Social ecology and experiential education in movement, environment and community.

Phillip G. Payne and Terri-Anne Philpott, Monash University.

Brisbane, Australia.

The formulation of Monash University’s research group focused on the notion of Movement, Environment and Community (MEC) is a response to challenging issues now confronting education and, in particular, physical education and outdoor education. In very general terms, educators and researchers must respond to the imperative for promoting physically active, health and wellbeing, and sustainable living.

The serious questions we are focused on for physical, outdoor, health and environmental educations include:

1. Should our research and related curriculum development efforts respond to the challenge for promoting physical activity, health, wellbeing and sustainable living? If so, do the prospects for healthy sustainable living require shifts in current approaches to education and understandings of its pedagogies?

2. What is our critique or complicity in that which troubles us? Is there some truth in the conclusions that Fiona Stanley (2005) has drawn about the betrayal of the next generation of young Australians and Zygmunt Bauman’s (2008) observation that many knowledge workers are estranged from society? If we offer critique, what is our reconstructive contribution? If complicit, what are we bequeathing to the following generations – when all the evidence and learned insight, and even public opinion, suggests those current troubles are not acceptable?

3. Is our critique ‘more of the same’ but with some tinkering around the edges? Or is there something useful way we can theorize and practice physical education, outdoor and health education? Do we ‘walk the talk’ of this potentially formidable role in our research? Or do we hide as knowledge workers only behind words, lofty ideals and inaction or disconnection from those whom we purport to educate and serve?

4. What then is the progressive role of scholarly inquiry, research and research-led-teaching, or education-led-research?

Brown & Payne (2008), Wattchow et al. (2008) and O’Connor (2008) grappled independently and collectively with these questions in preparing their respective but interrelated papers. We have asked how we might conceptualize each of movement, environment and community. These concepts are complex, ambiguous, contested and inherently political. We feel it was useful to provide some definition, characterization and ‘imagining’ of them as a starting point for further discussion and debate. More importantly, we see some positive solutions in how these three
concepts ‘dance’ with each other in ways that might not easily be recognizable or understandable. The dance leads inexorably to theory-building about ‘social ecology’ where, by way of introduction to that term, ‘cultural’ and ‘natural’ considerations about who and what we are intersect, often unevenly, in relation to what we are becoming.

MEC’s central notions of ‘spatiality of movement,’ ‘place-responsiveness’ and ‘communities and geographies of physical activity’ do, indeed, need a pedagogical partner for their translations into educational practices. Experiential education provides a preferred pedagogical platform for our theorization of social ecology, noting other pedagogical approaches such as constructivism and behaviorism have their place – situationally and contextually.

In what follows we reiterate the main ideas each of our MEC colleagues has made about the interrelated notions of movement, environment and community and their relevance to studies of sport and outdoor recreation, and physical, outdoor, health and environmental education. We emphasize the connection and interrelatedness that exists between each seemingly discreet concept. We highlight the transdisciplinary nature of our research and the ways it might inform a reconceptualization of our teaching in modules, units and programs. We then outline what the theoretical driver of ‘social ecology’ does encompass in physical and outdoor education and in the study of sport and outdoor recreation as a practical approach to health and wellbeing promotion and sustainable living. Next, we indicate what challenges the pedagogical driver of ‘experiential education’ presents to us, noting that each colleague has already briefly discussed some of the relevant pedagogical issues. Finally, we conclude with some general comments about the need to revise some of the standard assumptions about physical education and outdoor education, and their research.

Movement, its spatiality and experience

Our interest in movement, and physical activity, focuses on the intrinsic qualities and characteristics of movement experiences and, therefore, their significance in reconceive approaches to movement experiences in physical, outdoor, health and environmental educations. Via conceptual, theoretical and empirical means, we seek to advance understandings of the spatiality of movement and what that suggests for the meaning-making capacities of participants. This view of movement experiences leads to a more phenomenological, less scientific approach to physical, outdoor, environmental and health educations. Some impact on conventional notions of human movement studies, physical activity, outdoor adventure activities and exercise sciences can be expected.

The spatiality of movement is sometimes implied but rarely examined in physical education, most of all for what it implies for the meaning-making capacities of its participants. As Brown & Payne (2008) explained, meaning-making is a largely forgotten dimension of learning but, in all likelihood, is a pre-requisite for it. If meaning-making is invisible or excluded from physical and outdoor educations as a source of learning, conceptual development and cognitive growth, then such marginalization exacerbates a chronic problem in the discourses of physical and outdoor education. The addition of meaning-making to those discourses might offset their precarious status. Invariably, we still wear the allegation that physical education and even outdoor education are ‘just doing things’ or ‘having fun’ and, somehow, good for personal growth, fitness, learning the rules and accepting them, and great for team building and character development, or needed preparation for competitive sports outdoor pursuits. All of these are important, but in education ‘learning’ remains a priority! The notion of learning, however, often reflects a very limited view of what it is to ‘know how’ and ‘for’ a wide range of human potentialities. Brown & Payne (2008) emphasized how the notion of movement experience potentially provided a different perspective of what is currently assumed in physical education and outdoor education where, often, skills, technique, competence and performativity are privileged while the somaesthetics of bodily consciousness (Shusterman, 2008) are ignored or excluded.

We have concluded that movement experiences and meaning-making in physical activity and outdoor experiences remain understudied, noting the sporadic attempts by a few in the
discourse of physical education who have worked on the margins of a phenomenology of movement in physical education. Brown and Payne’s (2008) reference list identifies these key contributors. Brown and Payne’s conception of the ‘spatiality of movement’ and ‘meaningful movement experiences’ reveal how those moving, active bodies ‘fit’ into the environmental opportunities that Wattchow et al. (2008) described as occurring in ‘places,’ and O’Connor (2008) identified as being community-based, in his notion of the ‘geographies of physically active communities.’ Here, although not well appreciated to date, Brown & Payne’s (2008) account of the embodied, intrapersonal, spatial/temporal and ecological layers of movement experiences and physical activity is eminently amenable to description, interpretation, critique and pedagogical and research reconstruction. The social ecology of the phenomenology of movement is one amongst a number of interrelated layers that make up a social ecology of physical and outdoor education, or the study of sport and outdoor recreation.

**Place as a responsive and responsible environmental experience**

Wattchow et al. (2008) described how the diffuse term ‘environment’ opens up a way of getting into 'place' and how ‘place-responsiveness’ is a distinctive feature of MEC’s individual and collective research efforts. Brown & Payne’s (2008) spatiality of movement is strongly suggestive of certain embodied dimensions of the proximal environment and has clear implications for how we may or may not value the personal and social experiences and intrapersonal dimensions of movement, play, exploration and discovery – or somaesthetics (Shusterman, 2008). And how we might need to ‘zoom in’ our pedagogical and research efforts to further clarify the meaning making processes and consequences of the spatial affordances and restraints on various movement experiences.

Wattchow et al.’s (2008) notion of ‘place’ and responsiveness to it via place pedagogy has some important properties that have escaped the increasingly popularized use of that term. First, place as a version of pedagogy highlights the experiential phenomena of lived experience, encounters and responses to what that ‘space’ perceptually and conceptually offered -- as mediated ‘pedagogically’ between the educator/guide and learner/participant and their environment. There is, therefore, an important distinction to be made between the concepts of place and space. Often the terms are used interchangeably and, if so, diminish the intimacy of the notion of place pedagogy. Thus each learning place is, indeed, an intrapersonal, interpersonal and intercorporeal pedagogical transaction that requires a nuanced pedagogical response. Places, Wattchow et al. (2008) assert, make us (as educators and learners) as we make them. In this sense, place-responsive learning can occur in a wide variety of cultural and natural spaces that, potentially, converts them to meaningful places. This responsiveness is illustrated in Geraldine Burke’s community art project, Cutter-Mackenzie’s school space gardening project, O’Connor’s walking to school project or a wild space, as with Wattchow’s research on the Snowy River. Brown and Payne’s (2008) ‘spatiality of movement’ has a similar connotation – movement as form of ‘bodily responsiveness’ and its pedagogies of the somaesthetics of meaning-making in discovery and exploration of those proximal spaces that become intimate places.

In each of the above cases, their pedagogy of place entail an embodied perception and experiential participation in potentially less than meaningful spaces. They only become places when they are meaningful to the learners/participants and their educators/guides/leaders. The intercorporeal nature of the pedagogical transaction implies a group, collective or community of active participants, including various versions of environment and nature, that signal the broader consideration of ‘community.’

**Geographies of active living communities**

O’Connor’s (2008) synthesis of the idea of community alerts us to the broader geographical features of ‘physical activity,’ ‘active, healthy, sustainable communities’ and the motivations for
movement that occur in them. Traditional conceptions of communities and schools are often defined by the geographical boundaries of the school grounds. O’Connor argues that modern conceptions of community require us to blur these geographical boundaries and acknowledge the multiplicity of communities bound by social and physical features and forms of communication. A key issue is how the school community might act as a retraditionalized ‘hub’ for generating broader neighbourhood and community involvement in physical activity. This nested view of community acknowledges difference and contributes to the sustainability of the people and their places. O’Connor’s (2008) ‘geographies of active living communities’ takes, therefore, both a zoom and wider lens view of how local, built, urban, open-space and natural environments provide a range of opportunities and limits for physical activity, sport and outdoor recreation. This vantage point provides a means of identifying the ‘upstream’ and ‘early intervention’ opportunities for health promotion and sustainable living across multiple levels of physical activity. The incorporation into O’Connor’s ‘social ecology’ of Brown & Payne’s (2008) and Wattchow et al.’s (2008) layers will be of interest to pedagogues, as well as school designers, urban planners and policy makers. The upstream logic offered by socio-ecological theory contrasts markedly with the costly ‘downstream’ medical, therapeutic and pharmaceutical responses to disease.

O’Connor’s (2008) conception of community asks us to examine how physical activity, in all its variations, connects and disconnects different types of communities. O’Connor draws our attention to the ‘hub’ role schools might still enjoy as the ‘glue’ for neighborhoods, towns and suburbs in otherwise globalized and abstracted versions of society. O’Connor’s hub is another form of place but still raises the question of ‘which communities are privileged and which are ignored? Undoubtedly, there are social, geographic, economic and cultural differences in various schools, their resources and partnerships with broader community agencies and settings. As there are the various geographical and environmental factors shaping the formation of communities associated with physical activity, health and wellbeing promotion and sustainable living opportunities.

In regard to the hub role, physical education can become a site of practices that acknowledge the full scope of what physical activity is and what it means to people within different communities. By ignoring the meaning making of movement for individuals, schools and their communities O’Connor believes we trivialize incidental activities like playing in the streets, walking to school, hiding in a park, cycling to work, running for pleasure, swimming at the beach, playing sport at lunch time with mates. We then approach activity as primarily rational, positivist and instrumental. This ‘set’ activity logic is largely based upon a particular view of sport or exercise for health in the form of structured regimented and programmed experiences, many of which are costly and disconnect with the lives of participants in time. If we concentrate some of the curriculum on the meaning making attributes as they occur in a range of personal, school and social levels, we can 'learn' how to facilitate a lifetime of physical activity that is all encompassing and not limited to something that we cannot always sustain. So whilst this ultimately is an upstream contributor to disease prevention, the focus is not on this as an outcome, rather the outcome is learning what we can do to create communities that are active, engaging and connected. O’Connor (2008) asks physical education teachers to address questions like: What barriers exist to stop us from being active in our daily lives? What can we do to change these obstacles? What do we get out of being engaged physically with our environment and other people? What things help us to engage in non-structured physical activities and how can we enhance their impact within our home, school, community? Physical education, and outdoor education, classes might then be expanded to political action; home based interventions; reclaiming space within communities; cross curricular projects that document, measure and argue for greater incidental activity; community garden projects; and community artwork initiatives, as illustrated in Wattchow et al. (2008).

O’Connor (2008) makes the following point about the geographies of active living communities in which learning at the school hub, and in relation to nearby communities of neighborhoods and beyond. The processes of learning entailed are not about learning the technique of how to play or how to walk or how to run for fun, but learning how we can argue for the ‘capacity building’ opportunities to do so within our communities. Then we might provide some
different insights into the question of what is it to be physically educated, noting that the theoretical frame of social ecology invokes or invites a critical understanding of the multitude of factors that impact upon the capacity for individuals and communities to be active and advocates for that.

Social ecology of movement, environment and community

Yet again, the term ‘social ecology’ is complex and, therefore, easily confused. Five points are made to characterize what the theoretical-driver of ‘social ecology’ might look like.

1. The previous presentations and the above summation have consistently located the phenomena and social realities of movement, environments and communities in spatial, place and geographical/historical contexts. That humans interact with a range of environments and that cultures intersect with natures is a commonsense. But remarkably, so much theory, so much pedagogy, so much research ‘leaves out,’ implies only, or marginalizes the spatial, place and geographical constitutions of selves, identities, social practices and cultural conditions. Environments include personal, social and cultural spaces; they might also be understood as intra and inter or intersubjective and intercorporeal. Environments can be understood as proximal, local, built, neighborhood, urban, coastal, open space, remote, wilderness. What is common in the idea of social ecology, amongst all these variations, is the relational nature of humans and environments, including those that are more-than-human. Of course, there will always be an ethico-political dimension to the underlying human-environment relation. Simply speaking, some relations are deemed better than others, particularly when constructions like ‘sustainability’ enter into the picture.

2. A good example of confusion about the meaning of ‘social ecology’ is the current interest in socio-cultural theory. Close inspection of various explanations of socio-cultural and historical theory will confirm that the term environment is used in a fairly simple but abstract manner. This ‘loose’ reference to environments reduces the significance of the myriad environments shaping human, social, family and cultural behaviours. It diminishes the ‘ecology’ that (re)connects humans and their wider range of environments and cultures and, in turn, their intersections with various natures. So MEC’s theoretical-driver of social-ecology lays heavy emphasis on the spatial, place and geographic conditions and constitutive powers of various environments. An examination of physical education curriculum discourses will confirm the absence of detailed consideration of the environmental dimensions and underlying conditions of physical activity.

3. Socio-ecological theory, therefore, takes seriously a philosophical development in environmental philosophy. This development is highly suggestive of the need for a paradigm shift in the way we think, conceptualize and practice our professional vocations, conduct research and inform our teaching. Suffice to say, health promotion and sustainable living are inextricably linked given the strong connections of humans and environments. Social justice and ecological justice are mutually constitutive as much as the ecological, economic and health crises are unjustly connected, but too often ignored. Simply speaking, greater amounts of physical activity are risky if the spaces, places and geographies in which those activities take place are unhealthy, inaccessible, costly or poorly maintained and managed. Environmental/nature philosophy offers to our characterization of ‘social ecology’ the notions of anthropocentrism (human centredness at environmental expense/cost/subjugation) and ecocentrism (care/protection for, particularly, the more-than-human natures that sustain us). Importantly, these concepts exist on a continuum with, for example, ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ versions of anthropocentrism and ‘weak’ and ‘strong’ versions of ecocentrism. These difficult concepts, and the continuum that exists between them and different strength of similar versions (ie a, b and i, ii) are outlined in Figure 1.
Figure 1. The continuum of paradigmatic anthropocentrism and ecocentrism.

Anthropocentrism <---------------------------------------------------------------→ Ecocentrism

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strong</th>
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<tr>
<td>Socio-cultural theory a</td>
<td>Socio-ecological theory b</td>
<td>Socio-ecological theory ii</td>
<td>Socio-ecological theory i</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social environments</td>
<td>urban environments</td>
<td>Gardens/parks</td>
<td>Open spaces</td>
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<td>land/seascapes</td>
<td>Nature</td>
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4. We have mentioned the micro, meso and macro dimensions of a theory of social ecology. Phenomenological, place and system-like considerations were touched on. Embodied, local and global have also been mentioned, as have the intra and interpersonal and intersubjective and intercorporeal. O’Connor referred to Sallis et al.’s (2006) ‘systems’ type ecological framework for active living communities. In our theorizing of social ecology, noting the above ecocentric qualification in Figure 1 and the distinction of socio-cultural and socio-ecological theory, we see the importance of the comprehensive social theories of Giddens (1984), Bourdieu (1984), Archer (2000) and James (2006). They cannot be explained here beyond signaling how the concepts of movement, environment and community and each of their interrelated ‘social ecologies’ are suggestive of aspects of those well established theoretical efforts. Giddens has offered us a theory that combines structure and agency in explaining how societies are reconstituted. Bourdieu’s ‘habitus’ does similar work and insists on the importance of the role of concrete bodily skills and habits in reconfiguring social reality and its systems. Archer’s ‘primacy of practice’ seeks to redeem the embodied role of human agency in the development of personal and social identities and cultural formation. James’ theory of social formation stresses how localized practice and being have extended into the globalized present and are projected to extend and abstract further in the future. For the most part, however, they are examples of weak anthropocentric theory.

5. The concepts of movement, environment and community are being treated thematically in the social ecology we seek to develop and apply, for example, in physical, outdoor, environmental and health educations. In doing so, our collective efforts signal a revision is needed in the way those curriculum areas and pedagogical approaches are developed and practiced.

Experiential education

Almost needless to say, the terms experience and, therefore experiential education are complex and defy singular definition. But a pedagogical theory and practice is needed. Watchow et al. (2008) outlined a pedagogy sourced in the thoughtful transactions of learners, teachers, places and natures. To be sure, we require ‘good’ educative practices, so that the ‘talk (of socio-ecology) is walked.’ The notion of experiential education is well known in outdoor education, but less so in physical education. Commonly used terms include ‘activity’ and ‘learning by doing’ or ‘immersive,’ ‘situated,’ ‘contextualized’ and problem-based learning and ‘authentic’ experiences. However, to use these interchangeably with experiential education is dangerous because they might not emphasize the human-environment relation and transaction. Scholars dedicated to experiential education like Fox (2008) concluded, somewhat belatedly, that theoretical understandings of experience are missing in experiential education scholarship. John Dewey (1938), the great educational philosopher sometimes referred to as the ‘father of experiential education’, called for an ‘intelligent theory of experience.’ Dewey witnessed the rise of social control in education that all too often was due to fashionable intellectual breezes he detected that regularly ‘blow along’ in curriculum, pedagogical and research development.
We take Dewey’s warning seriously. Each of the three MEC papers highlighted a number of pedagogical issues that are ripe for further inquiry. Wattchow et al. (2008) via Burke’s interest in immersive art experiences is a fine example of both the pedagogical and representational issue dominating research. How does art express our embodied, intrapersonal and intercorporeal, or somaesthetic feelings and understandings about a place? What then, very briefly, are some of the key pedagogical issues and research possibilities surrounding the intersections of the pedagogical platform of ‘experiential education’ and theoretical driver of ‘social ecology’?

At a basic level, the old hoary chestnut in education of the gap between theory and practice still exists. Put differently, what might be a good ‘theory of practice’ and ‘practice of theory’ look like so that, for example, our graduates can confidently and competently ‘do’ and ‘talk about’ in their professional destinations? Put differently, again, we and hopefully our fellow researchers, will grapple seriously with the question of how the ‘embodied mind’ and/or ‘mind embodied’ are keys to the quest for ‘meaning-making’ in movement experiences. This finer grained question was raised by Brown & Payne (2008) and in Wattchow et al’s (2008) ‘place responsive’ challenge for pedagogy. O’Connor’s (2008) contribution invited a different slant on the ecologically-sensitive natures of ‘communities of learners’ and their ‘epistemic communities’ (a pedagogical hub) that currently are attracting interest.

We wish to distance ourselves from the pedagogical and methodological connotation of the individualized learner disconnected or displaced from his/her environments and, therefore, broader questions that need to be asked about the ways in which society is reconstituted, as indicated by Giddens, Bourdieu, Archer and James. Social ecology and experiential education seek to overcome the chronic lapses into individualism and isolated selves severed from others and the world in which we experience and exist. We want to move on from methodological individualism, in much the same way.

An intelligent theory of experience also bridges the I – world dualism that similarly has hampered educational and pedagogical development. There have been numerous critiques of the individualized, atomized and intensified self – in education, social and cultural theory, philosophy and numerous other disciplines. The linking of the pedagogies of experiential education and socio-ecological theory promotes a ‘relational self’ at both the levels of agency and structure – that is, a person who already is in the environment and world (for example, Dewey, 1938, Merleau-Ponty, 1962)!

So, in summary, MEC via its social ecology and experiential education platforms is keenly interested in reconciling dualisms, such as the theory – practice gap and I/mind – body/world disconnection and their associated values-hierarchical thinking. These dualisms inordinately privilege the rational mind and intellect – too often at the expense of the sensing, feeling, physically active individual and society. Indeed, because of the ‘physicality’ of physical education and outdoor education, these fields invite further theoretical, pedagogical and research development.

Reconceptualizing the fields of physical education and outdoor education

The concepts of movement, environment and community and theorizations of social ecology and experience provide a different vantage point through which physical, outdoor, health and environmental educations can be considered. The social ecology of movement, environment and community demands interdisciplinary insights and transdisciplinary responses. Promoting physical activity, health and wellbeing, and living sustainably present formidable challenges. Sympathetic to Bauman’s challenge to estranged knowledge workers, MEC aims to be highly responsive to the numerous challenges confronting society, schools and their teachers. We do not seek to replace those established approaches and versions of physical and outdoor education. But we do want to bring those conventions into a critical conversation.

We have provided some of the initial conceptual apparatus most relevant to how movement, place and community experiences might be developed. We identified some of the key pedagogical issues that flow from these conceptions. We stressed the intentions of our work, noting the serious
pedagogical, curriculum and theoretical/philosophical and empirical challenges presented by those intentions. We characterized social-ecology in a layered way we think challenges can be addressed according to the different dimensions and scales of movement and physical activity in various places and environments. We feel that notions like the ‘spatiality of movement,’ ‘place-responsiveness’ and ‘geographies of physical activity in communities’ are accessible and relevant to reflective practitioners and reflexive researchers. These notions provide an alternative ‘naming’ for the things that might currently be missing in physical and outdoor education. We anticipate such notions can comfortably be brought into conversation with the discourses of health and wellbeing promotion and sustainable living.

References

Fox, K. 2008.
Sallis, J.