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EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN ENVIRONMENTAL HUMANITIES EDUCATION: THEMES IN THE EMERGING LITERATURE

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Abstract

Through a literature review, this research note explores the incorporation of experiential learning in undergraduate environmental humanities university programs and the evaluation of these programs; we looked at relevant literature from Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand where the English language and other commonalities would allow themes to emerge. Prompted by a re-evaluation of an existing Humanities course at Memorial University — Humanities 3020: Humanities and the Environment — we sought and identified themes from the small body of emerging literature. The themes identified are: Finding students' knowledge base; Interdisciplinary education; Experiential learning component (particularly field study or place-based learning); and pedagogy of care. Our findings are based on specific keywords identified for the educational development of the environmental humanities course at Memorial University. Future research regarding elements of experiential learning in an undergraduate humanities setting would best benefit from a broad search approach accounting for variables omitted from this research.

Keywords: environmental humanities; experiential learning components; pedagogy; interdisciplinary education.



1. Introduction

In the words of humanities educator, Jeanne McGlinn (1999: 2-3), “experiential learning, or learning by doing, fits newer conceptions about the process of learning.” This research note explores how experiential learning can impact students studying environmental humanities. We draw upon several articles in peer-reviewed journals to investigate the introduction and evaluation of experiential learning in environmental humanities programs at the undergraduate university level. This work is part of a larger project of revising an undergraduate environmental humanities course – Humanities 3020 – at Memorial University’s Grenfell Campus, Corner Brook, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. We see such a component as potentially valuable. Although our research is ongoing, we have located a few articles, all pertaining to programs in the United States and Australia; given the youth of environmental humanities as a discipline, this is not surprising. In this note, we begin by outlining the rationale for experiential learning in environmental humanities. Then we review our methodology, including limitations of this research and discuss our findings with a subsequent summary of the four main themes from the literature: (1) finding students’ base knowledge, (2) interdisciplinary education, (3) field study or place-based learning, and (4) pedagogy of care.

A. Rationale for Experiential Learning in Environmental Humanities

Environmental humanities is a relatively new discipline that can be defined as a synthesis of humanities disciplines, such as literature, philosophy, history and art history with a focus on the natural world. Environmental humanities may contain elements of science, especially citizen science, and public policy. The introduction of and subsequent commitment to experiential learning comes from an understanding of the limits of classroom- or school-based learning. The impact of classroom teaching can limit a student’s understanding of real-life application and impede the development of personal meaning, both factors being important for meaningful long-term learning. (Goralnik, Millenbah, Nelson, and Thorp, 2012). The concept of learning has changed due to the work of Dewey, Freire, Kolb and others to emphasise experience as the key to real learning (McGlinn 1999). Put simply, “It is not enough for teachers to simply convey information in a behaviorist model of stimulus and response (as) learners are not passive vessels; they are persons with experiences and past knowledge which they use to transact with ideas and create meaning” McGlinn 1999: 3). This must be particularly true of education that is



centred around nature (Goralnik *et al.* 2012). There is also a concern to help students enhance their relationship with the natural world and to see themselves embedded in it so that they can develop values such as respect and responsibility for the environment (Goralnik *et al.* 2012).

For students to formulate meaning and develop understandings of themselves, the world around them and their place in it, they require education which evokes meaning. The following reviews a few of the noted practises for educational development of environmental humanities primarily through experiential learning.

2. Methodology

We developed a set of relevant keywords (Table 1) to review the existing English language literature on environmental humanities education in post-secondary institutions with a bias towards experiential learning techniques and activities. We were especially interested in evaluations of these techniques and activities. In addition to our original search terms, other search terms were added based on relevant words found during the review. In our search we included the following electronic databases: Memorial University library system, ProQuest, ERIC and Google Scholar. We also conducted a focused search of the *Journal of Experiential Learning*, given its mandate as “a peer-reviewed, scholarly journal presenting a diverse range of articles in subject areas such as outdoor adventure programming, service learning, environmental education, therapeutic applications, research and theory, the creative arts, and much more” (SAGE journals 2015). We use McGlinn’s (1999) work on experiential learning in environmental humanities programming to inform our interpretation of additional literature identified. McGlinn’s (1999) paper discusses the General Education program at the University of North Carolina, Asheville, which is built around a four-course interdisciplinary humanities sequence with a faculty teaching circle on experiential learning. Please see Table 1 in the Appendix.

A. Limitations of Research

We acknowledge that there is more literature on environmental humanities education in general and that there is literature addressing such education in high schools [e.g., Gillet, Thomas, Skok, and McLaughlin, 1991] but we chose research publications from developed English-speaking countries that pertained to post-secondary environmental humanities education programs with experiential learning



components. We also excluded research on related programs such as wilderness education, outdoors education and others, whether offered by universities, colleges or high schools (e.g., Grumbine, 1988). (In some ways, these programs are the precursors to current environmental humanities and helped to lay the foundation for an identifiable discipline that has taken root. In addition, many authors have argued that the humanities should play a more central role in interdisciplinary environmental education; for instance, Griffiths (2007) states that “humanities broaden the scale at which science commonly operates towards “human-scale geographies” and uses narrative forms to create human reflexivity in environmental practices and paradigms (cited in Ryan, 2012: 1014). Meanwhile, we restricted our search to university programs that are clearly part of the burgeoning discipline of environmental humanities. We understand that there may be other relevant literature for future research due to the limitations of our search parameters.

3. Findings

Given the relative novelty of environmental humanities programs, especially those incorporating experiential learning, literature on this topic remains in its infancy. We were able to locate only two articles in peer-reviewed journals that specifically addressed our topic: the evaluation of experiential learning in environmental humanities. The only articles focused on experiential learning and environmental humanities appeared in the *Journal of Experiential Education*. One was mainly concerned with evaluation (Alagona and Simon, 2010) and the other with an identified pedagogical approach (Goralnik *et al.* 2012). Another publication we reviewed was a research paper produced by an Australian university which explores the twenty year history of an undergraduate environmental humanities course though consistent themes that have emerged (Ryan, 2012).

The identified literature was confined to the United States and Australia, although such education is offered elsewhere and we searched for relevant publications on programs in any English-speaking country. The University of California at Santa Barbara offers a Wildlands Studies Program with a summer field course called Wilderness and Society: The California High Sierra Project (Alagona and Simon, 2010). Alagona and Simon (2010) based their evaluation of this program on the five summer sessions between 2002 and 2007, in the Sierra Nevada of eastern California. For the past twenty years, the School of Communications and Arts at Edith Cowan University in Western Australia has delivered



an undergraduate course called Environmental Humanities; the history of the course parallels the development of the environmental humanities as a field in Australia, where the journal *Environmental Humanities* was founded and is based (Ryan, 2012). The third paper is broader in scope than the others but the lead author teaches field philosophy at Oregon State University, with field philosophy defined as interdisciplinary experiential environmental humanities learning (Goralnik *et al.* 2012). Field philosophy has as its foundation, a concept of environmental ethics based in community and a commitment to place-based environmental education; among the goals of field philosophy (and environmental humanities in general) is the cultivation of empathy and ethical capacity and behaviours (Goralnik *et al.* 2012).

We would again like to acknowledge that there are likely other environmental humanities courses with experiential components besides those we have identified but, as far as we can tell, these are not yet considered in the literature. There are also, of course, many environmental humanities programs of study which may or may not include experiential learning; the environmental humanities minor at the University of Delaware is an example (University of Delaware College of Arts and Sciences, Department of English) and the MA in Environmental Humanities at the University of Utah is another (<http://environmental-humanities.utah.edu/>).

A. Themes

Although the literature on this topic is minimal, some fundamental themes can be identified. These are as follows:

1. Finding students' knowledge base
2. Interdisciplinary education
3. Experiential learning component (particularly field study or place-based learning)
4. Pedagogy of care

i. *Finding students' knowledge base*

A common element in the existing literature is the usefulness of building upon students' base knowledge. As McGlenn (1999: 3) states, "Dynamic learning requires that teachers draw on students' background information, build knowledge which is needed to develop new concepts by offering experiences, guide students in experiences in which they can create new knowledge, and provide a



structure for reflection.” This approach recognizes that the teacher is no longer considered the only expert in the classroom and that student experiences are significant and offer learning opportunities (McGlinn, 1999, 7). Accordingly, both McGlinn (1999) and Ryan (2012) suggest starting a course with a question or assignment to establish an understanding for students’ basic knowledge. Additionally Goralnik *et al.* (2012) suggest higher learning is improved when it builds upon students’ prior knowledge.

The literature also suggests embracing the natural relationships between students and teachers to maximize the efficacy of learning (Alagona & Simon, 2010; Goralnik *et al.* 2012). These elements set the stage for what Goralnik *et al.* (2012) call a pedagogy of care; experiential learning in environmental humanities has emotional engagement as a goal and aims to foster emotional connections. After all, “people experience emotional reactions to situations before they can engage events and ideas intellectually” (Goralnik *et al.* 2012:416).

ii. Interdisciplinary education

Humanities education is inherently interdisciplinary. Humanities courses taught at our university encompass material and approaches from literature, philosophy, visual art, theatre, history, anthropology, gender studies, Indigenous studies, and other disciplines. In this way, students are able to consider questions and examine problems from various perspectives; it is our belief that this promotes thinking, personal development, and citizenship. In some ways, environmental humanities as a discipline or sub-discipline, is even more adventurous and ambitious. As Ryan (2012: 1014) writes, “At a fundamental level, the ecological humanities seek to redress the arts and sciences gulf towards practicable environmental sustainability by ameliorating ‘two cultures’ (Western/Indigenous) thinking.”

Instructors in environmental humanities conclude that the experience of being exposed to an interdisciplinary curriculum encouraged students to move beyond compartmentalized learning (Christensen & Crimmel, 2008: cited in Alagona & Simon, 2012). This is particularly true if field study or place-based learning (discussed below) is included in the curriculum. Thus, environmental humanities courses and programs tend to draw from multiple disciplines. The University of California’s course Wilderness and Society: The California High Sierra Project draws from history, geography and law. The interdisciplinary nature of experiential learning opportunities in environmental humanities moves



students towards a deeper learning experience involving the natural world and, thus, away from anthropocentric approaches and further into relationship and even partnership with current environmental issues (Ryan, 2012).

iii. Experiential learning

It seems that interdisciplinary education is advanced through field work. Alagona & Simon (2012: 203). This implies that field work is inherently interdisciplinary as students focus on real problems, writing, “Field courses provide opportunities to break down disciplinary academic barriers and generate increased student interest and engagement in humanistic approaches to environmental studies that may seem overly abstract in a traditional classroom setting.” Place-based learning—sometimes called community-based education-- is an experiential learning concept that brings students out of the classroom and into natural settings. The environmental and place-based education literature demonstrates the value of direct experience with the natural world to develop relationships with nonhuman nature (Goralnik *et al.* 2012). Further, researchers believe that field trips provide students with opportunities to “unpack values, relationships, and identity in environmental humanities courses to provide quality environmental, philosophical and care- based learning experiences” (Goralnik *et al.* 2012: 422). To advancing critical place consciousness, instructors at Australia’s Edith Cowan University brought students on fieldwork trips to key biodiversity locations, such as Anstey-Keane Damplands and Forrestdale Lake in the southern Perth suburbs and more recently to Northbridge, a reclaimed wetland system in Perth (Ryan, 2012). Aboriginal Australian perspectives are incorporated into teaching during the last three weeks of the course and Aboriginal teachers appear as guest speakers. Field study and place-based learning provides students with an opportunity to connect meaning and deep understanding of curriculum topics to real-life situations (Alagona & Simon, 2010; Goralnik *et al.* 2012; Ryan, 2012). According to Alagona & Simon (2010:203), “In the field, students can see how biophysical processes, social structures, and cultural ideas about nature fit together to shape the land and its inhabitants.



iv. *Pedagogy of Care*

By the time Edith Cowan University students go on field trips, they have already studied concepts of nature, images of nature, nature as a contested political construct, and related ideas (Ryan, 2012). This prepares them for an enhanced field trip experience and allows experiential learning to have maximum value. Then, according to Alagona & Simon (2010: 193), “the field immersion experience foster(s) a sense of simplicity and opportunities for self-reflection.” This enables the development of values of care that Goralnik *et al.* (2012:417), for instance, envision: “Experiential learning can develop a sense of community, practical and problem-solving skills, empathy and personal growth” which are core to the mission of humanities in general and of environmental humanities as well. This ‘pedagogy of care’ recognizes emotions and relationships as important tools for learning as these tools encourage students to develop a deep understanding, respect and care about the content in class. Goralnik *et al.* (2015:417) suggest that often the impact of school learning is limited by the lack of applicable understanding or the internal question, “how does this apply to my life?” Experiential learning with a pedagogy of care provides a connection to literature and emotional engagement encouraging ‘deep learning.’

4. **Conclusion**

There are challenges when incorporating experiential learning into environmental humanities programs and courses. Although efforts are being made towards flexibility in learning approaches, most experiential models do not match the education models that have long been the bedrock of post-secondary education (Goralnik *et al.*, 2012). Logistics present another significant potential obstacle (Alagona and Simon, 2010) and often require support in the form of funding and staff assistance, which may or may not be available. In spite of these challenges, the existing literature contains compelling arguments about the value and effectiveness of incorporating experiential learning into environmental humanities education. Experiential learning seems to advance the goals of environmental humanities as a new discipline, providing students with a medium of maximum opportunity to conceptualize and apply course concepts. With these goals uppermost in mind, we cannot ignore the convincing arguments in the literature as we plan future programming at our university.



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Appendix

Table 1: Search Terms

Topic	Search Terms (Keywords)
Experiential Learning in Environmental Humanities in Higher Learning	“environmental humanities” and “evaluation” “evaluation” “environmental humanities course/class/education” “evaluating environmental humanities education” “education” AND “environmental humanities”