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ORIGINAL PAPER

Learning to speak Franklin: nature as co-teacher

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Abstract

Through the personal this article seeks to extend the lived experience felt by the authors that all-inclusive nature, the more-than-human world, is agential and possesses the potential to be considered as guide and co-teacher. As a combination of vignettes and reflections it is auto-ethnographic (Holman-Jones 2013) in tone and method. Yet this personal ethnography is extended by an attempt to include the voice of the river and its more-than-human inhabitants. Throughout the paper there is a persistent concern for the etymological roots of the terms wild and pedagogy that anchors the article in its core concerns of self-will and agency. Twin voices are utilised in parallel to explore several touchstones of wild pedagogies.

Keywords Wild · Pedagogy · Child · More-than-human · Nature · Co-Teacher

A tentative introduction

The river was so generous. We drank of its water and slept on its beaches. Its inhabitants lit up our camps at night and flew over our rafts by day. The river was also dangerous and we travelled with it as respectfully as we could. On occasion our dreams became infused with its roar and thunder. Over the course of our journey we began to think alongside, and with the river. This thinking was at times as refreshing as the cool draught that we received from its waters, at others as troubling and as challenging as the rapids themselves. What follows is an attempt to honour our experience with the river and the thinking that it supported.

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Nature speaks

Author 1

We have been silent in the boat all morning, awed by the landscape and by our growing reverence for the river.

As sunlight begins to break through the canopy and flickers across the surface of the water, the voices of birds can be heard, and I too am moved to sing. I begin to softly sing a song sung to greet the dawn. It is a song of creation, sung by the first people of another continent. My voice is quiet and tremulous, yet sincere despite being amongst strangers. I have a feeling for the place, and for this moment, there is a sense of peace opening up and an invitation to respond. The river is singing and it feels appropriate to join in, to make my feeling known, to express this outwardly to the river and its inhabitants, rather than simply to my fellow travellers. They have only known me for 2 days but I have known this full feeling before in gardens, forests and seas.

For a while my song ripples out across the water, then another traveller, sitting at the front of the boat, abruptly turns towards me, hushing, gesturing to the far bank. There an animal sits, hunched at the water's edge, its head turned toward us. In that moment its dark eyes meet mine.

It does not move. I can feel it sensing us. "Wallaby" our guide says, withdrawing his paddle from the water. We glide by in slow motion, the landscape appearing to fold back on itself bringing the animal curiously closer to our gaze. "Do you know how unusual that is," whispers our guide, "to see a wallaby, here?" I do not answer. I know little about wallabies or this land.

I feel petrified in the creature's gaze. The sensation of joy, the sensation of the traveller in a foreign land seeing something new gives way sharply to a deep sadness, almost a sense of shame. I 'hear' the Franklin River's vulnerability, despite currently being protected, politically, from human interests. Again, I fall silent.

Later another traveller, an experienced river guide who knew the river well, spoke about seeing the wallaby. He suggested that in over thirty trips he had rarely seen a wallaby on the bank of the river. He said he thought the wallaby might have been sick or injured.

I had never seen a wallaby before. I had never been on this river before. What I know of wallabies I learnt in my exchange with that wallaby, in this place, in this moment.

For me, the wallaby had intimated something unexpected, unanticipated and had done so in a way that cannot be reduced to a simple refrain. When the wallaby spoke to me it was all at once. The communication was instant and seemingly contained within it a profound sense of melancholy, a warning of the future and maybe a moment of deep kinship. With its look the wallaby impressed itself on me, directing my mind.

Reflecting on the encounter over the distance of time, I am challenged to consider if the recounting of my experience was simply a personal projection, an anthropomorphising of sorts? As the months pass, I begin to doubt my own experience, yet no matter how many times I replay the encounter it remains as vividly *participatory* as in the first instance. David Bohm (2004) explores the concept of participation, breaking open the meaning and assisting my thinking.

> The earliest meaning was, "to partake of," as you partake of food… Symbolically, or even actually… it meant partaking of the source. The second meaning is

> "to partake in," to make your contribution… it means that you are accepted, you are being taken into the whole. You can't take part in something unless that thing in some sense accepts your participation. Taken together, these ways of thinking do not create a separation of object and subject. (p. 99)

A question arises. If we can cultivate the ability to be open and aware, to really listen, *to participate* might we find the whole of the river directing us?

Author 2

The first warming comes as a gentle whisper – a quiet puff rising upriver and caressing exposed skin.

For those not literate in Franklin River speak it is, if noticed, a welcome change from colder temperature and harsher conditions.

Yet for those who speak Franklin it is a moment of being put on notice. For a solitary breath of warmth might be nothing, but when the river starts to push sentences and paragraphs of the same language into your face that means rain is coming. And in this narrow trench of a river canyon rain means rising water levels. And that means increasing danger and flooding. The meteorological explanation appears to involve warm air from the desert lands of central Australia colliding with moisture sodden cold air being drawn up from the southern Indian Ocean, but that all sounds like a post-rationalization of hard-earned knowing. For those who have spent a long time paddling this river the discussion is short – warm air up river = rain = be careful.

There are none that I have spoken to who do not have stories of high waters and hair-raising encounters. Groups squeezed onto tiny ledges trying to sleep as white foam inches ever higher. Trips waylaid for days at a time with no hope of continuing until levels recede. Or worse, decisions made to carry on in spite of all warnings through hubris, illiteracy, or commitments to a human timetable and worldview that is not honoured, or even considered, in/by this place that ended in disaster of some kind.

Questions arise: what, and how long, does it take to learn the language/s of the Franklin River? And, how might one expedite that learning?

Embarking on a wilder pedagogy

Author 1

I had embarked on the river journey as a teacher and researcher in search of solidarity and answers to a puzzle I am exploring in my doctoral studies: what might happen when young people have wild experiences within and alongside, or as part of, their formal education?

My search brought me into contact with a group of academics pursuing what they termed 'wild pedagogies' (Jickling 2016, Jensen 2014), an intriguing conjunction that I was working with, albeit with a different focus, on another continent (Ford 2016). Generously they invited me to join them and contribute to the growing shape of ideas and practices.

They were a welcoming group, good company both critically and personally. However, the river and my encounter with the wallaby had, for the most part, silenced

me: seemingly activating an additional layer of sensitivity to the world around me. As we left the river and our collective physical adventure I was encouraged by the offer of a written collaboration and with the suggestion of compiling personal vignettes.

Returning home, I sought the insight of authors, poets and naturalists alongside pursuing conversations about the kind of boundary crossing I felt I had encountered, trying to make sense of the experience. The thoughts of the environmental writer Barry Lopez (1986) support the feeling I had, "for some people, who they imagine they are does not end where the boundary of the skin meets the world. It continues with the reach of their senses out into the land" (p. 234). Lopez's words remind me that in my work as a teacher I might seek to enable the opportunity of boundary crossing, that stretching out of the imagination through the senses into the land.

Yet it felt that something was missing from the river trip, thus far. The river journey was an attempt to further explore the potential of wild pedagogies and the extent to which its emerging philosophy and practices may assist in extending these experiences. In particular, for me, this means working directly with children and young people, yet where was the child in all this?

Author 2

My entry into this conversation has been slightly different than the first author, given I am one of the 'loose group of academics' described earlier and have been involved in previous gatherings and publishing projects (e.g. Jickling et al. 2018a, 2018b; Blenkinsop et al. 2018).

My work, most recently, has been focused on education for cultural change with a particular emphasis on naming the environmental crisis and educating for a changing world where the natural world is an active part of process and we, in Sartre's terms, are preparing students for a world 'not yet' rather than the world 'no longer' (Blenkinsop and Morse 2017).

I have enjoyed being part of a project that attempts to enact that which is being advocated for. That is, this project has purposefully worked towards bringing the voices of the natural world to the fore, fostering idea sharing crucibles, being present upon and immersed in wilder places and seeing education as pivotal to change. The ideas of shared writing, diversity of voice, and researching in partnership with non-human others challenge and, I think, enrich my work. They have also led me into an on-going process of uncovering my own personal, academic, and cultural limitations. The successes and failures of each gathering of wild pedagogues have offered differing insights.

Travelling in such a place as the Franklin River allowed me, as a Cascadian dwelling Canadian, to return to an obvious position of infancy with regard to understanding the language and ways of being of that place. Where were the big leaf trees? How are the seasons demarcated? What happens if there are no obvious apex carnivores? Who, or maybe what crazed group, figured out the move of pulling the rafts over that giant boulder in the middle of the rapid, then dropping them into the tiny crevice behind, and jumping into them while they bucked and bounced like a wild horse (see can't even find the place specific metaphor … Tasmanian devil?)? As a kind of child in this place I realized that there were skills, orientations, perhaps that I might employ to assist me in becoming more able in, alert to, conscious of this magnificent place, community and culture.

Author 1

Over the course of my study and my work as a classroom teacher I have embraced the challenges of Max Van Manen (1990) and his methodological approach to educational research. Van Manen is forthright in his critical stance toward educational practices that are divorced from what he sees as addressing the question of how to apply the measure of pedagogy to the standard of one's own work with children.

> To be unresponsive to pedagogy could be termed the half-life state of modern educational theory and research which has forgotten its original vocation: that all theory and research were meant to orient us to pedagogy in our relations with children. (p. 135)

Van Manen (1990) urges us to maintain a strong and orientated pedagogical relation, likening "the products of much educational research to a puzzle – each puzzle carrying the same caption: 'Can you find the child?'… Where does all this theorising and research still connect with the life-worlds of children?" (p. 139). And he invites researchers to return to the source of language in the hope that "being attentive to the etymological origins of words may sometimes put us in touch with an original form of life where the terms still had living ties to the lived experiences from which they originally sprang" (p. 59). His point being that if the term pedagogy is looked at hard enough, a return to the child will be inevitable.

With this challenge in mind, an interpretation of wild pedagogies hinges on the meaning of wild and of pedagogy. Wild is, of course, a complex term and cannot easily be reduced to a single interpretation. Its meaning often relies on the interplay of related words and concepts, those such as nature and culture, concepts that are notoriously contested and misunderstood. Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862), perhaps the most famous advocate of the wild as educator, explored the meaning of wild in his journals.

> Trench says a wild man is a willed man. Well, then, a man of will who does what he willed or wishes, a man of hope and of the future tense, for not only the obstinate is willed, but far more the constant and persevering." (Thoreau 2007, p. 179)

In this quote Thoreau leans on a definition of wild from Richard Trench's *On the Study of Words* that is worth considering:

> 'Wild' is the participle past of 'to will'; a 'wild' horse is a 'willed' or self-willed horse, one that has been never tamed or taught to submit its will to the will of another; and so with a man. (Trench, 1853, in Thoreau 2007, p. 179)

Pedagogy then, too, is a notoriously problematic term, particularly within educational theory and practice (Smith 2012) but which etymologically and historically could be considered to mean, *to lead the child*, from 'pais', Greek for child, and 'agogos', to lead, or drive.

How then would this river trip enable us to think and act pedagogically in the absence of children and young people? How would our journey on the river enable us

to consider the will of the child? And how might this self-willed land lead us to important ideas and insights.

That there were no children on the trip was understandable from several vantage points. The river was physically demanding and unpredictable. In addition, the trip was a re-imagining of the academic conference where, typically, educator researchers share and promote ideas about teaching and learning. Since educational conferences often, perhaps perplexingly, exclude children and young people, maybe this is an important re-imagining for the next wild pedagogies gathering?

Perhaps the absence of children pointed in another direction?

Author 2

The campsites on the river tend to be small, the product of steep walls, the geology, small volume and little to no available flat space. The result, for an enjoyer of sound like myself, is that one tends to find small one-person nooks for sleeping on the outskirts of the main campsites.

Tonight I am perched on top of a knoll pressed against the canyon wall. Above me the cliff forms a slightly overhanging right angle. It is covered in thick moss and saturated with water. My only hope is that it doesn't rain heavily in the night. I have chosen this risky site because it fits me and gives me a little separation from the group, but mostly because someone mentioned in passing that the glow-worms were good in this soggy overhanging corner.

Drawn by this possibility I am excited, like the anticipation of a childhood birthday party. I have seen glow-worms before in various caves and subterranean venues but never have I slept alongside a wall with their glow-stick neon green, looking for love, lights. And, to finish the tale, they do not fail to impress. I fall asleep admiring the tiny constellations that rise up the wall above me and push back the deep darkness of night in this narrow gorge.

Martin Buber (1970), philosopher and theologian, has suggested that although we cannot make dialogical relationships (which he calls I/Thou relationships) happen through the power of our own will, we can orient ourselves to the possibility of relationship should the moment and necessary ingredients appear. And over the course of my own work as an outdoor/environmental educator I have tried to find ways to support students into such a relational orientation.

My sense is that we can push Van Manen in his pedagogical request to find and remember the child by finding and remembering our own child within. The newness of the Franklin environment positioned me in a place of deep not-knowing, wonder, and possibility. Yes, I understand how energies are transferred, how water and nutrients flow, how living beings can interact, but the specifics of this given locale were far from obvious for me. A metaphor (or is it?) that I found useful was to consider this place as a culture of its own, and this allowed me to draw on the skills of cross-cultural experiences to position myself as the limited knower, the excited and not yet explanation filled discoverer, the curious child. The result was a night immersed in glow-worm stars, a day spent locating all the colours of the rainbow (including personal visits by translucent butterflies as my orange life-jacket masqueraded as a munificent flower), and some lovely time spent just watching the deep brown, tannin-filled water curl back upon itself in a deep eddy.

Nature as a childhood cradle

Author 1

Surprisingly, my response to the previous question – perhaps the absence of children pointed in another direction? – was that I found myself examining my own childhood.

My childhood was turbulent. My experiences of nature by contrast were not. The places, beings and living things of my childhood, the woodland, the meadow, the seashore, the birds, the tall grasses, the raspberry canes, the storms, seemed to cradle me, offered me safety and solace and granted me insights into my own being. I felt whole among them and I still do.

As a child I lived in a small village close to the sea with access to public woodland, streams and fields. It seems almost unreal to me now, but then I would leave my house early in the morning and would not return until after dark, spending hours and hours outside inventing games, fantasies, bird-spotting, catching fish; behaviour that I can only describe as closer to feral than tame. Self-willed and at home amongst the wild. Now, when I fall out of the practice and habit of being in and attending to the wild world, I lose this traction, this freedom to think and be attentive to the thoughts of the wilder world, the dominant stories of human culture return and insinuate themselves again, seemingly preventing relation. The river was reminding me again to be unencumbered and vitally receptive.

In the early stages of becoming a teacher I discovered a book that dramatically affected my outlook: *The Wild Places* by Robert MacFarlane (2008). At the time MacFarlane was amongst a small group of writers who were re-engaging with nature writing and have since popularised it in the mainstream in the United Kingdom. While reading MacFarlane on holiday in Wales, I would embark each day on an exploration of the wild costal headland and woods: walking, playing, watching, thinking, recollecting. The descriptions in the book and the experience of the holiday returned me to my childhood. And the river was doing this too.

Ahead of the Franklin River trip some of the group had formulated a draft paper with guidelines and prompts that they called 'touchstones', a series of vignettes and provocations addressed to 'early childhood environmental educators' (Blenkinsop et al. 2018). The document circulated amongst participants during our journey becoming the focus for further questions and conversations. One touchstone resonated with my experience of the river, my prior experiences during nature immersion, and my commitment to pedagogy in particular – that of nature as agent and potential co-teacher.

Author 2

I have long been struck by this tale of the child in an unsafe, unstable, chaotic or troublesome environment who finds belonging, a sense of acceptance, a permission to be themselves when immersed in the local natural world. My sense is that it is worth noting this, especially given our current age of apparent instability; and its significance has been growing for me as I work in the Canadian context in which parents are making decisions not to place their children in the public school system. It appears for many that their own experience of public schooling was chaotic, unsafe, and troubling, with some even using the language of trauma (Ho and Block 2017). As an educator this is

deeply concerning. Might belonging, acceptance and a sense of safety become potential primary outcomes of outdoor-based / nature oriented education?

I have been struggling lately with the seeming necessary trope in environmental education that there was some magical and relationally significant time in our childhoods that has led those who really care to do something about it, to be the caring way they are with regard to the natural world. And yet, I wonder, a) if this is true, or at least if it is directly cause and effect as is often presumed; and b) whether there is a danger in freezing one's relationship in a childlike state? What might a mature adult relationship with the natural world look like if one has been nurturing it and caring for it since childhood? How do relationships avoid becoming passé, assumption filled, and taken-for-granted? If our students are engaged in on-going and substantial relationships with the world and its beings around them, might I need to leave space for those non-humans to change, to surprise me, to be myriad things, other than what I think they are?

One touchstone that has been resonating for me in relation to this conversation has to do with practice and time.

Nature as agent and co-teacher – a familiar impulse

Author 1

Reassuringly the voice of the child illuminates the opening vignette of the first touchstone – agency and the role of nature as co-teacher – in the draft paper we carried with us down the river.

> Raven: 'Well, see, you speak your way, they [different members of the natural world] speak different ways, like thousands of different ways. Billions. It's like the birds with those signals, like when you see a bird flapping up in the sky and a flock of birds how they all move at the same time, it's because they tell each other like through mental speaking.' (Blenkinsop and Piersol 2013, 54)

In an effort to continually renew my commitment to the child I have tried to perceive pedagogy as methodology; as a study of the way to discover how better to act as an educator. This study returned me to those that have lived lives committed to working with and understanding children.

Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi's observations and insights into how children learn have had profound consequences for pedagogy as a practice. Pestalozzi's (1900) accounts of the child in the process of growing and becoming, and his citing nature as an educational catalyst, suggest for the child "that 'from the moment in which his mind can receive impressions from Nature, Nature teaches him" (p. 25). In this way Pestalozzi was advocating for nature as co-teacher more than a century earlier.

> We leave children up to their fifth year in the full enjoyment of nature; we let every impression of nature work upon them; … they already know full well the joy of unrestrained liberty and all its charms. And after they have enjoyed this happiness of sensuous life for five whole years, we make all nature round them vanish before their eyes; tyrannically stop the delightful course of their

> unrestrained freedom, pen them up like sheep, whole flocks huddled together, in stinking rooms; pitilessly chain them for hours, days, weeks, months, years, to the contemplation of unattractive monotonous letters. (Pestalozzi 1900, p. 28)

Raven, the child quoted earlier, in perceiving the mental speaking of birds, had perhaps felt the impression of nature. Could Raven be assisted to stay connected to that unrestrained liberty offered by the natural world indicated by Pestalozzi? As an educator, could I?

Author 2

In thinking about and writing into the touchstone called practice and time, it has pushed my own commitments to engage with the natural world in active, dedicated, and on-going ways.

I made a commitment 10 years ago to spend at least 100 days/year in my tent and, to this point, despite some dubious inclusions, I have managed to achieve this. For me, it is easy to forget about the natural world and its myriad denizens during time spent in built environments. It is also incredibly easy to lose sight of, connection to, and relationship with them when I am surrounded by other interesting and active humans even if they share my interests.

This commitment to working on a relationship with the others that live around and in parallel to me has also had an impact on my pedagogy. Moving students into dialogical relationships with the natural world has startled and shuddered some of my educational and anthropocentric assumptions. And it has forced me to reconsider the pedagogical skills necessary for this kind of educational work. There appears, at times, to be a kind of identity crisis that accompanies this work for all the students who engage with it. And there are at least two sources that I can identify.

The first, which I frame here as loss, but it is clearly much more than that, involves a coming to know, or consciously recognize, the pain and suffering that the world and its myriad denizens have and are going through. This includes human suffering as well. This realization then seeks a need to grieve, a need to rage, a need to name the sadness and also a recognition that you yourself have lost something in all of this destruction. Part of your possibility, your freedom, your self-will, your wildness as human, as living being, has been taken from you.

The second source of the identity crisis, which I think the fields of outdoor and environmental education have been slower to acknowledge, has to do with the coming to recognize oneself as benefitting from and/or being privileged by our colonization of the non-human world. In other words, that we are often actively playing the part of coloniser/oppressor in the violence and destruction taking place within the world. I can't hear the voices of natural beings because I am part of a process that has taken their voices away and deems them unworthy if they were heard. And I benefit and profit from that. Thus, in parallel to the kind of identity crisis, avoidance strategies and 'moves to innocence' that one might anticipate seeing in the work of critical, decolonizing and cross-cultural educational work, *this* pedagogy requires a very different skill set.

How does one hold the space for truth and pain, for identity exploration and the voices of the margins, for building the abilities needed such that the privileged/colonizers can "lean into" these difficult conversations, for listening and alliances building, for finding ways to act/live/interact/relate that begin to change the alienated, colonial, violent status-quo?

Wild. Pedagogy

Author 1

I have not spent my life as a professional outdoor educator or naturalist. I am, rather, a teacher working in an everyday setting, most often working against nature, not with it, despite my best intentions, occupying a windowless classroom, facing computer screens, working on abstract problems divorced from hearing the language of nature. On refection it seems easy, within the culture of a traditional school aiming at its civic duties, to forget or turn aside from this relationship with the more-than-human world.

Now, in this wilderness, on the surging river, along its unpopulated beaches and inside its formidable forests I am able to recollect the potency of nature to act as agent, to impress itself on me, to direct my attention, to shape and guide my thoughts, whilst leaving space for my own becoming. I am reminded again of the writings of Lopez (1997) and in particular his exhortation to:

> Put aside the bird book, the analytic frame of mind, any compulsion to identify and sit still… the purpose of such attentiveness is to gain intimacy, to rid yourself of assumption… the key I think is to become vulnerable to a place. If you open yourself up, you can build intimacy. Out of such intimacy may come a sense of becoming. (p. 25)

My encounter with the river and the wallaby is not the first time that I have felt spoken with, or to, by a being who is not a human being. It was, however, the first time in a long time that I felt able to really listen and be open to hearing. Stripped of my usual comforts and concerns by the river, and with time, I was once again rendered open to other voices, songs and stories beyond the human.

Martin Freeman (2014), drawing on the philosophical work of Emmanuel Levinas, Simone Weill and Martin Buber challenges our disconnection from the Other. He suggests that we look "instead to the various "objects" outside ourselves – other people, nature, art, God – that draw us beyond our own borders and thereby open up the possibility there of a larger, unbounded Self, one that knows, and feels, its kinship with the world" (p. 2). For Freeman, "self is secondary; the Other comes first and is thus the primary source of meaning, value, and existential nourishment. This is the first and most basic meaning of the priority of the Other" (p. 5).

I feel myself nourished by the river and my encounter with the wallaby. This other seemed to have the power, perhaps the will, to call me into relationship and shape me in the process. What might all this mean for me as an educator, for me as a wild pedagogue?

A tentative conclusion

What has this meant to us? We are two human beings, joined together, first on the river, and now by the river, seeking to interpret our experience and honour the meaning of that experience in our actions, both in these words and in our future actions. It has, for

us, meant becoming an authentic participant, whilst being returned to the source of our own learning and growth. It has meant being in a place where we were not judged in traditional ways, or asked questions, but where questions could arise, where encounters with other active constituents could take place. Perhaps, these experiences, these recollections, could act as a starting point for us - as educators hoping to support the child into a relation with(in) the world, the wild, and their own liberty.

It is imperative that the child is not overlooked in any drive to engage in a different kind of relationship with the rest of the planet. Indeed, what we experienced might not be accessible to a child in the same way. But perhaps our experiences of attempting to learn to speak Franklin, with the wallaby, the river, the wind, the rain, the glow-worms, and everything beyond could be available in different ways, given conditions of support and challenge, of foregrounded co-teacher and of habit and practice?

We don't yet know what this might mean precisely to the children and young people in our lives. We do know, though, that we will urgently seek ways to find out. We know that we will continue to explore this wilder pedagogy, attempting to participate in the more-than human world, whilst seeking the support of nature as co-teacher.

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