

Lived-experience in outdoor education: Explorations for the educational practitioner / researcher.

Brian Wattchow

Abstract

Within outdoor education, researcher's and author's representations of 'nature', 'the outdoor environment', 'the outdoor classroom', and 'wilderness' are often presented as unproblematic phenomena to be encountered, learned 'in', 'about', and sometimes 'for'. This approach continues despite the emergence within environmental discourse of arguments suggesting that the human experience of relations with these 'places' are far more complex and ambiguous. This paper critiques phenomenology as a research methodology, specifically its potential to produce 'plausible insights' (van Manen, 2001) into the lived experience of embodied relations between people and outdoor places. Hermeneutic phenomenology involves both the writing and careful interpretation of texts that allow the researcher and the reader to interact with the essence of the phenomena being studied. For van Manen (2001), this offers a way inside the apparent mystery of human experience and can deliver us to a "critical pedagogical competence...[a] knowing how to act tactfully in pedagogic situations on the basis of carefully edified thoughtfulness" (van Manen, 2001, p. 8). Key examples from research studies drawing upon this methodological approach will be presented and examined.

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Introduction

Much research in outdoor education has been inattentive to the interdependencies of research questions, research methodologies, and how research findings are communicated. In this paper a commitment to consider questions of methodology, which are often overlooked in research, is coupled with an interest in the often unproblematic depiction of outdoor nature(s) as *learning-places*. Taken together these omissions have made it difficult for researchers in outdoor education to make ‘plausible insights’ (van Manen, 2001) into the structures and characteristics of what an education in place-relationships might mean, and indeed, how it might appear and feel in practice.

I intend to critique a number of research approaches and studies, and in particular, examine the emergence of phenomenological investigations into lived-experience. I will then interpret a number of research studies conducted in outdoor education that begin to reveal the qualities of how participants experience lived-relations with outdoor places. From these studies I will attempt to draw ‘plausible insights’ that reveal both limitations and possibilities for outdoor education practice and research that may bridge the gap somewhat between rhetoric and practice. Central to this paper is an assumption that knowing and communicating the qualities of ‘human experiencing’, an issue at the heart of outdoor pedagogy, is problematic. It is of the utmost importance that researchers challenge taken-for-granted beliefs about what constitutes worthwhile research, raise serious questions about methodology, and carefully consider how versions of experience are communicated in textual forms.

For many outdoor and adventure educators ‘natural’ areas are often presented as ideal *learning-places* that challenge participants physically, mentally, emotionally and socially. These places have been idealized as educational terrains where “physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual faculties are all engaged” and “[a]ttention to one part of our being waxes and wanes, but there is connectedness, a continuum throughout the experience” (Miles, 1986/87, p. 36). Further, John Miles (1990) argues that the rare gift of teaching in these places carries an ethical responsibility for the educator. He argues that ‘wilderness educators’ (his term),

... must teach responsibly for nature and wild land values ... must help their clients learn the special lessons about nature and human nature which may be revealed in wild places, lessons which may help them back home to do their part to assure sustainability of nature and civilization. (p. 43)

Miles’ approach here is characteristic of a wider rhetoric within outdoor education. Representations of wilderness and nature are often presented as a neutral terrain upon which participants might learn valuable lessons about themselves and others. This continues despite the emergence within environmental discourse of arguments suggesting that our relations with these outdoor places are far more complex and ambiguous

(Meinig, 1979; Soule & Lease, 1995; Cronon, 1996; Payne, 1998; Hay, 2002; Cameron, 2003; Adams & Mulligan, 2003). At one extreme this literature suggests an immanent nature that may be socially constructed into an endless list of possible ‘natures’ (as wild kingdom, wilderness, habitat, spaceship, sublime landscape, Gaia, commodified leisure playground, legislated / managed environment, New Age temple etc.), and that the variously privileged values attached to these different natures are ultimately relative. At the other extreme, it is argued that we experience the essence of nature as embodied, that it is beyond – or rather beneath - articulation, and that we inherently participate within a transcendent and more universal nature.

An outdoor education that seriously considers the experience of place-relations must question the tension between our sensing bodies, what it is to experience, and our social constructions of those outdoor learning-places that we visit for short durations of time under the licence of education. But this will be no easy task. Consider for a moment the contradictions that emerge in the space between the following two juxtaposed quotations.

We have become removed from the rhythms of nature, from the seasons, from day and night, and from land and sea, from other life. We surround ourselves with surrogates, second-hand experiences, vicarious pleasures. These are poor compensations for feeling part of the planet, for having a spiritual belonging, a kinship with the Earth. (Cooper, 1994, pp. 9-10)

As we gaze into the mirror it holds up for us, we too easily imagine that what we behold is Nature when in fact we see the reflection of our own unexamined longings and desires. For this reason, we mistake ourselves when we suppose that wilderness can be the solution to our culture’s problematic relationships with the nonhuman world, for wilderness is itself no small part of the problem. (Cronon, 1996, pp. 69-70)

On one hand we have Cooper’s anti-culture, nature determinism – a call to return to the wild-Earth. In contrast, Cronon begins to deconstruct wilderness as ‘desire’ for a socially constructed, exotic and ultimately mythological nature that was never there to discover in the first place. The learning terrain we occupy begins to shift beneath our feet. Suddenly, it is far less certain. It is precisely within this ‘uncertain terrain’ that I locate the emphasis of this paper – to better comprehend how this terrain is experienced as a learning-place, and the pivotal role that choices about methodology play in this undertaking.

Outdoor education has developed as a distinctive form of curriculum and pedagogy that has values founded upon an “education *in, about and for* the outdoors” (Donaldson and Donaldson, 1958, cited in Priest, 1996, p. 13). At the Darlington Conference on Outdoor Education in the United Kingdom (1975), the aims of outdoor education were further expressed in terms of an “awareness of and respect for self, others and the natural environment” (cited in Cooper, 1994, p. 11). Later attempts to establish and promote meta-definitions continue to claim that outdoor education is an experiential process, located in outdoor places, and that the subject matter is ‘relationships’ concerning people and ‘natural resources’ (Simon Priest, 1996). Brookes (2002) argues that outdoor

education practice must be considered “in [its] local and regional contexts, and that outdoor education programs must be understood as particular contributions to existing relationships between particular communities and particular regions” (p. 405). Perhaps it is the influence of a wider eco-politics, which has resulted in a ‘greening’ of outdoor education rhetoric towards “understanding human/nature relationships. . . that it is located in the lived experience of place, in direct and ongoing understanding of how the natural world enables health, action and thought” (Martin, 2003, p. 223).

If Cooper’s (1994) and Miles’ (1990) sentiments are representative of outdoor education discourse concerning the lessons that should be learnt in, and brought home from, experiences in outdoor learning-places, researchers are compelled to examine the structures, qualities and characteristics of these experiences. Equally, if there is any veracity in Cronon’s (1996) claim that we are in danger of “getting back to the wrong nature” (p.69), the ‘nature’ that is no more than a reflection of our own socially constructed desires, then the basis of an experiential education in outdoor-place-relations must be investigated, for it stands in danger of being built upon false assumptions. What therefore, is needed, is a greater emphasis on research into the phenomena of how relationships with and within outdoor places are experienced, and the consequences of those experiences. To do this kind of research is to enter into a sustained meditation upon what it means to live in relation to outdoor places. As Canadian educational researcher Max van Manen (2001) states;

... to do research is always to question the way we experience the world, to want to know the world in which we live as human beings. And since to know the world is profoundly to be in the world in a certain way, the act of researching – questioning – theorising is the intentional act of attaching oneself to the world, to become more fully a part of it, or better, to become the world. (p. 5)

Despite the apparent rhetorical interest in the experiencing of place-relations within outdoor education discourse, there are very few examples of research that has made this the central focus of inquiry. In order to understand why this might be so it is necessary to briefly commentate upon some large-scale research trends that apply to outdoor education. I do so in order to highlight critical issues relating to research methodologies and to contrast later discussions of phenomenological approaches that might better serve enquiry into the complex embodied and socially constructed nature of experiences.

Research in adventure programming, outdoor education, and environmental education.

A considerable body of research concerning the effectiveness of adventure programming, specifically in relation to intra and inter personal relationships, has been summarised in two recent meta-analyses (Carson & Gillis, 1994; Hattie, Marsh, Neill, & Richards, G, 1997). These meta-analyses have been cited as authoritative sources within the profession yet the Hattie et al (1977) meta-analysis explicitly excluded school based outdoor education programs as they were considered too short in duration or not

‘challenging’ enough. Interestingly, the authors state that earlier research studies in adventure programming had been “plagued with ... ‘soft’ forms of evaluation, such as narrative accounts and case studies” (Hattie et al, 1997, p. 46).

Of the 79 studies collected by the Cason and Gillis (1994) meta-analysis, 36 were excluded on the basis that they lacked sufficient statistical information, were not empirically based or did not involve the ‘target population’. The authors noted that “difficulties arose where some studies utilized unique, self designed outcome measurements. These studies were excluded from the meta-analysis” (Cason & Gillis, 1994, p. 42). In their desire to reduce human experience to statistically based findings that may be generalised to other populations, these meta-analyses have drawn exclusively upon quantitative studies that conform to a preconceived set of ‘rigorous’ criteria. It could be argued that there is a disturbing tendency evident here to sanction and silence alternative research methodologies and to dismiss studies (and thus other researchers and participants) who do not conform to the controlling measures of the meta-analyst.

In Australia, Neill (1997) has suggested that “the field [of outdoor education] is still characterized by a potted history of studies of varying quality and has yet to build a comprehensive and rigorous body of research-based knowledge” (p. 194). Most recently Martin (2003) surveyed research-based papers in outdoor education published in outdoor education conference proceedings and journals in Australia between 1991-2003. To qualify as research in Martin’s survey, papers had to clearly involve “the collection and analysis of data”, or “drew upon data previously collected” (p. 214). Sixty-six studies met these guidelines, while less than 10% were related to ‘environment’ topics. Martin’s survey serves as a kind of reduction of research activity in outdoor education. It shows overwhelmingly that “personal and group development” (p. 222) remains the main focus of researchers.

None of these meta-analyses or research surveys in adventure programming / outdoor education included a critical analysis of research methodologies, their ideological orientations, or trends and developments in the use of various research methodologies. This stands in stark contrast to environmental education, an ‘allied’ field of practice and inquiry, where two recent meta-analyses (Hart & Nolan, 1999; Rickinson, 2001) place considerable significance on research methodologies, are arguably more thorough in their search methods, and reveal both a more liberal and inclusive view of what constitutes research. In particular, Hart and Nolan (1999) note a “shift to interpretive, critical and postmodern lines of inquiry” (p. 2) and that;

questions are being posed about fundamental intents and purposes, about methods and methodologies, which can only be addressed through serious debate about philosophy, ideology and interest. (p. 2)

For the purposes of this paper, Rickinson’s (2001) summary of one of the emergent themes relating to how young people perceive nature as “living things with minimal or no human interference, and as a relatively static entity” (p. 279) may be significant for outdoor educators. In studies analysed from Australia, the UK and the US, young people

considered nature as a leisure place where solitude could be found, and also as a place that was dangerous and frightening, whilst being under threat from external pressures.

Outdoor education, as a field of research inquiry, highlights experience as a primary basis of its educational endeavours and therefore is badly in need of a debate concerning research methodologies and some of its most basic assumptions about the structure and character of outdoor experiences. In particular, methodologies that have the potential to investigate the lived-experience of both educators and participants warrant serious consideration if outdoor education is to build an understanding of the phenomena of human-environment relations as a result of the curriculum and pedagogies we promote as educators. Phenomenology, a relatively recent development within philosophical inquiry, provides such an opportunity, as is becoming apparent in environmental education research discourse, where investigations into the nature of lived-experiences (see for example; Ballantyne & Clacherty, 1990; Brody, 1997; Chawla, 1994; Payne, 1999; 2003) would appear to offer considerable guidance for researchers of outdoor education.

Phenomenology – investigating the essence of lived-experiences.

Phenomenology began as a rejection of positivism. As a philosophical tradition that has developed in the twentieth century, it has opposed the deployment of methodologies drawn from the physical sciences in the study of human experiences. Phenomenologists challenge the dominance of positivism, progressivism, and the ‘grand narrative’ of enlightenment (Pring, 2000). One of its most ardent supporters, Canadian teacher educator and researcher David Jardine (1998), rejects absolutely the methodologies and intentions of quantitative inquiry in education, as he claims that it can only ever;

... render children into strange and silent objects which require of us only management, manipulation, and objective information and (ac)countability. Children are no longer our kin, our kind; teaching is no longer an act of “kindness” and generosity bespeaking a deep connectedness with children. In the name of clarity, repeatability, accountability, such connections become severed in favour of pristine, “objective” surface articulation. (p. 7)

Proponents of phenomenology reject claims that human reality can be objectified into universal ‘facts’ and the privileged status of purely rationally-based inquiry into human experiencing. Rather, it has “sought to develop a philosophy that would give credence to ordinary conscious experience and would not dichotomise appearance from reality” (Ehrich, 2003, p. 48). For Patton (2002), the phenomenological researcher must always begin by asking “what is the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experience of this phenomenon for this person or group of people?” (p. 104).

Early in the twentieth century Edmund Husserl developed a transcendental phenomenology of the ‘everyday’, a series of investigations into the experience of life as it is lived. His body of work formed the basis of phenomenology, “conceived as a *science* of the essential structures of pure consciousness” (Moran, 2000, p. 60). Husserl’s work

was an attempt to “bring philosophy back from abstract metaphysical speculation” (Moran, 2000, p. xiii), to the essences of taken-for-granted experiences, which includes both subjective and an “intersubjective communal grounding of the knowing activity” (Moran, 2000, p. 61). This could only be achieved, Husserl argued, via a temporary suspension (bracketing) of our scientific, philosophical and cultural assumptions of the phenomena being studied. Thus phenomenology proposed to reveal and describe meaning in its most essential form. This method involves perception and ‘pure intuition’, rather than observation, to reveal the essence of phenomena (Webster, 2003). Phenomenology is first and foremost “a rigorous defence of the fundamental and inextricable role of subjectivity and consciousness in all knowledge and in descriptions of the world” (Moran, 2000, p. 15).

However, according to Webster (2002), Husserl had presupposed a neutral transcendental ego that was found beneath all human acts of consciousness. In doing so it was not possible to avoid the subject/object dualism, inherited from Descartes, that separates the knower from the known. In his final work published in 1936, *The Crisis of the European Sciences*, Husserl seems to have already “turned phenomenological analysis away from the transcendental ego and consciousness, to the prereflective lifeworld of everyday experience” (van Manen, 2000), and it is here that we begin to tap a rich vein for the investigation of lived-relations with outdoor ‘nature’.

In particular, the phenomenological investigations of Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty have provided a deep well of inspiration for a study of the ‘place-world’ (Casey, 1993; 1997) for philosophers of nature and language (Bate, 2000; Abram, 1996b), for geographers investigating our relationships with and in place (Tuan, 1974; 1977; Relph, 1976; Seamon, 1979; Seamon and Mugerauer, 1985, Mugerauer, 1995), for environmental philosophers inquiring into the nature of human-environment connections (Macauley, 1996; Hay, 2002), and for educators seeking insight into the essential nature of pedagogic relations (van Manen, 1996) and the ecological basis of an integrated curriculum (Jardine, 1998).

Hermeneutic phenomenology: Living in the ‘house of being’.

Heidegger’s existential phenomenology immerses how we make meaning in a reciprocal, mutual relationship between subject and object which, it is assumed, cease to be separable. Descartes’ dualisms of subject/object and knower/known are banished. As Moran (2000) nicely summarises;

Humans are always already caught up in a world into which they find themselves thrown, which reveals itself in moods, the overall nature of which is summed up by Heidegger’s notion of ‘Being-in-the-world’. (p. 13)

In particular, it is the emergence of Heidegger’s hermeneutic phenomenology that provides an approach for researching how we live within worlds of interpreted meaning.

Hermeneutic phenomenology involves both the careful writing and interpretation of texts that allow the researcher / writer and the reader to interact with the essence of the phenomena being studied. For van Manen (2001) the researcher aims to “transform experience into a textual expression of its essence – in such a way that the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience” (p. 36). This can only occur after an intense quest for understanding of the experience prior to its description. This is a crucial point. The researcher must come to *live*, first and foremost, within the research question, prior to the attempt to transform it into text.

In the tradition of both Husserl and Heidegger the hermeneutic researcher hopes to reveal the essential qualities of experiences that will “put us subjectivity in touch with the knowledge of what it is to be-in-the-world instead of separating and alienating us from it by objectification” (Brown, 1992, p. 48). According to Mugerauer (1995), Heidegger insisted that we reflect upon what is nearest, “on what is so close that we do not see or think it”(p. 118). Heidegger’s major legacies for later inquiry into the nature of lived-experiences include his depictions of what it means to dwell authentically in place (Hay, 2002), his conception of ‘sparing’ (a “tolerance for places in their own essence”; Relp, 1976, p. 39), his descriptions of ‘fields of care’ (as “taking responsibility for place” – Hay, 2002, p. 161), and his investigations into the ways that technology mediates all human experiences (in Knell, 1977).

Yet overriding even these Heideggerian legacies are his writings revealing that the essence of human existence, *Dasein*, as “a cosmo-ontological event, not merely a human one” (Zimmerman, 1996, p. 66). Being-in-the-world, for Heidegger, is then a world that is already an interpreted world at that temporal moment (Webster, 2003). For Heidegger, authentic dwelling, that which allows places to reveal their essential character, is articulated in language, which is the “house of being” (Heidegger, cited in Zimmerman, 1996, p. 66). It is a historico-linguistic world that requires constant telling and re-telling, interpretation and re-interpretation.

The hermeneutic tradition is broad and it begins as “a humble gesture, acknowledging that life proceeds and surrounds interpretation” (Pinar & Reynolds, 1992, p. 241). As humans are considered to live in a socialised context, and insofar as meaning making is continually a communal activity “hermeneutics challenged the assertion that an interpretation can ever be absolutely correct or true. It must remain only and always an interpretation” (Patton, 2002, p. 114). However, it is amongst a community of interpreters, in a particular time and place, that agreement of the meaning of a text is reached.

The challenge of hermeneutics is that it offers no procedural system (van Manen, 2001). Rather, the researcher must enter a community striving for meaningful insights into the essential nature of human experiences. Exemplary hermeneutic texts serve as role models, yet each new text must find a way into and through the labyrinth of many meanings that spring from each experience. The method requires an “ability to be

reflective, insightful, sensitive to language, and constantly open to experience” (van Manen, 2001, p. xi).

What then constitutes ‘data’ for the phenomenological investigator who is trying to write a description, or re-interpret a previously written description, that reveals something of the essences of the lived-experience of the experiencers. As with most qualitative approaches, data may be drawn from interviews, observations and documents. The crucial difference for phenomenology, according to van Manen (2001) is that the gathering and analysis of data are “not really separable and they should be seen as part of the same process” (van Manen, 2001, p. 63). The researcher must never lose sight of the “deeper goal, which...remains oriented to asking the question of what is the nature of this phenomenon...as an essentially human experience’ (van Manen, 2001, p. 62).

Hermeneutic phenomenology is not an endless accounting of interpretations, but a revelation of those interpretations most deeply assumed, shared and essential to the experience of the phenomena. As Mugerauer (1995) summarises in his hermeneutic analysis of the experience of ‘American nature as paradise’:

Our landscape is so close that we rarely notice it, because we instead perceive objects, events, and ourselves in it. Our landscape is ordinary. We live in it, photograph it, build subdivisions on it, and vow to save its mountains streams from pollution. To do hermeneutics of the American landscape means, as we have begun to understand, to retrieve past meanings effaced by time and forgetfulness and obscured by historical shifts and changes through which we act and see differently than we had before. Hermeneutics attempts to peer into and through such erasures and disclose what was unthought by tracing phenomena back to their original meanings, back to the source that still comes to us and informs our culture and possibilities today. What had been taken for granted might be newly known and, in turn, transform and enrich our experiences and actions. (Mugerauer, 1995, pp. 118-119)

Despite the acceptance amongst hermeneutic inquirers that there can be no set, linear procedural system, it is possible to suggest principles and pitfalls that might assist the investigator. Kneller (1984) provides four useful principles worth considering when involved in an hermeneutic investigation (cited in Patton, 2002, pp. 114-115).

1. Understanding a human act or product, and hence all learning, is like interpreting a text.
2. All interpretation occurs within traditions.
3. Interpretation involves opening myself to a text (or its analogue) and questioning it.
4. The inquirer must interpret a text in light of his or her situation.

For van Manen (2001) several problems may be encountered in the task of hermeneutic description. Descriptions may fail to aim at lived experience or, although properly aimed, may fail to elucidate the lived meaning of that experience. In addition, a description may

elucidate – but not lived experience. Furthermore, Payne (2003) adds “interpretive approaches to enquiry like phenomenology can also slide into a form of reductionism” where description of phenomena “does not fully capture the experience as it was lived and is embodied, perhaps pre-consciously, pre-reflexively and pre-discursively” (p. 188). In other words, our attempts to capture the essence of the experience in textual form will always be limited if the technologies of language are themselves a reduction, symbolic of the lifeworld. This is an important consideration, as it means that Heidegger may have unwittingly continued to support the most persistent of Cartesian dualisms – that of the mind/body. It is at this point that we turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of embodiment, articulated in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1958), provides an important development to Heideggerian hermeneutics.

Embodied experience and the ‘flesh of the earth’.

It has been said that Merleau-Ponty put Heidegger's head back on his shoulders. We turn to the space between Heidegger’s hermeneutics of experience as always mediated by language and technology, to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of the embodied experienter. Acknowledging his debt to Husserl, Merleau-Ponty writes that the “most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” and thus rejects the transcendental for an existential phenomenology.

If we were absolute mind, the reduction [Husserl’s bracketing] would present no problem. But since, on the contrary, we are in the world, since indeed our reflections are carried out in the temporal flux on the which we are trying to trying to seize ... there is no thought which embraces all our thought. (p. xv)

More than any other of the phenomenological philosophers Merleau-Ponty established that the essence of our experiences in the world is one of an embodied-relatedness.

We witness every minute the miracle of related experience, and yet nobody knows better than we do how this miracle is worked, for we are ourselves this network of relationships. (p. xxiii)

The Western philosophical tradition of an incorporeal intellect, which persisted still in Heidegger’s hermeneutics, becomes transformed into “the possibility of a truly authentic phenomenology, a philosophy which would strive, not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation within it” (Abrams, 1996, p. 47). According to Abrams (1996) it is within Merleau-Ponty’s investigations into the human experience of perception as a reciprocal relationship between the “body, and the entities that surround it” that we discover that we are in a “silent conversation that [we] carry on with things, a continuous dialogue that unfolds far below [our] verbal awareness ...’ (p. 52).

Thus it is for Merleau-Ponty that subjectivity shifts from its centre in the human intellect to the ‘body-subject’ or the ‘lived body.’ In doing so Merleau-Ponty uncovered the

radical extent to which “all subjectivity, or awareness, presupposes our inherence in a sensuous, corporeal world” (Abrams, 1996, p. 84). As Seamon (1979) suggests, “[m]ovements are learned when the body has understood them, and this understanding can be described as a set of invisible threads which run out between the body and the world with which the body is familiar” (p. 47). Without the ability for the body to learn and move in this way, we would not be able to exist in day-to-day life.

According to Stephen Priest, for Merleau-Ponty the body-subject can never be a body-object. It exists only in relation to the world in “complex relations of mutual dependence” (Stephen Priest, 1998, p. 73). As Merleau-Ponty explains:

My body is made of the same flesh of the world (it is perceived), and moreover...this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world (the felt at the same time the culmination of subjectivity and the culmination of materiality). They are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping. (cited in Stephen Priest, 1998, p. 73)

From Merleau-Ponty we learn that our flesh is the same flesh as that of the world, that our subjectivity is indeed an inter-subjectivity between humans and the world. This is why, perhaps, so much of what is called nature-writing (or at least when this writing is deeply phenomenological in character) removes us from the objective gaze, and seems to return us to an embodied reliance upon the earth. As Abrams (1996) says:

Our bodies have formed themselves in the delicate reciprocity with the manifold textures, sounds, and shapes of an animate earth – our eyes have evolved in subtle interaction with other eyes, as our ears are attuned by their very structure to the howling of wolves and the honking of geese. To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human. (p. 22)

There are shades of Cooper (1994) here. The crucial difference is that we are neither ‘for’ and objectified nature, or against an objectified culture, as humans we find ourselves existing only in relation between the two. Hence we are living always collectively, inter-connectedly and in continuity with the world. As researchers we are always ‘fleshing-out’ this dynamic between pre-reflection and reflection, between our senses and our interpretations of experiences. As Casey (1993) says, such “flesh is neither matter alone nor mind alone but something running between both. ... the fibers of culture and nature compose one continuous fabric” (pp. 255-256). In experience these fibres are inseparable, “even if they are distinguishable upon analysis or reflection” (Casey, 1993, p. 256).

What we must humbly admit, as both practitioners and researchers, is that reflection upon embodied experience can never fully recapture that experience in textual description. As educators and researchers we can only proceed through acknowledgment of our limitations. But in our perception of those limitations we become, in turn, liberated. As

Jardine (1992) suggests that we are returned, re-placed if you like, into a world with which we can only engage by way of conversation.

But if life dwells in an original difficulty, an original ambiguity that cannot be mastered but only lived with well, the pursuit of such mastery can only lead to immobility or exhaustion – it does not lead to *understanding* human life-as-lived in a deep way. Life as something to be mastered seems to deny what we already know about being alive. A hermeneutic notion of understanding is centred on the dispossession of understanding from its methodical, prepared self-security. It returns inquiry in education to the original, serious, and difficult interpretative play in which we live our lives together with children; it returns inquiry to the need and possibility of true conversation. (p. 122)

Therefore we can say that the following investigations, each potentially revealing something of the essence of the experience of lived-relations with outdoor places, represent particular conversations between outdoor education researchers, teachers, and participants with the world. In addition, each of us as readers of this (and these) texts become participants in further conversations as we reinterpret these texts, calling upon all of our prior embodied and reflective encounters, to make a sense of what it may be to experience an education in place-relationships.

Investigations and plausible insights into the lived-relations with 'outdoor places' through outdoor education.

Peter Allison (1998) completed a phenomenological inquiry involving 70 'young explorers' and 16 leaders on six-week long British Schools Exploring Society Expeditions which aimed to give participants the "opportunity to make explicit their own perceptions of the impact of the expedition on their values" (p. 16). The groups of 17-20 year olds were organised into six 'fires' (a locally derived term it appears for 'groups') as they explored the Tasermuit Fjord, a remote and untouched part of South West Greenland. With the caveat that he was reporting preliminary observations based on reading journals, notes from evaluation meetings and reflections on group and individual meetings rather than exhaustive analysis of the data, Allison found seven significant emergent themes: (1) reflection on values (2) reflection on life and career plans (3) friendships and relationships (4) connectedness to self and society (5) environmental appreciation (6) post-expedition syndrome.

Interpersonal relationships seemed richer on the expedition for participants than relationships experienced in their lives when they returned home. Knowledge of self and the relation of self to society also featured strongly (including a sense of alienation upon return home). Yet, when it came to relationships with nature the characteristic quality of the relationship was one of appreciation rather than a deep sense of attachment. Although participants felt as though they belonged to their 'fires', and experienced a sense of loss after the expedition, Allison's findings do not indicate that they felt deeply connected to 'place'. Allison (1998) notes that "this appreciation does not seem to

involve green issues but more an enjoyment and respect for the environment” (p. 18). ‘Enjoyment’ of ‘wild’ and ‘picturesque’ country is a hallmark of romantic sensibility. It is part of the cultural licence that allows for the preservation of ‘beautiful’ landscapes that will be viewed but are unlikely to be embodied in a deeper sense.

It is only due to the careful follow-up research that Allison reveals an unintended consequence of outdoor education in outdoor-places – the post expedition syndrome. The following two quotations, recorded after participants had returned home from the expedition (cited in Allison, 1998) should hold much gravity for us as outdoor educators.

Most of all you miss the company you have been living in very close quarters with 15 people for so long and suddenly they are gone. Since returning from the expedition I have found I am unable to read my diary because of the emotion and reflection it would bring ... (p. 19)

I met most of my friends the day after I got back, I went into the pub brimming with confidence, ‘I’ve just got back from a major expedition’ feeling. Nobody asked me how it was, nobody was really interested when I told them where I’d been. The big news was all about who ‘got off with who the night before’ That’s when I really landed, from the high of the expedition. (p. 19).

Plausible Insight.

Allison’s (1998) findings disturb the notion that we can isolate and dichotomise a study of relations within the self, and between the self-others or self-nature. To do so is to assume a false objectivity, and to persist with false dualisms. Life is not experienced from within these objects. Rather it is experienced, in all of its complexity and ambiguity, in the inter-subjective relationality between these as subjects. Outdoor educators should also recognise their moral obligation to care for participants as they move between their ‘everyday’ experiencing of the expedition in outdoor-places, to their ‘everyday’ experiencing of life in home-places. If an education in outdoor-places is disconnected from the ‘everyday’, then we teach a kind of anti-dwelling, a placelessness that reinforces an illusion of a disembodied knowing.

Randolph Haluza-Delay (2001) is surprised at the “paucity of research about how individuals interpret experience of the natural world - especially on wilderness trips” (p. 43). This is especially so given the volume and popularity of ‘nature-writing’ available, much of which may be argued is phenomenological in character. Disturbingly, Haluza-Delay (2001) goes on to state that “there is even less research on how participants use such experiences when they return to everyday life” (p. 43).

In Haluza-Delay’s (2001) study of the experiences of eight teenagers on a 12-day ‘adventure trip’ he concluded that for the participants “nature as a place out there – a reality fundamentally different and removed from their home reality of civilization (p. 43). Like many outdoor educators, Haluza-Delay had intuitively sensed that wilderness

experiences may help develop an ecological sensitivity, yet concluded that “[m]ost of the teens said they were too busy in their everyday lives to think about the environment” (Haluza-Delay, 2001, p. 45). If they did express concern for the ‘environment’ it was not seen by the participants to “translate into action back home. . . . Several participants said that their environmental concern related to wanting wilderness settings to ‘remain as they are’” (Haluza-Delay, 2001, p. 45).

Whilst the author is careful not to claim that the findings of this study would necessarily be representative of the experiences of others, the value of the study lies in the depth of revelation of participant’s subjective interpretation of their outdoor experiences, revealing that the experience of ‘nature’ is, for these participants, something that is both socially constructed and ‘felt’ in character (refer Haluza-Delay, 2001, Table 2.).

Haluza-Delay, 2001. TABLE 2. The Construction of Nature as Described by Teen Participants After Wilderness/Adventure Trip
<i>The qualities of nature</i>
Nature is Undisturbed Without people Natural (with trees) Not human-made Out there
<i>The feeling of nature</i>
Nature is Different from civilization Relaxing or not busy Free Unfamiliar

It would appear that ‘wilderness’ provides a powerful ‘blueprint’, which the teenagers used in an attempt to interpret the experience. Haluza-Delay finally concluded that the “trip may have reinforced the notion that nature is out there in the wilderness and not at home” (Haluza-Delay, 2001, p. 47) and that “if nature is out there and we humans are separated from it (as these wilderness program participants suggest) then nature has little meaning in everyday life” (Haluza-Delay, 2001, p. 48).

Again, as outdoor educators we should be alerted to the very real possibility that the social construction of a nature-as-wilderness is so persistent, and that our desire to ‘preserve’ this landscape for the recreational-experiencer is so strong, that despite our best efforts, outdoor education programming may continue to re-enforce a particularly narrow and problematic experiencing of outdoor-places. The following brief reflection made by Haluza-Delay of one of the participants should act as a salient reminder of the consequences of nature becoming a wilderness.

He said that there was no nature at home, although ‘there use to be.’ He then described a recent subdivision development near his house. Shrugging and expressing a sense of fatalism, he commented, ‘There’s really not much one person can do’” (2001, p. 45).

In a study recently conducted into adolescent student perceptions of learning that resulted from participation in an Australian secondary school outdoor education program (Johnson, In Press), it appears that students have become very adept at isolating experiences to different contexts, and avoiding the kind of internal crisis of meaning that we might expect result from such sudden transitions between home places and more remote outdoor places. Amongst the most surprising findings is that students seem to know in an embodied sense, and are partially able to reflect upon and articulate, that they must be a ‘different’ person when they are in the bush-as-visitor compared to when they are at home as dweller-in-the-city. This sense pervades all aspects of their personal, social and ecological lives.

Plausible insight.

Is then nature a distant wilderness, the kind of place that Hay (2002) calls “saturated with Eurocentric arrogance” (p. 19)? Is it ultimately a place that can only be visited for the briefest of times, a kind of sacred temple where we only linger briefly on the alter before returning to our secular, everyday world? Are we visiting only the nature of our imagination on our brief educational forays into the wild? The research outlined above seems to be telling us that this is exactly the kind of learning place that we have led students towards. Having done so we might expect students to find themselves in a kind of state of existential disarray. But they are not as they have found a deceptively simple way around this problem that we could not have anticipated. They simply *leave* ‘nature’ out there.

In such a process acknowledgment of our relatedness to the world is avoided. We have failed to investigate the crucial importance of the ‘feeling of nature’ – the embodiment of experiences. This phenomena is hinted at everywhere by participants, educators and researchers, and investigated almost nowhere. Only when we begin to understand this more deeply and humbly might we begin to imagine a pedagogy that unfolds the senses of our relatedness with the world.

Of equal of interest, from the phenomenological perspective, to any learning that may occur in outdoor-places is ‘how’ we venture into these places. Phillip Payne’s (2003) hermeneutic interpretation of kayaking was drafted and re-drafted in repeated consultation with a number of kayak paddlers who were also active outdoor educators or educators in training. In the following excerpts we note the disappearance of individual personality from the text in order to avoid the narrative restrictions of biography (and autobiography) in the search for the essence of the experience.

A kayak is also an instrument, a tool designed and manufactured to bring-forth certain human actions and reveal human experience-as-travel. Journeying, or playing in a particular type of water in the pre-specified settings of rivers. A kayak is a cocoon. Its yarn, or texturing, is fibreglass or, more recently, (almost unbreakable) plastic....The paddler’s body is also textured by a wet suit, whose

function is to warm-up-a-film-of-water gradually soaked onto-the-flesh, or more recently a dry suit that preserves the dryness-of-clothes-and-skin. Either way, the textured layerings of the paddler's body and flesh limits the effect of the coldness of water...

The purpose of the kayak instrument is for its user, or experiencer, to operate physically on the water and the river. Spatially, kayaks ... are designed in such a way that the paddler's body, perceptual (visual, auditory) field of reference, and range of physical movements are inclined predominantly forward and "down." The field of visual and physical reference is highly selective according to the linearity of the kayak's design to move down-the-river. ... align the paddler in forward position above-the-water or passing-by-water and in motion down-the-river. In playing-on-water or passing-by-water, vision is typically but momentarily fixated on stoppers and eddies or rocks, rapids and snags. These perceptions may invite, or demand, the paddler to perform certain skills at certain times during the time it takes to progress down-the-river.

In Payne's hermeneutic description of kayaking we hear again the voices of both Heidegger (the technological mediation of human experience), and Merleau-Ponty (the body portrayed as the center of our knowing, even as it exists in relation to the world as mediated by technology). The description re-animates us into the experience (or rather our own versions of experience), especially those of us who have known rivers through the activity of kayaking, and worked with students in river-places. Payne sets this phenomenology against the tendency of most dominant discursive constructions of kayaking that aim to privilege certain constructions and conceptions of self, river and 'desirable' relations (see Payne, 2002).

Plausible insight

Payne reminds us that the experiences of outdoor-places via outdoor education are always made possible, yet always remain limited, by the technologies we deploy. This technology acts as a "mode of revealing" (Heidegger, cited in Krell, 1977, p. 295) and through it we either *challenge* the ability to reveal something of essential character of the outdoor-place, or we participate in a creative act, accepting that we must come to dwell in the outdoor-place (even if only for a short time), in some way accepting that what we may have to learn there, can only be found there. For Heidegger, modern technology increasingly distances us from the possibility of this 'dwelling' and thus makes the human-environmental basis of the future uncertain. For Payne, it is the failure of educators and researchers to consider the techno-embodied structure of environmental experiences (like kayaking down-the-river) that remains problematic, as does the troubling role of researchers and teachers in predicting and imposing a view of experience on behalf of the experiencers themselves (2003, p. 188). It will take considerable effort for outdoor educators to find a way (methodologically speaking) of inquiring into the consequences of how we venture into outdoor places and, perhaps, to loosen our ties to certain, privileged ways of being in those places.

Finally, Johnna Haskell's (2000) inquiry into one student's (Holly) 'perceptual' knowing in an outdoor adventure experience provides quite a radical departure from 'mainstream' research practices, and a compelling 'immersion' into the life-world of a student as she experiences life during and outdoor education. Holly was a member of a program that involved outdoor adventure and environmental education curricula (in a Vancouver public school) for over a hundred year ten students. Students would be in the 'outdoor classroom' for up to five months. Through the use of poetry, journals, interviews and conversations the dominant themes that emerge on this long journey for Holly included: her feelings of loss of control; her willingness to risk in social interaction and to trust others; her pushing perceivable limits; her heightened perceptual awareness; her moving beyond the fear of the unfamiliar; and, her connections to the environment (Haskell, 2000, p. 41). Of course all of these themes are interesting for the researcher to attempt to understand Holly's experience 'from the inside', but it is those that relate to perception, reflection (interpretation and re-interpretation) and connection that most capture my attention here.

Haskell is well aware that she, as researcher, and we, as readers, are actively involved in the telling and re-telling of Holly's experience.

“While (re) presenting phenomena of experiencing for Holly, we begin to (re) experience our own perceptions and knowing through emergent interpretation. The translation of that experience is inseparable from participation and knowing – it is a boundless, re-iterative interpretive process that weaves one's history of experiencing while 'laying down a path in walking' (Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991)” (Haskell, 2000, p. 40).

Read, for example, this section of Haskell's commentary and a poem that Holly wrote in her journal (cited in Haskell, 2000, p. 45).

The tide is slowly ebbing out. The land around the island that was once surrounded by water is turning into mud flats that extend far out into the bay. Holly sits atop a large boulder in her thermarest chair writing furiously in her journal. The final light of the day softly lights her face of concentration. I wonder what she is writing and how her reflection in her journal contribute to her perceptual knowing and understanding of her experiences on this trip. At the end of the program, Holly shares her journal with me and I gain new awareness of her experiencing. Holly's perceptual awareness of her continual change during the seakayaking journey is evident in her poetic writings.

Progress

As the ocean crashes against the surf,
I long for the familiar.

The scent of my world,

The one I still love,
Regardless of its flaws.

I know I have changed,
And I know that for me,
I am doing well.

And at least I know that perfection is not for me now,
I am proud of what I have done.

I'm more proud to be me,
Than I have been in a long time.

And for me,
That is progress

Ultimately for Holly, according to Haskell, 'nature' is "not something you can describe but have to be a part of" (Haskell, 2000, p. 45). Even so, she attempts to describe her experience of the world as being separate from the natural world. She draws an analogy of the relationship that humans have to the natural world as that of a captive whale kept at an aquarium for so long, performing tricks for the audience, that it could no longer be released into the wild, as it "wouldn't know how to fend for itself in a place where it came from" (cited in Haskell, 2002, p. 45).

Plausible insight.

The powerful image Holly provides should serve to remind us of the spatial, technological and temporal structures that allow us to sustain our short-term forays away from everyday 'civilisation' in the name of education. We knowingly venture into 'the outdoors', 'wilderness', 'nature', or 'outdoor classroom' for only a limited time and with no intention (or desire) to stay. If the interpretation and writing of the text has captured something essential to the experience (for both Haskell and Holly) then the audience of the text becomes engaged and animated as "the effect of the text is at once a reflexive re-living and reflective appropriation of something meaningful: a notion by which a reader is powerfully animated in his or her own lived experience" (van Manen, 2001, p. 36).

We are re-animated through the text as, like Haskell and Holly, we too are both experiencers with the world, and experiencers with the language of the world. We may respond with either sadness at the image that Holly gives us of the child who seeks, but never quite finds, the connection to the world she senses is there – or, we may further resolve to live, to teach, to participate, to research experience more openly, more deeply, more humbly. Then we may embrace, as Haskell has, an investigative path where we no longer "render children into strange and silent objects which require of us only management, manipulation, and objective information and (ac)countability" (Jardine, 1998, p. 7). We may be returned as researchers with our participants or teachers with

their students to the humus of the world, a Being-in-the-world, where we once again might have a place on Earth (Jardine, 1988).

Concluding that research is a humble gesture of being-in-conversation-with-the-world.

For van Manen (2001);

Writing separates the knower from the known, but it also allows us to reclaim this knowledge and make it our own in a new and more intimate manner. Writing constantly seeks to make external what somehow is internal. We come to know what we know in this dialectic process of constructing a text (a body of knowledge) and thus learning what we are capable of saying (our knowing body). It is the dialectic of inside and outside, of embodiment and disembodiment, of separation and reconciliation. (p. 127)

Ultimately, as researchers we attempt to be as truthful as possible when we commit a conversation to text. We intentionally aim to serve better educational practice, and better thinking about educational practice. The work of each text occurs as it is carefully written, listened too, read, and as it shifts the empathetic reader *inside* the territory of his or her own lived experience. It calls upon ‘subtle undertones of language, to the way language speaks when it allows the things themselves to speak’ (van Manen, 2001, p. 111). As a community of researchers hoping to share in a more promising future for our outdoor education and for outdoor places, we need an outlook that embraces the possibility of many voices in a conversation of knowing and being.

Research that enters into being-in-conversation-with-the-world is likely to have the following qualities.

1. To reinvigorate a focus on the nature of human experience.
2. To rethink how we might inquire into human experience and how we might best represent it.
3. To recognise that researchers can write a text that is deeply reflective of experience, but that this re-telling can never be complete. It must remain an ongoing humble gesture.
4. That the research text can lead to worthwhile insights that will make us more careful, thoughtful and knowing in our practice as educators (and as researchers) – but equally it may lead us to silence and surprise as we discover that which cannot be spoken, anticipated or controlled.
5. That the research text is more valid when it is the result of a participatory process (between researcher, participants and their places) of interpreting / writing / reinterpreting / rewriting, until an acceptable level of consensus can be reached for the researcher and participants in that time and place.
6. That this approach to research is best understood as a sustained meditation and reflection where the researcher comes to live within the research question with

participants and place, and where methodology becomes a path to being-in-conversation-with-world.

If there is a divide between theory and practice, and if research cannot renew its efforts to represent and legitimise experience and our embodied relations with the world, then we will continue to wander blindly in a terrain that always shifts beneath our feet, leaving us out-of-balance and out-of-place. What we need is the understanding of the *insider* of experience, and paradoxically this will not be gained by further introspection as outdoor education researchers, but first by looking out and around ourselves to those who have already realised the imperative of this work. Perhaps then we will see that the work that binds theory and practice requires of us again to feel a part of the planet, to seek again a spiritual belonging, a kinship with the Earth (Cooper, 1994), yet simultaneously be able to question as we gaze at the reflection in the mirror that nature holds up for us (Cronon, 1996), what and whose nature it is that looks back at us.

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About the author

Brian Wattchow is a Senior Lecturer with Monash University's Faculty of Education. His is the Program Leader for the faculties Sport and Outdoor Recreation degree programs, and has been teaching, leading and lecturing in outdoor education both in Australia and overseas for the last 20 years. He has a long-standing interest in researching and writing about curriculum and pedagogy in outdoor learning places. He is currently completing a doctorate on participant's experiences of river-places through outdoor education.

Email: brian.wattchow@education.monash.edu.au