Wolves, Ptarmigan, and Lake Trout: Critical Elements of a Northern Canadian Place-Conscious Pedagogy

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Abstract

This paper explores the pedagogical benefits of combining remote winter wilderness travel and homestead living with reading, writing, and listening to personal narratives from the expedition region. A co-taught interdisciplinary university course will be used as a case study to demonstrate the ways in which this approach aids in developing place-consciousness—an awareness of storied landscapes—as well as the skills and mentality required for directly living with the land. It is our hope that the interdisciplinary content and experiential pedagogy employed in this course will enable students to re-establish vital relationships with nature that have been lost in our increasingly urban and technologically dominated lives. We will also discuss the use of uncommon and potentially controversial practices in our program such as fishing and hunting for food, and observing the skinning of wolves, that we believe are important elements of becoming genuinely place-conscious in the region of the Canadian north we study and visit. Tensions between our stated philosophies and actual practices are also revealed and examined.

Résumé

Cet article analyse les bienfaits pédagogiques, de combiner un voyage en hiver dans une région sauvage reculée, et la vie de campagne avec la lecture, l'écriture et l'écoute de récits personnels de la région de l'expédition. Un cours universitaire multidisciplinaire co-enseigné servira d'étude de cas pour démontrer de quelle façon cette approche favorise le développement de la conscience du lieu—une sensibilisation à ce que les paysages racontent—aussi bien que les habiletés et la mentalité requises pour vivre directement avec la terre. Nous espérons que le contenu multidisciplinaire et la pédagogie expérientielle de ce cours permettront aux élèves de rétablir des liens vitaux avec la nature, liens perdus dans notre vie de plus en plus urbaine et dominée par la technologie. Nous discuterons aussi de pratiques rares, potentiellement controversées, dans nos programmes, comme la pêche et la chasse de subsistance et l'observation du dépouillement des loups. Nous croyons que ce sont des éléments importants pour devenir vraiment conscients du lieu dans les régions du Nord canadien que nous étudions et visitons. Aussi, nous révélons et examinons les tensions entre nos énoncés philosophiques et les pratiques actuelles.

Keywords: place-consciousness, personal narratives, wilderness travel, storied landscape, interdisciplinary, writing, direct living, human-nature relationships.

Introduction

We live in a time when most of us are largely disconnected from those aspects of the natural world that provide the primary elements that sustain our lives (i.e., water, food, shelter, and heat). As outdoor and environmental educators, we often ask our students if they know where the water they drink comes from, where it goes when they flush it down the toilet, and where their food originated. Often students have no idea, affirming Leopold's (1949) claim from long ago that "your true modern is separated from the land by many middlemen, and by innumerable physical gadgets. He [sic] has no vital relation to it" (p. 223). Leopold labeled this disconnection "landlessness." As educators, we believe that this state of landlessness contributes to many of the environmental, cultural, and social maladies that we are experiencing today. We hope to create "landfullness" in our students by re-establishing a vital relationship to the world so that they may play a responsible role in their local and global landscapes.

The goal of this paper is to share the pedagogical practices and intentions of our co-taught university course that combines the study and writing of personal narratives with a winter dog sled expedition and wilderness homestead living experience in a remote corner of the Northwest Territories of Canada. After a number of years of teaching this course, we believe that this experience re-establishes some lost connections with the essential elements that sustain and enrich our lives.

Program Overview

As educators engaging our students in remote wilderness travel and living experiences, it is our aim to not only provide a safe and adventurous experience, but also to facilitate connections and understandings of nature, landscape, culture, and stories past and present. Our objectives are well aligned with those of place-based education as described by Sobel (2005) where "history, folk culture, social problems, economics and aesthetics of the community and its environment are all on the agenda" (p. 9). As well, our goals are reflected in Martin's (1999) description of critical outdoor education where students go into the wilderness "not just to recreate and have fun, but to look back with a critical perspective at the contexts left behind, particularly to those sets of beliefs which help shape human-nature relationships" (p. 465).

In the interdisciplinary course *Explorations of the Canadian North,* students from the Augustana Campus of the University of Alberta spend the first six weeks reading and analyzing personal narratives from the expedition region, as well as materials that explore the idea of north and its role in Canadian culture and identity. In addition, they prepare expedition food and equipment. These students have previously taken prerequisite courses in

outdoor education and Scandinavian literature. In late February, facilitators and students then spend 14 days in an isolated sub-arctic environment, with 6 days on a dog sled expedition that takes them to the treeless tundra and 8 days living and studying at a remote wilderness homestead. Following the expedition, students attend writing workshops and produce personal narratives of their northern experiences.

Homestead Experience

Dave Olesen (1994), our homestead host, moved to the wilderness in 1987 searching for "a life more difficult and direct" (p. iix). While he and his family live a life that includes a number of technologies of convenience, their life is far more directly linked to the landscape and seasonal rhythms than most. They have built their own home of local lumber and heat it with wood from the surrounding forest, haul water from the lake, hunt moose and caribou, and harness most of their electricity from the sun and wind. Without doubt, the dependence they have on the local life-sustaining resources fosters an ecological knowledge, understanding, and connection that few urbanites will ever know.

Orr (1992) speaks of "reeducating people in the art of living well where they are" (p. 130) as an important goal of the study of place. During the homestead experience we embrace this idea, which results in practices that are not common, and perhaps controversial, in outdoor education. However, these activities—hauling water by hand, cutting wood to heat the cabin, hunting ptarmigan, ice fishing, using discarded helicopter fuel as fire starter, and attempting to trap the local martin that has been stealing from the meat cache—are all parts of embracing and living the cultural norms of the place. On the surface, these practices are misaligned with the ubiquitous outdoor education mandate to "leave no trace." As much as we support the idea of leaving no trace on the land, it simply is not feasible if you are to live sustainability for any period of time in this place. At a basic level, it is impossible to live anywhere without leaving a trace, and a downfall of such a mandate is that it has the potential of developing a false sense of sustainability by ignoring the impact caused elsewhere in supplying high-tech materials, stove fuel, and food. Using the traditional and cultural practices of the place allows for more direct living and an acknowledgement of our dependence and impact on the natural environment in sustaining our lives. The practices of developing traditional wilderness skills (i.e., axe and saw use and fishing with self-made equipment), using traditional technologies (i.e., wool clothing and traditional snowshoes), and confronting the life and death process (i.e., hunting ptarmigan, fishing, and wolf skinning) are all attempts to have students become more like inhabitants than residents. Orr (1992) describes inhabitants as having "an intimate, organic, and mutually nurturing rela-

tionship with place" (p.130). A resident, on the other hand, "puts down few roots, invests little, know[s] little, and perhaps care[s] little for the immediate locale beyond its ability to gratify" (p. 130). Clearly, our students will not become true inhabitants of the homestead area in 14 days. However, we hope the experience will move them towards being inhabitants on a more national and global scale, as well as in their southern home places.

An additional goal of the homestead experience is to connect means and ends. In many aspects of our everyday lives we experience a separation between the two. Strong (1995) refers to this as "disburdenment." For example, we are made to believe that central heating and television disburden us and make our lives easier. However, with this disburdenment, our means of warmth and entertainment are not connected to the ends. But, when we saw, haul, and split our local wood for warmth, and when our entertainment is self-generated through singing, storytelling, and tobogganing, the means and ends are connected and become a celebration. By connecting means and ends we are better able to identify the burdens in our lives that are often barriers to becoming inhabitants. Frequently, these burdens are a form of technology that we are made to believe will disburden our lives.

A common outcome of the homestead living experience is that students more fully appreciate the cyclical nature of life, and as a result they begin to imagine a more direct life for themselves regardless of where they live and travel. For example, it may be the first time that some have directly engaged in the life and death process associated with eating meat. Ptarmigan hunting is part of the homestead stay, and it has been a profound and often surprisingly difficult experience for students to kill and then eat these birds. Much like Leopold (1949) who had a moment of epiphany as he watched the "fierce green fire dying" (p. 130) in the eyes of a wolf he had shot, our students have had similar experiences as they wring a ptarmigan's neck and the last force of life escapes it. In addition, this hunting provides an opportunity to connect with the stories of people who struggled to survive in this place in the past such as John Hornby, Edgar Christian, and Harold Adlard who starved to death in 1927 (Christian, 1937), and Sir George Back and crew who struggled to feed themselves during the winter of 1833-34 (Back, 1836/2005).

An equally powerful and sometimes difficult experience, yet one that is true to authentic place-conscious pedagogy, is our interaction with the last wolf hunter in the region. His livelihood is dependent on killing wolves and preparing their hides for annual sale, and this lifestyle has sustained him for 35 years. Clearly, this is a controversial practice that people, including our students, have varied and far-reaching feelings about. Listening to the stories of the wolf hunter, engaging in a dialogue with him, and watching him skin wolves, is a powerful experience that leads to lively discussions about sustainability and the ethics of hunting. While these discussions often create more questions than answers, it is clear that this place is the wolf hunter's home and that he takes a great deal of pride in his life as a wolf hunter. To watch him skin a wolf is to watch a master craftsman in action, and matches a

human face and soul to his story and livelihood, which acts as another pathway to place-consciousness.

Trail Experience

The 6-day trail experience is what first attracts many students to this course. It is an important experience that immerses students in an authentic winter travel experience that is not only adventurous and challenging, but also brings alive the storied landscape that they travel through and have read about. In addition, it offers numerous opportunities to experience and reflect upon the ever-present themes of human-nature relationships, direct and difficult living, and place-consciousness.

As students mush over lakes and portages, stake dogs out for the night, gather wood, and search for campsites that offer open water, the stories of Aboriginal peoples and others who have lived and worked in this place are critical to fully knowing and appreciating the landscape. In addition to the Dene (Pelly, 1996), these include characters such as Warburton Pike, the first white sport hunter who traveled in the area in the late 1800s (Pike, 1892/2007), Helge Ingstad, a Norwegian who lived and traveled in the region in the late 1920s (Ingstad, 1931/1992), and Gus D'Aoust, who trapped in the region from 1930 through the mid 1970s and was the mentor of the wolf hunter now living here (Harpelle, 1984). In mid-February, this land can seem truly barren, a term given to this treeless and windswept part of Canada by the first Europeans to visit it. However, while there are certainly periods when people are likely to starve to death if they are reliant on wild game for food, the landscape itself is anything but barren. To be place-conscious, one must be able and willing to see beyond the immediate emptiness. Stories of human history are one means of making the seemingly barren landscape come alive.

Henderson (2005) believes that "Canada is an 'echoing' land, ringing with stories of human life over centuries" (p. xviv) and that knowing these stories "broadens and deepens one's personal perspective of life" and landscape (p. xvi). Similarly, Olesen (1994) points out in his narrative of homestead life, *North of Reliance*, that:

> [t]o move through a wild land and know nothing of its human history would be an impoverishment. An understanding of the past enables a clearer appreciation of the present. In a time of rapid change, historical perspective can help to place that change in context. (p. 40)

As educators promoting place-consciousness, stories of the place are essential. Without them, the landscape is at risk of appearing empty, which makes it more vulnerable to myriad human abuses. Landscapes that we know, respect, and have relationships with, come alive with personal meanings and connections (Leopold, 1949). In a world where we are largely disconnected

from nature and landscape, stories from the past are a conduit for reconnection.

Equally important to knowing the stories are the challenges and authentic full-body sensory experiences that accompany winter travel by dog team. Just as we would never consider teaching someone to ski by merely talking about technique, taking students to the place that we are studying, and engaging them in the traditional activities of the people and cultures of which we are learning, is simply sound pedagogical practice.

Personal Narrative Reading and Writing

There are many educational benefits of combining wilderness travel with reading and writing personal narratives. First, aside from connecting us to the storied landscape as already discussed, "the outdoor experience gives students something immediate and deeply felt to write about" (Bennion & Olsen, 2002, p. 241). Second, the art of storytelling and an awareness of our self-story are enhanced in the process of writing personal narratives and are an essential human need. Baldwin (2005) examines the role of story in our lives and suggests that "how we make our experiences into story determines how we live our personal lives" (p. x); story "connects us with the world and outlines our relationship to everything" (p. 3). Finally, the discipline of literature provides students with the tools to understand, tell, and write stories and narratives.

Gruenewald (2003) reflects on Freire and Macedo's premise of reading the world and reading the word. He points out that "the two intertwined literacies reinforce each other" (p. 5), and that one does not eliminate the need for the other. Much like sound educational pedagogy, this points to the need for both primary (hands-on) and secondary (reflective) components of any truly educative experience (Dewey, 1981). In our case, the narratives that we read before the expedition prepare students for immersion into the place and demonstrate how others have come to understand their own experiences of that place. We discuss how these stories reflect Canadian history and culture, and reveal social, cultural, economic, and other issues of the time. In addition, the narrations of others serve both as examples of how students may approach their own dog sled and homestead experiences, and offer stylistic and thematic models as they prepare to write their own narratives.

Reflections on our Practice

This course has evolved from our collective personal and professional experiences of studying, teaching, living, and traveling in the north. In addition to the benefits of our interdisciplinary venture that we have outlined, we recognize there is some tension, or potential for perceived contradiction, between our stated philosophies and actual practice.

Some might argue that we do not need to venture far from "home" in order to connect to nature, landscape, and history. However, we choose to venture 1600 kilometers to a remote corner of the Northwest Territories for a number of reasons and are confident that our place-conscious pedagogy aids us in achieving our goals. First, traveling to this remote place ensures uncertain outcomes, risk, and inescapable consequences, which are all key ingredients of a challenging and adventurous experience (Horwood, 1999). Second, as instructors we each have a great deal of northern experience and feel that this allows us to effectively model place-consciousness in this setting. Gruenewald (2003) states, "place-based pedagogies are needed so that the education of citizens might have some direct bearing on the well being of the social and ecological *places people actually inhabit*" (p. 3, italics added), and we recognize that our students do not normally inhabit this place. However, they quickly begin to feel like inhabitants and at home during our stay and often have a difficult time leaving. The connection is strong and emotional, in no small part due to engaging with a family that has developed a successful and sustainable model of living directly in and with nature. We see this as students stand well back from the plane that has come to pick us up in an attempt to delay the looming departure, as they say emotional goodbyes to the Olesens and their dogs, as they feel somewhat out-of-place once back in Yellowknife and Camrose, and by the students who return to the north to work, travel, and sometimes live. This model of pedagogy allows students new ways of envisioning their lives. We have heard students say that their time in the north has allowed them to feel at home and connected to the essential elements that sustain their lives in a meaningful fashion. Once students experience this feeling of "home" and "connection," it is our hope that this will be the first step in developing similar feelings and connections in their "other" home places. Cuthbertson, Heine, and Whitson (1997) suggest that "rootedness to one's home-place is important, but so too is the mobility of travel to explore connectedness to multiple landscapes" (p. 74). We believe that one enhances the other.

In addition, some might argue that we do not need to engage in hunting ptarmigan, fishing for lake trout, or observing the skinning of wolves. However, these practices are common to most narratives from the region and deeply embedded in the local history and culture. Engaging in these practices promotes true place-consciousness. In addition, the directness of these experiences is important in re-establishing a vital relationship with the land, not only here in this place, but also in places beyond.

Some may also argue that the fuel burned by flying 260 kilometers in a bush plane to reach this wilderness homestead is unnecessary. However, the bush plane has played, and continues to play, an important role in Canadian history and identity. The experience of landing and taking-off on a frozen lake and loading and unloading hundreds of pounds of food staples, sled-dogs, and other homestead supplies is a quintessential northern Canadian experience and important for developing northern Canadian place-consciousness.

Conclusion

Our goal of developing place-consciousness is perhaps ambitious, yet is genuine. We recognize there are a number of tensions and potential contradictions between our stated philosophy and our actual pedagogical practices. Nevertheless, we see that our students begin to re-establish a vital relationship to nature, that they start to imagine a more direct means of living, and that personal narratives combined with the full body sensory experience of the homestead and trail experiences, are central to their development of place-consciousness. Equally important, this northern immersion experience provides them with a meaningful foundation for writing. At the same time, we believe that students broaden their understanding of Canada as a northern nation through the interdisciplinary content and experiential pedagogy employed in this course. Clearly, this paper is based on our experience of teaching this course and is supported by theoretical foundations and a collection of anecdotal stories. While important and relevant, there is a need for further research that can provide more robust data regarding the outcomes of this and similar courses—we are in the early stages of developing such a research project.

Notes on Contributors

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