Pathways

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Losing My Religion: The Quest for Applicable Theory in Outdoor Education

by Simon Beames

There is a growing body of increasingly complex critical outdoor education theory. This paper seeks to extract and synthesize applicable points from this literature so that they may be put to the test of usefulness in the field. In an effort to consider how practice may be informed by current outdoor education theory, a model is presented that places outdoor education practice on three dimensions: journeys/ ready-made sessions; instructor driven/ learning negotiated; universal/place based.

The 1990s were good to me as an outdoor educator. They were good because I was sure of what I was doing. I was sure of what I was doing because I followed the gospel according to *Islands of Healing* (Schoel, Prouty, & Radcliffe, 1988), *Adventure Education* (Miles & Priest, 1990), and, later, *Adventure Programming* (Priest & Gass, 1997). As a schoolteacher and outdoor education fundamentalist, I would eagerly stand on my soapbox and unashamedly try to convince parents and administrators that I would sort out their teenagers during a two-week canoe trip.

I learned how to funnel, frame, and frontload (Priest & Gass, 1997) and was good at it. The first 48 hours of my wilderness-based courses were carefully choreographed in order to steer the group to just where I wanted them to be. I wanted to be a top outdoor adventure education instructor, and, for a while, I actually believed I was. Now, when I look back at the nineties, I wonder, "Was that me?" This wonder stems from the growing body of critical writing in outdoor education that has come to the forefront in recent years. During this time, I have found myself more experienced, yet less certain about the kind of outdoor education I want to practice. This confusion is a result of the incongruence between what I saw happening in the field and this emerging body of literature. I no longer knew what I believed in and, like a pop song from the early 1990s, I was "losing my religion."

What Does the Research Say?

The last few years have brought with them some critical writing that has made me question what I do as an educator. Examining one's professional purpose should be a good thing for anyone to do. Higgins and Nicol (2002), Lugg (2004), and Wurdinger (1997) suggest that outdoor educators should continually examine the educational rationale underpinning their activity choices. My own deeper questioning began when I read "Adventure in a Bun" (Loynes, 1998), which compared pre-fabricated, off-the-shelf adventure education programs to McDonald's hamburgers. Loynes argued that outdoor education courses were becoming predictable, packaged, and commodified.

My questioning continued when I read Hovelynck's (2001) "reconnaissance" of experiential learning, where he stated that "if the lessons to be learned from an experience can be listed before the experience has taken place, and thus independently of the learner's experience, it seems misleading to call the learning 'experiential'" (p.8). Perhaps my courses were less experiential than I thought. Had I been the kind of domineering instructor described by Brown (2002) — the kind of instructor that acts as "gatekeeper" to what is admitted as knowledge, thereby steering individuals (and the group) towards my own pre-determined outcomes?

Loynes' (2002) "The Generative Paradigm" outlined a number of defining features that ran contrary to the beliefs that seemed to underpin most of the residential-based outdoor education that I had encountered. The dominant American model of the instructor as clever, all-knowing master of 100 initiative tasks was now being challenged by a model with a participant-centred approach, where "meaning and value emerge through the experience rather than being represented or defined by the programme structure or facilitator" (p.122).

At the same time, the literature I had been reading on *friluftsliv*, the "Norwegian tradition for seeking the joy of identification with free Nature" (Faarlund, 2002, p.18), stimulated the romantic in me. What could be better than a way of living and learning that emphasised forming cultural connections to the land, valued joy from being outside with each other (Faarlund, 2002), and did not depend on expensive equipment (Dahle, 2002)? Henderson (2001) urges North American outdoor educators to learn from the friluftsliv tradition. He penned an essay adding "warm" and "green" elements to the North American preoccupation with instructors' hard and soft skill development. Warm skills consider how we meet nature (our "manners") and the ways in which the educator works to create an overall ambience within the group. This is a crucial antecedent to developing a reconceived "human–nature" relationship. Green skills pertain to an instructor's ability to ground the experience within stories, meanings, and contexts that are deeply relevant to local culture.

Warm and green skills address the limited attention given to "place" in outdoor education. This kind of universal program can take place anywhere — or in "Anywoods, USA" (Baker, 2005), and has been criticised by a number of writers (Baker, 2005; Brookes, 2002a, 2002b; Higgins & Nicol, 1998; Knapp, 2005; Stewart, 2004). Brookes (2002a) is particularly critical of "neo-colonialist"

understandings of the land, in which some locations are viewed as "empty sites on which to establish social or psychological projects" (p.2). As with Henderson's (2001) green skills, Brookes (2002b) believes that outdoor education programs need to incorporate "knowledge of local patterns of community relationships with nature" (p.7). Place-based education is more attuned to local phenomena as it unfolds.

Although by this point my thinking was shifting further away from universalised, commodified adventure education, more insight came in the form of the "Neo-Hahnian critique," where Brookes (2003) argued how someone's character cannot be changed in a week-long adventure education course. I wasn't sure if I should be disappointed ("pity we can't change his character, as it needs changing") or relieved ("there was no way in hell we were going to change his character — now we don't have to attempt the impossible"). It became clearer to me that I did not want to base my outdoor education practice on the dominant textbook literature of the 1990s.[1] There was too great an emphasis on the instructor manipulating variables in order to reach pre-determined participant outcomes, along with minimal attention given to developing cultural connections with the land. I was eager to embrace all of this important critical writing from the last years, but unsure about how I could extract relevant nuggets that I could directly apply to my day-to-day work. Hence this essay, which emerged from notes I scribbled with the hope of clarifying my thoughts.

No longer under pressure to change people's character by going camping, I found myself faced with some difficult questions. First, if I

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[1] For a particularly scathing critique of Priest & Gass (1997) and other "cookbook" approaches to instructor training, see McDonald (2000).

don't think that through an outdoor experience I lead someone will have a better understanding of their relationships with themselves, other humans, and the natural environment, just what learning outcomes do I hope to elicit through my practice? Is it acceptable for me to have some pre-determined outcomes for my courses or is that too domineering? I am left wondering if it is egotistical of me to hope that anyone will gain anything from the time they spend with me on an outdoor education course. If I don't exercise some influence over the group, what is the point of me being there in the first place?

Second, if carefully planning a course beforehand (along with some un-experiential, pre-determined outcomes) is frowned upon by theorists, why would an outdoor educator need anything more than minimal experience, training, or qualifications? I have spent a fair number of years accumulating field experience, instructor tickets, and university degrees. Does embracing the ideals of friluftsliv, the generative paradigm, and a place-based inspired pedagogy mean that post-Priestian outdoor education has no place for me?

My third question is, if organisations stop evaluating their programs because they are worried that theorists will criticize them for trying to measure what participants might gain, don't they risk losing funding from purse-string holders who demand evidence of success? While I've never been a fan of using scientific research designs as a means of gauging learner outcomes, government and corporate funders want proof that their money is raising self-esteem and reducing recidivism. Allison and Pomeroy's (2001) question of "How shall we know?" would probably elicit different answers from outdoor education researchers and from funding bodies. Despite an increasing trend of outdoor education research being naturalistic (watching and talking to people), the people giving out the money still want to know what percentage of participants are better leaders than they were at the beginning of the week.

Idealism in the Real World

Wrestling with my three questions made me wonder if I could replace the fundamentalist outdoor education literature to which I had subscribed with simple and solidly grounded theory that would guide me in the field — not give me the answers, as some old-

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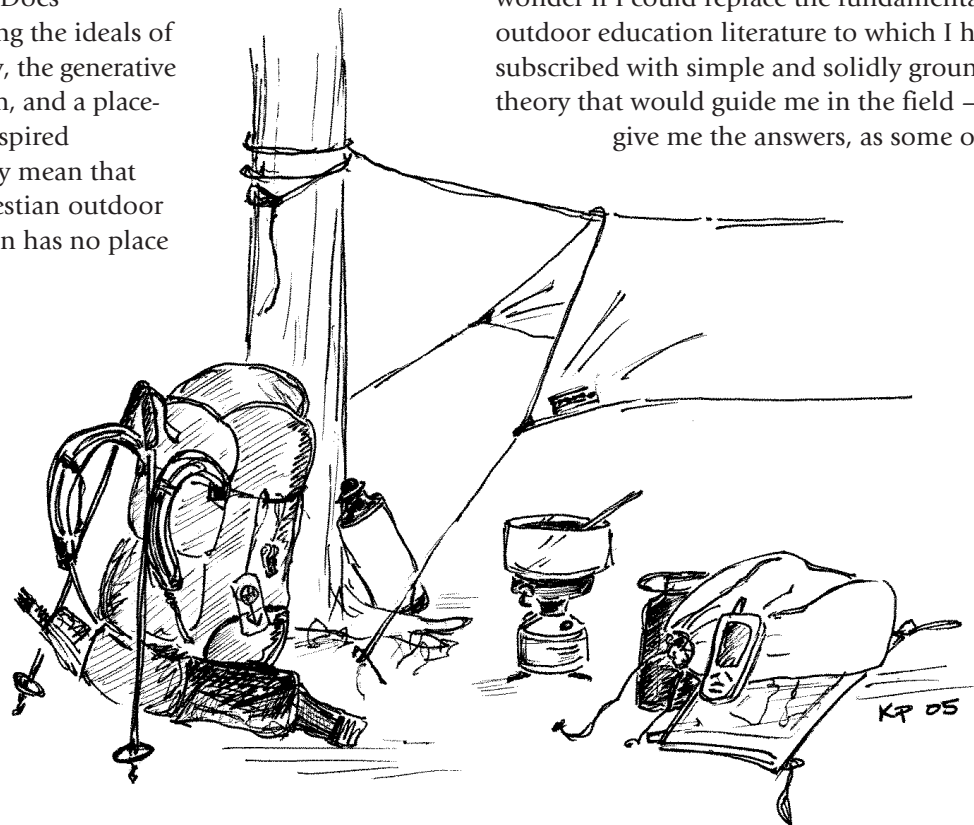
school theory did, but, rather, help me ask the right questions. As there are elements of the generative paradigm and friluftsliv that I believe in, I thought I might be able to create my own manifesto by combining their similar ethos' of espousing a less macho and adrenaline-dependent approach, emphasizing relationships, and not objectifying nature. Perfect.

The trouble is that friluftsliv doesn't sell and the generative paradigm does not bring in funding. My time working for a local education authority has shown me that schools, play centres, and youth clubs are crying out for commodified adventure. They want more than adventure in a bun — they want the entire adventure Happy Meal. For most outdoor education consumers, the main criteria seem to be trying something new, fun, safe, and close to home. In my experience, youth services and course directors want predictability and don't want to be lectured on why theorists are critical of off-the-shelf adventure programs.

If fundraising staff for youth development charities are applying for lottery money, it is not in their best interests to state that "meaning and value emerge within the experience rather than being represented or defined by the programme structure or the facilitator" (Loynes, 2002, p.122), and furthermore, that the course is mostly about seeking "a way home" through nature (Faarlund, 1993, p.158). If money is what you're after, then you'd better write "participants will learn leadership, problem-solving, and team-work skills" in bold face. In fact, some English government funding schemes have developed a code system for organizations who have received funds to operate activity programs for young people at risk of offending. One simply enters the code for the participant's ethnicity, followed by the numbers of the types of at-risk behaviour the participants have exhibited, and the code for the anticipated outcomes that will be the result of one of six types of intervention

(Positive Activities for Young People, 2005). This is an excellent example of what has been labelled the "algorithmic paradigm" (Ringer, 1999) in outdoor education, where specific interventions are used to elicit outcomes pre-determined by the instructor.

So, what's the alternative? Well, in the youth organisations and local government with which I have been affiliated there is little time to "educate" funders on the new outdoor education program that features "serendipitous learning" where "the individuals in learning communities discover and address issues within themselves" (Krouwel, 2005, p.28), and offers learning that is "goal free, the experience offered a step on the road rather than a solution" (Loynes, 2002, p.122). Funders want measurable outcomes and outdoor education organizations want money, which makes them, too, want measurable outcomes. But some outdoor education literature warns us that measurable is no good — that we cannot quantify something as personal and subjective as an outdoor education experience (Allison & Pomeroy, 2001). What's the answer? "Show me the money." In my experience, instrumental reasons win almost every time. In the world attracting funding, this means, "Show me the pre- and post-course questionnaires."

So, on one side, outdoor education theorists suggest that programs need to incorporate "broad adventure" where there is less emphasis on short, adrenaline-filled activities, and a greater focus on taking responsibility for more substantial outdoor challenges with uncertain outcomes (Loynes, 1998, 2002; Rubens, 1998), and all of this deeply rooted with a strong sense of place (Baker, 2005; Brookes, 2002a, 2002b; Henderson, 2001, 2005; Knapp, 2005; Martin, 2004; Nicol & Higgins, 1998; Preston, 2004; Stewart, 2004). On the other side are the funders who give money to those who play the game and include all the right buzzwords in their grant applications. Who loses? Well, the kids,

obviously, because they are stuck with conveyor belt style outdoor education. The other people who lose are those on the front line, the instructors who end up teaching three sessions of "team-building activities" to ten groups a week for 40 weeks. All of this points to a large chasm between theory and practice and not much learning for anyone.

I am an outdoor educator — that is part of who I am. From a pragmatic perspective, I need to make a living: I need shelter, food, and clothing. I'd love to be paid a decent salary to work at The Friluftsliv Centre or The Generative Paradigm Organisation, but there are not many of these places around. I need to make money, so I fall back on the skills I have spent 15 years accruing, and . . . provide adventure in a bun. What a shame.

Where to Now?

If I am to remain an outdoor educator, I need to decide what kind of outdoor education I want to practice. To do this means answering the three questions I posed earlier in the paper.

The first question concerned pre-determined outcomes. I do not support any programs that coerce participants into attending with the aim of eliciting specific, pre-determined intra-personal or inter-personal outcomes. I will happily run a course that seeks to yield personal growth in some form, but only if the participants are part of the process that decides what is learned and how it is learned. Only then will the learning have personal meaning for each individual. Most participants should not be left to figure this out for themselves, but should be helped by a facilitator.

While the generative paradigm sees relationships as egalitarian (Loynes, 2002), I take relationships to be hierarchical as well. There are times where participants will have tremendous power and freedom and other times when the instructor will assume total

control. Indeed, we use our power to provide our participants with a structure within which they may experience "the world in highly individual, unique, and variable ways" (Patterson, Watson, Williams, & Roggenbuck, 1998, p.426). The notion of instructors retaining a fair amount of discretionary power may be regarded by some theorists as un-experiential (see Hovelynck, 2001), but I am hard-pressed to think of any experiential education programs that are so experiential they don't need a facilitator. There would be no point in participating in an experiential learning program in that case. It is the instructor's privilege to have control over the group and it requires tremendous judgment to know how and when to use it. This judgment cannot be learned from a book either. It comes from the experience of having run many courses as an apprentice and lead instructor.

The idea of learning judgment leads to the second area of concern: Experience, training, and qualifications. I agree with Loynes' (1998) inference that some adventure activity programs in the UK are so artificial they are practically devoid of adventure. Still, adventures in buns as well as adventures to be planned by participants still need competent staff to oversee them — competent in relation to activity, that is. Being outdoors with participants demands technical skills suited to the terrain and conditions. Wilderness-based programs, in particular, require instructors who are very comfortable living outdoors in remote settings and who can impart these outdoor living skills. Although I would argue that there is an over-emphasis on outdoor educators amassing qualifications (certainly in the UK), parents have a right to expect that their child will be paddling down a river or walking in the hills with a competent leader.

The third area I highlighted was research and funding, which appear to be inextricably intertwined. I believe in qualitative, naturalistic research that focuses on understanding people's experiences. I am not a

big fan of using scientific methods to establish whether someone has increased their "life effectiveness." We need to observe people and hear their stories (Barrett & Greenaway, 1995). This can be incredibly valuable research, but for it to be trustworthy in the eyes of academics, it needs to be done with great rigour. This is what funders do not seem to understand: Rigorous, credible research in outdoor education does not have to rely on experimental research designs. On grant application forms, I have resolved to write almost anything that is needed to obtain money, which, in the past, has meant pulling out all of the clichés and buzzwords. I will not, however, use psychometric tests to justify the existence of my programs. If funders want "results" then I will offer to conduct naturalistic research to show how my courses may have influenced participants.

A Way of Considering Practice

The conceptual model presented below is offered as a tool for considering the nature of the outdoor education programs we are involved in, and, perhaps more importantly, would like to be involved in. It consists of three dimensions, the ends of which meet in the centre. The centre of the model is characterised by practice that I consider to be informed by current critical theory. There is some natural overlap between the three dimensions.

The first dimension *(ready-made sessions — journeys)* explores the extent to which outdoor education programs use self-sufficient journeys as a means to learn about self, others, and place. Why is it that so many outdoor education programs are packaged into three-hour sessions between meals prepared by someone else? All outdoor education programs are contrived to some degree, but journeys offer a high level of authentic adventure, as the outcomes are somewhat uncertain and there are very real consequences for actions and non-actions. The amount of

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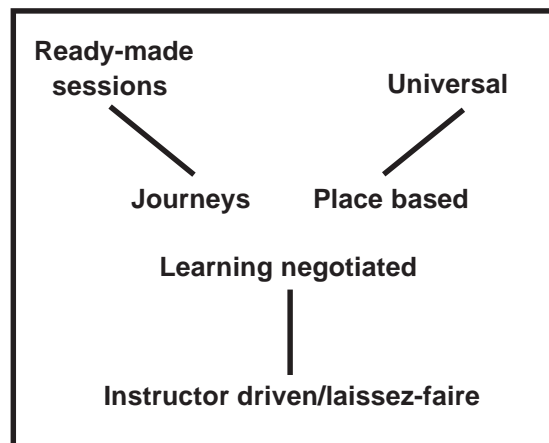
lasting, transferred learning that a participant can take from a centre-based activity such as the "dangle duo" is questionable. We need to move away from fragmented courses that are made up from a series of adrenaline-filled sessions and move towards "broad adventures" that involve much longer time scales, varied challenges, and responsibilities devolved to students (Rubens, 1998). I should add that journeys do not have to be multi-week arctic canoe trips, but can take place in urban environments with minimal expense. A journey can take place over an academic year and focus on curiosity-driven explorations of one's immediate surroundings.

The second dimension *(universal — place based)* considers the extent to which programs are grounded in a sense of place. The outside of the model is the domain of activities that can be done identically in thousands of different locations: Adventures in buns (Loynes, 1998) that can happen in Anywoods, USA (Baker, 2005). Outdoor education programs should be rooted in the history, ecology, culture, and stories of the place they are in (Baker, 2005; Brookes, 2002a, 2002b; Henderson, 2001, 2005; Knapp, 2005; Martin, 2004; Nicol & Higgins, 1998; Preston, 2004; Stewart, 2004). As outdoor educators, we must be able to interpret the land and bring it alive for participants.

The third dimension focuses on the level to which participants are able to negotiate what they want to learn and how they want to learn it. Educators in the centre of this model are different from manipulative instructors who hold all the power, and different from instructors who think they are being "experiential" by not getting involved at all (the laissez-faire approach). I believe that facilitators need to get to know the participants well enough to be able to help them determine just what they are after, and then help them get it (see Loynes, 2002). Only then will learning have personal meaning for each individual. Programs without specific, pre-determined outcomes may be a tough sell to those who are providing funding, but if the nature of the activities is to be experiential, then the "learning that really matters on experiential programmes is that which comes from the experience, not prescription" (Krouwel, 2005, p.31).

Until recently, I really felt as if I had lost my religion. I had read widely within the body of outdoor education literature and was bewildered by its volume, complexity, and contradictions. This confusion marginalises organisations whose practices are driven not by critical outdoor education theory, but by financial constraints or, simply, what has happened historically. Although I find that models tend to oversimplify complex relationships, this visual, three-dimensional way of considering outdoor education practice has helped to clarify my thoughts. This has proved to be particularly helpful in my conversations with program administrators, funding agencies, and field instructors. Ultimately, the test of usefulness for the discussion outlined in this paper is the degree to which it encourages instructors and administrators to develop their own set of guiding principles that are informed by critical perspectives.

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