More than activities: using a sense of place to enrich student learning in adventure sport.

Abstract

There has been increasing interest in recent years in the significance of a sense of place in the literature of outdoor adventure education. In the UK relationships between outdoor education and the environment still appear largely focused on the science of the natural environment and the activity in question. In this paper we present empirical evidence from an action research project to demonstrate how a combination of formal and informal pedagogy in a higher education context can lead to a socio-cultural and historical understanding of place and enrich the learning experience of students when teaching the classical outdoor adventurous activity of sailing. The sport of dinghy sailing is a module within a Bachelor's undergraduate degree in outdoor education and was taught from a small fishing town in Devon, England.   We adopted an integrated and experiential critical pedagogy of place that allowed theory and practice, thought and action to be a holistic experience and this approach provided opportunities for informal as well as formal learning. This action research project used methods including: photo-elicitation, focus group interviews and evidence from the analysis of written student assignments. Our findings show that students discover a significance of the meaningful relationship between the socio-cultural history of where that activity takes place and the activity itself and that as a result their engagement in the learning and research process was enriched.

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Introduction

In this paper we consider the experiences of university students who were learning to sail as part of a Bachelor of Arts degree programme in Outdoor Adventure Education. Student experiences need to be considered for several reasons. Firstly there is the evaluative component of a reflective teaching cycle; that was the impetus for this action research project detailed here. Also, and perhaps more importantly, the concept of experiential learning is fundamental to the pedagogical style seen in outdoor adventure education programmes (e.g. see Greenaway, 1990; Quay, 2003; 2013) and it is argued that in order to fully comprehend an outdoor education experience, it must be understood as a form of lived experience as underpinned by the philosophical pragmatism of John Dewey (Ord & Leather, 2011). Student experiences contain thinking, action and learning, in a complex yet inter-related weave of this experience, uniquely situated in the transactional experience of each individual, and as Ord & Leather (2011) argue 'Dewey's theory implores us to engage with the whole experience and engage with the participants fully and meaningfully throughout'(p.21).

The [NAME OF UNIVERSITY] is located in the south west of England close to the sea. Established in 1840, [NAME] has a long tradition and heritage of teacher education and sport, including those associated with outdoor adventurous activities. Dinghy (small boat) sailing has been taught at the University for the last thirty years as part of an outdoor education programme. This has always been located in the faculty of physical education and sport, and as such the current degree evolved from this heritage. The basic skills of sailing and 'seamanship' competency were the focus and in recent years the theoretical aspects of degree study were concerned with two areas: a) group leadership and management in the context of journeys and expeditions and b) the impact on, or of, the dynamic natural coastal environment.

The response of students had always been positive for the practical sailing aspects of the module, but disappointing when assessing the standard of their work for the written theoretical assessments.

This disappointing performance was determined over several years through a number of feedback

mechanisms; in the main the average grades for written assessments for these students were

slightly lower than for their other modules; lectures were not as well attended as sailing sessions;

the formal student feedback, through module evaluations, indicated that the theoretical content

and teaching was 'satisfactory' (rather than the normal good or excellent). Additionally, informal

conversations with students suggested that this lack of student engagement with the academic

theory could have been attributed not only to the curriculum content, but perhaps the personality

and pedagogical approach of some lecturing staff. Specifically, some lecturers were not involved in

the teaching of sailing and were only involved in teaching some components of outdoor education

theory. They were traditional in lecturing style and did not use an experiential pedagogy and as a

consequence were less able to build trust by grounding their teaching in students learning (see

Brookfield, 1996). As such these lecturers were relatively unknown and perhaps not trusted, when

compared to the outdoor adventure education staff and the experiential pedagogy which they

applied directly outdoors. As Bryson & Hand (2007) highlight, establishing 'trust' relationships

between students and staff and students and peers is essential in fostering student engagement.

The quality of the relationship between lecturer and student is referred to as its 'climate' by

amongst others Biggs & Tang (2007) who argue that a climate where the assumption is that students

can be trusted 'allows students freedom to make their own learning related choices' (p.48) which

supports how we approached our teaching as well as how we designed the theoretical assessments

as detailed below

The sailing module was reviewed each semester that it was taught; through formal student

evaluation as well as formal staff module review processes that consider the content, teaching,

resources and student performance. This process is good reflective practice in higher education

(H.E.) (see Brookfield, 1995) where effective self-evaluation is crucial to a healthy self-regulating H.E.

system (Jackson & Lund, 2000). With a change of curriculum as well as teaching staff, this provided an opportunity to re-structure the whole programme and allowed us to modify and address the factors detailed above. Martin & McCullagh (2011) discuss how outdoor education is a discipline that is complementary yet a discrete one when compared to physical education and when re-writing the module content our approach was informed by this conceptualisation. Specifically we designed a module that appreciated the overlap and complementary nature of these disciplines, and ensured that we had a greater emphasis on outdoor education than physical education i.e. it was less skill focussed and ego-centric (i.e. less emphasis on personal development and group leadership) and a greater emphasis on and awareness of the teaching location, the place and the environment (more eco-centric), or more simply what many would describe as a balanced and holistic outdoor education approach (e.g. Higgins, 1997).

As a teaching team we had discussed developments in contemporary outdoor education discourse on place based education. The content which emerges from the particular attributes of a place is specific to the geography, ecology, sociology, politics, and other dynamics of that place. This fundamental characteristic underpins the concept making it intrinsically multidisciplinary as well as experiential. It reflects an educational philosophy that is more wide-ranging than the 'learning for qualifications to secure employment' as it connects place with self and community (Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000). We were particularly influenced by the work of Gruenewald (2003) who argued for the cultural, political, economic, and ecological dynamics of places and Stewart (2008) who used reading of the landscape and use of historical accounts to explore complex cultural-ecological processes that shape places, as well as Harrison (2010) who explored the ontological and epistemological framework of place from the disciplines of human geography, phenomenology as well as anthropological and environmental psychological writing. In particular, and with our students we used the work of Wattchow & Brown (2011) which contextualises place for outdoor educators as well as the work of eminent geographer Tuan (1977). Whilst we realised that our shared outdoor practice had been place based for years, with stories of people, places and events,

this had never been formalised in the sailing module as part of the student learning experience and as such were keen to explore this by teaching sailing and place together in one module.

What kind of place?

For us, based in the UK, our cultural heritage is firmly rooted in living, trading and fighting on and near the sea. Viking invasions, Sir Francis Drake, the Royal Navy and colonial British Empire, the Pilgrim Fathers leaving the Mayflower steps in Plymouth bound for the 'new world' or Charles Darwin on his seminal journey on HMS Beagle; our history and heritage is firmly rooted in maritime adventures and seafaring. As a result, the prevalence of nautical terms in the English language (e.g. 'learning the ropes', 'shipshape and Bristol fashion', 'not enough room to swing a cat', 'by and large', 'slush fund', 'get under way' and 'all above board')[i] demonstrates how the sea inhabits our national psyche. The furthest point from the coastline in England and Wales is only 110 km, and about one third of the UK population lives within 10 km of it (Environment Agency, 1999).

The place we chose to focus upon was the town of Brixham. Brixham is on the south Devon coast in the south west peninsular of England, and for a number of years we have taught the skills and sport of sailing there. It is about an hour by road from our University campus.   Over several years we have developed some well-established personal relationships between the teaching team and people in the town; the head of the outdoor education centre, the assistant coxswain of the lifeboat and the curator of the museum amongst others. Geographically the size of Brixham appeared manageable to explore a sense of place and this made it affordable in implementing the curriculum.

In preparation for teaching about the place of Brixham we researched the town including visiting the Heritage Museum archive located there. Brixham is rich in history, dating back to at least Anglo-Saxon times since it is a natural harbour. It remains a small fishing town and port at the southern end of Torbay, across the bay from Torquay. The town is hilly and built around the harbour which

remains in use as a dock for fishing trawlers as well as a modern sailing marina for the recreation industry (Brixham Heritage Museum, online). Brixham has a focal tourist attraction in a life size floating replica of the *Golden Hind*, the ship of one of England's most famous seafaring men, Sir Francis Drake[ii]. On 5th November 1688 William of Orange landed in Brixham and this invasion of England ultimately deposed the catholic King James II and won him the crowns of England, Scotland and Ireland and the protestant legacy lives on. To the south of Brixham lies Berry Head, where a Napoleonic Fort is currently being excavated by local archaeologists, and also thought to be on the site of an Iron Age fort. Brixham's military naval significance continued into the 20th century. The wide concrete embarkation ramps are still evident for the troops, armour and fleet who sailed for the D-Day landings in France in June 1944. Fishing remains an integral part of Brixham's history. The great storm of 1866 that saw the loss of nearly 100 lives and prompted the people of The City of Exeter to raise funds for a lifeboat (Salsbury, 2002) still sees the RNLI Torbay Lifeboat 'on station' in Brixham with an average of 103 launches per year (RNLI, online) as well as a tourist attraction in its own right.

Fishing and tourism are the major industries in Brixham, with recreational sailing and power-boating a feature of the harbour. Of particular note in maritime heritage are the traditional tall ships[iii] operated by The Trinity Sailing Foundation (online) who sail these traditional old fishing trawlers primarily for personal development courses in the area of youth welfare. These traditional Brixham trawlers, with their ochre red sails, are living working connections with the cultural past of England and Brixham, where in their heyday in the 1890s there were as many as 300 working out of the port of Brixham (Brixham.uk.com, online).

INSET PLATE 1 HERE

Plate 1: The Brixham Trawler Provident

Reproduced with kind permission of The Trinity Sailing Foundation, Brixham, Devon.

In addition to this the outdoor education centre which hosts our sailing is itself rich in history. The British Seamen's (Orphans) Boys' Home in Brixham, Devon is nowadays a busy charitable-commercial outdoor education centre that specialises in traditional multi-activity residential visits for school children, typically in the last years of their primary education generally aged 10 and 11. The British Seamen's Boys' Home is an imposing gothic styled granite building built on the side of the harbour in 1863 by William Gibbs for the orphan sons[iv] of deceased British seamen. On his death in 1875 the Home was placed in trust to the Bishop of Exeter, with the object of providing for the orphan sons of British seaman which it did until it closed in 1988 after 125 years (Potts & Wilson, 2006). As such the start of our students place based sailing module is in a building full of history, as part of the town of Brixham.

INSERT PLATE 2 HERE

Plate 2: British Seamen's Boys' Home
Reproduced with kind permission of Grenville House Outdoor Education Centre, Brixham, Devon.

Thus, with this rich cultural heritage as a backdrop, quintessentially encapsulated in the outdoor centre and the town of Brixham, we believed that the stories to be discovered by our students through their own research would engage them enough to evoke a 'sense of place' and that this was an important aspect of the curriculum.

Enriching Student Learning

Brixham's extensive historical connection to the sea, and particularly sailing, provided a wonderful opportunity to engage students in a sense of place and so enrich their learning. We planned that by exploring the town on land and sea, interacting with locals, and hearing the stories from the past, that they would get a real sense and 'feel' for Brixham. As a consequence we hoped that they would

be able to relate their sailing skills within this socio-cultural historical matrix in a meaningful way. We believed that as Tuan (1977, p.18) suggested, 'a place [Brixham] achieves concrete reality when our experience of it is total, that is, through all the senses as well as with the active and reflective mind'.

Indeed Tuan (1977) has been influential in allowing us to conceptualise how we connect with a place through experiential engagement. He argues that 'while it takes time to form an attachment to place, the quality and intensity of experience matters more than simple duration' (Tuan, 1977, p.198). Consequently, we ensured there would be an intense, high quality educational experience with ample opportunity for both formal and informal learning during and around the planned activities. For example the shared minibus journey to and from Brixham, along with changing into kit, rigging the boats, sailing in groups and shared end of day reflections, all contributed to opportunities for talk – or the 'chat, conversation and dialogue' that Batsleer (2008) defines as central to informal education. By this we mean the formal learning occurred during planned sessions for both sailing skill acquisition and exploring the concept of place and these were well defined in a timetabled plan and the content prepared and taught in a structured way. The informal learning that occurred was at times opportunistic and spontaneous, where we saw opportunities to pose questions and help students develop the connections between dinghy sailing, the place and themselves. Jeffs & Smith (2011) explain that informal education is a spontaneous process of helping people to learn and suggest that it works through conversation, and the exploration and enlargement of experience. These informal learning opportunities also led to bigger questions about power, politics, equality and justice. For example a discussion about seasickness and discomfort leads to stories about the navy in Admiral Nelson's time. He also suffered seasickness and the conditions for the men on board were squalid, foul and fetid and at this time naval press gangs forcibly conscripted men, only of the working classes, into the navy (see Adkins & Adkins, 2009). It also required us as the teaching staff to trust in our intuition, each other and our flexibility in teaching, or what Atkinson and Claxton (2000) detail as *The Intuitive Practitioner* and the value of

not always knowing what one is doing or not knowing where a conversation is going! An awareness of this construct was reassuring for the teaching team. Adventure sport is taught in environments that require dynamic risk management, with well-structured opportunities for students to learn and when combined with traditional sailing tuition can be formulaic and rigid. However, when working with an intuitive grasp of situations, based on a deep tacit understanding of each other and our educational aims, we no longer needed to rely on plans and guidelines since we were able to make rapid responses to developing situations, based on the tacit application of tacit rules; knowing our students, the place, how to teach sailing and the holistic breadth of outdoor education.

The students were required to undertake an individual research project, as part of their assessed work as well as having their practical sailing skills assessed. Project-based learning as a pedagogical strategy has been shown by Wurdinger, Haar, Hugg and Bezon (2007) to be useful since it 'taps into students' interests by allowing them to create projects that result in meaningful learning experiences' (p.150). [NAME] students were given the freedom to choose one theme about Brixham from this socio-historical cultural matrix as a place that has been influenced by sailing. Examples of topics chosen included Brixham Trawlers, the Great Storm of 1866, the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, the British Seamen's Boys' Home, Brixham's strategic importance in World War 2 and the Berry Head Fort from the Napoleonic War. Two visits to the local museum were organised; the first as visitors to enable students to explore the wealth of possible topics, and to spark their interest. The second visit was to the museum archive, which was supported by the curator and volunteers (archaeologists and historians from the local area and community). Although people do not usually go to museums to talk, conversations in museums 'reflect and change a visitor's identity, discipline specific knowledge, and engagement with an informal learning environment' (Leinhardt, Crowley & Knutson, 2011, p. ix).

Initially we were a little circumspect as how the students would react to the module. From our previous experience and exploration of such issues, outdoor education students typically present themselves as having activist and kinaesthetic learning preferences, typically favouring 'learning by doing' or 'a hands on approach'. We were concerned about them struggling to engage cognitively and affectively (Solomonides, 2013) with learning through this research based pedagogy, especially since their practical adventure sport experiences prior to University were only skill focused, with little consideration for the environment or the place. However, despite our concerns, we found that individual student learning, a key feature of student engagement policy and practice (see Trowler & Trowler, 2010), was enhanced. Effective practices in undergraduate teaching that improve learning outcomes, and thus student engagement, are evidenced in the literature and summarised by Chickering & Gamson (1987, cited in Trowler & Trowler, 2010). These include; student-staff contact, cooperation among students, high expectations, time on task and active learning. Given the design of the module as detailed above this should not have been a surprise to us. The evident enthusiasm and enjoyment exhibited by the students during and after the teaching were behaviours that we had hoped for. Thus the three dimensions of student engagement, behavioural, cognitive and affective (Solomonides, 2013) had been addressed.

Method

This paper reports the findings of an action research project designed to evaluate the implementation of a new module for an undergraduate degree that combined sailing skills with place based education. We find the definition of action research by Carr and Kemmis (1986, p. 162) as 'simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken in order to improve the rationality of our practice, and understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out' as a highly effective explanation of our research presented here. It is firmly located in our own practice, is linked to our self-reflection and is associated with the notion of reflective practice that

permeates education and sports coaching, and remains a contemporary issue (e.g. see Knowles, Gilbourne, Cropley & Dugdill, 2014). Smith (2007) highlights how this approach places us firmly in the British tradition of action research, rather than the broader understanding in the USA of action research as 'the systematic collection of information that is designed to bring about social change' (Bogdan and Biklen 1982, p.213). We are university lecturers in the UK, who teach the practical skills of sailing combined with an associated and related theoretical body of knowledge, who wanted to evaluate our practice in the light of new curriculum developments. This position is supported by McNiff (1993) when she argues that in action research educational knowledge is created by individual teachers as they attempt to express their own values in their professional lives. As such we were clear that our values as outdoor educators had directly influenced both the content and pedagogy associated with teaching this module. Our values as outdoor educators were that learning to sail, or for that matter any other outdoor adventure sport, is always 'more than activities' an argument articulated for a long time by Greenaway (1990); specifically that the skill acquisition, here the one of sailing, does not happen in isolation in some form of sterile laboratory, but in a dynamic natural environment, and one in which people have created a place, a social environment, as much as the forces of nature have helped form that place. The idea of living our values in our professional practice is according to McNiff (2013, p.26) 'at the heart of debates about demonstrating and judging quality and validity in action research'. Whether these values are shared by others in culturally diverse settings is something that publishing our findings here in an international academic journal may help us to address.

Action research is a cyclical process and involves a cycle or spiral of planning, action, monitoring and reflection, and this basic structure has been elaborated in different accounts of the same process, for example Elliott (1991), Kemmis & McTaggart (1982) and McNiff, Whitehead & Lomax (2003) all promote the same cyclical or spiral approach to action and reflection. This article is not the place we believe for a comprehensive critique of action research in educational contexts and trust that for the interested reader the authors referred to here will act as a useful starting point for further inquiry.

We engaged with the cycle of action and reflection in order to evaluate our practice and present it here as a product of our research process. The action cycle for this research project was as follows:

1. Design a new teaching module based on practical sailing skills and current theoretical developments in the outdoor education literature on a Pedagogy of Place (Wattchow & Brown, 2011).
2. Plan, develop and implement a pedagogic approach – as detailed above.
3. Evaluate the impact of this module on the student experience – as explored below.
4. Reflect upon these findings and analyse the implications of these for our practice – discussed below
5. Teach the module in subsequent years in light of these findings, as yet to be implemented and evaluated.

Participants

This research cycle was experienced by the student participants as well as us the university teaching staff. There were twelve students who had opted for this module; six male and six female, with ages from 19 to 26 years and two experienced outdoor adventure education lecturers. The students were all in their second year of three on a full-time undergraduate degree programme in Outdoor Adventure Education and none of them had been to the town Brixham before the start of teaching. They were a mixed ability group of sailors across the spectrum of experience, ranging from three total novices to two Royal Yachting Association Instructors, one of whom was a regular competitive dinghy sailor at a national standard. As staff we brought a wealth and variety of experience to the module. Both are experienced sailing instructors as well as outdoor educators and in more recent years these experiences have been utilised in our university teaching. Our knowledge of Brixham as a socio-historical place was limited other than as a venue where sailing skills were taught and as a destination for our own sailing recreation. As such this was also a journey of discovery for us. Consequently, this teaching module provided an ideal opportunity for us to collaborate on this research project.

Instruments, procedures and data analysis

We employed two main methods to gather the students' experiences at the end of their sailing module. Firstly we conducted three separate focus group interviews for us to hear the students describe, express and make sense of their experience.   As Morgan (1997, p.2) highlights 'the hallmark of focus groups is the explicit use of group interaction to produce data and insights that would be less accessible without the interaction found in a group.' This structure was used in order to allow students the opportunity to freely engage in the research process, in their friendship groups and interact. All students chose to attend one of the groups and as Patton (2002) emphasises the participants get to hear each other's responses and to make additional comment beyond their own initial responses as they hear what other people have to say, thus providing a richer set of data.

We used the methods of photo-elicitation to stimulate discussion having been persuaded of its efficacy by Harper (2002), Loeffler (2005) and Porr, Mayan, Graffigna, Wall & Vieira (2011). For the purposes of the research, we asked the students to select three images from their collections that they thought would have 'a long lasting meaning to them related to their experience on this module'.   They brought these to the focus group where they shared them and were asked individually to "tell us the story" of what the image meant to them. We asked them not to try and guess why we were interested in seeing their photographs, in other words, not to select the images that they thought we wanted to see so as to minimise our effect as the researchers. We emphasised that we were genuinely interested in seeing what was meaningful to them and that as an ethical piece of research they had the right to withdraw and that importantly what they presented could remain anonymous and confidential[v]. A number of the students' choices that illustrate key themes are presented below in the research findings. Loeffler (2005, p.346) found that her participants

'exhibited a strong desire to capture every nuance of the excitement, intensity, and learning of the new activity or environment' when telling the stories associated with particular images and we suspected that our students would be similar.

Students were encouraged to bring images from any source, be it the museum archive, images found online or their own or friends photographs. Ethically we gained informed consent of all participating students, including for all the images used in the research including for this paper. Throughout the degree, and including this module, students were encouraged to take photographs if they wished as a useful aid for their own personal reflection, but we consciously made no attempt to influence their content. As such most of them took a variety of images to document their lives and many were users of social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter) on a regular basis sharing images and comments on many aspects of their student lives. This cohort of students has its own Facebook group and we have found that the sharing of images and informal stories has been useful in this module and throughout the degree in order to further reflect upon and make meaning out of the many practical experiences they encounter. As such the use of images and informal conversation around them was not a new process for the students and so to use this method as a research tool in a directed focus group appeared to be a logical method to use.

Following this, we also analysed the students' written academic assessments; one research project about Brixham and an associated piece of reflective writing that related learning to sail to Brixham the place. This was done once the work had been through the standard assessment procedures of the university. We looked at the student writing for evidence to support the themes that had emerged from the focus groups interviews.

To analyse the student writing and the discussion of their images we used what Stake, (1995, p.74) describes as 'two strategic ways that researchers reach new meanings'; categorical aggregation and

direct interpretation. We have used this useful description from Stake (1995) since this action

research project could also be described as an exploratory case study due to its size and structure.

'What is called open coding in grounded theory is similar to the first stage of classifying statements

in phenomenology is known as categorical aggregation in case study research' (Creswell, 1998,

p.155). Categorical aggregation is the collection of instances or occurrences within the data that

represent a specific category, theme, or idea that the researcher determines to be important as a

result of it emerging from the analysis of the data (Creswell, 1998). Direct interpretation may be of

an individual or singular instance (Stake, 1995) where the researcher 'draws meaning from it without

looking for multiple instances' (Creswell, 1998, p.154) and we considered this useful due to the small

size of our group.

As these photographs were categorised on our interpretations, we sought peer review as

verification, which involved discussing our findings with critical colleagues (as Merriam, 1988 cited in

Beames & Ross, 2010). These critical colleagues were involved in the teaching and research of

outdoor and experiential education, at our university as well as at a European conference where we

presented our research. Additionally, we showcased our work at a local research symposium where

students attended and this provided them with the opportunity to review our findings. This was not

as thorough a process as Hammersley & Atkinson's (1995, cited in Creswell, 1998) 'Member

Checking'. This was really a function of the resources available to us as well as the good will of the

students.

Research Findings & Discussion

A critical pedagogy of place challenges all educators to reflect on the relationship between the kind

of education they pursue and the kind of places we inhabit (Gruenewald, 2003). The evidence

presented by our students strongly indicates to us that by engaging with place responsive outdoor

education (Wattchow & Brown, 2011) that this place, the town of Brixham, is not merely a venue or empty space; rather it is rich in significance and meaning and consequently the place becomes a powerful pedagogic phenomenon. As a consequence the relationship between an embodied sailing experience and place appears at times mutually dependent. Here we present our findings in three themes; a) sailing and place mutuality, b) the informal pedagogic relationship, c) sailing skill development. Students chose images "that were significant to them" which were then discussed in the focus groups. Additionally, from their reflective writing we gained insights into specific examples of their experience in these categories. A selection of images and excerpts from their writing is presented here.

Sailing and place mutuality

For some students the recent history of the Brixham sailing trawler and its continued presence in the harbour evoked this response.

> *When I was on the water at Brixham or at the Sailing Centre, I would look out at*
>
> *the harbour and imagine the 300 vessels overpowering the area with their red*
>
> *sails.*

INSERT PLATE 3 HERE

Plate 3: Brixham Trawlers
Reproduced with kind permission of The Trinity Sailing Foundation, Brixham, Devon.

Whilst we had been on board a trawler in the harbour, talked to the crew and seen their story in the museum, we did not have the opportunity to sail one. For other students, who researched the earliest records of settlement, it was Brixham's longevity which captured their interest:

I like the fact that it's been there for such a long time ... Like when I was reading up on Brixham for that essay … like it was so interesting to see that you can get all the way back to the Neolithic Period and people have gone "Err…that's a good spot actually … I like that …" and it's still exactly the same and you can imagine they must had had exactly the same feeling as we do now sailing in and out of it.

Other students were able to express their comprehension of place and how this allowed them to think and connect more deeply, an introspection that continues to deepen their experience, knowledge and connection to particular places of significance and meaning. Wattchow & Brown (2011) consider this as an active journey towards belonging and with this it is believed comes a connection and the development of an ethic of care.

I feel this is the main aspect for me to take away from this module; the deeper understanding of what gives somewhere its sense of place and how that affects you and you then start to notice nice things about the place, and it becomes a stronger memory than just somewhere you went, you develop a connection which you always relate to that experience of that place. You then pass on the story and add new meaning to someone else's expectations of that place.

INSERT PLATE 4 HERE

Plate 4: Thoughtful contemplation

I think the impact of having a unique and challenging experience in [a] place with a sense of immense historical and cultural presence, especially if it is relevant to your experience can be a lot more sensory and you discover more about yourself and those others in your group. Sometimes it feels real education can be lost in the speed of modern life.

Informal pedagogic relationship

> *The day which we spent in Brixham but didn't go sailing was probably the day I was*
>
> *able to get a larger sense of Brixham as a place and experience all what it had to*
>
> *offer. This session was full of different events that made me experience Brixham and*
>
> *get to know the people who live there. I was introduced to many people who live and*
>
> *work in Brixham and who can relate to it as a place and a home.*

This particular day, described above, became known affectionately by the students as 'The best day ever', which is interesting as we did not go sailing. That day a strong easterly wind was blowing straight into the harbour making it unsuitable to sail. Instead we explored Brixham from the land. We visited Trinity Sailing's Brixham Trawlers, the RNLI Lifeboat and the town's heritage museum. This time spent together as tutors and students allowed us opportunities to engage in informal learning through what Batsleer (2008) describes as 'talk'. Batsleer (2008) highlights that the act of talking incorporates 'chat, conversation and dialogue'. She discusses the importance of learning through conversation and dialogue and how conversation is a vehicle of inquiry and education as dialogue, as a critical dialogue, 'is the paradigm to understand all the discussions' of informal outdoor education (Batsleer, 2008, p.7). Chat allows engagement between us and our students at a basic level, for example the rituals of group interaction, safety briefings and social niceties. Chat leads to conversation which allows a deeper level of engagement and the development of meanings to be made, and then if we are skilled facilitators of learning (outdoor experiential education lecturers) the deeper dialogue can be explored; issues of social and eco-justice, a critical pedagogy of place, or relationships between people and their environment. The students were like excited children on a family day out and their photographs told the same tale (see Plates 5 & 6). This rapport with the students was evident both on land and on the water and provided many opportunities for informal learning.

INSERT PLATE 5 HERE

Plate 5: 'The Best Day Ever' – Student Photograph

INSERT PLATE 6 HERE

Plate 6: The teaching family – student cartoon posted on social media

(Note: 'Auntie Ali' was a support worker for one student)

Some students enjoyed our research process using photographs and telling us about their

experiences. They made a real effort to include as many different stories as possible in the images

they brought along (see plate 7).

> *I feel that I can't reflect to someone on my experiences to the extent of what they were without*
>
> *showing them… but I have given a good idea on the sense of place of Brixham.*

INSERT PLATE 7 HERE

Plate 7: Student Montage

The informal learning opportunities and rapport developed is we believe at the heart of enriching

student learning and their engagement with the learning objectives of the module. Whilst we have

not presented any comparisons of assessment grades, it is our perception that the quality of the

written assignments was considerably improved compared to previous cohorts. As Harper & Quaye

(2009) highlight, student engagement is about developing empathy and rapport; with peers,

professors [lecturers] as well as the institution itself. They also argue that it is necessary to adapt traditional inflexible pedagogical, environmental, and curricular approaches and 'revise the curriculum, contextual factors, pedagogical strategies, and learning philosophies' (2009, p.51) in order to promote engagement, and this is what we believe we have achieved here. As Tuan (1977) suggests, 'Eventually what was strange… and unknown space becomes familiar place. Abstract space, lacking significance other than strangeness, becomes concrete place, filled with meaning. Much is learned but not through formal instruction' (p.199).

Sailing skill development

Whilst these findings have focussed upon students' connection with place, it is important to emphasise that this was not to the detriment of practical sailing skills. We highlight this here since one of the aims of an outdoor education degree is to develop students' practical skills, including sailing. To reassure the reader that a sense of place was not developed to the detriment of sailing skills we provide the following example. At the end of four full days on the water, one novice sailor, who was extremely nervous on the first day and stated that she wished she had not chosen to go sailing, was performing a 'dry-capsize' manoeuvre as evidenced in plate 8 below, citing this as a major 'sense of achievement'. This is a more advanced sailing manouvre that requires confidence, committment, timing and agility to successfully execute.

INSERT PLATE 8 HERE

Plate 8: Successful dry capsize

In summary the student learning on this taught module was influenced by;

1. Developing a sense of place, by researching, imagining and sometimes experiencing the lives of the people of Brixham (past and present) as well as an embodied sailing experience. This enabled the students to develop an empathy with the people of Brixham and their relationship with the sea and sailing and develop a sense of connection.

2. In developing a greater understanding of how the socio-cultural history of a place is directly related to an outdoor activity such as sailing, students were able to shape their own academic learning by specifically choosing what aspect of the place to explore in order to satisfy their own personal curiosities before relating this to their active physical sailing experiences and skill development. This we perceive produced a greater level of assessed academic performance.

3. The informal learning opportunities afforded by the module enabled student relationships to flourish both with other students and lecturers. This helped enable all participants to be part of an inter-connected set of relationships; of sailing and place as well as physical, emotional and cognitive components of student learning.

The centrality of embodied experiences which are integral to outdoor education suggest that place-responsive outdoor education cannot be conducted in a lecture room, nor can it be effectively implemented if students are outdoors and only 'being active'. The simplistic binary of 'doing or reflecting on experience' overlooks the nuanced, highly contextualised and interconnected webs of people, places and contested meanings of experience (Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

Implications for practice and research

The findings from this action research lead us to several related conclusions about our practice, in general terms as well as specifically related to our place based sailing module.

Firstly, we are curious as how to enable students and their communities to develop a sustainable socio-cultural and historical relationship with their places through engagement in outdoor adventurous activities. Gruenewald's (2003) *Critical Pedagogy of Place* is useful here since it attempts to contribute to the development of educational discourses and practices that explicitly 'examine the place-specific nexus between environment, culture, and education' (p.10). It is a pedagogy linked to cultural and ecological politics that is influenced 'by an ethic of eco-justice and other socio-ecological traditions that interrogate the intersection between cultures and ecosystems' (Gruenewald, 2003, p.10). The principal implication of a critical pedagogy of place to our research is the challenge it presents to expand the scope of our theory, inquiry, and practice to include the social and ecological contexts of our own, and others', 'inhabitance', even if this 'inhabitance' of Brixham is a temporary one when sailing as part of a university degree. A critical pedagogy of place challenges educators to reflect on the relationship between the kind of education they pursue and the kind of places we inhabit and leave behind for future generations (Gruenewald, 2003). Additionally, 'reading the landscape' (Stewart, 2008), or the application of outdoor education to specific cultural and environmental issues in particular places and communities, can assist us as outdoor educators and our students to 'probe and reflect on the relationships between personal experience and the complex cultural-ecological processes that have shaped the places in which we live and work' (p.79).

Specifically, on the next cycle of our action research we have planned to locate all of our teaching of the place based outdoor education sailing module, both indoor and outdoor, on land and on the water, in the town of Brixham, and as such hope to help blur the line for students between indoor and outdoor education, as well as the formal and informal learning. This is what Quay & Seaman

(2013, p.2) describe as 'the persistent dichotomy between method and subject matter… child and curriculum' that has been prevalent in education for the last hundred years. As Knapp (in Quay & Seaman, 2013, p.xiv) proposes, 'perhaps the time will soon arrive when [all] educators drop the many prefixes (… outdoor, experiential, adventure…) to describe the type of education they think is important… Maybe the only prefixes that will be used will be *good* or *effective*'. Once again, we will evaluate the student's experience of learning to sail and their sense of place as an integrated theoretical and practical experience. Quay & Seaman (2013) explain how we understand this process, and that in all experience the 'doing' and the 'thinking' are dialectically related; doing one necessarily involves and transforms the other.

More generally, across other aspects of our Bachelor's degree programme, we are looking to develop further opportunities for student choice in the focus of assessments including research projects and as a means of increasing student engagement in their formal learning that is assessed and so it is hoped enrich their learning.

In terms of specific areas for further research with which we are currently engaged, we are interested in the role that informal learning has in the development of relationships, the rapport building and the consequential increase in levels of attainment through a rise in motivation and engagement. In particular, the general talk that surrounds our pedagogy and the experiential immersion in sailing *and* place as one continuous entity that allowed us to engage deeply with students, their learning and the place.

Finally to address what McNiff (2013) discusses as theory generation, we are at an early stage. We have found that by providing a focus on place we have engaged and enriched student learning by helping the students to care about the place. Our values and the holistic approach to the teaching of adventure sport activities in outdoor education have shown that students do care about the place they sail, as evidenced in the quote below:

The smell of the salty harbour of which you feel you can taste, the sound of the wind

whistling through the sailing boats masts, the smell of fresh fish and chips on the quay

and the wonderful views of colourful layered houses. I would end every session looking

out into the harbour and appreciating just how beautiful Brixham was as a place and

how glad I was to experience it.

As Wattchow & Brown (2011) describe, places have an integral role in the teaching and learning experience. They are the sites of meaning making, the centre of lived experiences. If during this meaning making we are able to get the students, as well as ourselves, to care about the place, and each other and the activity itself, then perhaps we shall be able to more fully engage in the critical pedagogical approach that Gruenewald (2003) advocates, and address some of the bigger environmental and social injustices through a developed dialogue with our students (Batsleer, 2008). The maximising of these informal opportunities is an area upon which we are currently developing our ideas, and suggest here that formal physical and outdoor educators may have much to learn from those trained in the practices of informal education, as in Youth Work in the UK. The paper we present here has been the first iteration of an action research cycle that for us is highly illuminative, personally educative and consequently professionally stimulating. We trust that our experiences may have some resonance with reader's own contexts, places and professional practice.

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[i] There are too many to list and enjoy here - try Jolly R (2000) *Jackspeak: A Guide to British Naval Slang & Usage.* Maritime Books or Robinson, R (2008) *Not Enough Room to Swing a Cat: Naval Slang and Its Everyday Usage.* Conway.

[ii] Sir Francis Drake, Vice Admiral of the Royal Navy was an English sea captain, privateer, slaver and politician of the Elizabethan era. Drake carried out the second recorded circumnavigation of the world, and in 1580 the *Golden Hind* sailed into Plymouth with Drake and 59 remaining crew aboard, along with a rich cargo of spices and captured Spanish treasures. The Queen's half-share of the cargo surpassed the rest of the crown's income for that entire year. He was second-in-command of the English fleet against the *Spanish Armada* in 1588.

[iii] Tall ships - A tall ship is not a strictly defined type of sailing vessel. The term is widely used to mean a large traditionally rigged sailing vessel; traditional-rigged vessels are defined as those vessels whose sail-plan has a predominance of gaff sails and a number of masts constructed in sections.

[iv] No mention was made of orphaned daughters!

[v] Consent has been given for all images that are presented within this paper.