

GREGORY HEATH

7. RE-IMAGINING THE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE

A Philosophical View

... every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after.

John Dewey, *Experience and Education*

INTRODUCTION

Outdoor education has had at its core the elements of connecting being with nature; to develop and enliven our human capacities to understand and more fully experience the outdoors, the natural world, and to live sustainably in harmony with the environment. Learning to experience the outdoors has been at the core of the curriculum and intrinsic to the aims of education as personal enrichment and also to the instrumental aims of producing graduates who know how to interpret and care for the environment. A guiding principle behind the recent evolution of outdoor and environmental education has been the notion of *deep ecology*. Deep ecology is associated with the great Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess. Naess proposed that as a deep principle human consciousness was at one with the environment in which we live (Naess, 1989). To be completely human in moral, spiritual, emotional and cognitive dimensions requires an at-oneness with the fullness of the environment and not a standing apart from it and especially not adopting a dominant position with regard to it. A cornerstone of the deep ecology movement is that non-human entities including all living things, species and environments, such as wetlands or deserts have intrinsic value. This implies that they have intrinsic moral worth and to harm them without a valid moral cause is to do something wrong. Some such as William Godfrey-Smith (1980) have gone so far as to say environments and species have rights that should be protected by law. In this vein Naess was critical of more conventional instrumental theories of ethics that related right and wrong to human needs and interests as he claimed these would always prioritise human interests above those of other animals, plants and environments. Essential to deep ecology is the view that subject of experience is at-one with nature and standing in a subject–object relationship.

Naess' views have since been taken up, elaborated, discussed and defended at length by many authors including Godfrey-Smith (1980), Mathews (1993), Brennan (2010) and many others. These views and their elaborations have formed the bedrock for outdoor education theory granting to it a legitimate core as a discrete curriculum category.

GREGORY HEATH

However, despite the enduring quality of this work in establishing the field there have been significant changes, both in the socio-technical world and in philosophical theory that change the relationship of humans to the natural world. It is these changes that I wish to pursue here.

PHILOSOPHICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Developments in philosophical theory have altered the way 'self' and personal identity and thus the experience of the outdoors, are understood in very complex and to date indeterminate ways. As a consequence the aims and rationale for outdoor and environmental education stand in need of re-evaluation. This reevaluation will show that outdoor education is as important as ever but needs re-conceptualisation in relation to the broader curriculum. Conjointly with this philosophical shift, technology has changed the way we perceive and conceive of not only 'outdoor' but also indeed 'indoor' and 'virtual' place and space.

Considered from the historical perspective of educational philosophy, the conception of outdoor education in the curriculum stems from perception of the outdoors in the high romantic period, although it could be claimed that there are ancient sources going back to Greece and beyond where we see the symbols representing the spiritual union of humans with the natural world in ancient Egyptian mythology. Returning to more recent times the source of outdoor education is a legacy the counter-enlightenment period incorporating the views of writers such as Rousseau and Goethe, to be followed by William Wordsworth and Edmund Burke in England and GWF Hegel in Prussia that the Sublime had the power to inform and inspire the human soul to the highest spiritual perfection. Nature became a source of ideas and sensibility, not only inspiring heightened sensory perception but also revealing the *nature* within the depths of the soul, thus becoming integral to the sense of identity and the understanding of human nature. The *zeitgeist* of this new attitude was captured by the work of the Romantic German painter David Caspar Friedrich typified by his iconic painting *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* where nature becomes a deep source of inspiration leading to a transcendence of mundane human affairs. Some authors such as Richard Wolin *The Seduction of Unreason* (2004) have pointed out the very strong links between the counter-enlightenment and post-modernism with both sharing a deep suspicion of rationalism and what are called 'normalising narratives'.

In more recent times the ideas underlying outdoor education spring from diverse sources but most significant is the notion of the 'authenticity of being' deriving from Heidegger. Here lies the foundation of the view that the natural world is a source of true being in the world and as a source of ontological import and moral integrity. Heidegger uses the Greek term *alētheia* to approximate to 'unconcealment' as a way of being open to the truth revealed by the immediate phenomena of experience (Heidegger, 1977, p. 132) This involves amongst other factors a loss of the distorting lens of the ego through which the world is viewed. The desired state is one of harmonisation of being with nature. As Heidegger further states in *The Question Concerning Technology* (1977, p. 305) any

mediation between the phenomena and the mind introduces a level of distortion or concealment of the truth. Technology itself he sees a significant achievement of the rationalism of science, but he states, it is its' own reality, not a representation of an underlying reality. To extend Heidegger's view, an image of say scenery on a screen is, for this interpretation, in reality an image on a screen and is not given its reality, or 'authenticity' by what it is an image of. The reality experienced is of the technology itself, not of the underlying scene. Heidegger was, when writing, familiar only with the telephone, radio and very early television and not the electronic technologies so commonplace today. I believe that there is need to revise his view and to see recent technology, or at least the more abstract form of that technology, as integral to experience of a more nuanced and mediated world beyond the immediate presence of phenomena.

There are resonances between the thought of Naess and Heidegger and although Naess was not a close follower of Heidegger, he was in his later philosophy part of that European milieu of thought and he wrote about Heidegger specifically. He says, "I say that in spontaneous experiences [of nature] we have direct access to what is real." This, he suggests, relates closely to Heidegger's "self-luminosity of things" (Naess, 1997 p. 3) in open experience which, he claims, is a way to conceptually facilitate the replacement of anthropocentrism with the ecocentrism germane to *deep ecology*.

Part of the experience of nature and the outdoors has been linked in the philosophical literature to this direct validation of being by the loss of self in the direct experience of nature; being in touch with the 'self-luminosity' of experience, akin in some respects to a form of meditation. This view has formed the basis of much theorising about the value of outdoor education such as that found in the ethno-ecology of Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (1949) and it remains a valid strand for its rationale. But the world has changed since Aldo Leopold and his close ethno-ecological studies or since the early days of Naess laying the theoretical grounds of *Deep Ecology*. Their purist views, clearly of intrinsic worth and continuing validity, do need to be revised in the post-modern, technologically mediated environment.

The contemporary world has become *disenchanted*, to use the term coined by Max Weber (1930, p. 221) in the very early 20th century. Weber was of course referring to the demise of religious belief in the west. Weber could not have envisioned how radically disenchanted the world would become in the post-modern era, he also could not have been expected to foresee, but might have anticipated, reactive movements to *re-enchant* the world in a spiritual and non-religious sense. The deep ecology, along with alternative lifestyle movements, has been seen by some such as Landy and Saler (2009) as part of this re-enchantment. This is a very interesting development and might say something about the deeper spirituality of human nature. Re-enchantment broadly so described, is a movement that clearly has the potential for further elaboration, especially in environmental ethics. It might well indicate a strong future rationale for the importance of outdoor education, but to date has proven minor compared to other more rationalistic and instrumental justifications.

GREGORY HEATH

A COMMUNICATIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

A change in social consciousness and values along with communications technology and the effects of globalisation has changed the experience of the outdoors and the understanding of the place of outdoor education. The experience of the outdoors and the importance of outdoor education is no less relevant to the achievement of a richly fulfilling life than it has ever been, but the conceptualisation and contextualisation of how this is understood is now, as a consequence of the shifts in consciousness and the pervasive insinuation of technology, radically different.

To make a sweeping and likely unwarranted generalisation, it can be claimed that there are now very few wild places and no remote places left on the planet. With the population of the earth rising from 1.4 billion to 7.4 billion in the last one hundred years and the rapidly increasing affluence of so many, the pressure on land and the resources of the planet has become extreme. All, or very nearly all, of the earth is now deemed required for residential space, resource and food production. Satellites, 'Google Earth' Global Position System (GPS) technology, webcams and easy rapid travel mean that every part of the planet is now available to view, visit and potentially inhabit. When one considers that even more powerful tracking and surveillance technology is available to government agencies and the military, the idea of 'remote' becomes an historical concept. The understanding of what constitutes 'outdoor' in the experience of the outdoors has also changed in a way that is challenging to conceptualise and describe. Similarly all experience whether 'indoor' or 'outdoor' as it were has become mediated and contextualised by changes in technology and concomitant changes in social, political personal values.

EXPERIENCE AND THE AIMS OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

The traditional aims of outdoor education dating back to Kurt Hahn's *Ten Principles for Adventure Schools* (1957) have been variously set out over time in relation to pedagogical programs and, as with many other educational aims in this field, with little coherence or consistency (see Oikonomou, 2012). This, in part, is because such aims are always politically contested. There are those who would emphasise instrumental values such as physical fitness, resilience and survival capabilities against those who would emphasise the achievement ecological sensibilities, a sense of the sacredness of nature and a personal sense of wellbeing. I would list the aims as follows in an attempt to be inclusive:

- a heightened awareness of one's environment and surroundings,
- a deeper understanding of the ecology and connectedness of all living things and their environments,
- an enhanced aesthetic appreciation of nature, living organisms and landscape,
- self-knowledge and a sense of self-mastery,
- an enhanced capacity for teamwork and cooperation,
- an enhanced ethical awareness and capacity for responsible action,

- mastery of a range of skills for experiencing and surviving in the outdoors including first aid and safety management.

To these now are added the practical skills in the use of technologies related to the outdoors including GPS, responsible use of social media and use of advanced emergency equipment. Many of these aims can only be achieved via the type of experiential learning that has been highly developed in outdoor education, as pointed out by John Dewey (1938) nearly a century ago. The experiential learning involved in outdoor education, however, is different to more traditional vocational education as it is related more to the enrichment and deepening of personal perception and inspiration. At the core is the notion of nature as a source inspiration; as a locus of core truth and beauty. To be inspirational in this sense nature must not be just a mode of reality but also a central ideational principle.

The idea of the outdoors has always been very much an *idea*; an idea arising out of the enlightenment and the Romantic movement that has also taken on a phenomenological existence. That is not to say it is an illusion or merely a construction, far from it, but it is a way of conceptualising and enframing human experience in the same way that ‘society’ is an idea. To illustrate the point it is clear that attitudes to the ‘outdoors’ and the idea of ‘outdoors’ if indeed such a notion existed prior to the romantic age were very different. Nature or what we might conceive as the outdoors was seen as hostile, threatening and a place to be feared, tamed or conquered; the refuge of bandits, wild animals and in some cases non-human malevolent beings such as trolls or werewolves; a place of incivility. Towns and cities embodied the order, discipline and civility of the human spirit at the time and were regarded as sites of rational order and a source of moral inspiration. One is reminded of Immanuel Kant in his letters to Joseph Green singing the praises of his hometown of Königsberg in contrast to the ‘uncivilised’ world surrounding it (Kuehn, 2001, p. 155). The idea that deeper meaning and a deeper sense of being could be found in nature captured the human imagination as reaction to the rationalism of the enlightenment and the dehumanising elements of the industrial revolution. For Kant Nature was aligned with the ‘noumenal’ world. This came to be known in 20th century as the ‘counter-enlightenment’, most notably associated with Rousseau’s concept of the ‘noble savage’ and the high romantic movement.

It was this spirit that flourished in early 20th century captured most comprehensively by John Dewey who took outdoor education to be a central form of experiential education. This has recently been discussed in excellent detail by John Quay and Jayson Seaman in *John Dewey and Education Outdoors* (2013). Dewey was strongly influenced by philosophical pragmatism which in this case led him to see learning, including theoretical learning as a form of reflection on practice. In the first instance this related to vocational learning where practical mastery of complex tasks and processes could only be learned by doing. In this vein outdoor education, or ‘nature study’ as it was then often called, was clearly a unique form of learning and one that could not be replicated in the classroom. Dewey regarded outdoor education as pedagogically equivalent to other subject areas and saw the knowledge skills and capability required as integral to a fully

GREGORY HEATH

comprehensive education. In this and many other respects he was ahead of his time. However, the process and contextualisation of education have taken a quantum leap in last two decades and Dewey's thinking needs to be applied in the new context.

What are the implications for the outdoor experience and outdoor education of technological, social and philosophical change? Do technological mediation and changing values inhibit or enhance the quality and uniqueness of outdoor education? Well the answer is that it can do both, depending on the approach to curriculum and pedagogy.

The mediated environment and the networked society permeate human existence in developed societies to such an extent nowadays that we have almost taken it for granted; it has become almost 'nature like'. It has slid behind the veil of the familiar to such an extent that it has come to form a basis of sense of identity and reality. This is certainly true for those whom Marc Prensky (2001) christened 'digital natives', those born after about 2000 who have never known an 'unwired' world. They take much for granted in this marvellous digital age. So much so that it is no exaggeration to say that personal identity is literally networked into the web of social media. Any outdoor education teacher who has stood by with an open bag for deposit of mobile phones prior to an excursion and has seen the reluctance, resentment, and at times sense of panic, registered by the young participants is well aware of this condition. The critical thing for this discussion is that the way such networked individuals locate themselves in time and space is qualitatively different to the way this would have been done prior to the ubiquity of digital communications.

There are some deeper metaphysical issues here to be explored but for the sake of this chapter some of these can be simplified without compromising the argument. The best approach is to take a before and after approach. Prior to the digital age it is likely that the relationship of the person to their surroundings would have been fairly described as 'Cartesian'; that is a subjective, individual and discrete consciousness to an objective world, in this case a natural environment. The process of experience under this modality of consciousness is familiar would be conceived as one of harmonising the 'inner' to the 'outer'.

Post the digital revolution this is rapidly changing. This is harder to describe as the concepts are still under development and to an extent still in flux and subject to contest. The subject of experience is now linked to others in a radically new way, in a web of shared subjectivity or 'inter-subjectivity'. This is a phenomenon in process at present and as such is subject to ebb and flow of competing perspectives. The consequences of this shift for society have been described by Zygmunt Bauman in a number of his recent writings as 'liquid modernity' (Bauman, 2007). This process is typical of the dynamic of paradigm shift, with many factions in society fighting to oppose the transformation, whilst the young just ignore them and get on with it. But over time the old paradigm will give way to the new which will become the 'new normal'. Evidence of this new way of conceiving subjectivity can be seen in the way the younger generation, the digital natives, place such priority on communication using mobile electronic devices. Every

experience, indeed every thought and attitude, has to be shared instantly, with a view to authentication and validation, on social media. It is important to realise that to this group the devices and the technology that runs them is nearly invisible. They expect it to work and do what they demand to the extent that it is barely thought of as media at all. The process is of course part of the youthful urge to communicate but from a philosophical point of view there would seem to be something more significant going on. The immediacy of sharing for this group is essential to the validating of the experience, giving it reality and authenticity. This function was always present in the act of speech, sharing ideas and communication and remains so, but the technology has added new dimensions in that the reflexive self-validation process that do change its essential character in the following aspects:

- the proximity of the speaker and hearer has been altered; instant communication can be achieved literally a world away (although it is often in the adjacent seat in the classroom). Thus the traditional measures of space and time no longer apply,
 - the media of the communication can include pictures, still and moving images, animations, speech and other sounds and of course links to any other content,
 - the audience is potentially vast numbering anything from one to millions,
 - feedback (rather than a response) is now endemic to the communicative process.
- There are of course losses as well as gains in this process, which are only partially compensated. Most notably of course, that loss of immediacy of the speaker-hearer relationship, so important to Saussure's (1983) account of meaning making. Also largely lost is the rich texture of interpersonal communication that conveys affective as well as literal content. These are important and I would not wish to downplay their significance, but with the boundaries of communication being otherwise massively expanded they must be put into relative perspective.

CONCLUSIONS

What are the implications for the experience of the outdoors?

The concept of 'outdoors' and as a consequence its meaning for outdoor education has irrevocably changed. The outdoors is no longer so much a physical place, remote, located in *Nature* where a pointillistic Cartesian ego stands in a subject-object relationship, perhaps seeking to be immersed in the at-oneness with nature. The 'outdoors' has become a modality or process experience which is now interconnected with all other experience. An experience on the top of Mt Bogong or even down the Kelly Hill Caves is instantly sharable and linkable to any remotely related event. It can be observed that the first thing climbers do on summiting Mt Everest is to send a 'Tweet' to friends and relatives; "hi mum I am here nice view" (<https://twitter.com/MtEverest>). Others, anxious parents or teachers, can track the adventurers' whereabouts in real time and even enjoy the real-time Webcast. GPS technology means that anyone in the outdoors, just like anyone anywhere is never 'lost' with position data down to less than a metre instantly available. Add to this automated weather warnings, hazard warnings and 'best route' advice and trekking can become as much a virtual as an actual

experience. The sense of remoteness has therefore been permanently and irrevocably destroyed. The ‘old’ experience of the outdoors can now only be captured through artifice such as switching off electronic devices or deliberately choosing to use the increasingly hard to find paper maps.

Experiencing the outdoors becomes much more than the experience of what is immediately before the senses. The experience is essentially interconnected, firstly with others and secondly with a rich mine of data about the field of experience. An outdoor education teacher could reasonably expect students to access the history, geomorphology and biodiversity of any particular site *in situ*. Thus, outdoor education becomes more closely integrated with mainstream education. It is important to point out that this does not make outdoor education redundant, quite the contrary, in some respects it becomes more important than ever as reasserting reflexive values promoted by Dewey that make outdoor education essential to comprehensive education and personal fulfilment. But the way outdoor education is conceptualised, thematised and delivered will inexorably change in concert with the reshaping of the outdoor experience. The alignment of social, philosophical and technological change will bring about a major reassessment of outdoor education curriculum and delivery.

The deepest determinative factor is the shift in the way the self and subjectivity is implicitly experienced and understood by the emerging generation. The ‘self’ for them is a ‘networked’ and communicative self that will have a different view of alignment of indoor, virtual and outdoor environments with a continuity across all three. The authenticity of experience characterised as ‘the self-luminosity of things’ given in direct unmediated experience of phenomena will transform to an authenticity given by inter-subjectivity and communicability of experience.

Skills for specific environments will still be important, but integrated with supportive technologies. Environmental knowledge will also continue to be important but now incorporating strong elements of sustainability. Paramount here will be an understanding of how communicative human interests and the interests of deep ecology can be adjusted and harmonised using technologies to both experience and protect wilderness areas, species diversity and ecosystems.

REFERENCES

- Brennan, A., & Lo, Y. S. (2010). *Understanding environmental philosophy*. London: Acumen.
- Bauman, Z. (2007). *Liquid times*. Cambridge: Polity.
- de Saussure, F. (1983). *Course in general linguistics* (R. Harris, Trans.). Illinois: Open Court Publishing.
- Dewey, J. (1938). *Experience and education*. New York: Touchstone.
- Godfrey-Smith, W. (1980). The rights of non-humans and intrinsic values. In D. S. Mannison, M. A. McRobbie, & R. Routley (Eds.), *Environmental philosophy* (pp. 30–47). Research Monograph, Vol. 2, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University.
- Hahn, K. (1957). Outward bound. In G. Bereday & J. A. Lauwerys (Eds.), *The year book of education* (pp. 436–462). London: Evans Brothers.
- Heidegger, M. (1977). *The question concerning technology and other essays* (W. Lovitt, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row.
- Kuehn, M. (2001). *Kant: A biography*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

RE-IMAGINING THE OUTDOOR EXPERIENCE

- Landy, J., & Saler, M. (2009). *The re-enchantment of the world: Secular magic in a rational age*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Leopold, A. (1949). *A sand county almanac*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mathews, F. (1993). *The ecological self*. London: Routledge.
- Næss, A. (1989). *Ecology, community and lifestyle: Outline of an ecosophy* (D. Rothenberg, Trans.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Næss, A. (1997). Heidegger, postmodern theory and deep ecology. *The Trumpeter Journal of Ecosophy*, 14(4).
- Oikonomou, S. (2012). *Academic teachers' perceptions and experiences of outdoor education* (Unpublished master's thesis). Linköping University, Sweden.
- Prensky, M. (2001). Digital natives, digital immigrants, Part I. *On the Horizon*, 9(5), 1–6.
- Quay, J., & Seaman, J. (2013). *John Dewey and education outdoors*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Weber, M. (1930). *The protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism* (T. Parsons, Trans.). London: Allen & Unwin.
- Wolin, R. (2004). *The seduction of unreason: The intellectual romance with fascism from Nietzsche to postmodernism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Gregory Heath
La Trobe University
Australia