Environment, place and social ecology in educational practice

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Introduction

‘Environment,’ like ‘nature,’ is an ambiguous term because of the many environments that do exist and the different ways in which they are perceived and socially constructed over time and through space. Educators must be careful about the way meaning is ascribed to ‘environment’ and ‘nature’ if sustainability is to remain a plausible proposition. For example, the same school ‘environment’ may simultaneously be perceived by teachers and students as a sporting arena for testing human physical performance, a landscape of shapes, light and colours for the art class, or as a ecology in need of examination and management in a science subject. These examples mark only the beginning of a very long list of the multiple, complex and even contradictory ways that various pedagogic environments may be viewed and therefore experienced.

Environments can be personal, social, historical, built, natural, tame or wild. The integrity of each environment warrants study and requires a particular pedagogic response. Educators should be
mindful of the various ways in which teachers and students shape and are shaped by these learning environments physically, emotionally and intellectually stands to make a significant contribution to the creation of active communities and the promotion of health, wellbeing and sustainability.

Hence, a 'social ecology' of the complex term ‘environment’ is urgently required to enhance our pedagogical and research efforts in outdoor, environmental, movement, physical and health educations. What is needed is a conceptual shift in our thinking and bodily practices towards an ‘ecocentric’ or place responsive posture; a philosophical frame quite different from the anthropocentrism, or human centredness of most educational discourses.

In practical terms, a social ecology of the environment, in relation to the study of movement and community experiences, entails in pedagogical practices a range of human-environment interactions, be it open-space play, active art projects, walking to school, or outdoor education expeditions. A constant in these examples is the taking of education away from the environmental constraints of the ‘indoors,’ and its privileging of mind/learning/knowing, to the environmental enablements of the ‘outdoors’ and body/mind doing, meaning-making and becoming. A social ecology of these human-environment interactions and relations address various ‘other’ and ‘wild’ forms of expression and performance - be it strenuous activity in space, graceful movement in place, or kinaesthetic appreciation over time in different places.

This paper addresses some of the more ‘ecocentric’ and wild, less tamed concerns outlined above and leaves others to the ‘Movement’ and ‘Community’ papers. Simply, our aim is to outline the major distinguishing characteristics and dimensions of ‘environment’ so that inquiry of an ecological type can proceed into the qualities of movement, physicality, their spatialities and geographies, and generation of active and sustainable communities. To ground this in our research efforts, we focus on ‘place’ study - an important derivation of the nature/environment concepts. We offer vignettes about ‘the experience of river places in outdoor education, children’s gardens and artistic representations of pedagogies of place. But first, what do we mean by the term ‘place’?
**Place and space**

Place, as a concept, has been extensively discussed in the work of humanist geographers such as Tuan (1975, 1977), Relph (1976, 1985) and Seamon (1979, 1992, 2004). Yet use of word ‘place’, and the phrase ‘a sense of place,’ has become so commonplace that they stand to have their meaning diminished. At the heart of this issue is confusion between the concepts of space and place.

The relationship between space and place remains one of the most difficult challenges facing researchers and practitioners alike. On the one hand there are those who consider that place is ‘made’ through the accumulation of human experience (see for example, Meinig, 1979; Relph, 1976). On the other there are those who propose that place has its own inherent spirit and meaning waiting to be discovered (see for example, Park, 1995; Tacey, 1995). Differences between place as culturally constructed space or place as a site of intrinsic meaning are important to understand because they potentially bear on the ways in which teachers and participants locate themselves within, move through, and identify themselves with outdoor environments.

Casey (1996, p. 14) argues that it was the abstract physics of Newton and the critical philosophy of Kant that has resulted in places becoming “the mere apportionings of space, its compartmentalisations.” In his argument for a return to place, Casey (1996, p. 20) asks us to avoid the “the high road of modernism … to reoccupy the lowland of place.” Place can then be considered both pre-modern and post modern; “it serves to connect these two far sides of modernity” (Casey, 1996, p. 20). Space is abstracted in the mind. Place is inevitably lived in, first and foremost, through the body.
The New Zealand ecological historian Geoff Park (1995, p. 331) suggests that “any stretch of country, no matter how pervasive agriculture’s marks, has an indwelling life force, waning or waxing, which distinguishes if from any other.” Why is it necessary to consider the importance of sense of place and place attachment in education? Park (1995) answered this question simply and decisively when he wrote, “a sense of place is a fundamental human need” (p. 320). In his highly influential book *Place and Placelessness*, Relph (1976, p. 6) demonstrated how places serve as “sources of security and identity”, but also how the homogenising influence of modern practices can result in the experience of displacement or rootlessness. Educating for a responsiveness to place assumes that at least part of education is about preparing people to “to live and work to sustain the cultural and ecological integrity of the places they inhabit” (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000, p. 4).

**Place and education**

Yet according to David Orr (1992), educators have failed to see much significance in understanding, or attempting to teach a responsiveness to the particular places where teaching and learning is located. He explains that “place is nebulous to educators because to a great extent we are displaced people for whom immediate places are no longer sources of food, water, livelihood, energy, materials, friends, recreation or sacred inspiration” (p. 126). The typical curriculum, according to Orr is based upon abstraction, which disconnects people from “tangible experience, real problems, and the places where we live and work” (p. 126).

Place cannot, like the content of some subjects, be studied at a distance. Rather, place is a lived phenomenon. Students and teachers both make and are made by the place they live and work within. This reciprocal relationship – place as lived experience – makes it a compelling and accessible theme for all kinds of experiential educators. Geography, history, art, environmental science, outdoor education and even health and physical education can all benefit from a focus on
place. But it does require, on the part of educators and learners, a return to the immediacy of the local – that combination of topography, climate and ecology along with human activities and their signs, symbols and rituals that gives a place its unique distinctiveness. Hence, a social ecology of environment as place.

The following vignettes represent some of our attempts to return, with our students and program participants, to the immediacy of place, to encounter them with mind and body, and to refine pedagogies that respond to them. Each story gestures towards the potential for educators and learners to make a significant contribution to the social ecology of their community through carefully developed experiential pedagogies. A number of pedagogical implications are drawn from each vignette for the reader to consider.

Vignette 1: Creating Connections to place (Geraldine Burke)

A sense of place is a virtual immersion that depends on lived experience and a topographical intimacy that is rare today both in ordinary life and in traditional educational fields…. it demands extensive visual and historical research, a great deal of walking “in the field”, contact with oral tradition, and an intensive knowledge of both local multiculturalism and the broader context of multicentredness.

Lucy Lippard (1997, p. 33)

The Mother Earth, She is sharing Her colours and I think as the grains of coloured earth pass through my hands between my fingers colouring my jeans with the hues, the Mother is feeling me – my spirit – just as much as I am feeling her spirit. She teaches me to be in touch. I am in Taungurong country at Seymour (nearly). I am in Wurrundjeri country at Chum Creek and in Dalry Road which is another cutting with wonderful colours and spirit. The best fun this ochre hunting, the best fun making cuppa’s and yarning, the best fun being with our mob of artists. Roy, Teresa, Doug and me. The best fun us makin a sand paintin, the best fun meetin other artists doin
their “skulptya’s” just the best fun, must be somethin! Must be healthy! Sunny days, sunny people, sunny paintin, sunny colours – many sandshoes Mother Earth. \(^1\)


The joint Shire of Yarra Ranges–Vic Health, *Creative Junction* project sought to rethink the public space as both *an internal and external site for artistic expression* (Vic-Health, Mental health and Wellbeing - Art and Community grant Reference No. 2003-0557). Its priorities were to promote a sense of social connectedness, economic participation, diversity and freedom from discrimination. It aimed to connect art and environment to personal, meaningful experience and to develop and express a sense of place through art. Accordingly the *Creative Junction* project was inspired by the community’s stories, artwork and living culture; as well as their connection to the land and to each other.

As Artistic Coordinator, working within a project team, I developed a program of site based events designed to engage community in situated, embodied art activities exploring local culture *with* nature, *in* nature and *about* nature. This approach reflected UNESCO’s art education directive that ‘visual arts learning can commence from the local culture, and progressively introduce learners to other world cultures.’ (UNESCO 2004, p. 43).

The art program aimed to challenge everyday notions of the landscape genre, such that we were positioned inside its experience rather than onlookers to its view. Inspired by the poetry of Judith Wright we wanted to *express* rather than *describe* place; to adopt a disposition that “…lives through

\(^{1}\) Tony is a member of the Oonah Indigenous and non-Indigenous art collective who offered a Creative Junction community workshop, which began by walking and talking the Yarra Junction site, followed by an introduction to the use of ochre, both contemporary and historic. In addition community participants made images acknowledging cultural aspects of their heritage. As a follow up, the community was invited to add personal symbols and images to a large ground-based sand and ochre painting which was formed on Creative Junction Day. This artwork, ‘Bunjil, the Creator’, featured ochre from local sites which was ground, sprinkled and drawn onto a bed of sand.
landscape and event” (Wright, 1961, p. 96). We wanted to expand on western notions of place, to
become aware of Indigenous views of country (Rose, 1996), and to learn to play and create with
found materials as a means to undertake material thinking (Carter, 2004) as arts based research.

Following a literature review, extensive consultation with the community and project team, we
commissioned a series of ‘connector’ artworks. Expressing local knowledge and connecting the
community to place and each other, were viewed as central to the formation of these works. They
consisted of:

- A series of community workshops, focusing on nature and art to express ways of knowing;
- Permanent environmental artworks;
- Ephemeral artworks that utilised natural objects from the area as agents for
  Creative connection to local culture and sense of place;
- On going photographic and narrative documentation of the artistic process;
  Creative Junction festival days,
- Postcards and interpretive signage that reflected the project aims and allowed for ongoing
  reference to the events that surrounded the project.
The community workshops led to tactile engagement with place through art and nature. In the process participants extended their skills with local materials, leading to a range of locally inspired art pieces.
Fundamental to our immersive art program was a consistent emphasis on walking and talking the land whereby collecting natural materials and making artworks were seen as combined experiences. Our program of events invited participants back into nature in ways that encouraged them to look, smell, find, examine and collect objects from place for use in artistic processes and outcomes, believing, as per Emily Brady (2003, p. 127) the environmental philosopher, that our sense of place can be influenced by an “...(A)ppreciation of aesthetic qualities through sensory engagement which is ‘directed to a great degree by qualities perceived...’”. In the process we reframed and revisited place so as to tease out relational aspects between viewpoints, seeking Indigenous, botanical, historical, artistic, playful and logging perspectives. We hoped that this capturing of layered experiences would enable us to see, as per (Rogoff, 1995), how we were connected and involved in each others definition. The place responsive art that emerged from the project reflected a view of environmental art whereby the individual’s connection to the environment is primary (Wallis and Kastner, 1998, p. 11) a view that also seeks to relocate the artist and viewer from observer of nature to participant in it.

To achieve optimum creative engagement we used a developing framework for immersive art pedagogy (Burke, 2004; 2005; 2007) which sought to link a system’s view of creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996) to a radical/local view of pedagogy (Hedegard and Chaiklin, 2005). This approach promoted local knowledge/s alongside the discipline knowledge of art within socio-cultural and critical ways of knowing. The art/research/teaching that became the living inquiry within the Creative Junction project is also understood through a/r/tography (Irwin, 2004) an arts based approach to research which pays heed to the in-between (Grosz: 2001) where meanings reside in the simultaneous use of language, images, materials, situations, space and time (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xix). In so doing we troubled our awareness and knowing, so as to embody theory-as-practice-as-process-as-complication. (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xi). From this
A/r/tographic perspective we no longer understood place as being *geographically bound* (Doherty, 2004, p. 8). In addition, as per Kwon’s (2002) notion, we came to envision the concept of ‘site’ as a complex figure in the unstable relationship between location and identity (Irwin and Spinggay: 2008, p. xxvi).

Meta knowledge of the creative process helped us further develop a creative connection to place and each other. Csikszentmihalyi’s systems model of creativity (1996) enabled us to consider the cultural/community denomination of creativity and to go beyond an understanding of individual creativity to one that valued the interrelated sites of creativity; namely the domain, the field and the individual. Csikszentmihalyi’s attention to the ‘where’ of creativity (1996, p. 27) suggests that creativity does not happen inside people’s heads, but in the interactions between a person’s thoughts and a socio cultural context.

In the *Creative Junction* project the domain was understood through the site of Yarra Junction. The site actuated the multiple layers of knowing evident in the domain and was conceived as a place that continues to contain the remnants, past or present, that exist in this place reflecting a diverse continuum of knowing as explored through stories and artefacts.

The field was perceived as the funding bodies, project management team, selected project artists and participating teachers from local schools and kindergarten who constituted the primary gatekeepers to the symbolic knowing of place. This field aimed to further recognise, preserve and remember the culture of this place and culture generally, as actualised through our visual journaling process, project marketing, publicity material, scholarly articles, editorials, postcards and brochures that celebrated our project.
Individuals participated in art workshops and the making of ephemeral sculptures which exposed them to concepts in the domain and which were documented for possible inclusion in postcards and project documentation. Further these individuals were mentored through the process by field members, being the artists, teachers and project team members. As well, community members who did not participate directly in the project but who received project postcards were further introduced to the domain and the artwork of their fellow community members through the postcards.

The Creative Junction project continues to inspire my own environmental art investigations within my PhD and lives on as an introductory experience for pre-service teachers at Monash University involved in art/place and environment activities. The stories and informing theories behind the Creative Junction project also have implications for educators and students within a broader context and can be conceptualised through the following pedagogical applications.

1. Teachers and learners can become active agents in shaping the knowledge, art and narratives of a given place. Both teachers and learners can harness locally found materials, corresponding art methods, and relational narratives and associations of place rather than passively delivering ready made content from other sources. In so doing they are performing a type of Bricolage (Denzin and Lincoln, 2008) and can in the process become aware of pedagogical approaches that acknowledge complex connections between identity/ies, expression/s, place/s and power.

2. The outside environment generally lends itself to an experiential use of materials, movement and situation and can be harnessed by teachers and students as a means to link into the local. In this way teachers and students can enact a double move (Hedegard and Chaklin, 2005) such that students can connect their living enquiry (Irwin and De Cosson, 2004) of place and environment with the discipline knowledge of art, and in turn, teachers can connect their art knowledge to the local findings of their students.
3. Our daily life has become more inside focused. A cultural transition from the classroom to the outside learning zone could open up opportunities for art education by utilizing walking/talking/(environmentally sound)collecting/ and making as pedagogical devices that allow us to create from within the experience of environment and place rather than as mere onlookers to its view.

4. Creativity can be conceptualised as a personal AND societal pursuit that opens up community connections between the individual, the field and the domain.

5. A place can be conceptualised as a creative site that can be explored and revealed by the following phases identified through immersive art pedagogy. (Burke: PhD in progress; 2008). These may entail,
   - Walking place - as an aesthetic and reflective way of connecting to place;
   - Wondering place - through tactile engagement with natural materials;
   - Listening to place and each other - through art and narrative;
   - Exploring place - through nature;
   - Expressing place - through art and nature;
   - Deep learning - in, through and about art and nature;
   - Wellbeing through aesthetic engagement with place - through art and nature;
   - Valuing of diversity - through art and nature
   - Imaginative possibility and enjoyment - through art and nature
   - Critical awareness of place – through art and narrative

Vignette 2: School Garden Experiences – Fostering Place (Amy Cutter-Mackenzie)

For the past decade gardening programs have become increasingly popular in Australian schools as teachers seek pedagogical approaches to engage children in experiential learning and work towards tackling societal concerns such as childhood obesity and environmental sustainability (Miller, 2007). The desire to enable children to experience ‘slow’, less technologically focused experiences
(Payne, 2003; Payne & Wattchow, 2008) and to address concerns that children are growing up with what Louv (2005) describes as “Nature Deficit Disorder” are additional drivers that have led teachers and communities to embrace school gardening programs. Mayer-Smith et al. (2007, p. 85) found that “children’s relationship with the environment changed and became more personal” over the course of an Intergenerational Landed Learning Project. They noted that “the majority of children shifted from seeing the environment as an object or a place, to a view characterized by the interconnectedness of humans and environment” (p.83). With that in mind, Wake (2008, p. 432) argues that further research is needed with respect to “what children are looking for in a nature connection, if indeed they are looking” in the context of children’s gardens programs. She maintains that there is a tendency for adults to romanticize nature and utilize this to legitimize children’s interactions with nature through garden programs.

While there is a growing body of research focused on the benefits of school gardening programs, there is a dearth of research about children’s school garden experiences and how these experiences influence their notions of place. In this vignette I report on children’s gardening experiences. The focus of the vignette is the Multicultural School Gardens program that was implemented in disadvantaged schools in the greater metropolitan of Melbourne. Food gardening and cultural diversity are the focus of the program. The participating schools have high proportions of migrant and refugee families. Alongside the implementation of the Multicultural School Gardens program a research process has occurred where the schools (children and teachers) documented their experiences (A. Cutter-Mackenzie, 2007; A. Cutter-Mackenzie, 2008; 2005). Five schools (4 primary schools and 1 secondary school) have participated in the research process over the two year duration of the project. Students were invited to capture their experiences by keeping a journal, taking photographs and interviewing students, teachers, parents and community members about their Multicultural School Gardens experiences. All students and teachers also participated in a
focus group interview to discuss their experiences. What follows is a brief account of one primary school’s experience identifying the key themes generated through their research.

*City Heights Primary School* comprises a student body of approximately 90 children who reside in an estate in the same location as the school (on site). The school has a strong environmental education focus and established links with the surrounding community. The school’s motivation for joining the program was driven by a desire to facilitate ‘real life learning’ for children who live in high density apartment accommodation and have very limited opportunities to garden and engage in outdoor learning. The environmental education coordinator, a year six teacher, emphasized that experiential learning is a key pedagogical driver for his school which allowed for the inclusion of the multicultural school gardens program:

> We have changed most of our curriculum to incorporate a hands-on and experiential learning approach. For example, the younger kids do a lot of developmental play rather than formal lessons so the garden program fits into our curriculum quite well.

City Heights Primary School supported their students in designing and constructing their gardens. Recently Wake (2008) noted that children do not tend to have these opportunities in children’s garden programs. The process by which this was done for the multicultural school gardens project drew upon the children’s cultural heritage by involving their parents and grandparents as advisors. Teachers and community groups were also made available as advisers which together with the children’s parents and grandparents prompted intergenerational and cultural led learning.

The students’ research indicated that the garden project has had a positive impact on nutritional knowledge and healthy eating behaviours. One student commented “I learnt that you get stronger and healthier. I used to eat chips but now when I get hungry I eat a piece of fruit”. Furthermore, the environmental education coordinator reported a ‘flow-on effect’ as the healthy eating message
reached families, stating that the school had “seen changes in behaviour, especially the kids who were coming in the morning with a can of Coke for breakfast”. While Ozer (2007) maintains that research must move beyond reporting the nutritional benefits of children’s garden programs, this finding must not be downplayed given the harsh reality that an increasingly number of Australian families are adopting the values and culture of a fast-food society where children are consuming high-calorie, low-nutrition food, doing little exercise and have limited experiences in outdoor environments. According to the school’s environmental education coordinator:

The program links in with healthy eating because a lot of the children have little idea about healthy eating, nor do the parents, especially the ones that have come from a refugee background. The families think putting on weight and getting fat is a good thing.

The environmental education coordinator readily talked about the garden providing a space for children and their parents to discuss healthy eating and practical issues concerning cultivation and propagation. The garden has acted as a stimulus in bringing together a community of learners. This process has facilitated intercultural awareness as highlighted in the following comment:

The kids who are from overseas know about growing things in other countries. A lot of them say they want to grow things that you can’t grow in Melbourne’s climate. Or in the middle of winter Mums will come along and say ‘why don’t you grow tomatoes or bananas?’ So we will talk about that and they will talk about things that grow in other countries, some of them I have never heard of.

Students reported that the garden experiences enabled them to ‘slow down’ and learn in ways they had not experienced previously, mirroring the works of Payne and Wattchow (2008) arguing that experiential pedagogies must consider the lived qualities of time and space.
As shown in Figure 1, the children saw the garden as positive environmental behaviour where they considered that their actions “helped the environment” revealing a clear sense of agency in protecting the environment. When asked how is gardening helping the environment, the students explained that “growing your own food is more environmental [sustainable] than buying food from the supermarket”. This finding supports that children are looking for a nature or environment connection (Wake, 2008), particularly one that makes them feel empowered in their environmental behaviour and actions.

**Figure 1: Fostering a sense of agency**

“He help a lot in the garden. I water the vegetables and I do composting. It’s helping the environment because we are growing our own food. I like that I help the environment.”

While the benefits of school gardening programs are becoming increasingly acknowledged, the intercultural, environmental and experiential learning dimensions and possibilities of such programs are less understood and researched. This short vignette reveals some preliminary insights about the potential of a community of learners to make a significant contribution to the social ecology of their
community through a children’s garden program. This vignette also shows that experiential children’s garden programs extend students beyond an internal experience, wherein connecting a community focused on a common aspiration; the garden described as “one of the areas of human culture most neglected by social science and the humanities” (Miller, 2007, p.16, cited in Relf, 1992, p. 204).

Vignette 3 – Sensing place on the ‘wild’ river (Brian Wattchow)

In the first two vignettes you have read accounts of how members of a local community built a sense of place through their experiential and immersive art practices and how students, parents and researchers have engaged collectively in a school gardening project. These educational projects are well suited to place based approaches to pedagogical practice and even a place sensitive research methodology. But what happens when people encounter remote, isolated environments as educational travellers? What happens when people encounter and experience wild places?

In this third vignette I will report briefly on research I’ve conducted into undergraduate student recreational experiences of river places in south eastern Australia (Wattchow, 2006). Within the Bachelor of Sport and Outdoor Recreation at Monash University, students undertake many experiential learning programs. Some are close to ‘home’ activities such as snorkelling in Port Phillip Bay. Some are base camps in small regional park locations that enact a slow pedagogy (Payne and Wattchow, 2008). Others are more typical expedition style journeys in remote locations such as bushwalking on the Bogong High Plains or rafting on the Snowy River. On all of these different styles of experiential programs staff expect students to consider how their experiences result from a combination of the embodied encounter with, and the social construction of, their environment and what aspects of the experience either enable or disable a sense of attachment to that particular place.
There are two fairly typical and predictable student responses to remote river environments when they encounter them as expeditioners in rafts, kayaks or canoes. First, they feel excited, anxious and even fearful of the moving water, rapids, and remoteness that lie ahead. For many, the rest of the river and surrounding environments seemed to vanish as their attention is drawn again and again to the regular encounters with the river’s rapids; its obstacles, and perceived dangers and risks. As one participant put it: “I guess [that’s] what you think white water rafting is – rapid after rapid after rapid”.

Paddling river rapids is not always a pleasant experience for novice paddlers. Memory of the experience is polarised around the confusing view of the rapid from the banks, with its attendant embodied responses of tension and nausea - “like a balloon is being blown up inside me that makes me incapable of breathing” (female participant) - and the adrenaline ‘rush’ experienced when the rapid is safely negotiated. The anxious or fearful participant rarely escapes from the perceived ‘grip’ of the ‘rapid’, and it infiltrated all of their experiences: “I couldn’t sleep ‘cause I was so scared about what was going to happen the next day” (male participant).

The whole river landscape may evoke a similar response in the participants, where they anticipate the struggles and risky challenges that await them ‘down river’. As one student participant said:

I just remember these long, flat sections of water before Tulloch Gorge [on the Snowy River] and then … then they just narrow into these cliffs that get narrower and narrower … you can’t see that far ahead. You can just see the next cliff wall and then it tucks around … you don’t know what’s around that next point. Yeah, I distinctly remember paddling with [paddling partner] at that time and us just going; ‘Oh, what are we getting ourselves into here’.

Whilst it is tempting to think that these responses are purely a matter of skill development, the participants begin the process of *becoming* competent river travellers by learning how to *read* the river (interpret its flows and hazards), which developed in partnership with the techniques, skills
and abilities that particular paddling technologies demanded. Paddling a river thus represents a “specific cultural skill” (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1999, p. 104); a way-of-being that is acquired within the sub-culture of the river paddling community.

The second dominant reaction to the encounter with the river relates to the ways in which the students responded to the larger landscape that they found themselves living within for up two weeks. Whilst some of the diversity and detail of the river environment, in terms of its natural and cultural history, is missed the participants non-paddling activity narration of the river comes through all embracing clichés such as ‘immense’ and ‘overpowering’ and ‘Mother nature’. But these clichés are not themselves without a significant cultural heritage. Collectively, these responses can be characterised as Romantic in-so-far as they echoed sentiments for outdoor places that were popularised in Europe in the 18\textsuperscript{th} and 19\textsuperscript{th} century. Take for example the following student statements.

We had a thunderstorm come towards us, pretty much separating around us and joined back up and not a drop of rain on us. And I just remember sitting by that river and just being amazed by what was going on around, thinking that … our end was to come. Like it was going to trash us pretty much, but just the most spectacular experience that you’ve ever witnessed … that is still a very vivid memory for me. … I’d never experienced anything like it, like a – just almost seemed supernatural.

Just take time out to go and sit on a rock and, observe whatever we wanted to. Maybe not even observing, just sort of letting things happen around us, and just staring into the water and watching the froth do its thing in eddies and, and its just times like that where I’ve sort of been filled with a wonderment … we’ve sort of got our own cares and concerns and the way we pursue them, but when [it’s] all said and done, these things will keep going despite what’s going on to us.
The river environment here is respected for its awesomeness and its sense of unchanging character. These are significant motifs of wildness in Western culture. The essential character of participant narrative accounts of the ‘wild’ river was the urge to connect to the magnitude of a larger universe, of which the river is encountered as a living example. It was a desire to encounter the world as a potent mystery that has not, and possibly cannot, be solved.

Both of these phenomena, the time it takes to develop sufficient paddling skill and knowledge and the Romantic interpretation of the landscape can act as barriers to participants responding to the local uniqueness of the river as a place. The river may be awesome, timeless and sublime but it is seen and experienced as a wild environment through universal rather than particular terms. However, there were times when participants began to encounter the river as something else, when they began to respond to the river place in its own terms rather than through preconceived notions of an adventure in the wilderness.

A shift is made as a level of comfort is achieved, first with self (an inner nature), then the boat on the water (technologically mediated nature), and finally to the surrounding environment (an outer nature). When these various natures are reconciled the student travellers begin to develop a sense of place and attachment. Active concentration slides away from technique. Participants reflect later that a shift in attention occurred as a result of paddling becoming felt as a rhythm. Paddling, as a way of being, becomes a second nature for the body. When the stroke disappears into the rhythm of travel, then the mind is quiet and being turns outwards towards becoming.

Once you are feeling comfortable … with yourself, the boat and the environment it, it does just start to become a natural process. I mean, fatigue becomes a bit of a problem initially, but you do work your way through that … and you do find that paddling becomes second nature, and so the concentration comes off paddling and you start looking at the things around you.
The paddler, having achieved a level of comfort on the river, begins to open to a sense of place, something much larger and more interesting than the initial challenge of mastering a skill.

My attention to nature’s detail also increased with each stroke of the paddle; the sounds, the colours, the smells, all flooded my senses. This made me slow down my thinking and my movements to suit the environment that surrounded me and I was alerted to the importance of the forest to so many people.

The mind is released to wander and wonder; viewing the landscape, reflecting upon life, and the paddler only realises in retrospect that they have stopped having to think about each overwhelming detail of technique.

You are more immersed in the whole environment rather than in the river and the water and what’s ahead of you. So you look around at the beaches, you look around on the hillsides, and you look around at the vegetation … you are far more open than just the technical side of it, to somehow stay upright and master the next piece of river. So I think in that respect you are immersed in the whole landscape rather the river.

Eventually, for some, the river becomes a viable source of identity.

It (the river place) has become a place of connection and security.
I had given myself up to a landscape and a country I have finally begun to understand.
I allowed myself the opportunity to open up and to fill the empty spaces within me with stories and new memories.

David Abram (1996), paraphrasing Edmund Husserl (1859 – 1938), the founder of modern phenomenology, suggests that “underneath the layer of the diverse cultural lifeworld there reposes a deeper, more unitary lifeworld, always there beneath all our cultural acquisitions, a vast overlooked
dimension of experience that supports and sustains all our diverse and discontinuous worldviews” (pp. 41-42). If we accept this proposition then residing beneath our technical acquisitions and cultural interpretations of our experiences of river-places lies the possibility of the experience of a direct and sensuous reality with wild places. As Abram (1996) astutely concluded,

A genuinely ecological approach does not work to attain a mentally envisioned future, but strives to enter, ever more deeply, into the sensorial present. It strives to become ever more awake to the other lives, the other forms of sentience and sensibility that surround us in the open field of the present moment. (p. 272)

This short vignette of participants’ experiences of outdoor education river journeys may serve to remind experiential educators of several essential elements of the educational encounter with place.

1. Experiential pedagogies can be used to teach for a responsiveness to places, even a ‘wild’ places that are visited for a relatively short duration of time.

2. This relies first and foremost upon the educator and learners developing sensitivity to the local, which can only be achieved after the learner has become comfortable with that place.

3. A person’s embodied response to place precedes, but is linked too, their social constructions of that place – the layers of interpretation that the learner develops - whether they be through personal narrative, or historical, scientific or aesthetic ways of knowing that place.

4. A fuller response to place requires both of these qualities to be present and in ‘conversation’ with each other – the embodied encounter and the meaningful social constructions of the place experience.
Conclusion

What lessons can we draw from these stories of educators searching for ways to incorporate a response to place as a social ecology of community and environment in their practices?

Educators must make careful choices about the need, at times, to develop particular types of knowledge and skill (as artists, gardeners or recreators for example) that allow participants to feel competent and comfortable in a place – and the need to balance this with periods of time that invite a slow paced reflection and acts of creative engagement – the making of place.

Even so, it is worth repeating a note of caution raised by John Cameron from the University of Western Sydney, who has taught a place based seminar with a significant experiential component to many cohorts of students. In the course students were required to develop a relationship with a chosen place through regular visits spread throughout a semester. Cameron (2003) concludes,

I have observed a tendency amongst some students to take refuge in their chosen places, to derive personal comfort and significance from these visits, to revel in the newfound place attachment, and not to relate to the larger questions of sustainability, or cultural change, or control of economic power. It is a risk for educators that experiential learning can lead students so deeply into their internal experience that they are reluctant to emerge from it. (p. 189)

The immersion into an experiential encounter with a learning place is required, but it is not an end in itself. The rich learning experience that results can and should be tapped for its potential to contribute to sustainable practices in the educator and learners’ community and environment. This can and should be made relevant at local, regional, national and even global levels. Hence the ability to educate for a meaningful experience of place explores how a place is both made by, and is making, those who come to experience it. This commitment to place is then an authentic demonstration of sustainable practice.
References


*Applied Environmental Education & Communication, 6*(1), 15-17.


