



The Maturation of the Field

by
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These notes originate from my experience of the development and diversification of outdoor education in the UK and were honed by an invitation to talk to Canadian outdoor educators. This was at a time of a re-evaluation of purpose and direction in Ontario brought about partly by familiar issues of reducing funding and changing curricular and partly by a profession taking stock before working out what to do next with this wonderful educational process.

Burt Horwood and Bob Henderson have spent some time helping to orientate me. Burt's notes from a recent workshop capture some imaginative thoughts concerning the nature and relevance of practice in Ontario. Two metaphors from these notes stuck in my mind. Burt advocated for the importance of working with passion as well as knowledge by likening passion to the wind in the sail whilst he saw knowledge as the rudder to steer by. This reminded me of a Russian folk tale

called the Firebird in which the hunter, the hero of the story, has to encounter and take possession of passion, represented in the story by the firebird and values, represented by the princess.

Metaphors are a great way to communicate. They are a central strategy in much of our work. Burt also offered the metaphor of evolution inviting the workshop delegates to consider the field of outdoor education as an ecosystem with new species evolving and competing for a niche whilst other species pass into extinction. This generated some great discussion.

A developmental approach

I would like to continue in this grand tradition by exploring a complimentary metaphor, that of maturation. The field has been around in its current form since the Second World War. It is approaching 60 years of age, slightly longer than my own life span. Being an optimist I would like to propose that the field has reached the third age of personhood passing through child and youth to adulthood. It is these three ages I would like to use as the basis for my metaphor. I would also like to take an archetypal approach to these ages to enlarge the metaphor starting again with 'child' and progressing to the youth as 'hero' and the adult as 'warrior'.

Enlightenment shadows

Before I get going and apply this metaphor to our practice I would like to enrich this discussion by placing it in the context of our modern life. The enlightenment has brought many benefits including democracy, education, health care, longer life expectancies and higher standards of living for our part of the world. However this liberation from the oppression of rural poverty under the domination of a social elite has its shadow.

The first of these shadows is the disconnection we feel from landscapes and communities. My parents were evacuated during the Second World War to avoid the bombings. They never went home. They joined the Navy and my childhood involved moving every three years to be near the port my father was sailing from. There is no place in which I am rooted except through my own experiences and relationships. I have a broken history like so many of us today. Of course this has a huge upside; travel, professional satisfaction, higher education, new friends, intriguing landscapes and cultures. However, it is also a feature we refer to as a regret in our world leading to a disconnection from sustainable lifestyles. The consequences of our actions are less visible in the global markets and transient populations of this age. We would say we have lost touch.

The second shadow is equally paradoxical. Our culture has placed an increasing focus on the individual. The construction of the self is far more the responsibility of the self than of the community in which that self resides. The same can be said for any accountability for the actions of the self. For example, offending is the fault of the offender and not shared with the community that holds the person who has strayed from the moral order. Individuality is a wonderful achievement in which liberal educators have played a major role. It can be argued that it has also led to an abdication of social responsibility and part of the shadow of disconnection.

I will return to three themes of liberation, disconnection and individuality during my exploration of outdoor education as child, youth and adult.

The Child

Child's play develops embodied and tacit knowledge emphasising personal knowledge of the world learned experientially through the senses and in social interaction. As adults we can glimpse this knowledge when it surfaces as our bodies, voices or senses take over from our conscious minds in dramatic situations. We often value these moments but more often than not our egos get in the way of this social and sensual learning. Attachment theory explores the way in which our relations as adults are influenced by the quality of our relations with our significant carers, most often our mothers. Carole Gilligan argues in her book 'In a Different Voice' that those two thirds of us who were close to our mothers and treated as though we were like her, relations with others in adult life are easy and caring. For those of us who were close and treated as though we were different from her we find relations with others important but problematic. For those few of us who were distanced by our carers we treat relationships as less important and so even more problematic.

Brendan Hill replaced the idea of the mother with the earth mother. His research obtained similar results to those found in human relations. Two thirds of us have a close relationship with our landscape in which we felt at home and safe. We have no problems and value relationships with places as adults. What is more these childhood places do not need to be special or even green. A waste tip will do provided we feel safe and are allowed to play. Frank Furedi, a UK sociologist who has written about the problem of risk aversion in our culture, writes that the single most valuable thing we could do for our children is to re-create spaces in which they can play unsupervised.





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Outdoor Education has played a major role in compensating for this lack of child's play even though it is sometimes challenged as not proper education. I can't help thinking that it is education we would, on reflection, rather not be offering as a major goal in our work. It is remedial, addressing the disconnection we experience, a disconnection that perhaps could and should be addressed by family and community lifestyles rather than professionalised within formal educations. However, play is a core value of our practice. Many of our roots are in recreation out of doors through natural history and outdoor activities. The value of these activities is intrinsic, unquestioned and self-evident. We know it is satisfying, broadens horizons, builds character, establishes confidence, promotes a healthy body and mind and results in a sense of well being, even spiritual

fulfilment. As Peter Higgins has written it is 're-creation'. And sometimes we need someone else to carve out a space and give us permission to enter it at any time of life. It is our founding and most durable contribution to our culture, connecting and re-connecting the self with itself and with the other.

Growing pains

The step from child to youth can be compared with the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. Self-awareness, the gift of the fruit of knowledge, sets us apart from this immersed education in nature. At the same time the firebird of passion runs through our veins. We are energised to explore our identities through our exploration of the world around us. The project of constructing the self now lasts from mid teens to mid twenties and is increasingly complex in a diverse world offering more and more possibilities of location, friendship, work and faith. It is a time in which we seek agency in the

world, room to move in our own particular way. We feel good when we are powerful and in control of new skills and knowledge. We build the social and knowledge capital that will eventually set us on one path or another in adult life.

Alternatively we find this journey a struggle or even too difficult. Suicide, self-harming, anorexia, and other related conditions are on a rapid rise amongst young people. Anti-social behaviour, drug use and criminal activity are prevalent amongst 17% of this group leading to labels of disaffection or exclusion. Funding in formal and informal education is often targeted at these 'problems' seeing them as issues for individuals to resolve in their lives and absolving communities of any accountability for causing or solving the problem, further disconnection through professionalisation.

This is the time of the hero. A time to enter extraordinary fantasy worlds in order to discover our power, values and purpose. These worlds are the worlds of the gym, the pitch or the outdoors; of the computer game, the club, the gang or the street. They are defined by language, fashion and music and are increasingly a site for consumption requiring increasing disposable income in order to engage with these projects. No wonder, in a time of decreasing jobs, that this is a time of increasing financial dependence.

Again outdoor education has played its part since Hahn defined his six moral declines and Baden-Powell developed scouting as a moral equivalent to war. Funding, increasingly available to address the behaviours of youth that adults find most unsettling, has cornered outdoor education into the box of remedies for exclusion and disaffection.

In its professional development outdoor education has spent much time and energy exploring its youthful, heroic phase. We have revelled in the power and potency of our work and practiced it in extraordinary spaces often detached from the everyday world of the community or school. We have been reluctant to integrate with the mainstream preferring to explore our capabilities on our own terms in the safe spaces we can find in the wild. We tell

vivid stories of our exploits, close calls and dramatic successes both in terms of outdoor and educational accomplishments. We have pursued impossible quests and unearthed unimagined treasures in the process. Our individuality, our unique attributes, have been revealed and hardened in the adventure. We have learned to trust them and to be trusted for them. Recently, we have begun to glimpse what it is we might be capable of in the real world of social and environmental tragedies and how we might support our participants in playing their part with a hopeful optimism. It is time to explore what the field might do in its adult phase.

Engagement

The adult warrior returns from the hero's journey to the ordinary world carrying the hard won treasure that is the core of what they can do for this world. Waiting for them are the communities they will serve looking for the treasure they bring and wondering how it might affect the world around them. It is a time of service and humility. It is a time to make a difference as employee, director, partner, friend or parent. It is a time to play our part in the liberation of self and planet.

Outdoor education is only beginning to engage politically with the different domains to which it can contribute, formal education, informal education, adult learning, therapy and recreation. It has begun a dialogue with the gatekeepers of these institutions. It has learned to listen to the needs of its community and not simply celebrate its power without context or accountability. It has begun to experiment with political engagement in communities, finding its way to make a difference to sustainable living building connection, developing individuality and contributing to the liberation of the land and the people in generative ways. As a new 'treasure' it has the potential to reinvigorate old ways. As something returning from its time in the wilderness it is principled and proactive, ready to tackle the issues of the day with creative and energetic responses. It is looking for niches in which it can begin this work.

Not all institutions or communities remember how to treat the hero on

return. Sometimes it is a battle to find a role, to be recognised for what we are and to be resourced to play our part. This is not our fault. Institutions and communities need to be re-taught how to embrace the new energy of the time just as much as we have to learn how to offer our treasures with humility and relevance.

Blending

If you know anything of transactional analysis, a model of human relations that is also based on maturation, you will know that each of the relational positions, or ego states, of child, adult and parent is present in us at any time. You will also know that each position is of value. Rightness depends on context and perception. A conversation between two people can shift fluidly back and forth between all three ego states on both sides.

So I imagine it would be with this model. Our child like strategies are of as much worth as our youth and adult approaches in the right context. They will blend into a seamless response to individual or collective developmental needs. It is my hope that as one way of interpreting what each of us do with this wonderful approach to learning we become skilled blenders.

And let's look forward to the next stage in our maturation and what that might have to offer!

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Photos

Iris flower by Fiona Exon
All others from the IOL library.