“If you don’t mind going places without a map, follow me:”
Re-stor(y)ing of self, place and educator.

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Abstract

Metaphorically, going places without a map was a significant shift for me. Experiencing a sense of disconnection both professionally and personally became a catalyst to undertake a journey of re-connection. This coincided with an experience of displacement and what transpired was the making of new meanings around being an educator and around outdoor education. This paper is the beginning phase in articulating a new story.

The self (in roles of researcher and educator) is situated in the story, which can be a vulnerable and risky place to be since this form of narrative is on the margins of contemporary outdoor education practice and research. The telling of this story serves to give presence to an alternative representation of experience and narrative. It draws on qualitative research methods from the phenomenological and hermeneutic traditions. This paper is an autoethnographic account, which aims to narrate the tensions, complexities and contradictions around the spaces of experience that are not so visible.

Making meaning is demonstrated through the incorporation of poetic representation of experience in an attempt to capture the inter-subjective nature of these spaces. Writing as research is at the forefront and is a process of “re-stor(y)ing” (Pinn, 2003) that is about re-discovery, re-creating and re-visioning. Self-awareness occurs simultaneously in the writing process which I contend is a valuable and ethical way of engaging as a reflective practitioner. This paper will conclude by considering some implications with regard to the pedagogy of being an educator in the outdoors.

Introduction

“If you don’t mind going places without a map, follow me” (Behar 1996, p. 33) became a powerful metaphor as it created alternatives for me that ultimately have contributed towards a greater sense of self-understanding. I have used the map and compass as external guides to represent concepts I have lived by in my life and my work. For instance, I had delivered outdoor education experiences to students in places that were very familiar to me and the nature of these experiences were built around familiar patterns formed by curriculum and learning outcomes, particularly in relation to personal development. These are not negative in any way but something was enticing me to let go. On one level, there was the letting go of a financially secure job. But on another level, I was now looking for guidance by internal means as a ‘journey’ from the heart, an inner compass, and attempting to be open to difference and distinctiveness, creativity and change.

This story unfolds as a story of “learning to lead” (Dimitrov & Lederer, 2005). This presents a paradox, since after many years of working as an outdoor educator and leading students and adults, one may consider that the necessary qualifications and experience would be apparent. On the contrary, there emerged a sense of disequilibrium and a realisation of things I didn’t know that included not knowing myself and this was a catalyst for change.

I entered into unfamiliar terrain both within me and around me which made me feel uncertain but at the same time, possibilities for creativity and change emerged. In navigating this terrain in the course of study and research I adopted an approach described as “re-stor(y)ing” (Pinn, 2003). This began as part of coursework studies in social ecology and the material in this paper is drawn from recent research (Blades, 2004a; 2004b). This story is not a chronological narrative but rather a narrative that weaves reflective writing evoked by imagination, kinaesthetic senses and emotion. These elements create the “text” of experience and the “data” for interpretation of meaning. Therefore, writing formed a major part of this research and as Van Manen (1990) pointed out, in making sense of lived experience, the object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project that positions the act of writing as a research method in itself. I know my writing as it is situated in my body and engages all of my senses. Hence it became a significant source of meaning making. This was grounded in research methods primarily drawn from phenomenological approaches (Van Manen, 1990). Also, as the process of interpretation involved moving back and forth between the “texts” of my experience and conceptual understandings, hermeneutic methods of interpretation were applied (Smith, 1997).

The point of reference has been in relation to self. I questioned and reflected on my own disconnection to teaching and explored the nature of that disconnection. Paradoxically, emerging from
the familiarity of teaching in particular settings was a sense of not knowing myself. This presents a methodological challenge as my story is not written (and cannot be) from an authoritative “I.” Butler (2001) explored this dilemma in a revealing and substantive critique of paradigms concerning accounts of self. What then constitutes an account of self that has some responsibility to making a contribution to collective responsibilities concerning ethical and moral issues and crises? Facing and acknowledging uncertainty is a step towards that as it implies a dimension of care, of taking heed. Butler (2001) observed that her own “foreignness” to herself was, “... paradoxically, the source of... ethical connection with others” (p. 37). My research and writing thus became an enactment of connection and has involved re-imagining a more relational conceptualisation of self and place. In doing so, I have surrendered a part of myself and yet, in reaching out for a different level of connection, this became a search for wholeness which as Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers (1996) observed, is rewarded with a world made wholly new.

**Paradox and change**

*Let go and fall into the river.*
*Let the river of life sweep you beyond all aid from old and worn concepts.*
*I will support you. Trust me.*
*As you swim from an old consciousness, blind to higher realities beyond your physical world, trust that I will guide you with care and love into a new stream of consciousness.*
*I will open a new world before you. Can you trust me enough to let go of the known and swim in an unknown current?*


This is a wonderful metaphor depicting oneness with nature and consciousness. Whilst there are differing views on what consciousness is, Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers (1996) observed that “... consciousness stirs us to create ourselves. Consciousness calls us to be” (p. 54). So what was stirring inside me? What called me to be?

Paradox emerges as a catalyst for change. Over many years, my involvement in outdoor education outwardly seemed secure and grounded. However, I became aware of a sense of separateness, like I was an onlooker to my teaching. It was becoming a disembodied process as I felt like I was just going through the motions. This seemed paradoxical, as I knew the details of rock and river intimately. I knew the perceptions, the emotions, and the language that students would bring with them to these experiences. But did I? The doing in these activities seemed to get in the way of the feeling and being in places. The connection between the students and places was blurred by the attention to physical comfort (or discomfort) and the busyness of doing. For instance, the symbolic content of my dreams reflected these incongruities:

*I was at a climbing site working with a couple of colleagues. There were ropes going everywhere. The set up seemed so complicated. It seemed like it was taking forever to get done. I walked across a field and my sandal fell off. I had to return there to get it but I never got there.*

(Blades, 2003)

The feeling of inertia that this dream reflected, translated to a sense of being “entrapped” in an experience (Hillman, cited in Moore, 1990).

In exploring this experience further it became apparent that there were “degree(s) of separation” in my life. Mulligan (2003) illustrated this in the following way:

...we recreate the frontier between the settled and the wild, and when we travel we are cocooned by our technologies. Even in our most dedicated efforts to ‘get back to nature,’ we carry backpacks loaded with the ‘necessities’ for survival and we encase our feet in robust hiking boots...we need to keep in mind the degree of separation if we want to become more attentive and empathetic with the non-human world. (p. 284)

Familiarity was my cocoon, not just in relation to my use of technology but my tendency to compartmentalise experience. For instance, my attention focused on building competence in the classical model of outdoor leadership. That is, competencies in ‘hard skills’ (the technical aspects) and ‘soft skills’ (the interpersonal skills and facilitation techniques) which reflect this compartmentalisation. The language and the intention of leading reduced the experience to a mechanistic model rather than a relational model. Also, I was heavily involved in curriculum design and placed a bias towards planning and acting which, upon reflection, removed me from my imaginative world where feelings and passions were put aside. A separation emerged that could be described as

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1 Relph (1976, p.6) defined “placelessness” as the “weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places. Furthermore, placelessness describes both an environment without significant places and the underlying attitude which does not acknowledge significance in places” (p.143). This, he explained is epitomised by mass culture where anonymity and erosion of symbols create a sense of “homelessness” (Relph, 1976).
an overwhelming sense of “placelessness”\(^1\). I could not see “me” in the picture. There was an absence of responsiveness and relationship to place that called into question my degree of connection with self and place. This incongruity was unsettling and the emergent awareness of this provided the antecedents for change.

In addition to this emergent awareness, the external moorings in my life that had held me in place were released rapidly and in that time, I moved interstate and started a new job. The multiple layers of these changes revealed an overwhelming sense of anonymity that echoed the experience of “placelessness.” The intensity of emotion, the loss, the grief and uncertainty made me pay attention and writing became my means of location.

In the late afternoon, I play my drum, in the early morning dawn, I go for a run. I feel the resonance of my feet to ground, of my hand to drum. I’ve left home but at times I feel alone. So I play my drum and go for a run, to sing up this place and send this song in the breeze – to home. (Blades, 2004a)

In seeking to make meaning of this experience, I subsequently explored it through gaining an understanding of the experience of “displacement”\(^2\) (Blades, 2004a). What became apparent was the degree to which the intensity of emotion within the experience of displacement bears witness to the fact of how excruciating the paradoxes of attachment and place are (Behar, 1996, p. 81).

“Witnessing” as a means of observing

In the process of this self-interrogation I observed relational aspects of self/place/body/educator as a “witnessing” of self. Positioning the researcher as “witness” as distinct from an observer sought to reveal the hidden dialectic between connection and otherness (Behar, 1996). Witnessing is not a solitary act and it implies relationship, as the meaning you construct about your life connects you to others (Sparkes, 2002; Richardson, 2000). It was also congruent with providing a means of observing that was not held as an authoritative “I” since it demanded a conscious experiencing of the self as researcher and respondent – as one coming to know oneself (Lincoln and Guba, 2000).

The re-story

In the telling of my re-story, two themes are represented:

1. The “space between:” a call to connection
2. Body-subject: a “dialogue of foot-to-ground”

This re-story involves the telling of a story in that I intervene in the narrative and through interpretation tell a new story. Brief descriptions about the location and context are included along with excerpts of poetry to represent the experience at that place and interaction. In the excerpts that follow, meaning is made from a combination of poetic representation and “bearing witness.”

1. The “space between:” a call to connection

(a) Re-connecting with a familiar place: Cooloola story

As part of a social ecology unit, I chose to re-visit a familiar place called Cooloola, a place where a fresh water river meanders through a sandy region national park. I have lead numerous trips with students there and re-visiting this place solo for four days was a “leading of self.” I formed an intention to enact a re-connection to that place bringing to my attention the following:

- Imagination and creativity;
- Noticing and being attentive in the present moment;
- Memory.

In my journal I wrote:

I have settled into an easy rhythm with this place by the river. It is the fourth morning and I decide to go for a paddle and have breakfast somewhere. I paddle through the “everglades” and let myself glide. The mirror-like reflections of the surrounding paperbark trees are here to greet me again. I venture through a narrow channel and play, going under and around trees with their extended, embracing arms. I think about how I have taken many students through this place . . .

Paddling back to my campsite, I feel a welcoming sense, like I am going back home. My body has a warm sensation. Then I am drawn towards a distinctive tree by the river. It is dead but has intricate

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\(^1\) The philosopher, Edward Casey (1993) drew out the meaning of displacement emphatically by positioning it in relation to what he termed “implacement”. Implacement, he defined as our “immediate placement” and points out that the “pervasiveness of place and its plurality of forms are such that we can grasp the perplexing phenomenon of displacement...only in relation to an abiding implacement” (Casey, 1993, p.xiv).

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patterns and diverse textures that call me there. I know this tree. I visited it yesterday but there is something unknown that it wants to tell me. I hold it and look closely as though it held my gaze. I explore its fine detail with my hands. (Blades, 2003)

Later I wrote:

**Soul mate**
*Drawn together, our meeting is intense and intimate*
*How warm, how joyful!*
*I feel expansion in my heart*
*My eyes follow all your subtle and fine features intently, slowly*
*Timeless*
*Have we met before?*
*There is a deep sense of knowing, of ‘being’*
*We fit together, accommodating each other’s uniqueness*
*Yet we merge as one*

*I touch you slowly, gently*
*The river carries our tears of joy,*
*Of shared pain and sorrow*
*It also provides a mirror to our souls*
*Look beyond, into the clear reflection before you for wisdom and light.*

(Blades, 2003)

**Bearing witness**

To create an intention around re-connecting to this place the following quote by David Russell (2003) helped guide this:

This place by the river can no longer be just a literal place (or a littoral place for that matter). This particular place is now a place with a spiritual significance. It is the place where one goes to re-examine a mystery, a place that symbolises the boundary between the visible and invisible worlds, and by being open to this experience, receive a blessing. (p. 149)

It was a place where I shifted from a superficial experience with the day-to-day tangible experiences available to my senses to a deepened “ensouled” experience. Hillman (cited in Moore, 1990) explained that the animated possibilities and intimacy gained from the imagining of a phenomenon could be brought forward through a heightened sense of noticing and awareness in relation to both self and the phenomenon. It was a familiar place to me but it held a mystery and I explored this through paying attention to intimate detail in both movement and stillness, in silence and sound. My senses were wide open and alive.

Locating myself in “place” and being responsive to that is a significant part of this re-story. The description of a “sense of place” by Cameron (2003) was helpful in re-conceptualising this interaction. Looking at the fundamental parts of “place,” Cameron (2003, p. 3) used Relph’s (1992) description:

The word “place” is best applied to those fragments of human environments where meanings, activities and a specific landscape are all implicated and enfolded by each other.

To then put the phrase “sense of” in front of a word, can bring attention to the individual experience (Cameron, 2003). ‘Soul mate’ brought an intimate connection to the surface, which was completely unexpected. Here, the shifting identity of self in relation to this place was evocatively drawn to my attention.

The attention to distinctiveness brought to me a heightened sense of the fragility of the ecology in this place.

**Paperbark reflections**

*Infinite*
*your form knows no bounds*
*it is there, holding and supporting in silence*
*reaching out, whispering soft tunes – it gives its life energy.*

But it grows weary from people that do not join in its song.
*They strike a discord with their high-pitched mechanical drone,*
*they cannot hear,*
*they do not listen.*
*We weep for the paperbark.*
*Hold on! There are those that sing with you.*

(Blades, 2003)

This mutually reciprocal experience expressed through writing brought to mind the degree of separation I had maintained in my relationship to natural places. Over time, I had projected a “potential space” whereby I held onto a desire for a place of belonging, an attachment to place expressed as the merging with the sublime. To some extent, this was a hierarchical dualism, which privileged nature as a refuge for self and as a utopia for educational

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3 The term “potential space” was used by the late art critic, Peter Fuller in *Art and Psychoanalysis* (1986). He described it as the space where inner reality and external life both contribute. For instance, as an infant is separated from their mother at birth, the connection is ideally re-created between child and family, between individual and society (Cited in King, 2004, p. 144).
experiences. Was my sense of disconnection a denial of difference? A “homogenised” gaze (Plumwood, 1993) haunts this country and it revealed itself within me. In reflecting upon where this gaze comes from, I considered the influence of a “colonised psyche” and how it acted upon my sense of disconnection which, to some extent, has been filtered by a false sense of privilege of whiteness (Anthony, 1994). Here, structural elements underlying social and cultural aspects of place and experience are played out and it became apparent to me the extent to which I had denied these differences.

In the broader context of outdoor education, Wattchow (2004) described the experience of embodied relations between people and outdoor places as “uncertain terrain.” This terrain, he contended, becomes more “uncertain” as the complexities and ambiguities underlying our social constructions of “outdoor learning places” go unnoticed (Wattchow, 2004, p. 3). In re-visiting this reflection about this place as an ‘outdoor learning place’ I was drawn to the poem “At Cooloolah,” by Judith Wright (1963).

At Cooloolah  
The blue crane fishing in Cooloolah’s twilight  
Has fished there longer than our centuries.  
He is the certain heir of lake and evening,  
and he will wear their colour till he dies,

but I’m a stranger, come of a conquering people.  
I cannot share his calm, who watch his lake,  
being unloved by all my eyes delight in,  
and made uneasy, for an old murder’s sake.

Those dark-skinned people who once named Cooloolah  
knew that no land is lost or won by wars,  
for earth is spirit: the invader’s feet will tangle in nets there and his blood be thinned by fears.

Riding at noon and ninety years ago,  
my grandfather beckoned by a ghost-  
a black accoutred warrior armed for fighting,  
who sank into bare plain, as now into time past.

White shores of sand, plumed reed and paperbark,  
clear heavenly levels frequented by crane and swan-  
I know we are justified only by love,  
but oppressed by arrogant guilt, have room for none.

And walking on clean sand among prints of bird and animal, I am challenged by a driftwood spear thrust from the water; and, like my grandfather, must quiet a heart accused by its fear.

This poem is an evocative cultural and historical story of this place and reminded me of what had gone unnoticed in my pedagogic relationship to this place. So often I had constructed learning around familiar interpretations of place drawn from my own social and cultural background and experience which tended to prevent other stories and interpretations to emerge.

(b) Connecting to an unfamiliar place: Murray River story

Then, one year later, I moved interstate and in an unfamiliar place with students: The Murray River.

Gliding on water  
I feel the familiar grip of the paddle,  
the glide of boat on water, the guidance of the paddle.  
I listen to my voice speak to the students, it sounds unsure.

This river is unfamiliar to me.  
I do not know its history, its story.  
Yet it is familiar – the reflections, the silence, the conversations of birds, wind and trees.

I receive maps and see the abstract representation of this new place which gives me some comfort.  
I feel like I am a ‘beginner’ leader, just keeping up with the group,  
I feel vulnerable.  
I find my senses searching for connection, silent time on the river, talk to me, comfort me.

(Blades, 2004b)

Then one year later I re-visited this place on another paddling trip with students and wrote:

Singing up the stream  
The stream flows by,  
a constant tune held, not pausing.  
On it flows through the lurching branches of trees.

It holds me.  
If I pause  
I may fall into thoughts that take me to other places.
“If you don’t mind going places without a map, follow me.” Re-stor(y)ing of self, place and educator.

I am here, held by the tune of this stream.
Fullness, abundance, emptiness,
It doesn’t interrupt this moment.

All through the night and the coming of dawn,
as the sun spreads its glow and threads its warmth with shimmers of golden rays
my heart is filled.

I pause here
and hold out my hand
as if placing a cup to a waterfall
it will be filled with grace

(Blades, 2005).

Bearing witness

The feeling of vulnerability expressed in ‘gliding on water’ resonated with a time and place where I had opened myself up to the experience of displacement. The boundaries of self, educator and place became blurred and this engagement with emotion enabled me to notice the subtleties and relationships that often go unnoticed. Furthermore, it revealed to me aspects of self I had kept at arms length. As Josselson (1996) observed, western culture with its obsession with individualism tended to ward off experiences of relatedness, thus building the perception that vulnerability is a weakness. However, in acknowledging our fragility as humans, “. . . what we need most we cannot control” (Josselson, 1992, p. 14). This has made me reflect on the prescriptive ways I have taught and the subsequent feelings of disconnection. Opening up to my own vulnerability has enabled me to let go and acknowledge that there are things we cannot control in these outdoor learning places. That to be responsive to the unexpected is a way of ‘being’, a way which of caring.

Creating alternative metaphors

Then one year on, I wrote ‘singing up the stream’ and noticed the shift in my relationship to that place and furthermore, the affirmation and celebration around trusting the unknown. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observed that nearly all conceptual and abstract thought is structured metaphorically and most of those metaphors derive from bodily experience in the world. Creating alternative metaphors can contribute towards a greater sense of self-understanding and our place in this world (Lackoff & Johnson, 1980). An alternative metaphor that emerged for me was “courage in vulnerability.” It became a source of strength, renewal and creativity. The word “courage” comes from the French word “coeur” which means heart. Therefore, the meaning of “courage” relates to having heart. The social construction of this word in our society tends to diminish the centrality of heart. Therefore, in creating an alternative metaphor around vulnerability, this has enabled me to challenge this negative connotation and represent engagement in experience in an authentic way.

Authenticity has been significant for me in this story. In this context, using another metaphor of a “space between,” Josselson (1996) emphasised that “. . . the way the space is filled or reverberates – becomes all-important” (p. 4). The implication for neglecting this as Bell (1993) contended, is that there is the invisible “we” through the universality of western traditions of language and knowledge. Therefore, there are voices that can be marginalised and not heard. In the telling of my story it is an act of giving voice from those margins.

2. Body-subject: A “dialogue of foot-to-ground”

This phrase, a “dialogue of foot-to-ground” (Mulligan, 2003) embodies this re-story in the sense that it implies relationship and an attentive awareness to the ground beneath my feet. Placing foot to ground has been a major part of my life. This has taken the form of activities such as bushwalking, rockclimbing, and rogaining. Each activity resonates with its own unique contact with the ground. However, there has existed a tension for me, a tension between a sensing body and the social constructions I witnessed around me in places. For instance, the attention to technical aspects of an activity and the utilitarian imperatives of using the outdoors as a means to an end often created blind spots where I missed noticing the distinctiveness of a place.

So my re-stor(y)ing has been to create a sense or intention of not walking through places but rather, for places to go through me. Here are three poems written from river, land and sea:

Renewal
The water and rock are in conversation – you and I
at times, a whisper
this softly spoken language ebbs and flows,
it gives and receives
no judgement, just a mutual exchange.

(Blades, 2003)

With earth
With earth and on earth I lay
totally surrendering my being to be there.
Feel the solidity, the support
I let each muscle in my body relax
let go!

(Blades, 2003)
Freedom
The saltwater caresses my body.
Suspended, I thought I was standing still
but the shifting sands beneath my feet
tell a different story.

In a moment, I hesitate,
and stepping out of the water, take off my seal
skin
and wonder where my soul has gone?
My skin dried up,
I gasp for air in this windless place.

I return to the water’s edge
and as the salt air fills my lungs,
a sea eagle fills its wings and is held
in unison with its invisible partner,
making love with intimate understanding.

Freedom is the world’s water and weather,
the world’s nourishment freely given
again and again.
It is our soul’s homecoming

(Blades, 2004a)

Bearing witness

My writing has been from the body which has
helped locate me in the world. Displacement became
a significant teacher for me as I paid attention to the
subtleties that existed in places. In the poem ‘with
earth,’ I noticed, for instance, how I would refer to
holding in the sense of being supported in nature.

Josselson (1996) described holding as an “arms around
experience,” in that it keeps us from falling, it protects
us. Holding is something we can take for granted until
we acknowledge our groundlessness. Like the saying,
“she is all I have to hold on to,” in adult lives we have
larger systems of meaning (such as religious beliefs,
institutions such as marriage) to hold on to (Josselson,
1996).

This engagement of body as subject was a response
to seeking connection. In exploring experience from the
body as subject and the reciprocal engagement with
place, I opened myself to the “embodied relatedness” as described by the phenomenological philosopher
most immediate experience of things, according to
Merleau-Ponty, is an experience of “reciprocal
encounter,” characterised by tension, communication
and commingling and as such, is a “dynamic presence”
that confronts us and draws us into relation (Abram,
1996, p. 56). Furthermore, from this perspective,
subjectivity shifts from its centre in the human intellect
to the “body-subject” (Abram, 1996, p. 46). As “body-
subject,” I am connected viscerally (my body, mind,
and self), and this is my knowing. As Abram (1996)
pointed out “…the bodily gesture speaks directly to
our own body, and is thereby understood without any
interior reflection . . . thus we learn our native language
not mentally but bodily” (p. 74).

And So!

It is my hope that there is the space for you, the
reader, to sense the pauses, the gaps, the irregularities,
the rhythms. Also, that there is an opportunity for you
to make your own meaning from this story.

Re-stor(y)ing has situated me within a space of
critical reflection both as an educator/practitioner
and as a researcher. The interpretation of this story or
narrative of self not only presented methodological
challenges as a beginning researcher but also, in
exploring the inter-subjectivities of self/place/body/
educator, I was laid bare and this was a challenging
space to be in!

Emergent research methodologies

In exploring the relationships of self, place and
educator it has presented multiple, shifting identities
that are both complex and at times ambiguous. This
demanded more than one research method in order
to establish and maintain a research design that
was congruent with the nature of interpretation.
Phenomenological investigations of lived experience
have provided many rich and varied observations
and its use is extensive and particularly relevant to
highlight the “affective” dimensions (Smith, 1997;
Wattchow, 2004). Van Manen (1990) pointed out that
phenomenology always addresses a phenomenon as
a “possible human experience,” that is, as having a
universal or inter-subjective character. Thereby, one
considers the extent to which my experiences could be
our experiences by being reflexively aware of certain
experiential meanings (Van Manen, 1990).

In being reflexively aware, I opened myself to
the experience of displacement. That is, I not only
tried to understand the meaning of the experience but
also understand what claim it has on “us” which is
grounded in a heuristic approach⁴. The construction of
the “text” is the research process and this is constructed
in a dialectic, that is, the hermeneutic spiral, where the
researcher continually moves backward and forward
from parts of the text to the whole and vice versa
(Smith, 1997).

⁴ Heuristics recognises the deepest currents of meaning and
knowledge that take place within the individual through one’s
senses, perceptions, beliefs, and judgements (Moustakis, 1990,
p. 15). The basis of this is experience itself, combined with a
“self-dialogue” that is open and honest, and is portrayed as “self
disclosure”. It is this response to the tacit dimension within oneself
that sparks a similar call from others (Moustakis, 1990).
The research located me in places that had social and cultural meanings and therefore, autoethnography was a methodology that was congruent within the overall research design. Utilising the first person in ethnographic research has been a welcomed approach in social science research where tales are told that reveal the embodied selves and the multiple shifting identities of the authors (Sparkes, 2002).

Autoethnography has many meanings and applications but it has become the term of choice in describing autobiographical genres of writing and research that connects the personal to the cultural, placing self within a social context (Reed-Dunahay, 1997; Ellis and Bochner, 2000). Reed-Dunahay (1997) explained that there may be a differing emphasis given to its constituent parts: on graphy (i.e., the research process; ethnos (i.e., culture); or auto (i.e., self). In seeking to represent creative, personal and reflective elements around self as educator, my approach reflected what Ellis (1999, cited in Sparkes, 2002) described as “heartful autoethnography.” This is, being inclusive of the researchers’ vulnerable selves, emotions, bodies, and spirits.

This witnessing of self can also provide some insight into the web of power and how it can manifest itself in experience. Therefore, the visibility of the researcher’s personal experience and self-interrogation of their values and motivations become pivotal in this process of research (Humberstone, 1997). For me, I acknowledged my position of privilege, as white, middle class and educated. In the process of self-interrogation, incongruities were revealed around my values and motivations where socially and culturally woven threads constrained me.

Writing and poetic representation

Sociologist Laurel Richardson (1997, 2000) has written extensively with regard to the relationship between creative work and academic research and inquiry. She stated that poetry, “. . . built as it is on speech as an embodied activity, touches both the cognitive and the sensory in the speaker and the listener” (Richardson, 1997, p. 143).

In being situated in a “space between” I was drawn to poetry in the telling of my story. Poetry is a practical and powerful method for analysing our worlds since the pauses, the change of rhythm etc., engages the reader’s body (Richardson, 2000). It provides a space to allow others into the experience. As Mulligan (2003) stated, “. . . the aim of poetics is to resonate and not convince” (p. 287). Pinn (2003) pointed out how this type of writing provides an “enfolding of self with place, of the outer and the inner. Imaginative writing offers an intensity of language that is non-dualistic, that is able to take in the everyday that is emotional, vulnerable, embodied and has movement” (p. 45).

This does raise some epistemological dilemmas and issues, particularly in relation to subjectivity and knowledge. However, the self-organising systems theory articulated by Maturana and Varela (1987) has contributed to bridging the academic with the creative. They described this as “autoepoiesis.”

Auto, of course, means ‘self’ and refers to the autonomy of self-organising systems; and poiesis – which shares the same Greek root as the word ‘poetry’ – means ‘making.’ So autopoeisis means ‘self-making.’ (Capra, 1996, pp. 97-98)

Here, science and imagination are married in a process of meaning making marked by the participation of the meaning-maker.

In sharing my poetry, it is not in the sense of being analysed as good or bad poetry but is my attempt to represent the enfolding of self, place and educator. Change was inherent within that and place was not a static entity; but rather, it presented dynamic, fluid elements.

From a feminist perspective, this re-story was an opportunity to write new “plot lines” where one’s life exceeds the cultural script and in recognising the “master” narratives, one can then reject them and challenge them (Richardson, 2001, cited in Sparkes, 2002, p. 98). The “master” narratives I recognised were those affecting and shaping my life that marginalised me and left me feeling out of “place.”

In making meaning, I have had to unlearn the patriarchal discourses in education and outdoor education. Engaging with emotion as “text” and opening up to my vulnerability was part of that unlearning. Often, in educational settings, to listen to and speak the “mother tongue” is not “valid” discourse and subjectivity, an essentially embodied experience, exposes vulnerability, which in a patriarchal context is perceived as a weakness (Le Guin, 1989). Writing creatively has connected me with the “mother tongue.” It is situated in “wild” places, that is, places of mystery and uncertainty. This re-defined “nature” for me in that it shifted from a patriarchal space of being the property of “others” to a shared place of custodial responsibility.

Language and imagination provided me with ways of being in a place in an authentic and responsive way. Paying attention to metaphor was significant for me. In outdoor education, metaphor is often used as a facilitation tool but it has the potential to separate or disconnect us from experience and place. Bell (1993) warned that if we don’t question metaphors we disempower the participant and serve to further separate them from their lived experience. The process of creating alternative metaphors, as I have explored,
can be a creative response to addressing issues of power in educational settings. It shifts the power from "power over" to "power with."

**Some implications for outdoor education**

There are some broader pedagogical implications to consider. Themes of connectedness, care and empathy present worthwhile contributions for the wider community. As an educator, engaging in new places, through a vulnerable lens, I found myself encountering qualities of attentiveness and listening as part of my leadership approach and teaching. This has involved, for instance, changing my language from objectives to intentions. Also, by engaging in receptivity with place enacted through attentive awareness a relationship can then be expressed poetically. These elements have also helped shape and create significant conditions of self awareness.

This connectedness and embodied sense of engagement, can point to ways of creating conditions for learners to be connected to their experience. Drawing from and adding to the work of Broomfield (1997), these conditions include:

- simplicity – bring meditative silence into the learning environment;
- creativity – delight in the unknowable, taking risks into strange places to ‘shake ourselves’;
- healing – foster a sense of belonging;
- resolve conditioning – teach self-trust;
- relate harmoniously with the environment – provision for sensate experiences.

These conditions speak about a way of ‘being’ as opposed to a way of ‘doing’. This also involves paying attention to privilege and difference along the way. As Mindell (1995) asserted, when you bring into the open the hidden content of your face-to-face interactions, you are working on the world’s issues: “Bring your inner work out, speak about your powers, use them to shine a light on prejudices, and discover what nature does exist” (p. 207).

This dialogue is about listening and about articulating an authentic experience that is not filtered by privilege. It is about being aware of privilege, enabling the dialogue to be open and to help develop shared and common understandings. This is a critical distinction, since privilege, if gone unchecked, creates barriers to participation. It is about developing empathy that will foster a truly connected way of being in our world. By connecting the ethical, respectful self dialogically to the worldly environment, there is a political imperative that interrogates forms of oppression (Lincoln & Denzin, 2001). This requires more dialogue and research in outdoor education. There are ethical and moral imperatives for outdoor education to be responsive to the social and environmental crises of our time.

Confronting the sense of my own displacement and acknowledging woundedness along the way, brought to my senses an ethical dimension to re-stor(y)ing my life. King (2004) observed that this sense of displacement is something that “. . . haunts this country and all its occupants” (p. 147).

Perhaps it is time to challenge the way we express our most deeply held place attachments and question whether we are viewing the land with a disembodied gaze. (King, 2004, p. 147)

As outdoor educators, this is a timely challenge to reflect upon both individually and collectively. In a time when global powers use fear as their dominant discourse and the experience of displacement is a worldwide phenomenon it is now time to flip the coin and promote the discourses of love and compassion, of care and empathy.

**Conclusion**

Walk to your own rhythm! To be open to the heart as a compass is challenging yet incredibly revealing. Take time to explore and write your own story – your “autoopoiesis.” In a profession where people engage in incredibly rich experiences with learners yet at the same time, can be driven by so many external contingencies, I encourage you to engage in some creativity and imagination. Dream up your vision and live it!

Thank you for entering into these pages, to listening and feeling the words, and the silences. The gaps are for you to fill.

**To finish: A Haiku**

The silence at dawn,  
is the whole world’s medicine,  
if taken in by the soul.  

(Blades, 2005).
“If you don’t mind going places without a map, follow me.” Re-stor(y)ing of self, place and educator.

References


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