Windows onto other worlds: The role of imagination in outdoor education

Alistair Stewart
La Trobe University,

Imagine its 1852, you have just spent five months sailing half way around the world in a crowded, leaky ship and landed at Melbourne, Australia. You have come to this new land with hope of striking it rich on the goldfields of central Victoria. But first, you must purchase your prospecting tools, camping equipment and mining licence and walk 150 km to the diggings.

The role of imagination in outdoor education has received only passing attention. What opportunities might imagination offer outdoor education? How might one understand the life of a gold miner in 1852, or the geological, ecological or cultural influences on a landscape without use of one’s imagination? The ecologically catastrophic settlement of Australia by Europeans could be described as a failure to engage imaginatively with the nature of nature in the ‘new’ land. The conference subtitle ‘critical reflections, new directions’ implies, I believe, an imaginative process; how might one contemplate new directions without being imaginative? In this paper I will review the research on imagination within education and explore some implications, possibilities and ‘new directions’ for outdoor education.

Introduction

Imagination would appear, to me, to be an essential element of any learning or educational context. The conference subtitle ‘critical reflections, new directions’ implies, I believe, an imaginative process; how might one contemplate new directions without being imaginative? My interest in the role of imagination in outdoor education stems from my desire to teach undergraduate students about aspects of natural and cultural history that have played a part in shaping a given landscape but might not be immediately visible. The Box and Ironbark woodlands of central Victoria, for example, were radically transformed with the discovery of gold in the 1850s. How might I help students to read the landscape, observe the impact of gold mining on a forest and understand the lives of those on the diggings in the 1850s? In this context, imagination would appear to be an essential element of learning.

This paper is a work-in-progress. In what follows I give a brief account of aspects of the education research literature dedicated to imagination, discuss the role of imagination in the settlement of Australia, and explore how I use imaginative strategies in my teaching.

Imagination and education

In the educational research literature the role of imagination within learning has received considerable more attention than I have been able to discover in outdoor education literature. Having said that, Gregory Heath (2008) observes that imagination within educational research has been marginalised in recent decades. The term imagination has multiple meanings. Egan and Nadaner (1988) argue that it would be difficult to compress imagination into one definition. Imagination is diverse, ‘may be a thing of narrative, of pure visual imagery, or of abstract relations’ (Egan & Nadaner, 1988, p. xiii). For Barrow (1988), imagination is not an entity itself, but nevertheless it does demonstrate certain qualities:

The criteria of imagination are, I suggest, unusualness and effectiveness. To be imaginative is to have the inclination and ability consciously to conceive of the unusual and effective in particular contexts … what constitutes unusualness and effectiveness will differ in different contexts, and can be judged only by those with an understanding of the context. (p. 84)

Heath (2008) suggests that imagination ‘is not a precise term but rather describes a loose set of connections describing cognitive states or mental activities. It is one of those terms that is useful in large part because of its imprecision’ (p. 117). Heath, following Cornelius Castoriadis, argues that there are two distinct ‘species’ of imagination: inventive and radical. Heath suggests:
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This distinction is meant to be more descriptive than categorical but is meant to draw an important difference between forms of imagination. At its most basic the inventive imagination is the cognitive capacity to bring before the mind what (an image) is not present to it, but such a view of the imagination can be seen as rather naive in that it makes all manner of assumptions about reality and subjectivity … the radical imagination, attributable to philosophers as disparate as Aristotle and Heidegger, claims that the imagination can bring into experience what is not just novel within experience but novel to the world of experience; it can actually create new experiences or phantasia not represented in any prior experience. (p. 117) [emphasis in original]

Maxine Greene (1988, 1995), a prominent researcher of imagination within education, argues imagination has been discouraged by literalism and an obsession with predictable results. Greene (1995) advocates for the rediscovery of imagination:

One of the reasons I have come to concentrate on imagination as a means through which we can assemble a coherent world is that imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible. It is what enables us to cross the empty spaces between ourselves and those we teachers have called “other” over the years. If those others are willing to give us clues, we can look in some manner through strangers’ eyes and hear through their ears. That is because, of all our cognitive capabilities, imagination is the one that permits us to give credence to alternative realities. It allows us to break with taken for granted, to set aside familiar distinctions and definitions. (p. 3)

Similarly, Kieran Egan (2005) argues that imagination is too easily and often seen as on the periphery of the core of education. Egan believes, as do I, that ‘engaging students’ imaginations in learning is one key to successful teaching’ (p. xii). Egan encourages readers to use a range of cognitive tools to engage students’ imaginations: story, metaphor, binary opposites, rhyme, rhythm and pattern, jokes and humour, mental imagery, gossip, play, mystery, and embryonic tools of literacy. Egan (2005) advocates that:

This imaginative approach to education aims to maximize for students the array of important cultural tools that they each convert into their own cognitive tools…This imaginative approach to education emphasizes teaching and learning focused on the acquisition of the main cognitive tools that connect students’ imaginations with the knowledge in the curriculum, on one hand, and enhances the powers of their brains in general. One important contribution that developing imagination makes to thought is to increase its flexibility, creativity, and energy. The aim of imaginative education is much more knowledgeable students who are able to think flexibly, creatively, and with energy about the knowledge they gain about the world and experience. (pp. 8-9)

As this short journey through the educational research literature demonstrates there is no one approach to how imagination might be encouraged to help learning. My focus here is not so much on how imagination might be used to escape the here and now, though perhaps this does play a role. Rather, my interest is in how imagination might play a role in developing understanding or awareness of the lives of others, human and more-than-human, both in the past and the present. That is, the use of imagination to step back in time into the lives and circumstances of others, to understand lost landscapes, species and experiences.

Imagination and European settlement of Australia

Europeans settling in Australia over the last 200 years have struggled both imaginatively and physically to grasp hold of this new land. Early European settlers applied their imaginations, perhaps inappropriately, in the transformation of the landscape to suit their needs. For example, much of the poor ecological health the Murray River faces today can be traced back to settlers desire to re-shape the river and surrounding land to fit European landscape aesthetics and agricultural technologies and preferences (Sinclair, 2001).
Some of the natural and cultural histories that early settlers encountered within the new landscapes were in many cases either difficult to comprehend or even unimaginable. James Edward Smith, for example, observes in his 1793 publication *Specimen of the Botany of New Holland*:

> When a botanist first enters on the investigation of so remote a country as New Holland, he finds himself as it were in a new world. He can scarcely meet with any certain fixed points from which to draw his analogies; and even those that appear most promising are frequently in danger of misleading him. Whole tribes of plants, which at first sight seem familiar to his acquaintance, as occupying links in Nature’s chain … prove, on a nearer examination, total strangers, with other configurations, other œconomy (sic), and other qualities; not only the species that present themselves are new, but most of the genera, and even the natural orders.

(in Crozier, 1999, p. 844)

Australian native animals such as the platypus, echidna, kangaroo and wombat were to many early European settlers also bizarre or other-worldly. The first platypus, for example, that arrived in England in 1799 was treated with disbelief. It was many years before the European scientific community would accept that a mammal with a beak-like snout, webbed feet, vestiges of a pouch, that lay eggs was one animal (for more detail see Moyal, 2001).

An active imagination would also appear to have been a prerequisite in the early exploration of the interior of the continent by Europeans. The search for an inland sea in the first half of the 19th century was a significant preoccupation for the explorer Charles Sturt. Sturt’s desire to discover an imagined inland sea bordered on the obsessive. The search for an inland sea has become part of Australian mythology; it is one of the stories of exploration often told but little understood. Historian Michael Cathcart (2009) observes:

> The first draft of the history of the expansion into the hinterland was written by the official explorers–an elite who in number were about the size of a football team. It was they and the colonial writers, painters and poets who did most to shape the mythologies that dominated the Australian imagination. No explorer, except Charles Sturt, consistently wrote about an inland sea, let alone the inland sea, as the object of his quest. (p. 123)

The land itself was often baffling to early explorers and settlers. Rivers that flowed inland or dried up for months, or even years, confounded early settler expectations of how the natural world ought behave (Carter, 1987; Cathcart, 2009). Trees that shed bark rather than leaves, animals with beaks and lay eggs we equally confronting and unimaginable. I don't mean to suggest that people did not warm to the continent and its natural history; many who stayed came to love and appreciate the particularities of the Australian landscapes. The imagination has played a strong role in shaping how and what contemporary Australians understand of the natural and cultural history of this land. In the following section I explore how I use imagination in my teaching to explore aspects of Australian natural and cultural history.

**Walking back in time – imagination within outdoor education**

The forests of central Victoria have been radically reorder with the settlement of Europeans. Gold mining in particular, from the 1850s on, has had a significant impact on both the indigenous people and natural environment. Today the region provides an excellent setting to explore aspects of the relationships between Australian cultural history, land tenure, use, and management, traditions of use and access, and attitudes to nature conservation. Second year students in the degree programs in which I teach undertake the subject ‘Australian Culture and Land’ (ACL). As part of the subject students participate in a 3-day overnight bushwalk along the Great Dividing Trail, between Castlemaine and Daylesford, to investigate different ways cultural activities have shaped the landscape. Much of the walk is within the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park (CDNHP), but periodically we cross or follow public roads, visit cemeteries, and walk through small rural townships. The landscapes of this region are rich in cultural artefacts, particularly from the gold mining era. There are a range of sites along the walking track that allow us to stop and explore the
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relationship between past attitudes to and use of the land and what we might see in the landscape today.¹

I have found imagination to be a vital ingredient of these experiences to assist students in contemplating how different cultural activities have shaped the landscape. I use a range of strategies to explore past attitudes to and use of the land: reading the landscape as a series of historical layers (indigenous, early European explorers, squatters, miners, post-mining settlement, current land use), thinking about the lives of individuals from different periods (imagining oneself in those circumstances), and use of historical records of past land use. Each of these strategies involves consider detail; I will give a brief account of an aspect of each for brevity.

The indigenous people of central Victoria, the Dja Dja Wurrung, have lived in the region for thousands of years. Like other indigenous nations of southern and eastern Australia, the invasion of Europeans brought devastation to the Dja Dja Wurrung communities. Evidence of indigenous culture and land use can still be seen in the landscape today. Scar trees, rock wells, seed grinding-grooves, oven mounds, shell middens and place names enable an observant traveller to contemplate readily overlooked aspects of central Victorian cultural history. The layer(s) of indigenous history have been heavily overwritten by more recent land use, particularly gold mining, but they nonetheless are still present.

Between the late 1830s and the discovery of gold in 1851 much of central Victoria was occupied by squatters grazing sheep and cattle. The discovery of gold displaced many of the squatters as the population of Victoria boomed with people flooding in from around the world in the search of gold. Place names across the diggings act as a reminder of the cultural origins of some miners (for example, Canadian Gully or Californian Gully), or of contemporary current affairs (for example, Sebastopol Gully after the 1850s Crimean war). For many people getting to the diggings involved long walks from the nearest port, often carrying mining and living equipment. Imagining oneself living on the diggings might involve contemplation of accommodation, access to clean drinking water and affordable food, personal safety and security of belongings (the diggings were often a laws and violent place) and knowledge, equipment and skills needed to find and mine gold. Life on the diggings would have been difficult for many: housing was usually temporary canvas tents or slab huts, drinking water was often poor quality and lead to the death of many, food was often expensive and limited in diversity and availability. Once the initial alluvial rush had subsided gold became more difficult to find and required more knowledge and skill to mine.

Historical accounts, including descriptions, painting, photographs, offer a way to access historical activities that might otherwise be difficult to observe in a landscape. Similar to the other strategies, historical accounts enables students to think themselves into the past. The mining process of puddling, for example, has left 5-6 metre wide depressions in the ground that today are often overgrown and partially filled with leaf litter. Reading a description or photograph while standing beside a puddler might allow students to consider the process and the resulting impact of puddling on the landscape.

Concluding comments

This is a very brief account of a much lengthier teaching strategy. Central to this process is the use of the imagination to think ones way into the landscape from various cultural history perspectives. Imagination within outdoor education, I believe, is under-researched area of pedagogy. I have discussed how I use imagination to explore cultural history but there are other areas that I think warrant further attention. For example, safety management and fatality prevention requires a combination of site specific knowledge and contemplation of the future, how others might respond to given circumstances or environments, and ways to prevent accidents or fatalities. Understanding geology or ecology also might be enhanced by more active use of the imagination.

¹ I am indebted to my colleague Deirdre Slattery with whom I developed this experience. Deirdre is the former coordinator and primary developer of the subject Australian Culture and Land.
Imagination is not one easily defined aspect of thinking but there are a range of ways we might deploy it to help our students develop a greater understanding of a given topic. I believe there is much scope for outdoor education to actively encourage students to use their imaginations to extend their learning.

References