

Chapter 1

Starting with Stories: The Power of Socio-Ecological Narrative

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Abstract In this first chapter we felt it important to introduce the editors of the book via a series of short autobiographical stories. In each case the author has chosen a few influential experiences that they believe have been crucial in shaping the development of their socio-ecological outlook as educators and researchers. In other words, in this first section of the book we are putting practical, lived experience prior to the theoretical explanation of what it means to be a socio-ecological educator. In this first chapter of Part I we want to lead with example and narrative. We then explore and reinforce the message with sound theoretical discussion of the crucial concepts that make up this unique perspective on educational philosophy and practice. In Part II of the book, different authors from a variety of backgrounds and work contexts explore socio-ecological ideas and practices via a range of case studies. Finally, in the conclusion chapter we summarise the book and reflect on the incorporation of a socio-ecological approach into educational and research settings.

Keywords Narrative • Socio-ecology • Reflection • Experience

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Introduction

The brief stories that follow are, of course, something of a simplification of the complex life experiences that contribute, in both obvious and less obvious ways, to each educator's knowledge and beliefs. The accounts are not intended to be complete or even substantial, but there are several important reasons why educators' stories provide a good place to start. First, they introduce the editors of this book as 'real' people who learn through experience, and who teach, think about and research educational practices. We want to signal to the reader that we each work within what Donald Schon (1987) has called the messy world of practice. Second, the diversity of stories shows that socio-ecological approaches are not 'siloed' into separate educational disciplines. Rather, diversity and difference are accommodated and even celebrated in socio-ecological approaches to education. Finally, we offer these stories because we want to signal the importance of narrative ways of knowing in developing beliefs and ideas about educational and research practice. As a series of starting points, each story raises a number of questions about the nature of learning in physical and health education, and in outdoor and environmental education.

Patton (2002, p. 115) suggests two foundational questions in relation to the kind of narrative work we present in this chapter:

What does the narrative or story reveal about the person and world from which it came?
How can this narrative be interpreted so that it provides an understanding of and illuminates the life and culture that created it?

The short narratives that follow provide the reader with the opportunity to pose Patton's questions. The emphasis here is on story, context and interpretation where the reader engages with the text in an act of meaning-making. What results, inevitably, is a 'polyvocality' (Hopper et al. 2008), reflecting a multiplicity of different voices, which brings complexity and nuance to the ways that researchers and educators write about physical activity and its socio-ecological connections. Sparkes (1992, 2002) has suggested that sport and physical activity researchers need to embrace alternative methodological approaches to counterbalance the dominance of scientism in these fields. Only through qualitative methods such as narrative inquiry, case study, semi-fictional and poetic representations and other phenomenological orientations can we hope to illuminate the character and essence of people's lived experiences. It is not our intention to mount an attack on the natural sciences, for many important discoveries about human nature have had their origins there. However, the narratives here do draw inspiration from the social sciences in the approaches they adopt. This is because our interest in this book is to attempt to gain an insider's view of how people experience sport, physical activity, physical, outdoor and environmental education. We want to portray the subjective 'lifeworlds' of the people and communities that these accounts are about.

As a result we hope that you, the reader, will be encouraged to approach the writing that follows as a 'search for these patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes' (Clandinin and Connelly 1998, p. 171). There is no clear-cut, single theory of socio-ecological education, so we use these stories to begin the process of teasing

out this complex concept somewhat gently, and then develop it as a powerful way of thinking about and practising education in the chapters that follow. We begin with Amy's story.

'This Was No Ordinary School Project': Amy Cutter-Mackenzie

I am the youngest of six siblings. My childhood was somewhat nomadic. My father was a boilermaker and my mother an active gardener while caring for my brothers, sisters and me. I was born in Melbourne, where I lived until I was 2 years old. Then the family moved to a small farm in Bahrs Scrub, on the Gold Coast in the hinterland of Queensland. When I was five, we moved again, this time to a small mining town, Tieri, in Central Queensland, 400 km inland from Rockhampton. We lived in Tieri until I was 14, at which point we then moved back to Bahrs Scrub (to the same place that we affectionately called the 'the farm').

My experience of growing up in an open-cut mining town had a profound impact and was, I feel, crucial in the development of my environmental disposition. Around the dinner table, the conflict between environmental conservation and destruction was always a subject of lively discussion. Often the 'destruction line' seemed to be favoured, which was hardly surprising given my family's livelihood depended on the use or exploitation of natural resources. However, this small town also provided a natural playground, as it was surrounded by dense bushland. As a very young child and then a teenager, I often spent full days either alone or with my siblings and friends exploring the bush with no supervision by my parents or other adults.

My experience of our farm was equally significant. In many respects it was 'home'. Since an early age I have had a strong and personal affinity with animals. Dogs and cats lived outside and inside the house and slept in our beds. The farm included a *mélange* of chickens, pigs, cows, goats and sheep ranging free on our land. We all raised and loved all the animals on our property. My job, from just 2 years of age, was to help Mum milk the cows and collect the eggs. My parents did not sell their stock. I can remember becoming very distressed and often inconsolable each time one of our animals was to be slaughtered. It seemed beyond my comprehension. My Mum always said the same thing to me, 'It's important for you to understand that this is where *your* meat comes from. It may seem cruel, but all of our animals have had a very good life'.

My internal conflict never ceased and at the age of 15 I became a vegetarian after doing a school project on the environmental effects of beef cattle farming in Australia. This was no ordinary school project. A national food (cereal) company, selected and sponsored a number of science students, nominated by their schools, to investigate the production of beef in Australia. For 3 months I lived in Alice Springs (in the Northern Territory of Australia), where I visited abattoirs and lived and worked on multiple cattle stations. During my farm stays, my job was to milk the

cows at 5 o'clock each morning, which was followed by working the land (largely fencing and preparing animals for slaughter). This significant life experience not only led me to make a decision to never eat meat again, but the process awakened the researcher within me, as I witnessed the mass production of meat (from paddock to feedlot to market), where animals were treated as a commodity with little dignity, integrity or compassion. This awakening led me to become a teacher and then later a researcher in the area of environmental education, so that I could make a difference for the environment, animals and the way people live their lives.

My passion for teaching and the environment came together during my studies towards a Bachelor of Education at Griffith University. In the third year of my degree I also commenced an Honours degree in environmental education. Already I had in mind that I would become a teacher-researcher. That journey, which began with my nomadic childhood and confronting the harsh realities of food production and its impact upon the lives of animals, the land, and the surrounding communities, has led me to becoming a teacher and environmental educator in Australia and overseas, while completing a doctorate in environmental education.

‘I Am a Physical Educator’: Trent Brown

In the beginning . . . First and foremost I am a physical educator. I was interested in ‘sports science’ as an undergraduate until a not-so-positive work experience opportunity at an institute of sport. This experience provided an awakening that educative physical activity and movement experiences for youth was more important to me than studying the stroke rate of an elite flatwater kayaker for 3 days. This ‘awakening’ reinforced the importance of physical education and its place in the curriculum for all young people, as opposed to the precious resources flowing to an elite few. It set me on a path that continues to this day.

An early entrée . . . I first heard the term ‘socio-ecological’ when I was a graduate student studying for my PhD. It came up when I was collecting articles and writing the literature review for my doctoral dissertation (Brown 2004) on physical activity and wellness. However, the term was not applied to physical education. It seemed to have more to do with health promotion and health education, as it was used as a framework for understanding practices with health-promoting schools (St Leger 1998). Later I remember it being connected to physical activity participation (Cale 2000) and, given the links to my developing research work, there were clearly parallels with socio-ecological approaches and its potential contribution to further understanding physical education. But it was not until some years later, during my first academic appointment, that I began to develop and apply socio-ecological approaches to my teaching practice and research.

My first appointment . . . In my interview for my first academic appointment I was asked, ‘How do you see yourself – as a researcher, a teacher, an administrator or

something else?’ Given that I had prepared some answers, via a discussion with my doctoral supervisor, I was comfortable in answering the question:

I see myself primarily as a teacher. This is not to say that I don’t think that I can engage with research and see this as contributing additionally to my career as an academic, it is just that who I am and how I see myself, is first and foremost as a teacher.

I was pretty sure that I gave a coherent answer to this question. But what I did not know or engage with at the time was the broader direction of teacher education research. I came from a school of performance and exercise situated in a medical faculty. All they seemed to argue about in research was whether anything was significant beyond the $p < 0.05$! To move into a Faculty of Education, where teaching and research were more about qualitative approaches, epistemologies, ontologies, post-structuralism and interpretivism, was a difficult enough transition, let alone trying to set up a research agenda that was supportive of quantitative approaches to studying physical activity. However, I persevered. With the benefit of hindsight, I can see that the social, cultural and historical aspects of the ideas, ideals and practices that I held dear in physical education were indeed socio-ecological in nature.

Responding to the socio-ecological in my teaching and research TODAY! ... Over the past decade I have been somewhat eclectic in my research activity: physical activity participation, physical education teacher knowledge, curriculum development, test scale development and validation, professional learning and, more recently, meaning and meaning-making of teachers as physical educators. This latter research area grew out of what I see as the marginalisation of physical education in the broader curriculum. In addition, I had begun to question the ‘invisible authority’ it seemed was often assumed by the author of research papers. In the research that I was reading it seemed that the concept of ‘I’, that first-hand account of lived experience, was seldom seen. I had begun asking questions that my quantitative statistical training as a researcher could not answer.

My transition from quantitative to qualitative researcher (and perhaps to a more socio-ecologically orientated educator) was a difficult one. Each time I tried to bridge my understanding I confronted the barriers of unfamiliar language and terms in the qualitative research literature. I had never even heard of ‘the paradigm wars’ that raged between quantitative and qualitative proponents and antagonists in the research world. For some time I felt adrift between two distinctly different views of the world. Eventually, I found support from some senior staff within my faculty, who encouraged me to persevere. I needed to succeed. I needed to engage, to find a way through this impasse. I began with a small academic piece on meaning and meaning-making in physical education (Brown 2008), before attempting to conceptualise a phenomenology of movement (Brown and Payne 2009). I forced myself to read more widely, including Arnold, Kleinman, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Dewey. At times I still felt I was an outsider looking in. But there were glimpses. I had started down a path and felt like I had begun my Ph.D. all over again. For me, socio-ecological education it is about understanding the individual as an actor and meaning-maker. This is something I have lived through in my own development

as a physical educator. In essence, I feel that I have gained some of my most valuable insights into a socio-ecological perspective by becoming a socio-ecological educator.

‘Experience, Time, Epiphany’: Laura Alfrey

Why do I call myself a socio-ecological educator? Three words spring to mind when I reflect upon this question: ‘experience’, ‘time’ and ‘epiphany’. The latter may seem a little sensationalised, but if an epiphany may be thought of as finding the special piece(s) of a jigsaw puzzle that sees the whole picture emerge, then it makes sense. With the benefit of hindsight I am able to track my (physical) education ‘experiences’ and see how often it was the unplanned and unintended that allowed me to find more pieces of the puzzle. I would be naive to say that my jigsaw is complete, but I have definitely now accrued enough pieces to know what I am working towards. And that is, educating, and helping others educate, in ways that acknowledge the multiple levels of our personal, social and environmental ecologies. Each of these levels needs to be responsive to people and place and thus become more relevant, engaging and likely to result in meaningful learning. If this is my current position, how did I get here?

I grew up in Gomersal, a little village in Yorkshire, in a house where my parents live to this day. As a child, any free time at home was spent with friends, dodging bulls in the barley fields, riding my bike along the country lanes, running races or reinventing the age-old pastime of playing marbles. I don’t like to brag but my success on the marble circuit was quite impressive and was evidenced by a large glass jar in my parents’ hallway that housed my winnings. Every weekend my parents and I would pack up the cherry-red Volvo 340 and head for pastures new. Our travels took us to the riverbank in Burnsall, the tarn (glacial lake) in Malham, or the forests of Sherwood (where Robin Hood used to roam . . . according to the legend). Such trips instilled in me a love of the outdoors and being active from a young age. At the time I thought that this was what all families did. I can now see that I was in a privileged situation and that the opportunities my parents presented to me were invaluable in terms of developing a love for movement and the outdoors. A socio-ecological perspective encourages you to look beyond individuals and appreciate how their relationships with others and the environment influence their thoughts and behaviours. Looking back through a socio-ecological lens I can now see that my current interests and approaches as an educator and researcher have been influenced heavily by both my parents and my formative experiences in the wild countryside of Yorkshire.

My parents were never particularly sporty, but they were very active and supportive of my physical and adventurous ways, even when I came home with my new shoes scuffed and worn within an inch of their lives because I had used them to slow my bike down on a big descent. As I grew up and began to play in the school sports teams, the support of my parents was manifested by transporting

me to and from events, and financing my hockey, netball, athletics, karate, judo, swimming, and so on. You can tell where this story is going, can't you? At school my favourite subject was physical education, closely followed by geography. Both of which involve movement, people and places. It is the relationship between these three aspects of social ecology that continue to grasp my attention.

Out of a class of 30 girls, I remember wondering why only three or four of us enjoyed and willingly participated in our physical education. To me it was natural and fun and I experienced success to fuel my passion further. For a short time I ran the 100 metre sprint faster than any girl at St John Fisher Secondary School and I thought selection for the Olympics was the next stop. I was a big (or rather – fast) fish in a small pond. But my initial and positive experiences of physical education meant one thing: if I wasn't going to the Olympics I was going to be a – you guessed it – physical education teacher. I wanted to help everyone enjoy movement and games as much as I did.

So, with that in mind, I went to university in Chester, England, at a college of the University of Liverpool. I was getting good grades and graduation was close. But then I enrolled in a unit entitled 'Issues in Physical Education' that was taught by (now) Professor Ken Green. Until this point I had never been encouraged to think critically about physical education or its role within the school curriculum and society more broadly. As the unit progressed, I developed new and critical understandings about an activity that I had taken for granted. I began to gain some insights into why most of the girls at school had not liked physical education and realised that the subject as I knew it did little to promote in *all* a love and understanding of movement. I began to doubt some aspects of physical education. I wanted and needed to learn more.

I started working in schools and at the same time began working towards a Masters degree in Sociology of Sport, Physical Education and Exercise. Holding my Masters certificate in my hand a few years later, I still wanted to know more about the theoretical underpinnings of physical education and the ways in which theory translated into pedagogical practices. I accepted a scholarship to do a Ph.D. at Loughborough University and this allowed me to pose and seek answers to some deep personal and professional questions about my field. While doing my doctorate I continued to work with schools and the Institute of Youth Sport. This again gave me the valuable opportunity to test my ideas in practice and also have the messy world of work upset the apparent certainty of theory.

My doctoral research was concerned with the promotion of healthy, active lifestyles and as part of a literature review I explored the concept of an 'Active School' (Cale 1997). The Active School uses a socio-ecological approach to promote opportunities for physical activity. I remember the first time I read the term 'socio-ecological'. I probably muttered the word 'What?' aloud at the time. That said, as soon as I read the explanation provided by Cale and Harris (2005) it made immediate and complete sense. This was my epiphany. I had found a big piece of the puzzle: recognising that early research on physical activity was largely individualistic and was thus a very narrow and incomplete way of understanding the complexities of human choices and behaviour.

Socio-ecological approaches, however, have at their core the notion that physical behaviour ‘is influenced by multiple facets of the intrapersonal, interpersonal and physical, and policy and legislative environments’ as well as the natural environment (Cale and Harris 2005, p. 83). Applying social ecology to a school setting provided me with a multi-levelled frame through which I could make better sense of the many factors and influences that affect how, what and why teachers teach. It also helped me appreciate how knowledge of social (people) and ecological (environment) interdependencies can help us better understand the teaching of physical education. Over time I have come to better understand and rethink ways of knowing, and have utilised socio-ecological approaches in a range of contexts (schools and communities) and for a variety of reasons (to develop understandings of physical education practices and to promote active transport). More recently I have begun to draw on socio-ecological principles in my teaching and it has been a very rewarding experience. I have seen and experienced ways of doing physical education that has allayed some of my earlier doubts and fears about participation for all.

I was an educator before I was a socio-ecological educator but, returning to the three words I referred to at the start of this narrative, my epiphany and subsequent experiences have led to a gradual and enjoyable piecing together of a puzzle. The process has, I think, made me a better educator.

‘For Me, It’s About a Sense of Place and the Quality of the Experience’: Brian Wattchow

I am not a person who places a great deal of store in labels. I would not be comfortable wearing a T-shirt stating ‘I’m a socio-ecological educator’, or a badge that says ‘Place-responsive outdoor educator’ or ‘human geographer’. However, having said that, I do see considerable merit in attempting to carefully articulate the conditions and qualities that I believe make my educational practice both socio-ecological and place-responsive in character. I trace my own approach to working socio-ecologically to a range of formative experiences. In this brief narrative account I want to talk about the three elements that I find most compelling in the socio-ecological approach and, in each case, demonstrate how remembering our past is a good way of beginning to understand the present. The first recollection I wish to consider has to do with my belief in the value of inter-disciplinary approaches to inquiry and experience.

My introduction to inter-disciplinarity ... I grew up in an inter-disciplinary household. My father was a school principal and humanities teacher. He had a great knowledge of English and Australian literature and an active interest in history and geography. Over the years, he and I shared many long and pleasurable conversations that ranged across topics as diverse as the health of the land, politics, Australian poetry and make-up of the Australian cricket team. My mother was an artist and

art teacher. She has a wonderful sensitivity for landscape. When I was growing up our house was always full of books, many informing my parents' interests in literature, land, art and history. My experience of these various 'disciplines' was that they were active pursuits. The books were for inspiration and reflection in quieter moments. Most of the time we were actively encouraged to be out and about. Along with my siblings and cousins I would keep 'project' books during our regular caravan holidays and camping trips. These books consisted of collections of drawings, photographs, stories about each day's explorations and experiences, as well as early attempts at writing fiction and poetry. Crowding around a table at one end of the caravan each evening the children would work assiduously on their projects. The adults discussed politics, family history and so on down the adult end of the van. At the end of the evening our project books would be passed around, commented on and, finally, the 'treats' drawer in the van would be opened by my grandmother and our efforts rewarded.

Every school holidays saw us travelling to the south or west coast of South Australia, or inland to the River Murray or Flinders Ranges. Occasionally we would venture further afield to the snow-capped alps across the border in Victoria. I would cart along a wooden box my grandfather had made me. It was full of books, sketch pads, comics, and another smaller box of pens and colour pencils. This was long before the age of the digital camera and laptop computer. I am not trying to present some sort of sentimental view of the past as preferable to modern times. But it was an experience of childhood that would be difficult to imagine today.

When I think back to those evenings working on the project books I realise now that the pages I was filling developed like mosaics and the process of their production was as much about exploring meaning as it was about simply recording events. One page might have a sketch of a sand dune and the sea, a pressed flower sticky-taped alongside it, a local postcard glued into place, and a story about the day. Another page might have a scientific-like drawing of a crab, a sketch of its rock pool, and maybe a few clumsy poetic lines of description. The advocate of ecological literacy Orr (1992, p. 125) would, I think, have approved of this approach. Like Henry David Thoreau's classic *Walden*, what results from an inter-disciplinary approach 'is a mosaic of philosophy, natural history, ecology, folklore, archeology, economics, politics, education, and more'.

Each vacation's projects were naturalistic, small-scale, inter-disciplinary studies. This early exposure to a broad cross-section of the humanities has stayed with me ever since and has, no doubt, influenced choices I have made about study, my work as an educator and how I think about and go about research. When I look at a landscape I am immediately searching for colour, shape and form – the play of light on different surfaces. But I am also trying to work my way into the place. I am looking for evidence of human occupation – tensions between natural and cultural elements. I want to experience the place's character and what it has to show and teach me. I want to physically explore the place with my body. And, I want to read stories, fact and fiction, about the place and its human history. I take great joy in this experience of physical and intellectual inquiry – of slowly getting to know a place, of it revealing itself to me, over time.

I now realise what a gift my parents gave me in the simplicity of our holiday life and the ‘projects’ we completed. I want to pass that along to others – to my own children and my students. I want them to re-engage with ways of knowing that have often been sidelined and even discredited as they have advanced through their years of formal education. Inter-disciplinary inquiry, especially when done for its own sake, brings great richness to our experience. For me it is the rawness of the embodied encounter and how this mixes with more composed and quiet moments of reflection and still later attempts at creative representation that define this inter-disciplinary form of practice.

Outdoor Places . . . Professionally I have come to realise that my approach to teaching and writing is more place-based and place-responsive (Wattchow and Brown 2011) than anything else. This is a very different style of teaching in outdoor recreation and education, where the common approach is still one of treating nature and the outdoors as an adversary, against which students are expected to test themselves and build their character or develop better teamwork. There is an immersive quality in the type of approach to teaching and learning in a socio-ecological and place-responsive way. It is about an unfolding sense of place and the quality of the experience rather than striving to attain some sort of predicted educational outcome. Certain educational strategies can be employed by a teacher or leader to assist students to open their senses to a place. The Australian social ecologist and academic John Cameron (2001, p. 32) described the pedagogical process involved in this approach as follows:

open attentiveness, the willingness to suspend judgment and ‘listen’ to a place, the capacity to reflect on both affective and intellectual responses. These are abilities which are best communicated by the presence and attitudes of the educators themselves – by how they are rather than what they say when they are outdoors with the students. It sets the outdoor educators on just as much a journey as the students; always broadening and deepening their relationships with places.

Periods of stillness and quietness (often hard to find in our modern societies, and harder still to elicit in time-pressured undergraduate students), repeat visits, getting to know a place on macro and micro levels, moving slowly, consciously exploring how each of the human senses allows the qualities of a place to permeate the skin and become a part of memory – are just some of the many possibilities of sensing a place. Ed Relph, author of *Place and Placelessness* (1976), called this searching for an empathetic insidedness to a particular location on the Earth’s surface.

But places are about more than just our embodied encounter of them. I have realised over the years in my teaching and guiding in the outdoors that it is all too easy for both myself and my students to dwell a little too long in a state of romantic revelry amidst the sublime qualities of a beautiful wild place. We need to also consciously learn the ecology, economy and politics of a place. How these elements interact influences the place that is before our eyes, beneath our feet, and working its way under our skin.

At its most basic level, a socio-ecologically inspired educator begins with a sense of attachment to, and therefore a desire to sustain, the people, communities

and places where they live and work. It doesn't matter to me if that place and community is found in the city, on the suburban fringe, or in rural or remote locations. It doesn't even matter to me if we are only temporary visitors to a place or long time inhabitants. The realisation that our wellbeing is simply an extension of ecological and community wellbeing brings a sense of socio-ecological responsibility. Individual, community and ecology are all nested within wider systems that reach and spread through time and space. We need to think and learn historically, geographically, economically and ecologically, as well as physically. We need to look for connections, through both current networks of relations between individuals, and through their communities and ecologies. As an educator, I think I am working at my best when I can encourage a learner to *experience* a sense of these connections rather than to have them only *think* about them. My hope is that these *experiences* will be so profound that the student will feel an inevitable call to action to contribute to the unfolding richness of a place and ensure its health into the future.

‘A Sports Coach on the Margins’: Ruth Jeanes

My journey to understanding the value of social ecology within my teaching and research focus on sports coaching has been a slow but steady one. Recently, I have been actively pursuing ways of thinking about and practising coaching within this broader framework. Reflecting on my past, I can see a number of critical moments within my own experiences of being coached and subsequently becoming a coach that have shaped my current practice and influenced why I feel a social ecological approach has so much to offer.

My first memory of being coached was when I started playing cricket as a 15-year-old with Daventry Youth Club. There were no local teams for girls but my Dad had organised for me to attend practice sessions with the youth section of the local men's team, who had a 'great coach'. He was an ex-professional player. Club members said 'He really knows his stuff' and 'He's a great technician'. At my first session I was asked to bat in the practice nets fairly early on. With some help from Dad, I buckled on the pads that protect a batter from injury and walked down to the end of the net, feeling the weight of the cricket bat in my hands. A line of 10 or so 15–18-year-old boys eyed me from the end of their bowling run-ups. I wonder now what they were thinking. Were they torn between whether they should attempt to take my head off or bobble one in nice and slowly to 'give the girl a chance'. Being a hockey player, I had reasonably good hand-eye-ball coordination and when the first ball came in it was full and wide. I moved my feet into position, swung hard and caught it with that lovely 'puck' sound that signals you've hit the ball just right. It smashed into the side of the net and I was off. Next ball was straight and faster and I swung again to hit it straight back, just to the side of the bowler's outstretched right hand – a 'straight drive' (a shot Dad would later tell me is one of the hardest to master).

Immediately the ‘coach’ came marching down towards me. He was six foot four, incredibly imposing and what I’d now describe as a ‘very busy coach’. A busy coach is someone who is always giving instructions, continually telling the bowlers how they should adjust, batters how to move their feet, and so on. He strode towards me, shouting that I needed to stop ‘waving my bat about like I was swotting flies’ and before we went any further I had to ‘sort my defence out’. I was taken out of the net to one side and for the next 30 min he painstakingly explained how to execute the forward defence shot and told me I was not to play anything else for the following 3 weeks. Defence, I was told, was essential, as ‘you can’t score runs if you’re sat back in the pavilion’. Slowly over the coming weeks he ‘coached’ any natural exuberance and the ability to play freely out of me and I have remained a very conservative player ever since. This crucial, early introduction to the game turned a possible flamboyant ‘Bothamesque’ young female cricketer into just another dour, Boycott-like defensive, ‘safe’ player. It has, perhaps, influenced how I see and feel about the game and, as sport plays such a central part in my life, how I feel about myself. Even then I had a sense that I had to question what was good and effective coaching. My coach, though highly qualified, failed to build on the natural resources and abilities I brought to *his* cricket nets.

When I first began coaching, I was aware of not wanting my young players to have experiences similar to the one that I had had as a young cricketer. But, despite completing an undergraduate sports science degree and undertaking numerous coaching education courses, I felt very unsure of the ‘best way’ to coach. All I had gained from the classes was expertise in breaking down particular skills, devising drills and making sure I also put a short, adapted game somewhere into my coaching session. My first coaching role was with the Wollaton Girls Cricket Club. The girls who came to the first training sessions had an incredibly diverse range of ability. I had been made aware of gender issues and how young people become socialised into sport at university, including the lack of support and encouragement girls receive to develop core movement skills at an early age. But this was now reality for me as a new coach and I was finding coaching difficult as a result. All the courses I had been on had assumed learning was a linear process and I had always worked with athletes of similar ability. A further issue I quickly became aware of was that most of the girls were not participating because they had a particular interest in playing cricket. Most had grown tired of spending Friday evening sitting in the pavilion while they waited for fathers or brothers to finish practising and thought they would give playing a go instead.

As I learnt more about the girls, it was clear that skill development, all that I had really been trained to help them with, was at the bottom of their priorities. Instead, they wanted to talk to each other, talk with me, learn a few skills and generally enjoy getting to grips with a new sport in a fun, supportive setting. Some also wanted to ‘play seriously’, creating further challenges for me to develop an environment that would meet their diverse needs. It was probably my first realisation that to be a ‘good coach’ I had to do more than undertake the ‘coaching process’ I had learnt through my studies and training. I started to think about the ‘bigger picture’: Who were the girls? Why were they coming to my sessions? What did they want from me?

What experiences were they bringing with them? All of the girls brought different histories, interests and expectations that I had to understand and respond to.

My coaching journey took a further turn several years later when I received a phone call from a local women's refuge hostel that offered housing and support to homeless women. Staff at the hostel wanted to develop a physical activity program, as a group of women had expressed interest in playing soccer. Would I be able to provide weekly soccer sessions for them? I agreed and turned up to my first session on a cold windy day in the middle of an English winter. We were meeting at a local authority all-weather pitch. These seem to always be built next to an elevated, open space of wasteland, so the wind whips across them, with limited shelter. Eight women of various shapes and sizes stood in front of me. I could see that they were eyeing me with various levels of suspicion. Only two were wearing sports shoes and sports clothing. Three appeared to be chain smoking and one, despite the cold, was wearing a T-shirt revealing arms that were a mass of purple bruises and raised criss-crosses of scars and cuts. All were shivering and seemed to have been forced to the session under duress by an exceptionally bubbly, slightly irritating, social worker. Mentally I saw my 'coaching plan' dissolving in front of my eyes.

As the weeks progressed, the women reinforced to me continually the importance of understanding 'beyond the pitch' before I could work with them effectively. I began to get to know them as individuals, ensuring I made space in each session for interaction, using particular tasks to help us communicate. I tried to find out about them, their histories, stories and hopes. Most had been through incredible trauma; domestic abuse, child abuse, loss of family networks and jobs, and these experiences had contributed to the situation in which they now found themselves. I quickly understood that for these women, 'good coaching' meant providing an environment where they felt safe, valued and important, where they could achieve what *they* wanted to get out of the sessions.

While humanistic approaches to coaching are advocated in academic coaching literature (Lyle 2002) I found my situation required a different level of understanding. The women started asking my advice on various aspects of their lives, from filling in social security forms to issues with ex-boyfriends or accessing children in care. My role was extended to one of 'cultural intermediary' (Crabbe 2009), connecting the women with people, places and communities from which they had become marginalised. I was younger than them and did not feel that I had the necessary life experience to advise them. I continually felt guilty and inadequate at being unable to do more to help. But, once a rapport was established, this did not seem to matter. To them I was a female, I had a good job, I had a home and I was kind to them and treated them with respect. I was therefore a person to turn to, to rely on. Perhaps I had become a sports coach on the margins and of the marginalised.

For me, it was this experience that crystallised the need for broader thinking, using multiple lenses to guide my coaching philosophy and practice. While I had read extensive literature on creating democratic environments within the coaching context and the importance of athlete-centred approaches, these arguments seemed one dimensional when I considered the breadth of factors that were impacting on my sessions with the soccer group. I began to examine other disciplines and

particularly gained insights from youth work and community development literature that focused on developing relationships, collective action and the fostering of critical consciousness. All of these areas became relevant as I took a large step backward and attempted to view the situation holistically or through a socio-ecological lens, recognising all the 'layers' influencing the coaching process. To do this, and appreciate what people brought to my coaching sessions and how to respond to it appropriately was, and is, a difficult and uncomfortable process and one I continually feel inadequate undertaking. However, I now recognise that this is the only way I can fully connect with the people I coach, whoever they might be and wherever we may be, and provide an experience that offers so much beyond developing skills and learning to play a game.

'Balls, Bats, Sticks, Stones and Earth': Justen O'Connor

Growing up in a small country town in regional Victoria, Australia, my childhood was full of wild and wonderful experiences, the vast majority involving some sort of physical activity. The long driveway was our cricket pitch, the large backyard our football field, the clothesline held a ball on a string that I would repeatedly hit with a stick appropriated from the nearby fence. My bicycle, a shiny gold BMX, was my freedom; it opened up a multitude of playgrounds – the like of which I wish my own children could access today. Every day was an adventure. I would get home from school, wolf down a sandwich and then it was outside until the street lights came on. Building Lego models was for cold or wet days and television programming in 'the bush' presented few choices. Balls, bats, sticks, stones, and earth – being active and outside – this was the stuff that filled my world.

Upon reflection, I can now see the many things that shaped my participation in sports and physical activity as a boy. Good at everything, master of nothing, I was never going to represent my country, but I loved sport, almost as much as I loved the free time exploring, creating and playing outdoors with friends. There were many layers of influence to my participation in sports and physical activity. My parents were both active, my father was a good Australian Rules footballer with the Robinvale Eagles. My mother was always active in sports and other activities like gardening. They also took great interest in my participation.

My older brother was my benchmark. We were competitive and drove each other to improve. I lived in a town where no one locked their doors, most people knew each other, so strangers were rare and certainly not worth worrying about. The risk of injury seemed to pale into insignificance when compared with the benefits obtained from independence and experimentation. I had access to a river, two ovals across the road, community sporting clubs, a basketball court, a large yard, sporting equipment, financial support, good weather, few hills, and a town with little traffic. My peers were also active. I quickly adopted the dominant masculine social norms expected of a young lad growing up in the country. Fishing, cricket, football and basketball were an important part of my identity. Even though I was small for my

age, I loved physical education class in primary school because I knew I was not the worst, and every now and then, I could be one of the best.

As I grew, my delayed physical development meant that I avoided contact sports like Australian Rules football for fear of being hurt or injured by the larger-bodied boys. I began to specialise in cricket, which was also shaped by my environment. The many hours spent batting against my brother in our long narrow driveway meant I became competent at front-foot shots. Alas, I did not develop a pull or hook stroke, as this would often mean the ball would travel over our neighbour's fence and result in an encounter with their dog, 'Bruiser'.

The fitter I became, the further I could ride my bike and the more I could explore. This constant exploration along the boundary of my environment led to ever-increasing circles of experience, throughout which I was developing skills, fitness and the attitude to push what I perceived to be my limits. This sometimes led to misadventure and injury, which was a most effective and natural way of reminding me of my limitations. The environment provided me with a host of opportunities and constraints for movement, to test my physical prowess or to simply move from one place to another for another purpose. It was a dynamic interaction between multiple layers of influence, constantly changing and far removed from the idea of refining motor skills. My country childhood provided an ever-expanding set of opportunities.

As an undergraduate in a Human Movement Science degree, I was drawn into the biophysical discourses of physiology, biomechanics and exercise prescription. I adopted a reductionist logic exemplified in a final-year project and honours thesis in which I reduced a host of team games and sports to a few key fundamental movement skills. My thoughts were, that if I could teach kids the skills that are fundamental to a range of sports, they could play any of these without too much trouble. There was a considerable naivety in my ideas and logic that participation in sports could be boiled down to only an individual's motor competence. These reflections reveal a host of supportive environmental, social, physical and behavioural factors that have coalesced to produce a lifetime that has turned out to be engaged in physical activity and sports. It is the multi-layered complexity that is important and, while the temptation exists to reduce sports to a set of skills or tactics, the reality is far from reductionist logic and is, perhaps, beyond scientific forms of measurement.

In more recent years, organised team sports have become less of a priority. I took up road cycling, which challenged me in new ways. The dynamic interplay between my moving body regulated by physiology and attitude, the fast changing landscape beneath my wheels, the push and pull of the fluid air environment and the appeal to my 'wild' inner self drew me in. I felt a return of that freedom I experienced as a young lad. Unconstrained, wind-in-the-face freedom – an experience of wildness that is formed through a symbiotic relationship with the environment and your fellow cyclists. Socio-ecological systems are dynamic in nature and place a focus on environmental affordances to drive behaviour. At a more micro level, the act of cycling reflects such a system and speaks to a primacy of practice (Archer 2000). I have borrowed heavily from Matt Rendell's (2004) account of cycling with others to highlight this dynamic interplay between environment, task and organism.

Whirring out of the pre-dawn darkness they come, transferring energy from muscles into the fluid atmosphere, tunnelling through still air and creating a moving stream in their wake. *'In normal life, the petty turbulence that fills the spaces we vacate, the insignificant by-product of lives spent scurrying like sea insects over the floor of an atmospheric ocean of air, melts inconsequentially'* (p. 6). For cyclists, this pocket of moving air becomes far more significant, a powerful attractor for movement. By instinctively *'diving into the comet's tail of chasing air'* the following rider is sheltered from work (p. 6). Instead of exploiting the lead rider's efforts, those who have the capacity, cooperate, *'taking turns pulling at the front and recovering behind'* (p. 7). The more riders taking turns at the head of the bunch, the greater the energy saved, the higher the speed attained, the more powerful and alive the collective becomes. Dynamic, like birds flying in formation or a fish shoal under attack, *'the play of accommodation and opposition creates complex systems in dynamic equilibrium, yet rarely chaotic for long, oscillating around limits defined by shared interest'* (p. 7). 'Holding the wheel' in cycling is an embodied, 'wild' and, at the same time, a socially constructed imperative. (With adaptation from Rendell 2004, pp. 6–7)

To observe cyclists in action is to observe first hand how movement is shaped and influenced by the environment. It is the emphasis of this relationship that separates social-ecology from socio-cultural perspectives and it places a primacy on practice. There is no denying that much of the behaviour of cyclists is socially constructed, from shaved legs to many bunch-riding practices. But there is something more natural, primal and embodied when movement and environment are so closely entwined.

This dynamic interplay between my biology, attitude, social context and the environment begins to shed light on the interplay between and across multiple layers of influence. In both my broad physically active life, as well as within specific acts of moving (like cycling), I exist in this expanding and dynamic interaction between the environment, the tasks and my body, which have shaped and continue to shape my participation in sports and physical activity (Handford et al. 1997). At a macro level I can see how my own physical education has been influenced by my natural and built surroundings, my socio-cultural and historical context and my own attitudes, beliefs and indeed by my biological capacity. I can also zoom in and note that when I move through an environment it is the environment that is pushing and pulling me as much as I am acting on it. It is no surprise, then, that in the physical education profession we are seeing a proliferation in more complex ways of viewing sports and physical activities. Games Sense, Play Practice, Teaching Games for Understanding and ecological approaches for Active Schools are all examples of an acknowledgment that movement is not simply the execution of a motor program, controlled by an individual's desire to move, in isolation of other movements or the environment.

If I am to encourage others to lead healthy, active lifestyles, I have to be aware that many connections conspire to influence its possibility, even if I don't or can't understand all of them. These connections include those to the built environment and to the broader natural systems that sustain life. Our wellbeing is intimately connected to that of our community and its broader ecology. Today I view movement through many lenses, which are complex and interactive. I see physical education as a much broader concept than the mastery of tactics or motor skills for the purpose of playing competitive games and sports. For me there is an inherent connection between physical activity, the immediate and broader environment, and the idea of

living healthy, sustainable lives. As you can see by the stories from my colleagues, a social-ecology for sport, physical activity and active leisure can be many things to many people. It is multi-disciplinary, multi-layered and inclusive of a host of approaches to teaching and learning. Because of this it can seem uncomfortably messy. But for me, like a 3D eye puzzle, once you squint for a while, the eyes adjust and you can become comfortable with the messiness that is the reality of people's day-to-day lives and a clearer picture begins to emerge.

Conclusion

Promoting the kind of narratives about educators' and researchers' beliefs and practices contained in this first chapter (and throughout the book) is an important place to start. It provides descriptions of how educators have developed their educational philosophies and pedagogic practices over time, and how these continue to unfold throughout a career. Personal and professional narratives, with their idiosyncratic twists and turns, challenge the apparent certainty of theory often presented in textbooks about coaching, teaching and leading. It reminds us of the importance of reflection, self-understanding and the unfolding journey of discovery that is the everyday reality of each and every educator. These narratives also bring to the surface the importance and impact of the social and environmental setting and the key roles that they play in the narrative journey of the self. Instead of acting as independent components we can begin to see the personal, social and environmental character of experience as an unfolding, co-dependent phenomenon.

These stories provide an introduction to this book and, we hope, signal to the reader something about our motivations for teaching, guiding and researching with a socio-ecologically approach. There will be elements of some of these short narratives that resonate with different readers. We hope that you will reflect on your own narrative journey as a sports or outdoor person and as a researcher, teacher, guide or coach. The stories also work collectively. We begin to see commonality of experience across seemingly diverse educational disciplines. This diversity and difference raise new possibilities as well.

Consider how a supportive social and natural environment, in the case of Laura, Justen and Brian, provided such a profound influence upon their childhood experiences. Children, and young people, can also perceive social and environmental injustices, and we see this surface in Ruth and Amy's stories. Equally, adults draw on the principles of social ecology as they develop a philosophical framework that guides their research and teaching. We see this emerge in Trent's narrative. We suggest that writing a socio-ecological autobiography is a meaningful starting point. Producing one's own lifelong physical activity lifeline, as Penney and Jess (2004, p. 275) note:

is not merely a tool for description. Rather, it also represents a potentially powerful reference point for policy and curriculum development relating to physical education, sport, physical activity and health.

In this process of reflective writing we feel that it is important to ask the following questions: What can I learn about the social and environmental context that I live and work in? How have my opportunities and experiences been both limited and made possible by my circumstances? How have I been able to make decisions and take actions that have changed my circumstances?

Having begun to explore a socio-ecological approach through a process of critical reflection and narrative we are ready to move on. The next two chapters highlight some of the essential qualities and characteristics of a socio-ecological approach. The case studies in Part II then describe examples of how such an approach can renew teaching, guiding and coaching practice. We also hope that introducing the human element early makes a clear statement that we consider that people and places, the contexts in which we all find ourselves, encourages a sense of empathy. People and places are complex and ever changing and a socio-ecological perspective requires we are vitally interested in the lives and locations of those we are privileged to teach, guide or coach.

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