Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education (2020) 23:323–327
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42322-020-00067-2

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Developing place-responsive pedagogy in outdoor environmental education: A rhizomatic curriculum autobiography* by Alistair Stewart

Springer, 2020, ISBN: 978-3-030-40319-5, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40320-1

Scott Jukes[1]

Accepted: 13 September 2020 / Published online: 8 October 2020

Alistair Stewart's (2020) 'Developing place-responsive pedagogy in outdoor environmental education' asks questions that provoke different ways of thinking about outdoor environmental education (OEE). He prompts educators to think critically about pedagogical practices, inquire into the places we teach and reevaluate how we form relationships with the more-than-human world. As he states, 'survival of the more-than-human world is intimately linked to how we think about and act in their interests' (Stewart 2020, p. 181). A significant thread running through Stewart's book is this pressing need to ethically reevaluate how we think about and relate to unique Australian environments. Despite the distinctly Australian focus, many of the lessons that can be gleaned from this book are relevant and worth contemplating in other places.

This book comes at a crucial time for rapidly changing environments and species facing extinction. It also emerges from several decades of development in outdoor education (OE) where the environmental education overlap has gained increased focus. For example, academics such as Brookes (2002a, b) argued for a move away from universalist and personal development centred approaches in OE towards more concentration on the specific environments and cultural contexts educators practice in. In 2016, this journal even changed its name, adding 'environmental' into its title (see Quay 2016; Gough 2016 for discussion on this).

Handling editor: Scott Polley

Alistair Stewart, Developing place-responsive pedagogy in outdoor environmental education: A rhizomatic curriculum autobiography, first edition, Springer Nature. Switzerland, 2020. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40320-1

✉ Scott Jukes
s.jukes@latrobe.edu.au

[1] La Trobe University, Bendigo, Australia

Stewart has been central in this development of OEE and, in particular, place-responsive pedagogies.[1]

Stewart's (2020) book travels his 20+ year journey of practicing/researching place-responsive OEE within south-eastern Australia. Throughout he offers pedagogies that attend to the bio-geographical and cultural locations he practices, and curriculum that draws upon natural and cultural history. The book provides a critique of some taken for granted approaches whilst offering original alternative possibilities. In the development of curriculum and pedagogy, Stewart reaches beyond previous OEE literature, delving into philosophy and environmental history to produce a thought provoking and pragmatic text, highlighting the potential OEE has in engaging students with places. In simple terms, his approach is about exploring and getting to know places, not expeditions through them.

Structure and approach

Drawing upon French poststructuralists Deleuze and Guattari, Stewart (2020) takes their mission to destabilise dominant modes of thought, applying qualities of their philosophy to his work in OEE. What results is a book with an unconventional structure that takes readers on 'lines of flight'. This is to say that many of the ideas and concepts Stewart explores provoke new ways of thinking for OEE. Structurally, the book does not follow an established linear model and has no chapters (so to speak). Instead, the book consists of thirteen plateaus (inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) 'A thousand plateaus'). Each plateau is linked in multiple ways to other plateaus; the plateaus don't have conclusions or findings, they are explorations and provocations into thinking differently about OEE and/or particular environmental contexts. Many of the plateaus are made up of previously published works, but importantly, this is not just a reproduction of papers published elsewhere. The book links plateaus together, adding personal accounts, extending ideas and taking divergent paths or pausing for contemplation.

The collection of works is envisioned as curriculum autobiography – what Stewart calls *rhizocurrere*. Rhizocurrere brings together Deleuze and Guattari's *rhizome* and Pinar's *currere*. These concepts require some explication and I will offer a brief and partial interpretation (see plateau 2 for Stewart's explanation). The rhizome is a concept that encourages open and divergent modes of thought – it is about making connections and moving in multiple different directions. In a sense, the concept is also political, in that it challenges hierarchical and centralised notions of thought/knowledge production. Currere, is a form of curriculum autobiography, deriving from Latin 'to run' or 'to run a course'. The emphasis lies on the living development of curriculum, rather than curriculum as a static object to be observed (I see this as the process of developing

[1] For example, Stewart's 'Seeing the trees and the forest: Attending to Australian natural history as if it mattered' (Stewart 2006) was declared in 2014 one of the most significant articles published in the *Australian Journal of Environmental Education* over the previous 30-years (Cutter-Mackenzie et al. 2014). Furthermore, his 'Decolonising encounters with the Murray River: Building place responsive outdoor education' (Stewart 2004) was one of the most cited papers in Australian Journal of Outdoor Education/Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education between 2000 and 2013 (Brookes and Stewart 2016).

curriculum not curriculum as a product). In this sense, rhizocurrere is an emergent form of curriculum autobiography that explores Stewart's (re) thinking of OEE.

By no means is it essential to grasp rhizocurrere to get value from the book. The first three plateaus contain most of the philosophical/methodological discussions, whereas the latter plateaus involve pedagogical discussions in locations such as the Murray River and central Victorian goldfields. As a collection of ideas, this is a book for outdoor environmental educators to pick up and read in sections or as a whole. Any plateau can be read whenever, as there is no order. Each plateau will help generate ideas for teaching, learning and the development of curricula. But Stewart doesn't layout rules or a how-to script for developing curriculum or practicing place-responsive pedagogies: his book is 'a report on an exploratory journey' (Stewart 2020, p. 4) that accepts curriculum development as an iterative (and itinerant) process. For me, following Stewart's journey has prompted (re) thinking of my OEE practice, what I include/exclude and how landscapes can shape pedagogy.

Why is this book important?

One of the things I appreciate about this book is that it is delivered from a situated position. As an educator and researcher, Stewart deeply cares about the Australian landscape and the places he teaches in, provoking others to consider their contexts. He situates his research within the places and conditions he teaches and uses theory to uncover blind-spots and generate different perspectives to improve outdoor learning.

Throughout the book, Stewart critiques the devastating effects of colonisation on Australian landscapes, showing how destructive attitudes are still being perpetuated:

> In relative terms Australia is a wealthy nation and has high levels of literacy, yet it also currently has the highest rate of land clearing of any developed nation and arguably the worst record of animal extinction of any nation on earth (Lindenmayer 2007). The settlement of Australia by Europeans has been marked by a failure to recognise that the landscapes, flora and fauna of the continent are radically different from those of Europe. (Stewart 2020, p. 171)

But what does this have to do with OEE? For Stewart, a focus on adventurous activities and romanticised experiences aiming to connect with (generic) nature can leave the realities of the particular environment a forgotten backdrop. Such focus may be another colonial trait of ignoring a place's bio-geographical and cultural histories, disregarding human/more-than-human communities that live there and importing unfitting practices from elsewhere.

The ecological health of many south-east Australian environments is declining and should act as a reminder that cultural (and educational) perspectives need a shakeup. But Stewart explains that OEE literature has largely had nothing to say about declining ecological conditions in Australian places. Furthermore, pedagogical approaches that respond to local specifics have been few and far between. He contends that cultural viewpoints still remain largely ignorant of the particularities of the natural world, threatened species and ecological decline. For Stewart, nature is not all one thing,

separated from humanity; landscapes are distinctive and unique, therefore pedagogy should reflect responsiveness to the land itself. For the most part, Australians do not seem 'ecologically attuned' (p. 45), and remedying this ignorance is one important step that a place-responsive OEE might offer.

To become more attuned to places, Stewart suggests that learning in OEE might attend to native species (e.g. plateaus 7 and 12), Indigenous culture (e.g. plateaus 6 and 8) and specific natural and cultural histories (e.g. plateaus 9, 10 and 11). Such strategies have implications as they can bring Australians' into a closer relationship with the diverse continent and develop a greater understanding of past mistakes, present problems and prospects. These themes and more permeate throughout the plateaus. Rather than tell the reader how to perform place-responsive pedagogy, the strength of this book is it explains why place-responsive pedagogy is important and offers an example of how Stewart has thought and enacted place-responsive pedagogies. Not all places are the same so not all place-responsive pedagogies should be the same. Rather than rules, Stewart provides questions and ideas to think with and consider.

If you care about the environment and the places you live/visit/work, this book is a must-read. It is an inspiring and thoughtful piece of work that all outdoor environmental educators (both practitioners and researchers) should take notice of. It experiments with concepts and reflects upon Australian stories of natural and cultural history, providing an assemblage as unique as the Australian landscape itself. Moreover, it is an ethically minded and carefully delivered thesis on generating maximum potential through our position as outdoor environmental educators, especially within our current ecological precarity. If we outdoor environmental educators are to make a transformative difference through our educational experiences, we need to develop a critical awareness of the plight of the environments we work, and how our worldviews and actions perpetuate ecological decline. If we follow Stewart's lead, maybe 'settler Australians will be better able to think themselves into the country and adapt more successfully to the constraints of the environment. Perhaps then more sustainable futures will be possible to imagine' (Sinclair 2001, p. 234).

Compliance with ethical standards

Declarations Not applicable.

References

Brookes, A. (2002a). Gilbert white never came this far south: Naturalist knowledge and the limits of universalist environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 7*(2), 73–87.

Brookes, A. (2002b). Lost in the Australian bush: Outdoor education as curriculum. *Journal of Curriculum Studies, 34*(4), 405–425. https://doi.org/10.1080/00220270110101805.

Brookes, A. (2004). Astride a long-dead horse. Mainstream outdoor education theory and the central curriculum problem. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education, 8*(2), 22–33.

Brookes, A., & Stewart, A. (2016). What do citation patterns reveal about the outdoor education field? A snapshot 2000-2013. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education, 19*(2), 12–24.

Cutter-Mackenzie, A., Gough, A., Gough, N., & Whitehouse, H. (2014). Opening to the Australian journal of environmental education special 30-year anniversary issue. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 30*(1), v–vi. https://doi.org/10.1017/aee.2014.12.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus: Capitalism and schizophrenia* (B. Massumi, Trans.). London: Bloomsbury.

Gough, N. (2016). Australian outdoor (and) environmental education research: Senses of "place" in two constituencies. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education, 19*(2), 2–11.

Lindenmayer, D. (2007). On borrowed time: Australia's environmental crisis and what we must do about it. Camberwell, Australia: Penguin.

Quay, J. (2016). Editorial. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education, 19*(1), 1. https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03400981.

Sinclair, P. (2001). *The Murray: A river and its people*. Carlton South: Melbourne University Press.

Stewart, A. (2004). Decolonising encounters with the Murray River: Building place responsive outdoor education. *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education, 8*(2), 46–55.

Stewart, A. (2006). Seeing the trees and the forest: Attending to Australian natural history as if it mattered. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education, 22*(2), 85–97.

Stewart, A. (2020). *Developing place-responsive pedagogy in outdoor environmental education: A rhizomatic curriculum autobiography*. Cham: Springer Nature.

Scott Jukes is a PhD candidate and works as a lecturer at La Trobe University, teaching in alpine and river environments. He is interested in how students engage with places, environmental problems and creating positive educational experiences. Scott's research focusses on outdoor environmental education pedagogies that attend to the more-than-human world.