

Place in Practice - The Influence of Further Education Outdoor Adventure on Sense of Place

by Jodie Pinnell



An Exploration into the Concept of 'Sense of Place' From the Perspectives of Outdoor Adventure Students Studying in Further Education

To teach is to understand that learning is for all; multi-dimensional and all encompassing. It is safe to say, throughout the four short years of my teaching career, I have learnt alongside my students, all of us on a journey of change, no matter the starting point. This has led to a drive to constantly develop my practice, resulting in many revelations, with one in particular that remains prevalent; an emergent and organic approach to learning is the most effective. This is because emergent learning has the potential to incorporate 'environments, individuals, groups, cultures and activities, and the experiences that arise from their interaction.'¹ With this in the forefront of my mind, the importance of understanding my students better, formed the foundation for a study all about them. Through emergent learning approaches, it is drawing upon these 'environments, individuals and cultures' that link so well to the concept of 'place.' Put simply, 'place' is 'the tangible element of man's association with the earth,' and the manner by which resources of nature have been moulded 'into human usage.'² Upon further exploration however, 'place' is not simple at all, proving to embody 'cultural geography, anthropology, sociology, phenomenological philosophy, architecture and cultural process.'³ This complexity is apparent in educational process and reflected in the course delivery, student feedback, attitudes towards practice and the constant changes we face in Further Education. As I am lucky enough to work with potentially fascinating research participants every day, I chose to write my Master's dissertation on 'Sense of Place' from a student perspective, and explore the influence that their Outdoor Adventure course could be having upon this. An area that has not yet been explored in a Further Education context; I was astounded to realise that the student experience and 'sense of place' in this phase of education had not been researched more rigorously. I wanted to rectify this, striving to enrich my student's learning and my personal teaching practice. Not purely motivated by professional development, I was also driven by the transformations happening in my classroom, and the intangible change I could see in my students over the duration of the course. It has become increasingly apparent that the academic qualification itself is a byproduct of the course, not the main event. The students appear to reflect solely on the learning process in their feedback; the outdoor experiences, the residential visits and the culture they're part of. The assessment and grade profiles rarely shape what they highlight to gain from their two years with us. What I also find particularly interesting is the way they speak of where they live, the beauty of the natural landscape and their relationships to place; whether that be the outdoors or in some cases, their urban hometowns.

The research conducted involved delving into the student perceptions of place through both interviews and observations, in both an outdoor and classroom environment. The focus was how sense of place was being influenced by the Outdoor Adventure course and how I could make this a more enriching factor of their education. To provide an overview, the research was conducted in South Wales, in a Further Education (FE) college, specifically delivering a Level 3 BTEC Diploma in Sport (Outdoor Adventure). The course is delivered over two years, and is run within a classroom, with one practical outdoor day per week. Experiences span a range of outdoor activities, including: Sailing, river swimming, kayaking, coasteering, climbing, navigation and mountain biking. The learners are exposed to many outdoor

and urban environments throughout the course and study a variety of topics in the classroom. The course offers opportunities for residential experiences also; two local expeditions, a ski trip and a fortnight work placement opportunity in Spain.

Findings

The students commented positively on their educational experiences: **'[The course] has made us go outside and do things that we wouldn't necessarily know we could do.'** **'It has made the area seem a lot nicer.'** This showed that students were having experiences that shaped their view of the local area, and although literature highlighted that traditional deliveries of outdoor education can limit perceptions of 'place',⁴ the study contradicted this: **Interviewer: 'What do you think studying outdoor adventure can offer people when looking at their relationship to the environment?'** Participant: 'It can broaden the mind sort of, so it makes them think outside of the box,' [You can] 'look at higher concepts.' The participants showed that their experiences in general were meaningful and this could be a result of being exposed to 'uncomfortable new territory' in their learning environment⁵ and having somewhat holistic learning experiences to 'physically, emotionally and spiritually'⁶ develop their relationships to 'place.' This deeper meaning was a result of the students being exposed to different experiences with their reactions signifying a deeper connection to 'place'; **When in the woods on an expedition at night, students were singing, laughing and talking and one said 'Do you reckon normal people hear these sounds? People who don't do walks?'** The observations revealed interaction with place that did not emerge in interviews, and this added to the student experiences facilitated by the course. One observation reflected this; **when at a bothy on an expedition, students explored the immediate area and found a brick with '1852' on it. Some displayed shock and awe that the bothy could be so old.'** This is not therefore representative of 'traditional' deliveries of outdoor education but instead a more meaningful experience provided by the course.

Within the study, literature also suggested that within a traditional educational setting, the potential to develop a 'sense of place,' may be stifled by learning through sequential processes, and that social systems and formal education systems are 'largely disconnected.'⁷ This was not apparent in the study; no comments reflected the separation of 'place' from the learning environment. In fact, the learning environment proved to enhance place perception, and this was particularly apparent in the observation findings; **when walking along a coastal area and discussing myths and legends, being in the environment and linking the stories to the land was beneficial for the student's motivation, attitudes and interests. They were animated, laughing and repeated the stories and attempted to re-enact aspects of the stories.** The participants also did not express a disconnection from the natural environment; a concern raised by Pederson; if people are not in 'close contact with nature.'⁸ If anything, students felt the course brought them closer to their environment; **'I've been taken to places I've not known about in South Wales, like little beautiful places, places of extreme beauty or natural beauty.'** This showed that although some parts of the course were in a classroom, the course itself broadened the opportunities for learning experiences and development of sense of place.

Environmental responsibility and stewardship proved to be the most obvious outcome from the study. This linked directly to literature, as environmental compassion is a beneficial result of place perception or 'sense of place.'⁹ It was apparent that the experiences offered on the course created a connection that encouraged participants to care about the natural environment. One student commented; **'the more you know, the more you can help prevent it,' 'you get an educated answer of something of that level if someone asked you 'why shouldn't I throw this?'** This confirms findings from academic research; 'affective ties to places may motivate people to be better informed about local environmental issues and make decisions



and Norsidah: 'Sense of place' is reliant upon three factors, 'the quality of the physical elements,' 'the intensity of activities,' and the 'meanings associated with the attachment and experience of the place.'¹⁵ These three elements were proven to come from family, the course, personal experiences and the idea of 'home.' The findings made it clear that there was no 'one size fits all' approach, and that 'place' is an ever-changing, subjective process dependent on the particular environment, culture and society.'¹⁶ This was shown in a number of different situations: **'I feel a sense of place in Wales because that's my national identity and it's what I've grown up around and it's where I'm comfortable. I know Wales and I know its people' and 'it's sort of home but I guess you can make home wherever you want to make it.'** These findings showed two ends of a spectrum; one student felt a deep rootedness to place, whereas another showed disconnect. This shows the difference in perspective when looking at 'place' and can be related to many factors such as links to family, social processes, quality of life and experiences of place. This point further illustrates the multitude of factors that contribute to place perception and thus the difference in student's experiences.

beneficial to their communities'.¹⁰ The course proved to encourage this: **'A lot of people who do outdoor education do care about the environment. And then you respect that then, and you respect them for doing that.'** Environmental stewardship was reflected also in the observations; **students were largely in agreement that outdoor sessions should involve an element of educating participants on natural areas, flora, fauna and local myths and legends.** This was a positive outcome of the study as 'people will act responsibly towards their immediate environment if they have a sense of rootedness',¹¹ and 'sense of place' inspires and mobilises stewardship¹². Evidence of environmental stewardship was consistently apparent from different students and different experiences; in classroom sessions, students discussed environmental responsibility; **learners did not see relevance in spending time litter picking unless it was a place they personally enjoyed.** Where this positive outcome of place attachment can be criticised therefore is the lack of stewardship for the environment on a wider scale. Participants only demonstrated a sense of environmental responsibility on a local level, **showing disappointment at litter on a beach, and when discussing local areas; 'Why worry about the North Pole when the Gower needs help?' and 'If you are Welsh, you should be proud of Wales and look after the natural environment.'** This can be problematic as the 'greatest sustainability challenges are at regional, national and global scales,' and it is at this level that 'sense of place is least understood'.¹³ This was echoed in the study; no consideration for larger sustainability issues was referenced in relation to place perception. This may not be a negative aspect of the findings however as local appreciation of the environment can 'drive change on a global scale,' following 'careful place- specific research'.¹⁴ At a local level, one participant commented: **'It is 'much better to appreciate the environment and encourage people to look after it.' 'Without talking about litter and maintaining the natural balance of beaches and crags, people will ruin it.'**

The findings on place attachment, relationship and perception were consistent with literature in many ways; with participants showing unique, individualised points of view and reference to culture, social process and experience. This was specifically in tune with Shamsuddin

The articulation of participant's 'sense of place,' was also difficult to ascertain as predicted by the literature.¹⁷ The observations therefore served as excellent indicators of this as 'language can never fully encompass the felt or embodied qualities of experience'.¹⁸ This was evidenced in the observation findings, with some participants demonstrating a connection to the environment through experience; **'The path was so boggy, we called it 'The bog of stench.' But the sky was so pretty and then we knew we were lucky.'** Connections to 'place' were also evident in comments from participants when in nature; **'We need to pass this on, everyone watches TV and they never go out, they might not know how amazing it is in Wales.'** This linked to the literature about the human experience of place relying upon 'emotion and intuition,' and thus the subjective nature of 'place' is reiterated. To elaborate, this 'emotion and intuition'¹⁹ can be linked to the social interaction and emotive responses held by participants as a result of the course. Students share thoughts and feelings with one another and thus create emotional connections to this social, cultural and educational experience. This emotional 'place attachment' was reflected clearly in the findings; **'I don't generally develop an emotional attachment to anywhere, that way, because when I definitely will leave, I'm not upset about leaving.'** Some participants linked their experiences of place to emotional connection freely, but it was apparent that this was only in reference to nature or the outdoors- not urban settings.

Implications for Teaching Practice

Recommendations from the study fall into two areas; recommendations specific to key findings, and suggestions for future research in the area. From the key findings, it is clear that the course encouraged students to discover their local area, encouraging environmental responsibility, thus strengthening their appreciation of 'place.' It was also revealed that history and culture are of great value when reflected in the learning experience. The recommendation therefore would be to educate practitioners to further diversify the outdoor and academic learning journey and to facilitate exploration more widely to foster this. This recommendation would benefit



practice to give a collective understanding of 'place' offered on the course and to further nurture positive behaviours that encourage the development of place perception.

The second recommendation for the course is to develop an understanding for both practitioners and students about 'sense of place' within the context of the curriculum, reiterating the importance of social, historical and cultural factors. This recommendation is closely linked to the first but with a focus on involving the student in the facilitation of learning experiences. Transparency in practice that shows an understanding of place attachment could serve to strengthen environmental appreciation, responsibility and emotional connection to 'place.'

Recommendations for further research in the area can be presented in two different directions. The first is to conduct the research in a longitudinal study; monitoring the effect of the course on place perception following course completion. This recommendation would be beneficial as developing 'sense of place' is not a quantifiable 'lesson' but an ongoing process throughout one's life, linked to identity creation²⁰. It would therefore be of value to explore the learning experiences of the course in reference to place perception in an ongoing manner; truly monitoring the lifelong learning journey. The second direction for further research is to expand the study to more participants; access only allowed for two year groups (19 students maximum) so a larger number of students across other year groups or levels could signify the future of this research. This recommendation serves to diversify the findings and collect a richer sample of data with the same focus as the study itself. This may further deepen the understanding of the influences of an outdoor adventure course of 'sense of place' for learners.

Conclusion

To all educational practitioners, From reading 'Place in Practice,' if you take away only one message, I hope it is this: I have found that it is not a matter of finding 'place' in education, but to acknowledge the holistic permeation of place in our practice and to fully embody this. Take every opportunity to highlight valuable place based experiences, facilitate conversations surrounding relationships to the environment and importantly, fuel learners' curiosity about place: If we continue to accept that learning is for all, place in education can be a reward for both learners and teachers. The wonderful biproduct of our curricula, place in practice can be embraced by all. ■

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