Narrative Journey: storying landscapes for children's adventurous outdoor play and experiential learning

by Phil Waters

Imagine reading a landscape like you would a good book. Rock formations might be the remnants of a battle between giants from a fictional past; wind-swept gorse might be on the run as they stride across the countryside, their gnarly twisted form looking more villainous than the crime from which they escape. Or, if your literary tastes are beyond fantasy and 'who-done-its', the common garden slug might be a creature worth chewing the cud with; the very least it would lead you to a wholesome banquet of lettuce and geraniums! Whether it's horticultural mythology, local legend or fictional fairy tale, every landscape has the potential to tell a story.

Reading landscapes as if they were storied maps is neither a new method nor approach to navigational pedagogy. Yet current variations in this approach prove useful in adventure education because they forge relationships between humans and their environments; a key component in most, if not all, outdoor experiential learning programmes. For instance, Tristan Gooley [1] proposes that Natural Navigation is an art form that brings the traveller into a liaison with nature by reading landscapes as if they were texts. In other words, landscapes have symbols, meanings and information to guide us on our journey as long as we know the language or have the means by which to read their stories. In this context nature points the way through things like the constellations, weather, plant type, geology, or even the direction other animals travel. It would seem that nature's signposts, once understood, can point the direction for the lost traveller to find her way home from anywhere in the world.

Natural Navigation, while important, implies landscapes have stories that are already written and that all we need do is learn the language or the means to decode them. We know from our ancestors, however, that stories are also placed onto landscapes as a form of metaphorical map. Aboriginal tribes are well-known for their songlines [2] - maps of landscapes that are passed from one generation to another through detailed lyrics that contain information about how one can navigate to certain places. Similarly, Native American Indians collected natural artefacts and tied them to sticks as a means of creating stories of place. The 'story-stick' would then be handed to other members in their tribe as an identity about the place in which it was created; a symbolic reference not unlike handing over your journal to a family member.

In my work with the Eden project I have developed a story-based method called Narrative Journey for engaging children's interest in the natural world [3-6]. In its basic form this could be a practitioner picking up an object, like a decaying leaf, and exclaiming it to be a fairy's wing. The practitioner would then simply observe what children do with the narrative cue. For example, does it incite children to go hunting for fairies, or foraging for leaves, or building fairy houses, or even fairy villages? The point being the practitioner offers just a bit of narrative, but leaves the adventure to the participant as an open-ended learning experience.

Hunting for Fairies

On the other hand, practitioners who work with specific learning outcomes might instead provide a series of narrative cues that are delivered within an unfolding saga. Using story frameworks, Narrative Journey provides a storied world in which children and practitioners co-construct characters, plots and themes in moment-by-moment collaboration. Here, participants are engaged in producing adventures through which they encounter repeated challenges; which is quite different from crafting stories with beginning, middle and ends as would be expected in a storytelling context. Narrative frameworks are employed to evolve stories in site-specific spaces. Thus, stories are more likely to be informed by local, historical, social and cultural meanings as they are through the interactions participants have with each other and with the environment.

Adventures often go in any direction, both narratively and geographically, because no single player owns or controls the story. In fact, there's an underlying notion that the environment offers as much to the unfolding story as do the people playing within it – a stone found, a twig broken, a tree climbed or a puddle splashed, is useful narrative material for the storied world. Of course, the practitioner still has an educative role to play. Narrative Journey is, after all, a pedagogic practice. And so for the most part, the practitioner's role is split between being 'in the story' and being 'outside of the story'.

Out-of-story praxis involves a framework in which narrative cues are presented to children to orientate their play towards potential experiences. That is, practitioners look for learning opportunities in the landscape, such as climbing a tree to get a better view, and use narrative cues that are likely to navigate children towards that action. On the contrary, praxis that is 'in-the-story' is driven by the story itself, and for the most part practitioners are likely to adopt a role equated to a wizened mentor; someone who advises characters from within, while monitoring the story's broader architecture. Moreover, Narrative Journey practitioners are expected to be in both contexts at the same time; mindful of the story and of their praxis role. For the remainder of this article I am going to focus on the practitioner's 'out-of-story' position in creating story frameworks.

Co-Creating Stories

The Hero's Journey

When Joseph Campbell published his seminal work: The Hero with a Thousand Faces [7], little did he suspect it would later inform the literary practices of writers across the globe. Most notable was his idea of the monomyth; a narrative structure that positions the hero on a particular journey or narrative trajectory - a pathway that has since been popularised by well-known stories like Star Wars, [8], by George Lucas. Christopher Vogler [9] offers a good summary of the Hero's Journey below, which provides a useful formula for storying landscapes for adventure education:

1. The story begins with the hero living life in an ordinary world. Here the scene is set; we get to know who the hero is.
2. The hero then receives a call to action; that is, something inspires or incites the hero to step out of her ordinary world.
3. The hero refuses the call to action. They don't see themselves as a hero, and they don't wish to face any foes or their own fears.
4. The hero then encounters their mentor; often a wizened character with worldly knowledge and useful skills.
5. Accepting their fate, the hero crosses the first threshold, and leaves their ordinary world.
6. Now in the special world, the hero encounters many tests, forges alliances and makes enemies. In the new world it is hard to distinguish allies from foes.
7. In the new world the hero encounters the inmost cave; the edge of a dangerous place, often where the quest is hidden.
8. Once in the inmost cave, the hero confronts his greatest fear, enemy or hostile force, and undergoes the ordeal. This is the darkest moment for the hero.
9. Surviving the ordeal, the hero seeks her reward, which could be treasure, a weapon, a kiss, a magic cure…
10. As the hero escapes with the reward in hand, he takes the road back home. This is often the most perilous road.

The Hero's Journey

11. Just as the hero feels safe, there is the resurrection; one last test; one last dark moment, usually involving the antagonist having one last attempt to sever the hero's return to safety.
12. The hero, having defeated the antagonist, returns to her ordinary world with the elixir; the reward claimed earlier in the quest, or a new-found reward such as bravery, knowledge or a loved one.

The strength of the Hero's Journey as a story-crafting structure is that it lends itself favourably to chronicles of a questing nature; the very sorts of narrative one might find in travel writing. To this end, physical challenges can be designed into a storied world as part of an experiential learning activity. On Bodmin Moor in Cornwall, for example, a Narrative Journey was designed to encourage local families to use the moor for recreational and environmental interests. By drawing on local myths and legends, the journey made use of both natural and manufactured landscape features, such as stone circles, the remains of disused mine buildings, a quarry, a cave and an ancient stone wall purported to be older than the Egyptian pyramids. All of which featured within a fictional account about avoiding the wrath of Golitha, a giant, who, as the legend was told, was tricked into a stone-throwing contest in which he lost and resulted in his banishment from the moor.

Looking for Golitha

The Journey began with families encountering a hooded traveller who offered a 'call to action' to undergo a two-mile moorland adventure. In this instance, it was to stop Golitha's revenge by collecting various artefacts that were likely to appease his anger. Activities included walking across a strapline suspended over the footings of a disused mine building to retrieve a lump of coal; making a clay 'mini-me' for the stone circle, so as to trick the gods into believing they had already been turned to stone and thus could sneak across the moors undetected; treading quietly past a sleeping troll whose smelly breath was an instant poison, and whose sleep protected a hoard of treasure at the bottom of a rope and netted pit; stealing a magic potion from a witch using only slight-of-hand; building a stone monument resembling the configuration created by the giant when cheated out of his game, and retrieving a magic key that opened a treasure chest containing a secret – the key was in the middle of a lake, in a quarry, with just a few objects around that would prove useful if families worked together. Each challenge was supported by a practitioner playing a character that would help sustain the story framework and narrative journey.

In another project, a Narrative Journey was created for families visiting a National Trust property in East Cornwall. The Trust wanted to encourage families to explore natural areas beyond the historic house and gardens. Again, a two-mile circular quest was designed, but this time with darker motives to suit a broader range of participants, which included teenagers. The 'call to action' was that a ship had floated into the harbour unattended and on-board was a chest, which was dragged into the local woods by a young village boy who inadvertently set free an evil spirit lurking within. The quest entailed undoing the dark magic by collecting items that had to be returned to the chest.

To play a little more closely to the Hero's Journey, practitioners were briefed to play their characters in particular ways. For example, a witch was asked to only hand over a magic potion if children crossed her palm with silver. This contradicted the brief given to the children by their mentor: that they must return from the quest with all items gathered, including the silver coin. Here then, was an opportunity for the villain, the witch, to be resurrected as the hero journeyed on the road home, thus adding a second encounter with her and creating more drama.

Again, like the previous quest, there were opportunities to engage in the landscape in physical ways, such as scrambling up nets, balancing over logs crossing rivers, and fighting one's way through bushes and long grass.

Beware the Witch's Trick

Narrative Journey, while it is a rich pedagogic blend for storying and animating landscapes, is reliant on people and props who give the story depth and meaning. That's not to ignore, of course, that stories can and do act on the world independently of their creator. Because as Arthur Frank so eloquently puts, stories do 'breathe' [10]; shaping people's actions and relationship with places and spaces. In Narrative Journey praxis, however, people bring the stories alive through theatrical storyscaping, and use artefacts from the landscape for staging and propping these performances. In this sense, Narrative Journey is about place-making, about giving landscapes meaning, context and possibility. Narrative is but a currency that we use in making that meaning. It can, as described here, be used within a playful adventure. But it is equally valid as a navigational tool like those used in Aboriginal songlines, or to teach specific skills or cultural practices as with American Indians. Narrative Journey has the potential to be used in a wide array of educational contexts, from outdoor adventure education, to schools and home tuition. All that is required is a good story, a hero and a questing spirit. ■

Note: Philip Waters is delivering a Master Class about Narrative Journey at this year's IOL National Conference

The primary aim, however, was to signpost visitors to experience parts of the landscape not often visited by the public. In doing so we had to make the landscape appealing and inviting and once involved, create such a powerful and memorable experience that visitors would make repeat returns and continue to explore the wider landscape. It's worth noting that the areas of countryside we were narrating were outside of the property's paid entry; so this wasn't about making money, or increasing footfall or membership. It was about encouraging access to nature and nature-based recreation.

Creating Memorable Exepriences

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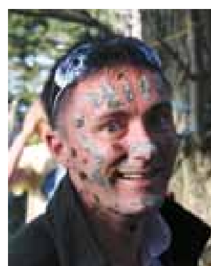
Photographs:

First four photos by Philip Waters/Eden Project
Fifth, seventh and eighth photos – Philip Waters
Sixth photo – Eden project



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A researcher at the University of Exeter Medical School and Play Project Coordinator for the Eden project, Phil's work involves blending play, narrative and nature into a practice called Narrative Journey. He is a keen writer, film maker and story maker, and when time permits, enjoys a good hike with his partner, playing with his dogs, cats and children, and carving a story-stick or two!