices influenced by this new knowledge, such as organizing a float down and a walk up the riverbed in order to experience the feel of moving water.

### **Discussion**

The evidence from the excursions indicate that they met with the definition of immersive forms of experiential education. Both staff and students reportedly were able to transcend to a considerable degree the norms of traditional English outdoor education practices. Whilst the presence of canoes and camping equipment did provide artefacts that

might be expected to realize normative practices, in fact the students were observed and reported using these tools in innovative ways. To understand this, staff found it was important to understand the intention for, as much as the action with, these and other activities. In many more circumstances observations suggested and students described how activities themselves were co-created and strongly place-based in that they arose out of a growing knowledge of the valley and its affordances. In our view, these practices were also informed by ethics that emerged within student practice. This, we noted, was later informed by the inputs from the rewilding officer and staff. The participants claimed that the ethical rules of engagement that they exhibited arose implicitly from a sense of connection and care built up through the week. Indeed, and in contrast to the students' expectations, the rewilding officer was keen for the participants to feel free to trample and harvest more rather than less. Her view was that humans, as another species in the valley, have an impact that is important for a flourishing ecology. The students discussed with us how this freed them up to consider camping in untrampled meadows and causing disturbance to the riverbed. The emerging ethics were respectful of both human and non-human relations and often drove the few text-based enquiries that took place to find out more about species, habitats and the history of the valley and its community.

For the staff, the sources of knowledge acquired by the participants were in stark contrast to normal excursions on which students would be taught a set of skills and a body of knowledge considered necessary to encounter a place thoughtfully, safely and carefully. Our interpretation of the weeks suggested that, in Ennerdale, the knowledge privileged by the students did not come from OEE experts but was co-constructed by them from their experiences. Staff were included by the students in co-construction through specific questions formulated by them (for example, canoeing skills and weather interpretation). Also, at the suggestion of staff, local experts (for example, the rewilding officer) contributed. In addition,

the previous knowledge base of the participants themselves remained a factor. Other experts including those available online were demonstrably not consulted, suggesting that a direct relationship with the person holding what was considered to be expert knowledge was significant. The voices of people in place were privileged over those who were not.

The students reported that the explicit and reflective critical approach elucidated creative responses from all the students. Staff felt that the participative nature of the inquiry was important as it encouraged reflection that enabled the participants to recognize the practices they were co-creating and make explicit an understanding of the skills, values, ethics and knowledge they were gaining in the context of the wider critiques of the trends in society and the established norms of the profession.

In our view, we were largely successful in avoiding the norms of English outdoor practices. This was made possible because many of the participants had little or no prior knowledge of English practices or, indeed, of OEE. We also felt that the novelty of the rewilding project further contributed as it placed a spotlight on the strong cultural influences on landscapes often understood as wild or natural.

The workshop exploring the needs of society, which was introduced in the latter two excursions, helped to provide a context for the participants that explained why we had adopted the approach used. It was felt that an opportunity to construct an excursion for others based on the newly acquired knowledge of the valley informed by the future needs of society would have been a desirable next step.

### **Conclusion**

To summarize, the emerging pedagogy was significantly different from “guided participation” (Mascolo, 2009). In order to situate the excursion within socially relevant issues, we introduced a critical theoretical analysis of the needs of the world. A novel learning space encouraged the emergence of new knowledge and practices. We then

conducted an enquiry that invited staff and students to critique normative professional practices. Staff and students worked together to generate personal, and discover collective, knowledge of the place, to co-construct experiences in the valley and then build diverse professional identities that were respectful of varied cultural backgrounds, the emerging knowledge of the place and individual perceptions of the needs of society. Certain techniques proved crucial to the reported impacts. These included the time in the field with local experts, involving students from diverse cultural traditions and the iterative reflections encouraged by acknowledging the occupation of student as participant researcher.

Our instinct was perhaps right in that a different outdoor educator did emerge when the norms of practice are withheld or challenged. The approach was successful in problematizing the occupation of outdoor educator amongst the students. Both the critique of traditional, normative professional practices and the consideration of the future needs of society worked to inform responsible professional practices. These were expressed in the development of occupations that responded to these wider contexts as well as to the affordances of the valley and the personal interests of the students. For some, this was easier to embrace as this was either their first encounter with the role or they came from a culture in which the occupation of outdoor educator has yet to develop. Novices were at an advantage. Others, experts with professional experience within cultures with a strong outdoor education tradition, found the experience challenging though thought provoking. 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 the students. Smith and Segbers (2018) indicate that it helped the students develop a different occupation of student allowing them to explore their own interests more confidently throughout the remaining two years of the degree program and to be alert to their

particular personal, professional and cultural contexts. They became a learning community and insisted on staff remaining as only one source of an increasingly provisional knowledge.

For the staff, time seemed crucial and suggested future changes in our approach. Short visits did not allow for 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 are, it seems, important. The opportunity to apply ideas in a piece of professional practice in Ennerdale would also add considerably to the ongoing discourse. Once a critical approach is established, we believe place-responsive outdoor educators need to repeatedly experience a landscape in space, over a longer time and with others of diverse occupations in order to develop the outdoor educator they want to become, suitable for diverse places in the current times.

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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/>

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