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## Space for play

### The dilemma of radical outdoor education

► About the author ► Key words

Learning takes place through experiencing something new and connecting it to previous experience. John Dewey thought of such continuity as a precondition for learning, arguing that in order for new experience to be educationally significant, or educationally positive, it would need to have certain continuity with previous experience. I refer to this generic idea as the continuity thesis. I use the phrase radical outdoor education to refer to educational practices that are designed to make a sharp break with previous experience of those involved in the role of students by being set in outdoor surroundings that are utterly new for the students and which they have never seen before, or by posing challenges that they have not encountered before. The more radical the setting is, the less it has in common with previous experience of the students.

The continuity thesis and radical outdoor education refer to two views of education, both of which seem plausible (and both of which are variously supported by empirical evidence). The first emphasizes continuity while the second emphasizes a sharp break with continuity. This is puzzling. To be more precise, the continuity thesis seems initially plausible, but it is incompatible with the claim that radical educational settings, which make a sharp break with previous experience, are conducive to learning. I shall refer to this as the dilemma of radical educational settings. In this paper I address the dilemma by exploring the concept of experience itself, the role of nature in providing new and potentially transformative experience and the relevance for education of what I call morally significant experience.

#### Pláss fyrir leik: Þverstæðan um róttæka útimenntun

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Nám á sér stað fyrir tilverknað nýrrar reynslu sem maður tengir fyrri reynslu. John Dewey leit á slíka samfellu sem forsendu náms og færði rök fyrir því að til þess að ný reynsla stuðlaði að námi, eða hefði jákvætt menntunargildi, þá þyrfti hún að hafa tiltekin tengsl við fyrri reynslu. Ég kalla þetta *samfellukennninguna*. Ég nota orðasambandið *róttæk útimenntun* til að vísa til menntunar eða kennslu sem er skipulögð þannig að reynsla þátttakenda verði algerlega ný eða framandi og myndi ekki samfellu við fyrri reynslu. Því nýstárlegri eða meira

framandi sem reynslan er, þeim mun minna á hún sameiginlegt með fyrri reynslu. Í róttækri útímenntun er það sem gerir hana róttæka einmitt það sem á að stuðla að námi.

Samfellukenningin og róttæk útímenntun vísa til tveggja hugmynda um nám sem virðast báðar raunhæfar (og eru studdar margvíslegum gögnum). Sú fyrri leggur áherslu á samfellu en sú síðari leggur áherslu á uppbrót. Þetta er þverstæðukennt. Nánar tiltekið; samfellukenningin virðist sennileg en fer í bága við þá hugmynd að róttækt uppbrót samfellu sé líklegt til að stuðla að menntun. Ég kalla þetta þverstæðuna um róttækar kringumstæður menntunar. Ég fer í saumana á þessari þverstæðu með því að skoða sjálft hugtakið um reynslu, mikilvægi náttúru í að stuðla að nýrri og mögulega umbreytandi reynslu og menntunarlegt mikilvægi þess sem ég kalla siðferðilega mikilvæg reynsla.

## Continuity and break

Learning takes place through experiencing something new and connecting it to previous experience. John Dewey thought of such continuity as a precondition for learning, arguing that in order for new experience to be educationally significant, or educationally positive, it would need to have certain continuity with previous experience. In *Democracy and Education* he makes the point very succinctly when drawing out the difference between something just happening to someone on the one hand, and something happening which makes a connection between past and future. Concerning the former he says:

... many things happen to us in the way of pleasure and pain which we do not connect with any prior activity of our own. They are mere accidents so far as we are concerned. There is no before or after to such experience; no retrospect nor outlook, and consequently no meaning. (Dewey, 2007, p. 107)

And he then goes on to say:

To “learn from experience” is to make backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. (Dewey, 2007, p. 107)

Dewey did not consider his continuity thesis to be trivial. However, it seems reasonable that some sort of continuity in the experience of a person is required for a new experience to have constructive influence on that person. Whatever else is involved in one’s learning, it at least involves connecting one thing to another. We understand things – or misunderstand them as it might be – in virtue of their meaning or significance and thus, when we understand something new we must be able to relate it to what we have previously come across and understood. I refer to this generic idea as *the continuity thesis*. And as a generic idea it should be uncontroversial though it may be a matter of debate how exactly to spell it out.

Consider now what one might call radical outdoor education. By this I mean education that is designed to break sharply with previous experience of those involved in the role of students by being set in outdoor surroundings that are utterly new for the students and which they have never seen before, or by posing challenges that they have not encountered before. The more radical the setting is, the less it has in common with previous experience of the students. As an example one might mention some of the Outward bound programmes (<http://www.outwardbound.org/>) or, to point to something closer to home, the adventure therapy which took a group of teenagers on a 13 day hike in Hornstrandir, one of the most remote parts of Iceland (Júlíusdóttir, 2002; Vilhjálmsón, 2013). This has developed into a whole field of practice and study under the heading Outdoor

Adventure Education. Such programmes have been found to be educationally successful in various ways, both having to do with environmental awareness and personal growth (D'Amato & Krasny, 2011).

So, we have two views of education, both of which seem plausible (and both of which are variously supported by empirical evidence). The first emphasizes continuity while the second emphasizes a sharp break with continuity. This is puzzling. To be more precise, the continuity thesis seems initially plausible but it is incompatible with the claim that radical educational settings, which make a sharp break with previous experience, are conducive to learning. I shall refer to this as *the dilemma of radical educational settings*. As with any dilemma one can bite the bullet and give up either of the horns, i.e. either abandon the continuity thesis or deny the effectiveness of radical outdoor education. However, neither seems to be a plausible option so we are stuck with the dilemma.

In this paper I address the dilemma by exploring the concept of experience itself, the role of nature in providing new and potentially transformative experience and the relevance for education of what I call *morally significant experience*. My approach will be philosophical in nature, focusing on certain underlying concepts and basic practices with only marginal attention to empirical research on radical outdoor education.

I begin my discussion by considering briefly the educational relevance of the dilemma (section 2) and then go on to discuss the concepts of *place*, *journey* and *well-being* explaining how they can be understood as either thin value-free concepts or as thick value-laden concepts (section 3). I then use this distinction to show how breaking with previous experience by journeying in the wilderness may give rise to morally significant experience (section 4). The concept of transgression is important in this respect and in the next section I discuss the connection between transgression and experience (section 5) to substantiate the thesis that journeying in the wilderness may often lead to experience that is morally significant. Finally, I get back to the dilemma for an evaluation of how we might want to respond to it – or rather, what we might learn from it (section 6).

## **Educational relevance of the dilemma**

The dilemma of radical educational settings has obvious consequences for how we might think about outdoor education: For many people, not least for city-based young people, being in nature constitutes such a radical break with previous experience that it may easily violate the principle of continuity. One might, therefore, expect such experience to leave little behind in the way of education. Even if being in nature makes strong impressions on the participants at the time – they have strong experiences – one might expect that once they get back to their familiar surroundings these moments in nature are likely to be just isolated episodes in their lives.

The dilemma is not confined to outdoor education but can be formulated with respect to any circumstances where a person is supposed to learn by being placed in an environment that is radically different from what he or she is used to. Thus, it might be asked whether an overseas programme where students spend some time in a foreign country provides significant educational experience or just a break in the normal lives of the students (Dettweiler et al., 2015). If such programmes have only marginal educational value they should either be abandoned or else changed dramatically.

Many educators might not be bothered by this dilemma claiming that there is ample evidence of successful educational programmes that seem to owe their success precisely to the fact that the participants were placed in settings that were radically different from what they had experienced before, whether the settings were in a natural environment,

a foreign country, a different kind of workplace, etc. Why should one be bothered with an argument if experience tells one otherwise? This observation only confirms the one horn of the dilemma. It is precisely because it is well established that radical outdoor education, and various other forms of radical educational settings, can work wonders that we have a dilemma at all. Without such evidence, we could just affirm the continuity theses with ease. That is, however, exactly what is not open to us to do. There is no question *whether* breaking with previous experience can be conducive to learning. The question is *how* such a break can be educationally effective in light of the continuity thesis.

Any educational programme which relies on breaking with previous experience must address this question, for although such programmes may be highly effective, they can also be quite ineffective. Think of a different kind of cases which many are familiar with: You have been to a foreign country for some time – days or weeks, even months – where you experience new things. You even change your way of going about certain things in your daily routine. But once you return to your old life – your home, your job and your friends – that whole experience seems to leave little or nothing behind. Whether good or bad, the experience was simply left behind and is hardly more than a memory of an isolated episode in your life with little or no impact on your future life.

## Place, journey and well-being

Outdoor education or wilderness education always has two components which are supposed to interact: certain place or places and certain activities carried out in those places. The activities often take the form of a journey literally speaking where the participants travel from one place to another (sometimes returning to starting point). Although the words ‘place’ and ‘journey’ are familiar in everyday language, their meanings are far from trivial. In the case of ‘place’ this becomes evident when we try to explain exactly how its meaning differs from the meanings of words such as ‘space’ or ‘location.’ I do not intend to offer any exhaustive analysis or comparisons of the meanings of these words but only distinguish between a technical or value-free understanding of the concepts of place and journey on the one hand, and a moral or value-laden understanding on the other. I then do the same for the concept ‘well-being.’ This serves the purpose of paving the way to the concept of morally relevant education.

### Place

As the world’s places have become ever more interrelated and interdependent, the concept of place itself has undergone changes (Castree, 2003), both in human and physical geography, where scholars have emphasised both constitutive and relational aspects (Castree, 2003; Gregory, 2003; Massey, 2005). A somewhat similar development has taken place in analytic philosophy (Casati & Varzi, 1994; 1999). One aspect of this development is increased emphasis on ethical issues in geography as witnessed, for example, by an issue of *Ethics, Place and Environment from* (Vol. 13, No. 2, 2010) on ethics of care in geography. In this section I will draw out certain ethical aspects of the concept of place, drawing on ideas from Massey (2005; 2007) and others. My approach is, however, quite different from much of the ethical work in contemporary geography which has been “concerned with distance, or the ethics arising out of a sense of responsibility towards those with whom we have caring relationships and toward different and distant others” (McEwan & Goodman, 2010). My concern is with the concept of place as an ethical concept rather than with ethical issues arising from people’s relation to different places.

First, we use the concept of place to describe location and movement in space: We go from one place to another, such as from Reykjavík to Thingvellir. This meaning was particularly important for Aristotle who conceived of the possibility of movement as the

possibility of changing places (Physics, book IV) (Aristotle, 1984; Morison, 2002). This meaning was also what Einstein assumed when he discussed the physical content of geometrical propositions in relation to his theory of relativity (Einstein, 1920, pp. 1–7). The concept 'place' in this sense is roughly equivalent to the concept 'location' where a location is determined and exhausted by the description of a space-time point or region.

The second meaning becomes relevant when we go beyond simply locating things to classifying our surroundings: When going from Reykjavík to Thingvellir we go from one *kind* of place to another, in this case from an urban place to a rural place. Every day people go from a home, as one kind of place, to work, which is an altogether different kind of place. Moreover, being in a place one may experience it very differently when learning about its history. Werner Heisenberg once visited Niels Bohr in Denmark and the two physicists took a walk through Kronborg Castle in Helsingör. During their walk through the castle Bohr remarked:

Isn't it strange how this castle changes as soon as one imagines that Hamlet lived here? As scientists we believe that a castle consists only of stones, and admire the way the architect put them together. The stones, the green roof with its patina, the wood carvings in the church, constitute the whole castle. None of this should be changed by the fact that Hamlet lived here, and yet it is changed completely. Suddenly the walls and the ramparts speak a quite different language. The courtyard becomes an entire world, a dark corner reminds us of the darkness in the human soul, we hear Hamlet's "To be or not to be." Yet all we really know about Hamlet is that his name appears in a thirteenth-century chronicle. No one can prove that he really lived, let alone that he lived here. But everyone knows the questions Shakespeare had him ask, the human depth he was made to reveal, and so he, too, had to be found a place on earth, here in Kronborg. And once we know that, Kronborg becomes quite a different castle for us. (Heisenberg, 1971, p. 51)

It is instructive to see how these physicists relate to the Castle as a meaningful place, i.e. a place that is fundamentally transformed by historical and cultural aspects of the place.

Walking along the cliffs of Almannagjá in Thingvellir, one might ask: "What kind of place is this?" or, being taken in by the landscape and the history, one might say: "I love this place!" Both in the question as well as in the exclamation, the concept *place* is not equivalent to the concept *location*. Likewise, when standing in Lögberg, the heart of Thingvellir, one might wonder where the boundaries of Thingvellir as a place are. Further still, a place may be changed by building a road or a bridge, or even by planting or cutting down trees. Such doings will not alter or change the location. Thus, while location may be considered an abstract construct, a place is very much a physical phenomenon, with history and full of meaning and internal relations between its different elements. Locations, although depending on physical features, are much more abstract and not infused with meaning and value in the same sense as places are.

My distinction here between location and place as a centre of felt value is somewhat similar to a threefold distinction made by Agnew (1987) and elaborated by Castree in "Place: Connection and Boundaries in an Interdependent World" (2003). They distinguish between: (1) Place as location; (2) a sense of place; and (3) place as locale (Castree, 2003, p. 167). My understanding of place as location corresponds to the first meaning specified by Castree, while place as a centre of felt value brings together meanings (2) and (3) on Castree's list.

Place is a relational entity; it is an environment; it is something that surrounds, is meaningful and is brought about and maintained by ongoing exchanges between subjects that are within the place – or we might say, are environed – and the things that form the objective surroundings. Massey expresses similar thought linking the concept of space and the concept of place:

Space is alive. It is an ongoing construction of our interrelatedness, human and nonhuman. It is the dimension of multiplicity, the dimension of a simultaneity of innumerable stories-so-far. And places are the locations of the meeting-up of those stories (or of particular sets of them), articulations of energy, of flow (Massey, 2007, p. 2).

Talk about places invites judgments about the significance of the surroundings from different perspectives, judgments about interests of people and animals, considerations about how things came into existence and how they will develop, etc. It turns out that places are neither static nor void of meaning but are actually dynamic, meaningful wholes (Thrift, 2003). Yi-Fu Tuan relates this explicitly, and appropriately I would say, to ethics when he says: “Places are centers of felt value” (Tuan, 1977, p. 4).

This conception of place as a dynamic meaningful whole has invited geographers and philosophers alike to explore the metaphor of conversation with nature or landscapes (Benediktsson & Lund, 2010, pp. 1–5). The idea of conversation, whether metaphorical or literal, has important educational implications which I will explore later in this paper, drawing on ideas from Socratic pedagogy where dialogue is the principal means of learning.

## Journey

A journey has a beginning and an end, the point of departure and the destination. However, going from Reykjavík to Thingvellir via the shortest route across Mosfellsheiði or taking the much longer route into Borgarfjörður and over the mountains of Kaldidalur will make for two very different journeys. Thus, accounting for a journey one would do better in describing a *path* of travel than simply the beginning and the end. But the word ‘path’ is itself ambiguous since it may either refer to a series of locations or to a series of places.

The differences that we encountered between the concepts *place* and *location* are replicated when we try to understand the concept *journey*. So, on the one hand, a journey may refer to a series of locations (continuous or discontinuous) describable in geometrical terms. In this sense, a ship may be on a journey across the ocean and the planets may be on a journey around the sun. But on the other hand, a journey may refer to the traveling of a conscious being that moves through a series of places, i.e. a being that moves through landscapes and places which are infused with meaning and significance (Gros, 2015). Moreover, two people may travel together and yet be on different journeys due to different meanings and subjective experiences. An extreme example would be a policeman and a prisoner on their way from the place of arrest to the prison. Thus, to describe a journey in this sense, one has to describe what one encounters on the way.

The concept of a journey inherits all the complexity of the concept of a place. But that is not the end, for the concept of a journey – as a meaningful travel through places – adds the dimensions of purpose and challenge. A place, although a dynamic and meaningful phenomenon, is something which does not require an agent of change (though it may require an agent of interpretation). One may be in a place, even a meaningful one which sparks the emotions, without being challenged to do anything – without having to be an agent in the ordinary sense. The journey, on the other hand, always needs an agent of change and behind it lays the question of purpose. Where am I going? Why am I going there?

Massey (2005) uses the term 'negotiation' to describe one's interaction with a place: "What applies to public space applies a fortiori to more ordinary places. These temporary constellations of trajectories, these events which are places, require negotiation" (Massey, 2005, p. 153). Connecting the notion of negotiation to the act of passing through spaces or places, she writes:

So to walk 'across space' is, in fact, to walk across stories, across multiplicity of ongoing trajectories. A further consequence is that the multiplicity presented to us by the fact of space requires negotiation. It poses the question of how we are going to live together. (Massey, 2007, p. 5)

When Massey says that places require negotiation and that they pose the question of how we are going to live together, she takes the ethical relevance of place one step further than Tuan, for it is not only that places are "centers of felt value" but actually centres where one is forced to respond to question about issues of fundamental ethical importance.

In the context of a journey, the question of change is not merely a matter of different locations or different places; it is also a matter of changes in the self who undertakes the journey. Here the story of a person who leaves home, goes on a journey, and returns as a changed being is relevant. The place of departure and destination is the same, and yet because of the journey everything is changed.

## Well-being

Discussing the concepts *place* and *journey* I made a distinction between what one might call a thin, value-free understanding on the one hand, and a normative or value-laden understanding on the other. Location is value-free; a place is meaningful and value-laden. The ship that is on a journey through the sea travels in a value-vacuum, while a person travelling on board may be undertaking an emotional, value-laden journey filled with meaning and purpose. With respect to well-being, one might expect that only a value-laden concept was possible since the concept well-being would refer to what is inherently value-laden. But that need not be so.

Well-being as a major theme in contemporary educational research is often pursued as a psychological concept (Kristjánsson, 2013). Only recently, for instance, has positive psychology taken seriously its origin — or its predecessor — in Aristotelian moral philosophy (Kristjánsson, 2015) or Buddhist thought. Even when positive psychologists talk about virtues, they often emphasize virtues such as resilience and self-determination, which are not necessarily moral or need not have moral content. They are called *performance virtues* since they are about being good at performing whatever it is one wants to do and differ from *moral virtues* since they need not be directed at what is morally good. In a criminal, resilience only adds to his bad character; it increases his badness rather than adding to his goodness. On the other hand, compassion, which is a moral virtue, would make the criminal better — or at least less evil. Coupled with genuine moral virtues, such as honesty and compassion, resilience may be important for the overall moral quality of the person. The philosopher Kristján Kristjánsson (2015) writes:

... all good programmes of character education will include the cultivation of performance virtues, but they will also explain to students that those virtues derive their ultimate value from serving morally acceptable ends, in particular from being enablers and vehicles of the moral virtues. Generally speaking, the internal cohesion of one's virtue system is of crucial importance — more so than the exclusive nourishing of individual virtues. This is why there is good reason to be sceptical of virtue developmental programmes that emphasise the

further strengthening of the virtues that one is already good at — so-called ‘signature strengths’ — rather than the overall strengthening of the whole system. (Kristjánsson, 2015, p. 17)

I want to stress the importance of what Kristjánsson here refers to as “morally acceptable ends.” Much of educational discourse emphasizes performance, and although ways of measuring performance may have become more varied than before, they rarely touch on what one might call *moral quality* — and perhaps for good reasons, for it is questionable whether or how it could be measured in the context of schools and educational programmes.

The distinction between performance virtue and moral virtue — and a corresponding divide in the academic world — shows two very different ways of understanding the concept of well-being. Well-being as excellence in performance is essentially a value free concept, while well-being as moral excellence is infused with values; it is not simply conducive to the good life but is an essential part of the good life.

Educational programmes, such as various wilderness and outdoor education programmes, are often promoted as a means for increasing the well-being of the participants by strengthening the character of the participants through cultivating certain virtues. A well-known quote from Kurt Hahn, the founder of the Outdoor Bound programme goes like this: “There is more in us than we know. If we can be made to see it perhaps for the rest of our lives we will be unwilling to settle for less.” The Outdoor Bound programmes were meant to generate the kind of personal growth that Hahn alludes to here. Personal growth has indeed been one of the main goals of Outdoor Adventure Education:

Outward Bound (OB), National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), and similar wilderness Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) programs focus largely on outcomes related to personal growth, with participants often reporting significant emotional, spiritual, and transcendent experiences as a result of spending time in nature ... For example, outcomes of an OB course associated with personal growth included increased self-awareness and self-confidence, pushing one’s limits, and learning respect for others. (D’Amato & Krasny, 2011, p. 238)

However, insofar as such programmes are supposed to have real educational value, they can not focus only on performative virtues but must be concerned with either cultivating moral virtues of the participants, or else build on the pre-established moral integrity of the participants. The characterization of personal growth in Adventure Outdoor Education is ambivalent between personal growth as better performance and growth as moral development (D’Amato & Krasny, 2011, p. 238).

## **Morally significant experience**

When we think of places we visit, or which we bring our students to, we should think of them not simply as pieces of land — or as locations — but as interpretable places, laden with history and meaning, and variously significant for people and animals. Likewise, when we think of journeys, we should think of these as morally significant events or procedures. Moreover, when thinking about well-being we should not focus on performance but also on experience and emotions and how these influence and are part of the good life of those involved. This was of central importance for Kurt Hahn, the founder of Outward Bound movement and one of the most important figures in the history of outdoor end experimental learning. He would always emphasize the moral aspect of his work (see <http://www.kurthahn.org>). Thus, when we think about experiential learning and outdoor education we should think of this in terms of morally significant experience.



When I say that we must consider how experience and emotions influence and are part of the good life of those involved, I use the phrase 'good life' without much explanation. To fill this lacuna, I could pick my favourite philosopher and present his or her understanding. Doing that, however, I would run the risk of being ignored by those who do not share my philosophical tastes. So, instead of offering an analysis of the concept of *the good life*, let me just mention a few ingredients that are essential on most Western philosophical accounts of what makes life good (though not necessarily many psychological accounts of the good life). A *good life* involves such things as attachment to oneself and others and to one's environment; i.e. intrapersonal states such as self-awareness, self-knowledge and self-respect; an attitude to oneself as a valuable being (Kristjánsson, 2010, pp. 148–166). It also involves interpersonal relations or conditions such as friendship and justice. And, finally, it involves what we might call extra-personal relations or virtues such as harmony with nature (Jordan & Kristjánsson, in press).

Given this ground, we might ask: What are the implications of this discussion for education? Or, perhaps: What kind of educational settings are relevant — and possible — if the goals of education are ultimately the good life? One challenge that people meet today — not least young people — is that they are pressured into playing fairly determined roles both in their public and private lives. Space for self-realization, or for development of self-concept, are very limited (Petersen, 2011). The French philosopher Frédéric Gros describes in an insightful way by reflecting the simple freedoms one may gain from walking:

What I mean is that by walking you are not going to meet yourself. By walking, you escape from the very idea of identity, the temptation to be someone, to have a name and a history. Being someone is all very well for smart parties where everyone is telling their story, it's all very well for psychologists' consulting rooms. But isn't being someone also a social obligation which trails in its wake — for one has to be faithful to the self-portrait — a stupid and burdensome fiction. The freedom in walking lies in not being anyone; for the walking body has no history, it is just an eddy in the stream of immemorial life. (Gros, 2015, pp. 6–7)

Experiments in living are not welcome, both because of peer pressure and because of fashion and dominant ideology. Moreover, and the recent trends in technology are not very helpful here, young people live increasingly through the lenses of others, who in turn live through the lenses of yet others. This phenomenon is nothing new, but the circumstances in which it takes place have changed dramatically with the new technology and social changes that have taken place in at least Western societies in the last few decades. The Danish educationalist Per Schultz Jørgensen describes the situation thus:

... the open society exposes to view the day-to-day reality of children's lives. It tells us about the world they have to navigate, to a large extent on their own. In short, this implies a quite different formation of character today as compared to, say, 50 years ago. This is critical to our understanding of the new demands on schools and on the democratic learning process. From now on, the task of the school is much greater: it is not simply a question of teaching, but of learning and the formation of character (Jørgensen, 2004, p. 117).

Reflecting further on the situation, Jørgensen draws out the significance of two levels of personal existence on which young people live. Jørgensen also maintains that young people have to find their own way in life in an interplay between these two levels; they have to find and create their own self from the inner world of experience and the outer world of social relations. After reflecting on these two levels of personal existence and the

importance of schools for formation of character, Jørgensen comes to the conclusion that if educational institutions are to serve the young, education has to be democratic.

I find Jørgensen's argument convincing, but his analysis brings us to another question which he does not discuss: What are the conditions of personal existence and personal change? How do people in general, and young people in particular, discover, express or experiment with their inner existence? In what kind of circumstances do young people have free play with their character, aspirations, emotions, etc.? The fact is that despite the age of individuation, liquidation, eradication of tradition etc. (Bauman, 2000) young people are under immense pressure to conform to strong norms, they spend years after years in schools where authority is firmly embedded in books and concrete or tied to position and merit where they are the least advantaged. They come under increased pressure to perform, where their humanity is reduced to predefined skills and conformity (Nussbaum, 1997). Compulsory education is plagued with such pressure and lack of freedom, but it also affects lifelong learning (Biesta, 2006).

The American author, feminist, educationist and social activist bell hooks describes her early education as a place for self-realization or self-determination. She uses the term 'transgression' to refer to the crossing of cultural and disciplinary boundaries of her home to be changed by ideas learned at school. In the introduction to her book, *Teaching to Transgress*, she writes:

School was the place of ecstasy — pleasure and danger. To be changed by ideas was pure pleasure. But to learn ideas that ran counter to values and beliefs learned at home was to place oneself at risk, to enter the danger zone. Home was the place where I was forced to conform to someone else's image of who and what I would be. School was the place where I would forget that self and, through ideas, reinvent myself. (hooks, 1994, p. 3)

School was a place for transgression for hooks — a learning community which urged students "to open [their] minds and hearts so that [they] can know beyond the boundaries of what is acceptable, so that [they] can think and rethink, so that [they] can create new vision" (hooks, 1994, p. 12). This kind of learning community is one which, according to hooks, makes education the practice of freedom.

Although young people in Western societies may not be forced to conform to predefined images of who they are, it is evident that the pressure is great to fit into predefined categories. Often the school offers little freedom, and it certainly does not offer much space for experiments in living (Kaldalóns, 2015). This is one reason why exploring the wild has been so effective and liberating. By being set in a place which is void of all the conventional meanings that determine who oneself is and what is expected of oneself — where there is no self-portrait to live up to, as Gros puts it — one can transgress the boundaries of conventions and reinvent oneself. It is partly because of this potential for reinvention that some philosophers have depicted nature as a Socratic midwife. Malenfant has discussed this analogy, saying:

While Socratic maieutics aimed at a rebirth of the subject, non-anthropocentric conversations with the natural midwife should here be understood as the processes through which our individuality would become devoid of its pretensions to dominate or grasp nature one-sidedly. (Malenfant, 2010, p. 32)

The point here is that by getting rid of our pretensions (because we are in a natural environment where pretence has no place) we can pose different questions that we end up having to answer ourselves (somewhat like the interlocutor in a Socratic dialogue).

Moreover, travelling through an extreme environment such as the wilderness, where one has to negotiate one's relation to nature at every step, one may be forced to ask such questions and then answer them oneself.

## Experience and transgression

I now turn to the concept of experience, tie it to the concept of transgression and get back to our initial dilemma. The German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer distinguishes between two meanings of the word 'experience,' or actually between the meanings of the German words 'Erlebnis' and 'Erfahrung,' both of which would translate as 'experience' in English (Gadamer, 2004, p. 84, Vilhauer, 2010). Experience can have two meanings:

- (1) the immediate, first-person, lived feeling that precedes interpretation or communication (a kind of material to be shaped) and
- (2) the lasting significance that results from this "flow" of feeling, which we are likely to call "an experience". (Vilhauer, 2010, p.9)

This distinction is similar to one Dewey makes in *Democracy and Education*, where he compares the ancient Greek understanding of experience and the understanding which became dominant among philosophers in the modern age:

To Plato experience meant habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials. Reason meant the principle of reform, of progress, of increase of control. Devotion to the cause of reason meant breaking through the limitations of custom and getting at things as they really were. To the modern reformers, the situation was the other way around. Reason, universal principles, a priori notions, meant either blank forms which had to be filled in by experience, by sense observations, in order to get significance and validity; or else were mere indurated prejudices, dogmas imposed by authority, which masqueraded and found protection under august names. (Dewey, 2007, p. 197)

Gadamer's first understanding of experience corresponds to the ideas of the modern reformers, while Gadamer's latter understanding corresponds more or less to the ancient understanding of experience, as Dewey describes it. This distinction is neatly captured in Icelandic by two distinct words: 'upplifun' and 'reynsla.' 'Upplifun', corresponds to the first understanding given by Gadamer and the understanding of 'experience' that became dominant in the modern age. The word 'reynsla,' on the other hand, corresponds to the ancient understanding of 'experience' and Gadamer's second understanding.

I shall not dwell on linguistic issues, but go back to Dewey's description of Plato's understanding from above: "To Plato experience meant habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials." But where do children and young people have the opportunity to gain experience in this sense, i.e. where do they have the chance of engaging in a lot of past chance trials? In trivial matters, it may be easy to gain experience from chance trials, but in more serious cases where the stakes are high and of moral importance one does not easily engage in such trials.

On a journey through circumstances that are as if they were a play where consequences are limited to a certain space and time, the activities are nevertheless of utter seriousness. The participants are forced to experiment with circumstances in which they have no way of engaging in daily life and they enter into relations and take up roles that they may not have access to outside the journey. The wild, therefore, functions as a great

laboratory of life where not only meaning is explored but also where virtue and character can be developed in, so to speak, experimental circumstances.

Bell hooks could have described her transgressional education as education where she could play with the limits of possible self-realization. Such a play would involve emotions and attitudes that are inward-looking (e.g. pride and self-respect) social (e.g. compassion and justice) and extra-personal (e.g. harmony with nature). In the above quotation she describes how at school in an interaction with ideas she was able to transgress the home-defined limits of acceptable forms of self-realization. Journeying through the wild may also provide space for such self-realization. In this sense, the wild does not become an educational setting by providing participants (students) with knowledge or by giving them answers to questions about nature, but by confronting participants with questions about their own self — or their own subjectivity (Biesta, 2015) — and making them answer with full honesty.

When I describe the wild as confronting people with questions about their own selves, the wild sounds like a rather horrific kind of teacher, one who teaches through brute force. However, this need not be so and there are, in fact, countless stories of people who seek the wild for exactly its transgressional potential. Gros relates this to the “call of the wild”:

The appeal of transgression, the call of the outdoors are easily found in the writings of Kerouac or Snyder: throwing off moronic conventions, the soporific security of four walls, the boredom of the Same, the war of repetition, the chilliness of the well-heeled and their hatred of change. The decision to walk (to head somewhere far off, anywhere, to try something else) can be understood this time as the Call of the Wild. (Gros, 2015, pp. 5–6)

## Responding to the dilemma

Finally I think I have the material to respond to the dilemma of radical outdoor education. Let us begin by recalling what the dilemma was: We have two contradictory views on what might make a particular setting educational; on the one hand, there is a view that emphasizes continuity, while on the other hand there is a view that emphasizes non-continuity, a break with previous experience.

I want to begin by noting that when we talk about radical educational settings, we may be thinking of either of two alternatives. First, the place in which the educational activities are supposed to take place may simply be different from previous places. If that is all there is to it, the effect may just as well be little, or even negative in terms of education. Second, a radical educational setting may also be whatever place which gives rise to subjective experiences that are new and different from what a person has experienced before, and where conventional meanings are lost or absent. As I explained earlier in this paper, a place is not just a location, and a ‘different place’ is not just a ‘location never seen before.’ A place comes with meaning and significance and when we talk about a place that is radically different from places previously experienced, we should not be concerned with the aspects of the physical surroundings but with the subjective experience of the persons who are located in that place.

There are different considerations that may justify applying the term ‘radical’ to a place. One way a place may be radical is by challenging the roles a person finds him or herself in, and this may actually happen by forcing the person to ‘play herself out’, to use the phrase from Gadamer.

In outdoor education, not least when teens from urban areas are taken into the wild, the teens are often forced to take part as if they were in a play. Walking for several weeks in

Strandir, in the rural north of Iceland is not life itself. It is more like a play, and like any other play, it need not be taken seriously. It is an exception to life. But the circumstances offer no discount, and sooner than later anyone participating realizes that one has to be a full participant. Even if it is an exception to life, like any other play, one does not get away without being present and playing oneself out. The extremity of the circumstances does not only allow the participants to transgress various personal and social boundaries, but may force them to do so.

One challenge of the wilderness for the urban teens is the experience of being constantly lost. The places through which they travel on their journey — at least during the initial phase of it — appear void of meaning; they could be anywhere, all directions are equal, and nothing makes much sense. All the signs and symbols from their previous environment — their customary places and spaces — are nowhere to be found. On their walk through the wilderness they have to negotiate their own standing in a foreign place with nothing but other people to count on. If the teen comes from a background where he or she has learned through the hard facts of life that no adults are to be trusted, each step brings along a little challenge that must be overcome. In the end, the teen has not only learned that there are, after all, some adults that can be trusted, but he or she has actually had to trust some of them.

The question now is this: What kind of experience does such an exception to life offer? The answer depends on those involved, the nature of the experience and the home-situation to which they return. It may offer only strong momentary experience, an 'uplift', i.e. strong "immediate, first-person, lived feeling that precedes interpretation or communication." If that is all there is, the experience is of little or no educational value.

But chances are that the experience of a journey into the wilderness makes a lasting impact on the self, that it offers (to use the wording from Dewey) "lasting significance that results from [a] 'flow' of feeling", or as Plato might have put it, had he spoken English, "habituation, or the conservation of the net product of a lot of past chance trials." This possibility does not depend only on the nature of the experience involved in the exceptional activities, but also on the circumstances which meet the student once he or she returns to the home situation (Beightol et al., 2012, p. 322).

The dilemma of radical educational settings is not an illusion but points to a real possibilities for both the transforming educational potential of radical educational settings and the danger of such settings being void of educational value. By bringing about radically different experiences and forcing participants to negotiate and search for meaning in places they have never encountered before, outdoor education may offer educational possibilities that promote personal (moral) growth of the participants. O'Sullivan (2002) and D'Amato and Krasny (2011) describe transformative education in a similar way:

O'Sullivan (2002) suggests that transformative learning occurs when we can no longer interpret our current experience in terms of our old assumptions, and our cognitive system then searches for ways to reorganize until new constructs are discovered that make the novel and confusing perceptions intelligible. As a result of such disconnect between constructs and experience, "living systems adapt by transforming themselves, and learning occurs" (O'Sullivan, 2002, p. 3) (D'Amato & Krasny, 2011, pp. 238–239).

But radical outdoor education may also miss the mark entirely exactly because it breaks with previous experience. Nothing of value is gained simply by exposing students to challenging situations, though it can have fundamental value for character growth — for instance, for virtues such as compassion and resilience — if it is done in a setting which

engages the participants as moral beings while ‘out there’ and continues that journey when they return home. The continuation of the journey can take different forms. It can be visible in radical changes to one’s life, but it can also take a much more mundane form.

Other examples of practices that may aid in post-course transfer include learning to appreciate small wonders of nature that are also found close to home (e.g., insects), and to metaphorically relate principles learned on course to issues dealt with in daily life (D’Amato & Krasny, 2011, p. 250).

The continuity in radical outdoor education — the condition that Dewey emphasized as a precondition for all learning — does not come from the external environment, nor is it a feature of the participant’s relation to this environment; rather, it comes from the internal questioning and search for answers and meaning. Although new places are negotiated along the way, the same self will be there for the negotiation, and such negotiation is always, at the same time, a negotiation of that very self.

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