PhD Proposal

College: Humanities and Social Sciences

School: Moray House School of Education

Department: Physical Education, Sport and Leisure Studies

Topic: Outdoor Education

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Title: **Wild Praxis: A theory and practice of reconnection to self, community and place through exploration of the Scottish hills**

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Introduction

Philosophy means 'love of wisdom,' and there is need for wisdom in dealing with the eco-social breakdown of the twenty-first century. Direct experience of ecology and community through journeys in the hills and wild places of Scotland has the potential to work in a small way towards this wisdom (Higgins, 1996b). Facilitation of these experiences could reconnect participants into the more-than-human world (Abrams, 2001), into a sense of place which carried with it values and responsibilities, and might lead to ecologically aware behaviour. These experiences could also touch on larger or 'ecological' aspects of the self (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995).

There is much theory which speaks of these issues, attempting to draw ecological philosophy towards practical outcomes (see for example Seed, Macy, Flemming and Naess (1988)) and yet in my experience many providers of outdoor experiences are unaware of this potential. When I asked a team leader who had worked for 8 years in a remote highland outdoor centre, what role the local hills played in the changes that occurred in the young people he said he had 'never thought of that.' In my experience, and research conducted (Goodyear in personal communications May/June 2006) the course delivered by this centre was effective at increasing participants self-esteem, and had other positive personal outcomes. However, current theory ((Higgins, 1996b), (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995). (Kidner, 2001), (Sessions, (Ed.) 1995) suggests that there are deeper possibilities within outdoor education.

Seeing the hills as *more* than simply one venue among others at which to achieve goals for individuals, could increase the effectiveness of already effective programs by widening the sphere of influence to include ecological and communitarian outcomes. There are various small organisations in Scotland working within this field (Footprint Consulting, An Turus, The GalGael Trust), however given the possible benefits to the pressing concerns of environmental and social problems, it is important to research this area in greater depth. There already exists both theory and practice, but, as will be detailed below, there are various challenges that face any detailed research into connecting with community and place. One of the main needs is greater relationship between practice and theory in delivering experiences in the wilds. Hence this proposal looks at how experiences in the Scottish hills can facilitate greater active relationship with place and community, how we might measure or value these experiences *and* theorize them.

The Research Problem

"The philosophical challenge for educators is to provide a framework of understanding where the world of ideas is rooted in the same world in which people carry out their multi-sensory everyday lives." (Nicol, 2003, p15)

Engaging in a 'thought experiment,' a standard philosophical tool, will shed light on the problem outlined above. *You are out in Knoydart, camping alone, the sun*

is setting red above three small lochans. Three stags bellow and each time they do your whole body vibrates, you can feel the air in your vocal chords and it almost feels like you are making that primal noise. Every time you think 'whoa this is an amazing experience' you are distracted from the sunset, so you stop thinking. Months later it is raining, but you still make the effort to go out and sort your recycling, and as you walk up the street to the recycling bins, for some reason you think about that night in Knoydart with the deer bellowing.

In trying to live in a more ecologically sound manner, we might hope that such an experience was the catalyst for our action. However, we can see from this thought experiment that finding out whether an experience was effective in bringing about changes in our ecological behaviour is extremely difficult. And yet if we are to develop these experiences, facilitate them and prove their effectiveness to funders and policy makers these questions must be asked.

The problem becomes more pronounced when we move from reflecting on our own experience to the experiences of others: imagine that you are facilitating a trip for others with the express aim of achieving greater ecological and social awareness and action. *How do you know what Janet is thinking as she sits in front of her tent watching the sunset and shivering each time the deer call for a mate? What do you say or do the next day when she wants to talk about it? How will you know the trip has been successful? How will you justify the money that the funders (who are not on the course) gave you for the week away in Knoydart? Will you ever hear about it when she pulls herself off the sofa to do the family recycling despite the rain?*

Here we can see the difficulties facing any study into the effectiveness of outdoor education, and the specific difficulties of judging the success in less immediately obvious modes of living such as environmental care. However there are some indicators: a smile on the face of a participant at the end of the day might mean that they have had a good day. A discussion, a piece of artwork, or a report of changed behaviour after the course will give more information addressing the questions of 'what was effective?' and 'what outcomes were achieved?' This is also where theory serves a useful purpose in providing a model for changes which might occur, and implies the possibility of facilitation techniques predicated on the theory, alongside evidence of change from experience.

This need for theoretical structure can be met by philosophy, however, typically removed from practical issues, academic philosophy has largely stuck to the logical and rational aspects of human being (Capra, 1997). Raising ecological and social awareness will engage feelings, intuitions and relationships, which is a new challenge in terms of the generation, the language, and the structure of theory. There are traditions such as Phenomenology (see Heidegger, (1953/2000), Husserl, (1900/1970)), and Deep Ecology (Sessions, (Ed.) 1995) which are taking up this challenge, but they often still suffer from a detachment

from real issues: Cartesian duality has left a latent prejudice of idealism – that ideas can and should be detached from substance.

How would such a theory be developed that did not suffer from this 'idealism'? A sound theoretical understanding of our relationship to outdoor places might be developed from experiences in the wilds, (for example the tradition of Deep Ecology, (Naess, 1989)). However in positing this, we are engaged in a cycle, which is not necessarily vicious, but which highlights the link between theory and practice: understanding experiences in the wilds could be aided by a theory, but creating that theory might arise from understanding experiences in the wilds. The presence of a cycle can be taken as the indication of richness rather than a logical fallacy (Heidegger, 1927/1996), and a hermeneutical approach can be taken. This is also the heart of 'praxis' where theory and practice mutually reinforce one another.

Research Aims

Given the problems outlined above, this research aims to do more than develop ways of working in the hills which stimulate greater *active* relationship with community and place, 'outdoor education for sustainability' (Higgins, 1996). What is lacking are adequate *ways of expressing the value, or measuring the impact* of these experiences (see Nicol, (2003), and also Kidner, (2001) and personal communication (December 11, 2006). This problem also requires a theoretical framework, and this research aims to utilise philosophical and psychological insights to think about these non-dualistic relational experiences (such as are described by Kidner, (2001)), and express their value to environmental and social concerns. Furthermore it aims to engage this theoretical debate with the practical issues of facilitation.

'Practical' Questions:

Experiences that stimulate understanding of our membership in the natural world, and action preserving that ecology, combined with developing healthy social and personal interaction, will be hard to describe and measure. They will also not occur with every participant. They are based on promoting subjective and relational ways of being which are resistant to standard objective, or quantitative study, and are dependent on the state of the participant as much as any other factor. However, the development of facilitation of these experiences must occur in tandem with showing their effectiveness to clients, funders and policy makers, otherwise promoting them will merely be preaching to the converted. This leads to the first question:

- **How do you show the effectiveness of the transformational experiences which might occur in the hills?**

If an experience was effective for a participant how do they think about that experience, how do they, and the facilitator talk to others about the experience,

how does one judge the success of a course, and promote it? The experiences that will be studied to answer the above questions will have certain aims:

- Developing sense of place in the locale of the experience with the aim of aiding the transfer a sense of community/ecological responsibility back to the client's home place. This 'sense of place' might involve caring for the environment, (personal communication, McIntosh, 2006), which would also support the place within which the initial experience occurred. This contrasts with an approach which sees the outdoors as a place in which social development can be achieved but does nothing to acknowledge that society's role in causing damage to that very place, or in creating the individual's issues (Roszak, Gomes & Kanner, 1995).
- Developing elemental (ie not artificial or game based) activities such as making food, working wood, building shelter. (Higgins, 1996b). This works towards the triad of outdoor education 'in, about and for' the environment.
- Working on a symbolic or psychological level, rather than asking people to will themselves to change their behaviour.
- Holding a long-term purpose of a cultural re-integration into wild places; a culture which does not reproduce the dislocation and nihilism currently seen for example in participants in 'personal and social development' programs (my MSc thesis studied nihilism in the context of Govan, Glasgow). This is an inherently political process see McIntosh, (2001).

Judging the success of these elements for social and environmental engagement will necessarily revolve around how they are facilitated and how we access their value. This is the crux of the first question: how do we develop transformational experiences? Answering this will involve asking:

- What transformations do we want to attempt to stimulate, and what right have we to work towards this?
- What types of activity might be effective?
- What methods of facilitation will provide stories, diaries, actions out of the experience, to allow the clients to express their experiences (as well giving a measure for the facilitators)
- What sustains these changes?

In making the choices to create these course facilitators often rely on intuition, experience, and also theoretical ideas as they may not see any results in the span of our relationship with the client. This research aims to supplement this picture through case studies and a clear theoretical model. This will clarify choices for outdoor educators, and also stand alone as evidence for those who don't share the experience.

'Theoretical' Questions:

"… new ways need to be found to legitimate subjectivity and the nature of experience. This requires an epistemology which recognises the individual's inner experience in relation to their perception of external stimulus. This is not to deny objectivity so much as to redefine it "as a striving to achieve greater consensus, greater agreement or consonance among a plurality of subjects" (Abram, 1997)," Nicol, 2003, p. 15.

Beyond the obvious idea that we are attempting to provide experiences rather than facts, the focus of these experiences in wild places is inherently personal and subjective. As facilitators we are asking people to delve into their relationships with themselves, those around them and their place (Clover, Follen & Hall, 1998). Developing a theory of this is intrinsically difficult (and probably limited in scope) as theory attempts generalisations, models and abstractions, including the celebrated 'Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness' (Whitehead, 1925). The aims of theory at first seem to militate against the fact that each person's experience will be different. The clash between renewed value of subjective experience and 'objective' academic study has led towards outdoor education literature which often focuses on the openness needed to allow for different experiences (see Ringer, 2002). However only dealing with the 'constructed' subjective world of the client has led to a lack of focus on the more 'objective' context of the client – the rocks, the rain and the path (Nicol, 2003). This has limited the transformational scope of the experience as well. In widening the focus of wild work from the individual to include the ecological and social, the theoretical bridge also must be made between subjective experience, and 'objective' things that we can all in principle reach consensus on e.g. the state of ecological systems.

The theoretical need here is to find ways of thinking about embodied, somatic experiences, which is not entirely bounded inside the individual. Hence the second question:

- **How do you theorise transformational experiences in the hills?**

This has obvious mutuality with the first 'practical' research question. Thinking the elements of the experience you are attempting to facilitate, and using a theoretical model, will also aid your perceptions and reports of its success. Equally the development of ways of thinking and ways of acting are not separate, and thus measuring change, and theorising it go hand in hand. In considering the philosophical roots of these issues it will be important to consider:

- How might theory help us understand transformational experiences is the outdoors?
- How might theory influence and support practical choices when facilitating outdoor experiences for community and ecology?
- How does theory respond to 'subjective' individual experiences at the same time as 'objective' places and problems?
- What might a *placed* theory look like?

- What new criteria might we use to evaluate theory (apart from logical consistency, conceptual transparency etc) that will help it be useful *in context*?

These questions will be initially looked at through the lens of existing theory:

- Eco-psychology: the psychological problems of human nature 'inside' and the destruction of nature 'outside' are two sides of the same coin (Kidner, 2001, p.16)
- Phenomenology and eco-phenomenology: the (inter)subjective experience of nature, for example Merleau-Ponty's concept of 'flesh,' (Merleau-Ponty, 1969) or Heidegger's 'dasein' (Heidegger, 1927/1996).
- Deep Ecology: re-orientating our relation to nature through 'identification' (Fox, 1995).

The above ideas from eco-philosophy will provide a starting point for theorising transformational wild experiences. Initially they will offer models to fit (or not) with the accounts of these experiences gained through the research. The project however aims to develop its own theoretical base, moving forward from the above models through a thorough critique of their explanatory power and practical use. The aim is to develop (if possible) an accessible theory which supports practical choices on facilitation of work in wild places, which offers a theoretical explanation of what changes might be occurring and why, and thus whether the work is effective.

Methodology

The above discussion makes it clear that the question of a wild theory and practice in the hills has many dimensions which are connected into a complex whole. The question of methodology is as important as any of the questions above. The realms of practice, theory, others' experience and my own, all need to be respected and reflected in an adequately clear and critical way. Equally methodologies take their own place in the history of western thought, and influence certain types of practice. Investigating this will clearly be an ongoing part of the research. The methodological challenges of this project also include an ecological viewpoint, in which we see ourselves as embodied in an interdependent web of life. This has implications for a methodology which will need to look at relationships and connections of the self-in-world, thus the study will be more psychological and philosophical than sociological.

Taking into account the above, answering the first question 'how do you show the effectiveness of transformational experiences which might occur in the hills?' will be through a qualitative study, which will emerge as my reading, and relationships with specific outdoor projects develop. The process of documenting participants' experiences in the hills needs to be sensitive to their personal issues and context and so will revolve around informal, less structured forms of conversation and interview (Bryman, 2001). This might be achieved by case-

studies following participants through the stages of their involvement with outdoor programs. Interviews before, during and after will allow insight to be gained on how and when change took place, what was effective and what was not, and also what affect the project had alongside other influences. The interviews need to acknowledge the difficulty of expressing a whole experience such as might be had in the hills through language, no matter how eloquent one might be. This insight will leave room for artistic expressions and video recordings of work in the hills to support a picture of people's encounter with the wild. This will also be based on the insight that helping the participants say and show what happened to them will be a measure of the effectiveness of a project that can then be added to the conclusions of the facilitator.

Video evidence (from simple unstructured diary room sessions) will give a chance to see the physical and character changes and influences throughout this period. The interviews alongside the creative outputs from the course will provide a variety of expressions of the nature of the experience for the participant. A variety of programs will be followed, and interviews will be conducted with the facilitators to link the activities to the outcomes of the interviews. Sometimes the facilitator will be me, and throughout this, in line with the principles of Action Research, (Reason & Bradbury, 2005), I will be conducting a first person inquiry into my own role in this project.

The output of this research should be a good sample of 'multi-media' expressions of participant's experiences linked to various stages and activities in the projects they undertook. From this evidence it will be possible to discuss questions of effectiveness of programs, evidencing change, and how to talk about what happened with those who weren't there. Also it will hopefully show the scope for influence in ecological and social spheres through following the participant after the course for a period of time. This data will provide concrete foundations for theorizing and critiquing other theory through a methodology which I have worked with before called Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The idea is then for this theory to feed back into a more sensitive way of structuring and recording the experience, the client's expressions of which will then develop the theorising and so on hermeneutically.

The second methodological need is to record my involvement in the dialectic between practice and reflection, between theory and action. In this research I am directly involved; I am both practitioner and philosopher, and I want to participate in this research with other interested parties and those who, like myself want to experience the hills. Action Research (Reason & Bradbury, 2005) meets this need in providing a framework for personal and collective inquiry, focusing around cycles of action and reflection, and aimed at practical knowledge that increases health and well being on personal, communal and ecological levels. It is also a participative process which is shaped by those involved, not simply by the researcher. This will strengthen the idea that the wisdom generated in this philosophy should be a *shared* wisdom.

Contribution to Knowledge

- A clearer understanding for participants and non-participants of the potential for outdoor experiences to promote ecological and cultural ends.
- An accessible theory explaining the transformation that occurs during experiences in the wilds, building on data gathered from experiences, and past theory.
- Through direct interaction between theory and practice, new criteria for assessing the usefulness, 'fit' and explanatory power of environmental theory will be developed.

Anticipated Problems

- Finding rigorous methodologies to link theory and practice
- Drawing together the varied output of outdoor courses as evidence of change
- Finding accessible theoretical language
- Limiting the diverse (and endless) literature with relevant and strict criteria
- Finding time in the busy schedules of outdoor educators to discuss this area in depth.

Timescale

This research will be conducted full-time over three years:

1. Starting from September 2007 – Begin theoretical review, and develop relationships with potential informants
2. Spring/ Summer 2008 – Initial 'practical research' conducted, following a small number of participants through a 6 month period.
3. Winter 2008 – Analysis of initial findings; theoretical and practical development
4. Spring/ Summer 2009 – In-depth study with a number of different groups and courses, utilising insights from pilot study
5. Winter 2009 – Analysis of findings and further theoretical development
6. Spring/ Summer 2010 - Drafting of text and Final write up
7. Autumn 2010 – Submission of Thesis

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