

Daring to Care? Humans, nature and outdoor education.

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Outdoor educators allege a difference from outdoor recreation based on the intent of the programs they run. That outdoor education seeks outcomes beyond introduction to leisure activities, social involvement, or personal enjoyment seems clear enough. However within outdoor education, ideology and outcomes are still quite diverse. Outdoor educators variously lay claim to personal empowerment, group development, environmental stewardship, team co-operation, rehabilitative powers, and more. I have previously argued for the uniqueness of a socially critical outdoor education which examines human-nature relationships (Martin 1998).

Within the diversity of outdoor education, one of the commonalities which I believe may bind the profession is an ethic of care - care for humanity and non-human nature. The practices predicated on an ethic of care for humanity are not strangers to traditional outdoor educators - but what of an ethic of care for non-human nature? How might an ethic of care for nature influence the practice of outdoor education? Of the contributions that outdoor educators can make to education and global well being into the next millennium, developing an ethic of care for nature must surely be significant. In this viewpoint article I explore some of the philosophy and resultant practices suggested by an ethic of care for non-human nature.

Caring

Caring translates to action to improve the lot of the 'other', be it nature, other person, or self.

When I look at and think about how I am when I care, I realise that there is invariably this displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other. Noddings 1984 p.14

Noddings (1984, 1990) is a feminist philosopher who has examined the notion of caring. She argues that caring exists on a continuum from natural to ethical. In natural caring people experience a powerful subconscious obligation to care and act, such as that commonly experienced for immediate family or partners. In ethical

caring more choice creeps in - obligation and intensity to act decrease until the imperative yields to the suggestion 'someone (else) ought to do something'. Noddings (1984, 1990) argues that what determines the imperative to act out of care, is a combination of three factors: relatedness, reciprocity, and particular modes of thinking . For outdoor education practice there are some potent implications from her work.

Relatedness

Proximity is the most powerful determinant of caring behaviour, proximity is a precursor to relatedness. Despite encouragement of global egalitarian attitudes, people most actively care for those to whom they feel closely related. If outdoor education seeks caring outcomes then relatedness must be deliberately built and fostered. In caring for nature, students need to understand their relatedness to the bush. Caring demands subject to subject relatedness, individual to individual. This is an immediate challenge to outdoor education that interprets the bush as an external generic *object* rather than an individual *subjective* identity. Nature caring outdoor education must see nature as an 'ecology of individuals' with whom students develop specific personal relationships. Relationships for example with: that big snowgum in the saddle, the possum that lives in the hollow near the creek, that airy but welcoming ledge on the second pitch which lets you look across to the falcon's nest. Outdoor education seeking caring outcomes must recognise that one-off tourist-like visits to remote places are in essence voyeuristic one night stands with unpredictable outcomes. Building relatedness demands students get to know specific individual nature over extended time and in multiple contexts. Most importantly this suggests that revisits to the same location, to meet again the nature individuals met previously, is essential. I have experienced the growing relatedness, bond and resultant caring that has developed with multiple visits to Mt Arapiles to climb. I tend to sleep under the same tree, walk the same paths, pass familiar rocks and bushes. I can visualise the smell, touch and sense of place which familiarity has bred - and it brings a smile to my heart as I do so.

Reciprocity

Any relationship will dwindle without nurturing. A relationship can grow into, and beyond, a caring ethic if pathways of responsiveness or “reciprocity” (Noddings 1984, p.86) are opened. The extent to which a relationship grows is determined by how effectively the carer can perceive that the subject of his or her care is responding. That makes sense - we have all seen relationships die from lack of acknowledgment and mutually supportive action. In teaching I know how great it feels to work with a responsive group, to be caught in the upward spiral of mutually supportive behaviour - and the increased subconscious obligation that then places on me to act caringly. For relationships with individual nature this demands receptivity to the ways in which our relatedness and care is acknowledged in nature. Acknowledgement must at least be a subjective perception that nature is by some means responding - as if the sunset is a reward for our efforts of the day, the regrowth recompense for our erosion control work, the fantastic day on the rock made so by the way the cliff and climbers worked together, the birds who dropped by to visit our camp as sharing of their song. If as outdoor educators we cannot instil ways in which our students can perceive nature as responding within a relationship, then there will be no growth in that relationship beyond instrumental value. ‘A good spot for outdoor activity’ or an ‘appreciation of scenery’ is about the best we’ll ever do without recognising reciprocity. As Nodding’s expresses it:

We are not obliged to summon the ‘I must’ [care] if there is no possibility of completion in the other.. (Noddings, 1984, p.86)

Ways of thinking?

Knowing nature as an ecology of individuals and perceiving reciprocity from nature challenges conventional Western thinking. Such ideas are however consistent with indigenous perspectives.

Country in Aboriginal English is not only a common noun but also a proper noun. People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel for country, and long for country. People say that country hears, smells, takes notice, takes care, is sorry or happy. ... country is a living entity with a yesterday, today and tomorrow, with a consciousness, and will toward life. (Rose 1996, p.7)

Various writers have argued that what is required for thinking consistent with the ideas expressed above, is a special receptivity, the capacity to change between two modes of consciousness, a receptive - intuitive mode and a mode of rational

objectivity - or a blending of both emotive and rational thought (as examples: Belenky et al 1986, Noddings 1985, 1990, Knudtson and Suzuki 1992, Capra in Simpson 1996, Sanger 1997). While I may have grown up being told to 'leave your emotions out of it, be rational and don't cloud your thinking...' seeing and feeling with subjective nature is impossible with only rational objectivity, demanding as it does a separateness of subject and object . Outdoor education practices have potential to recognise and foster modes of consciousness other than the rational. Experiential knowledge, tacit understanding and spiritual responses are all ways of knowing which can be powerfully reified by time in the bush. Students of outdoor education get to know that rational objectivity may well be powerful, but can also be limited in helping them decide, for example: how to navigate in mist, why they enjoyed a rockclimb, or how the night sky promotes reflection. For educators interested in encouraging an ethic of care, the capacity to think with the heart as well as the head is vital.

...while much of what goes on in caring is rational and well thought out, the basic relationship is not, and neither is the required awareness of relatedness...
Noddings 1984, p.61

Conclusion

I have erected some signposts which point the way to outdoor education practices which could develop an ethic of caring for nature. Like many signposts they point to the distance, to the yet to be experienced, to situations still to be realised or fully explored. An ethic of care as underscoring outdoor education practice must exist in the future - it should be an ethic well suited to the educational imperatives of the coming millennium - but is one which demands thoughtful practice and research today.

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