

Skill development and our perception of the environment: A phenomenological approach to canoe tripping in Canada

Jonas Mikael, Umeå University, Sweden, jonas.mikaels@pedag.umu.se

Purpose

This investigation set out to explore the perspectives of students who have participated in an outdoor learning programme that is theoretically underpinned by the perception of the environment, place consciousness and skill development. The study focuses on the student's socio-cultural and geo-physical stories from time spent, skills learned, and experiences made in the Canadian Rockies. Of particular interest for this study, is to explore ways of moving from a predominant wilderness discourse, with the view of seeing nature as something 'out there', something wild that is to be manipulated, controlled and concurred, towards an emerging ecological sustainability discourse in outdoor education practice. From this starting point, our aims are: (i) To provide insight into how skill development influence our perception of the environment, (ii) To provide insight into how sense of movement and sense of place may influence our lived experience and perception of our surroundings, and (iii) To provide insight into how power operates within this socio-environmental discourse, as well as what subject positions are made available, thus creating certain subject positions as more desirable than others.

Method

The intention of this study is to follow the design suggested by Mullins (2011), who used Ingold's (2011) *dwelling perspective* to interpret performances and experiences, which allowed alternative accounts of the meaningful ways in which participants related to, as well as shaped their environments. This research project is designed in the form of a case study and a common place journey. Through the commonplace research methodology and from travelling together, the researcher can come to know some of the ways in which participants engage with, as well as understand their surroundings (Mullins, 2011). The investigation will examine observations and participant narratives from journal entries and group discussions, to explore engagement with place and issues of sustainability.

Each participant of this study will be asked to record individual observations and reflections on practices and experiences in a field notebook/journal. The units of analysis will be the various experiences made by the participants in the project. This case study involves examining the process by which our perception of the environment is built. The case consists of multiple levels of components, all by which will be examined through specific prompts asked to the participants, at different stages of the trip. Following Mullins (2011), five guiding topics will be used to focus participant observation and help the researcher recognize the relevance of events as they occur, both mundane and unexpected. Observations will be noted as soon as possible in a water

proof field notebook.

The guiding topics are:

1. *Skill*: How attention to landscape and environmental features was shaped by travel activities, tasks, performances, equipment, and other group members.
2. *Place*: Meanings, impressions, and knowledge of particular landscapes and places gained through travel, shared group experiences, individuals' past experiences, and encounters with other people and animals during the trip.
3. *Interrelationships*: The influences of individuals and group on surroundings and vice versa; how movement was shaped by environmental factors and landscape features.
4. *Self*: Identity and roles related to particular skills, tasks, environments, and places.
5. *Stories*: The role of stories within the group, as influencing travel, and as communicating landscape meanings within and beyond the group of participants.

Results

Data was collected in May, 2012. At this point we can only show some preliminary results, since the data has not yet been fully analysed.

Conclusions

Ingold (2005) admits a conspicuous lack of attention to power relations within his dwelling perspective, which has focused primarily on the material relations of life. According to Mullins (2011), greater attention to the interpersonal implications of outdoor education adventure travel is certainly needed and possible from the dwelling perspective. Therefore, our interest lies in exploring how skill development serves to influence our perception of the environment and our surroundings, as well as exploring how power operates within this socio-environmental discourse. For this analysis, we draw on a discourse perspective inspired by Foucault (1980). The investigation is designed in the form of a case study and examines observations and participant narratives from journal entries and group discussions, to explore engagement with place and issues of sustainability. To analyse the data, this investigation uses hermeneutic phenomenological approach and a commonplace journey, through which the participants and the researcher questioned and reinterpreted their experiences. All analysis in this project has the overarching purpose of providing insight into how skill development serves to influence our perception of the environment, our sense of place, and how power operates within this socio-environmental discourse.

Ingold, T. (2005). Epilogue: Towards a politics of dwelling. *Conservation and Society*, 3(2), 501–508.

Ingold, T. (2011). *The perception of the environment: Essays in livelihood, dwelling and skill*. New York: Routledge.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon.

Mullins, P. (2011). *A Phenomenological Approach to Canoe Tripping: Applicability of the Dwelling Perspective*. University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.