



Title: Environmental awareness through rock climbing: connecting students to their outdoor practice

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Copyright, publisher and additional information: Abstract presented at the 16th European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning Seminar, Plymouth Marjon University, 2th June – 2nd July 2017.

Reference: Porter, S. (2017, June). *Environmental awareness through rock climbing: connecting student to their outdoor practice*. Abstract presented at the 16th European Institute for Outdoor Adventure Education and Experiential Learning Seminar, Marjon University, Plymouth.

Environmental awareness through rock climbing: connecting students to their outdoor practice

Su Porter¹

The BA Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) degree at the University of St Mark and St John, Plymouth (Marjon), aims to develop well rounded outdoor learning practitioners, who are academically, socially, ethically and technically capable.

The programme is shaped by

- The QAA² Benchmarks for Hospitality, Sport, Leisure and Tourism and Environmental Studies,
- The Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL) – the umbrella organisation that promotes outdoor learning, lobbies on behalf of, represents and supports anyone involved in outdoor learning,
- The work of the National Governing Bodies such as the British Mountaineering Council (BMC), Royal Yachting Association (RYA) and British Canoeing (BC).

Pedagogically the degree is built on a philosophy of experiential education, and the emphasis on outdoor learning and leadership means that this largely involves reflective practice, action research, and humanistic and interpretative modes of enquiry. Therefore, we aim to develop graduates who are increasing their environmental awareness, for themselves, others and the environment in which we work.

The programme is professionally oriented, so what matters is the students' ability to act. Brown & Dilley (2012) argue that a responsible outdoor subject is response-able; a 'knowing' subject, able to anticipate human/non-human interactions and act accordingly. This suggests that *self-awareness*, in terms of *self-in-environment*, is as important as environmental awareness.

One of the ways utilised to develop the students' environmental awareness and ability to reflect upon their actions is through the production of an auto-ethnographic account of their participation in rock climbing in the outdoor environment. We believe that this

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² QAA - Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>

exercise provokes a development of the students' self-awareness, environmental awareness and – crucially – *self-in-environment* awareness.

To engage students in developing this idea of *self-in environment* awareness we decided to use autoethnography. We require the students to reflect on their experiences, identify themes and create a narrative that gives their voice as participant and, having read around their themes, give an outside view as a researcher. When the autoethnography was first trialled a highly apposite paper appeared in the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, in which Robbie Nicol presented an autoethnographic account of his solo expedition by canoe and sea kayak (Nicol, 2013). Nicol presented similar discussions to the aims we were hoping to achieve – to engage students in the promotion of pro-environmental behaviour, through their own participation in a taught module of rock climbing, which would engage them in physical, emotional, intellectual, social and possibly spiritual experiences.

The *Environmental Awareness through Adventure Sport* module has a strong practical component; where the development of personal outdoor climbing skills is used as a starting point for a more holistic discussion of the environment in which we work. This includes the nature and geology, weather, the users groups and the management, if any, of these sites. Venues included Dartmoor granite and Devonian limestone, uplands, lowlands and sea cliffs. More theoretical lectures included research positionality, journaling, autoethnography, environmental ethics and professionalism. Students are asked to keep a journal throughout the module, in order to base their assessed coursework on this. Through this the learners are more at the centre of the experience, there is ownership and hopefully empowerment and greater engagement as they enquire further and make sense of their own thoughts and ideas within the journal. The journal itself is not assessed; it is submitted with the final assignment as an appendix to support their writing.

What we are looking for in the students is a development of self-awareness, environmental awareness and – crucially – *self-in-environment* awareness. This was seen in the final written submission, the autoethnography, the journal and in an additional module evaluation we asked students to participate in.

All modules are evaluated; this module had an additional evaluation that asked three questions:

1. What impact did the auto-ethnography exercise have on the module for you?
2. What did you learn?
3. How might this affect you as an outdoor practitioner in the future?

These were deliberately open questions to allow the students to respond with what was uppermost in their thinking at that time. Some of the responses fit into the three areas of self-awareness, environmental awareness and – crucially – self-in-environment awareness and examples are included here.

The combination of the autoethnography, the journal accompanying the submission and the additional module evaluation resulted in us being able to see that:

1. Levels of self-awareness demonstrated are good;

Martha's journal (after she's bought some climbing boots):

"It was quite a difficult climb but the grip you get from the boots was amazing. This has definitely increased my climbing ability and my confidence as I can trust in my equipment to keep myself safe and not fall/slip off the rock!"

Andy's journal

"I climb because I love it and because it is there (Mallory, 1924; Yates, 2001). My dyspraxia becomes a mere inconvenience and almost forgotten, as I improve my motor skills with every climb; my muscles remembering my climbing moves; and, most importantly, I take part on an equal basis with my peers. The challenge of rock climbing has been a spiritual epiphany for me with a strong connection with the environment and excellent partnerships being formed."

Selected comments from the additional module evaluations...

- Made me think and reflect on my emotions rather than just the good and bad aspects of a session
- Psychologically I learnt how to deal with my fears and anxiety
- Viewing others from their perspective and not mine.

- I have learnt about myself and how I cope and react with others around me, I can use this in similar situations in the future.
- The deeper meaning of reflective practice has meant that through looking at my own thoughts deeper I have identified area where I can improve further and this is apparent in my autoethnography.

2. Environmental Awareness

In the students' work less was seen about the cognitive/scientific knowledge of the non-human world, much more was seen about an appreciation for the environment, which is at least a start.

“An awareness of the environment you're working in is crucial to outdoor adventure education and absolutely essential to rock climbing. It provides a three dimensional learning experience. It grounds the experience and, through all the senses, embeds the place in the memory.” Izzy.

Andy in particular, revealed a variety of different positions at different times. His autoethnography features a mythical, magical, mystical nature, highly romanticised and fantasized:

“...I became enchanted by the spirits who surrounded me in a soft blanket of every shade of green with moss and lichen and creeping plants protecting the rock and having a life of their own.” Andy

His journal ranged from the egocentric/functionalist to being 'at one with' or 'part of' nature. At one point he advocates a rule-based approach to nature:

“This was good to see that climbers were being respectful and evidence of everyone respecting and following the BMC's Guidance on correct crag etiquette of leaving no trace.” Andy

Comments from the additional Module Evaluation Forms about **environmental awareness**

- It has made me think more about the interaction between myself and the environment whilst participating in outdoor activities and the impact I can have on the environment
- Without an understanding of the environment climbing would not be so enjoyable
- I learnt that the environment is more delicate than I previously thought

- Greater appreciation of the environment we work in and how to look after it

3. *Self-in-environment* awareness - the relationship to environment.

Student's auto-ethnographies and journals revealed a range of attitudes/positions towards the environment.

These mostly focused on egocentric comments about the students' enjoyment, safety or use of the environment (all of which is very necessary!), such as:

"There was so much to contend with when seconding the climb, it had just started to rain, and the rock had become slippery. Instead of feeling like I could dance on the rock and really perfect my flexibility on the rock, I felt like an animal on ice, slipping all over the place. Everything I had finally become confident and comfortable with had gone out of the window. I was clinging to the rock with dear life and hating every minute, just wanting the climb to end. After feeling like I had come so far with rock climbing it is amazing how the change in the environment can affect me."
Martha.

Hayden developed a critique of Western dualist notions of 'society'/ humans as separate from 'nature'. He also picked up on technology as a means of bridging that separation

"'Outside of society, wilderness is something to be feared' (Short, 1991:6). This is a deeply worrying concept that human beings are forgetting where they are from; they are disconnecting themselves from their origins"...

"...climbing technology brings us closer to nature; it serves to bring us deeper and higher into nature". Hayden.

There were also signs of 'care'; this is reminiscent of Heidegger's 'dwelling' (dwelling, as opposed to just inhabiting a place, involves sparing, preserving, 'safeguarding each thing in its nature'), and also Leopold's land ethic.

"To avoid damaging a spider's web across one of the cracks I was going to use as a handhold, it seemed only right that I located a different crack even though this made my climb much harder. Climbing may help to blow the cobwebs of my mind away but I did not wish to do this to such an intricate and labour intensive creation. After all I was relying on a web of climbing

ropes tightly strung over rock and tree roots to hold me as I scaled the rock face wishing I also had six legs for extra grip.” Andy

Comments from the additional Module Evaluation Forms about **Self in environment**:

- The impact of being outdoors on group and personal attitudes
- I began to think more about what happened, how I felt, how others felt, my interaction with the environment
- To explore my senses, what I heard, what I saw and what I smelt.
- Made me properly evaluate not only my climbing ability but the environment and other aspects around me, including my feelings in an in-depth way
- Through my research I also learned a great deal about other outdoor practitioners and about how their respect for the natural world was sculpted in similar ways
- Look around take in environment and to think about my effect on it and its' effect on me

Conclusions

We are looking for self-awareness, environmental awareness and – crucially – self-in-environment awareness. Are we achieving our aim? Robbie Nicol posed the question: is autoethnography a useful approach for outdoor educators in promoting pro-environmental behaviour?

Certainly the level of self-awareness among the students is good, and perhaps the journal helped here as it pushed them to reflect on and articulate their experiences each week. Most of the students do not really move beyond self-awareness, choosing focal themes of fear, trust, confidence and development – though there was an awareness of their reliance on technology, and how technology enables a climb. A secure harness, shoes for grip, the hardware for placement and protection; climbers do develop close relationships and subjectivities with their equipment (Barratt, 2011, 2012).

A small number of students wrote about themselves in relation to the environment more explicitly, more consciously, than other; interestingly, and perhaps not surprisingly, these are generally the most competent climbers or particularly conscientious students. This

accords with suggestions from Wattchow (2007, 2008) and Preston (2014) that novice participants in outdoor activities can be overwhelmed by technical demands, rendering anything beyond that immediate focus (such as ethical relations with place) unimportant.

We require our students to have a good appreciation of the environment in which they work, to work sustainably and to be able to educate others with whom they come into contact. In their work here we see evidence of environmental awareness as an aesthetic appreciation of the environment, appreciation of the need to care for nature and a physical appreciation of cause and effect of climbers. The learning journal was certainly important as this led to deeper reflection, analysis, making sense of and application – all worthy graduate attributes.

This has led us to consider our range of approaches to develop environmental awareness in our programme. One example is the assessment in our module based in the mountains. Students engage with footpath management, the more scientific reasons for, why and how. They are then asked to investigate the impact footpath management has on people and their time spent in this mountain environment; this further develops their *self-in-environment* alongside more cognitive environmental awareness.

At the end of the day we aim to equip Marjon Outdoor Adventure Education graduates with skills, knowledge and experience to contribute to an environmentally and ethically responsible society and as outdoor practitioners who seek to develop their own, and others', understanding of the environment and the behaviours that can adversely affect it.

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