

## An Absent Body in a Present Landscape

By Jens Marcussen

*On a calm section of the Mara River, seven red canoes are zigzagging around, and it looks like the paddlers have no skills. The truth is that half of the group is paddling blind. It is an exercise in which the purpose is to start a process of reflection on the embodied experience during a wilderness educational expedition.*

### Understanding the Embodied Experience on a Educational Wilderness Experience

The wilderness expedition experience will always be a confluence of emotional, cognitive and bodily processes. I want to show that the body is an important but often forgotten part of the wilderness expedition experience. Using the phenomenological approach, we can try to understand the body as a subject instead of an object, or sometimes both at the same time. We talk about being our body and having a body. In a phenomenological lifeworld analysis, it is possible to use some of these fractions according to the body: embodiment (meanings related to one's own sense of one's body), and spatiality (sense of place, space and bodily scope and possibilities) (Ashworth, 2003, 2006).

In society, the focus on the body is often polarised. Sometimes, there is an extreme focus on the thin and fit body as a symbol of success and control, and a symbol of the opposite when the body is fat and unfit. From that perspective, the body becomes an object we can count and measure. On the other hand, bodily work and manual transport have almost disappeared from our society. Our everyday lives become more and more sedentary and people have lost the ability to sense their own bodies. We can say, then, that the body is often forgotten in everyday life. I discuss here how embodiment is an important part of the wilderness expedition experience, as well as suggest ways to help participants on such an expedition increase their sense of their own bodies, space and bodily scope and possibilities.

When we describe outdoor education and its pedagogic potential, we often talk about personal and social development, leadership and of course a number of "hard" skills. It is not common to talk about the development of a sense of one's own body and the body experience as part of the expedition experience. Sometimes having a sense of one's own body is highlighted as an issue, though that is mostly in relation to when we teach hard skills.

In sports with elements of competition there is often a quantifying of the body that can lead to negative experiences for some people and low self-esteem with respect to their bodies. In a wilderness expedition, it is possible to work with an approach to the body that is different from what people experience in sports and everyday life. The embodied experience can also be a negative one on a wilderness expedition if a person feel limited by their body during the entire expedition. Nevertheless, I think there are many opportunities to give people new, different and, it is hoped, positive experiences with their bodies on educational wilderness expeditions.

Even though we do not want to maintain a constant focus on the body and training, we can use outdoor life to learn something about our own bodies. Outdoor life involves the body, and as a facilitator we must create situations in which we can stimulate the participants to understand and explore their own bodies. We can try to create a positive focus on the body by asking about the experiences of the body. For instance, how do I use my body when I paddle a canoe? Why do I get warm when I do this? How do I get good balance when I climb? And how does the expedition experience in general affect our body conditions? We have to shift the focus of the body away from thinking about it in terms of its size and limitations towards what we can do with it and the possibilities it gives us in nature. We must try to facilitate conceptualizing the body in outdoor life as something meaningful and positive.

## The Reflection Process

It can be difficult to express a bodily experience because people are unfamiliar with talking about and reflecting on their own bodies. Learning from an experience involves reflecting upon that experience (Boud, Keogh & Walker, 1985). Boud et al. (1985) describe reflection as an activity in which people “recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” (p. 19).

What we want to achieve with the reflection process can be diverse. It can be a process in which we work with an understanding of the embodied experience on a wilderness expedition to better understand the sense of our own body, as well as a sense of place, space, bodily scope and possibilities. Below I describe two exercises I developed that serve to encourage such an experience.

One way we can initiate reflections on the body is to begin with a concrete experience, such as an exercise in which the participants are paddling blind and need to develop a sense of their own bodies according to the canoe and their surroundings. For this exercise, the canoes are put together in pairs, with the canoeist in front paddling blind and the one behind giving directions about going either left or right. The purpose of this is to promote reflection on ways the body is part of the wilderness expedition experience and how body awareness develops through such an expedition. While I used canoeing as an example to begin the reflection process, a diversity of exercises designed to encourage reflections on the body experience were interspersed throughout the expedition.

I also tried to initiate a discussion/ reflection on ways we can help participants on a wilderness educational expedition to increase the sense of their own bodies, space, bodily scope and possibilities. If we want participants to reflect on their own body experience, some may find it easier to write about privately than to deliver an oral description to the entire group. The first time I delivered this, participants shared their thoughts immediately following

the canoe exercise described above. The reaction among the participants was that it was a positive experience that stimulated an increase in body awareness. Some participants mentioned that they used senses other than sight to paddle on a straight course such as the feeling of the sun and wind on their faces and the sound from the other canoes. We also talk about the use of the exercise when we work with instructions in paddling and the use of the different strokes. This type of exercise can help to achieve better boat control to ensure that the strokes are done by intuition instead of analysis and rules.

## Theories to Explain the Embodied Experience in Wilderness Educational Expeditions

To understand and describe the development in bodily experiences on wilderness expeditions from a phenomenological perspective, it is obvious to turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his work with body phenomenology (2004). Additionally, however, I use terms from Dreyfus’ (2004b) “The Five-stage Model of Adult Skill Acquisition” and Drew Leder’s *The Absent Body* (1990).

According to van Manen, “Phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications” (2007, p. 1). But what can this reflection do to our practice? Why is phenomenology useful for those of us who work in the outdoors? Heidegger warns that phenomenology “never makes things easier, but only more difficult” (2000, p. 12). And, further, “Nothing comes of philosophy . . . You can’t do anything with it” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 13). Yet he offers a counterquestion: “Even if we can’t do anything with it, may not philosophy in the end do something *with us*, provided that we engage ourselves with it?” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 13).

So as I see it, phenomenology can be one perspective that adds something to the

process of reflection according to the learning done among the participants. According to the outdoor education literature, we as leaders can increase participant learning by facilitating the reflective process (Knapp, 1999).

The pitfall in the processing sessions as I experienced it was that people only use terms from physiology to describe their body experience, and describe the body as an object. According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is a unit that seeks meaning and to surpass, which takes place through both reflection and action. Merleau-Ponty maintains that the body does not contain an “either/or,” but instead a “both/and.” The body is both subject and object, not only in relation to others, but also in relation to itself. We see and are seen (Duesund, 2008).

A classical example from Merleau-Ponty is one in which he describes the blind man and his stick and how the stick connects him to the world, and that it is difficult to say where the limits are between the stick, the body and the world:

The blind man’s stick has ceased to be an object for him, and is no longer perceived for itself; its point has become an area of sensitivity, extending the scope and active radius of touch, and providing a parallel to sight (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 143).

Similarly, the participants paddling blind are exploring the limits between their bodies and their surroundings. We cannot see our own body or the canoe as an object, but we can sense the world through our body and act on a pre-reflective level. Normally, sight is the primary mode of world disclosure, and the body’s status is that of a natural background (Leder, 1990). In this exercise, the body is the primary mode of world disclosure; in this instance sight is blocked out so that we can understand the paddle and the canoe, as the blind man does with his stick. In this exercise, we have achieved a total incorporation of the canoe and the paddle. According to Leder, “To incorporate a tool is to redesign one’s extended body until its extremities expressly mesh with the world”

(1990, p. 34). Hence, this exercise is a way to explore the zone object and subject, and dialectic body–world relation.

With reference to Merleau-Ponty, there are two situations that damage the existential relation to the life–world and inhibit “the intentional arc” (Dreyfus, 2004a). One is if one gives strictly rational attention to the body. The other is the case of illness. In these situations the body becomes objectified, and the body is felt as an obstacle to taking part in the world in a subjective way. The attention to the body on a wilderness expedition will probably change over the course of the expedition, from strictly rational attention due to new and challenging surroundings, to a more optimal body–environment relationship, which allows us to take part in the world in a subjective way. We recognize this when the participants talk about the body needing to rediscover movements in the daily routine at the beginning of the trip.

*“The experience we receive will be greatly influenced by the body dimension.”*

When Drew Leder (1990) uses the term “the absent body,” he refers to the ways we can experience our bodies as being absent or present. He describes one body dimension as “the ecstatic body.” The ecstatic body forgets its own body because it is preoccupied with something else. This forgetting is decisive if we are to be able to fully live in the world. The body is present in an absent way (Duesund, 1995, p.41). The type of wilderness expedition experience we receive will probably be greatly influenced by the body dimension. Perhaps it is possible to experience the body as ecstatic during the entire expedition and as preoccupied with the wilderness and the expedition context. Can we then say that the body becomes absent in a positive way? Or maybe the body will first become absent after we have become familiar with the wilderness and the way we travel through the landscape. Why

is it interesting for us from a pedagogical perspective whether the body becomes absent in a present way? Because there are an increasing number of young people who struggle with their own bodies, whether due to obesity, eating disorders or low self-confidence caused by low bodily competencies. For these individuals it might be considered a positive development to experience a situation in which the body becomes absent in a present way (Duesund and Skårderud, 2003).

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