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You are never alone

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Title

You are never alone: understanding the educational potential of an 'urban solo' in promoting place-responsiveness.

Abstract

Solos have a long history in outdoor learning (education) for their use in 'wilderness' settings. They have been theorised in experiential education literature and through phenomenological concepts where dwelling and solitude provide unstructured time for individual reflection. Place-Based Education provides opportunities for educators to develop place-responsive practices in areas local to where people live, work and study. This paper reports on an exploratory investigation into a Masters-level course. Students were required to undertake an 'urban solo' in a familiar place and consider how ontological disruption might be nurtured in city-based locations. Six students participated in semi-structured interviews which were then analysed thematically using a constructivist grounded theory approach. Findings revealed that their solo experiences had had a profound and unexpected effect on all students. These changes seemed to occur as the result of an ontological shift in the students from being passive receptors of stimuli to engaging more actively with their surroundings. We concluded that, because of its simplicity and close proximity to school grounds, the urban solo is one way for teachers to overcome the barriers they consistently report to outdoor learning. We recommend that future studies draw further on urban theorists to develop more city-based, place-responsive practices.

Keywords: Place-Based Education, Urban solo, Ontological disruption, Experiential education, Outdoor learning, Phenomenology.

Introduction

The urgent need to reassess the relationships between nature, human cultures and how to live well in the world has seen a flourishing of scholarly activity under the umbrella term 'environmental philosophy' with authors such as Weston (2009), Hill and Brown (2014) Cocks and Simpson (2015) and Jickling, Blenkinsop, Timmerman, and Sitka-Sage (2018) focussing specifically on the role and impact of education outdoors. One enduring theme that emerges from this body of work is the belief that over time human beings have become increasingly alienated from nature and that spending time outdoors will in some way ameliorate this alienation. Theoretical debates have raged about the Cartesian separation of things into subjects and objects (see, e.g., Midgley [1995]) and the epistemic separation of knower from known (see, e.g., Plumwood, [2002]). However, practical philosophy (James 2015) and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 2002; van Manen 2007) provide a basis from which to study these not as separations but instead as relationships and, importantly for this paper, at an agentic level through person/place experiences.

The paper is an exploratory investigation into one activity of a Masters-level credit-bearing course called *Environmental Philosophy and City-Based Outdoor Learning* where ideas around alienation were explored through background reading (see, e.g., Clarke [2012]; Wals and Corcoran [2012]) and group discussions. Students critiqued the view that the survival of the human species requires changes to modern lifestyles and were asked to further consider the role of educational responses. This paper is not an evaluation of the course in its entirety. It is an empirical study of one outdoor activity, an urban solo, that students were required to complete. They were asked to stay for an hour by themselves in a place that was close to their home, or the school in

which they worked, to experience the appearances and sensations of that place first hand. We wanted to find out what happened when the students stopped to dwell for a short time in a place that they passed through on a regular basis.

The Outdoors as a Place for Learning

In Outdoor Education (OE) literature there is a shifting emphasis on the role of place which can be observed through changes in terminology. Nicol (2002) and Beames, Higgins, and Nicol (2012) explain how the term 'Outdoor Education' has traditionally meant learning that occurs predominantly at a residential centre or on expeditions. Mostly, this requires the temporary movement of city-based children to rural areas for educational purposes. However, since the majority of the world's population lives in cities (Department for International Development 2010) there has been a demonstrable shift in this literature from the rural and remote to educational opportunities closer to the urban places where most people live (see, e.g., Derby, Piersol, and Blenkinsop [2015]; Wolsink [2015]; Morgan [2017]; Rautio, Hohti, Leinonen, and Tammi [2017]).

These changing spatial and geographical emphases have paved the way for the emergence of the term 'Outdoor Learning' (OL) as something broader and more enabling for teachers as it encompasses not just adventurous activities led by specialist providers but the significant cross-curricular learning opportunities that might take place just outside the classroom.

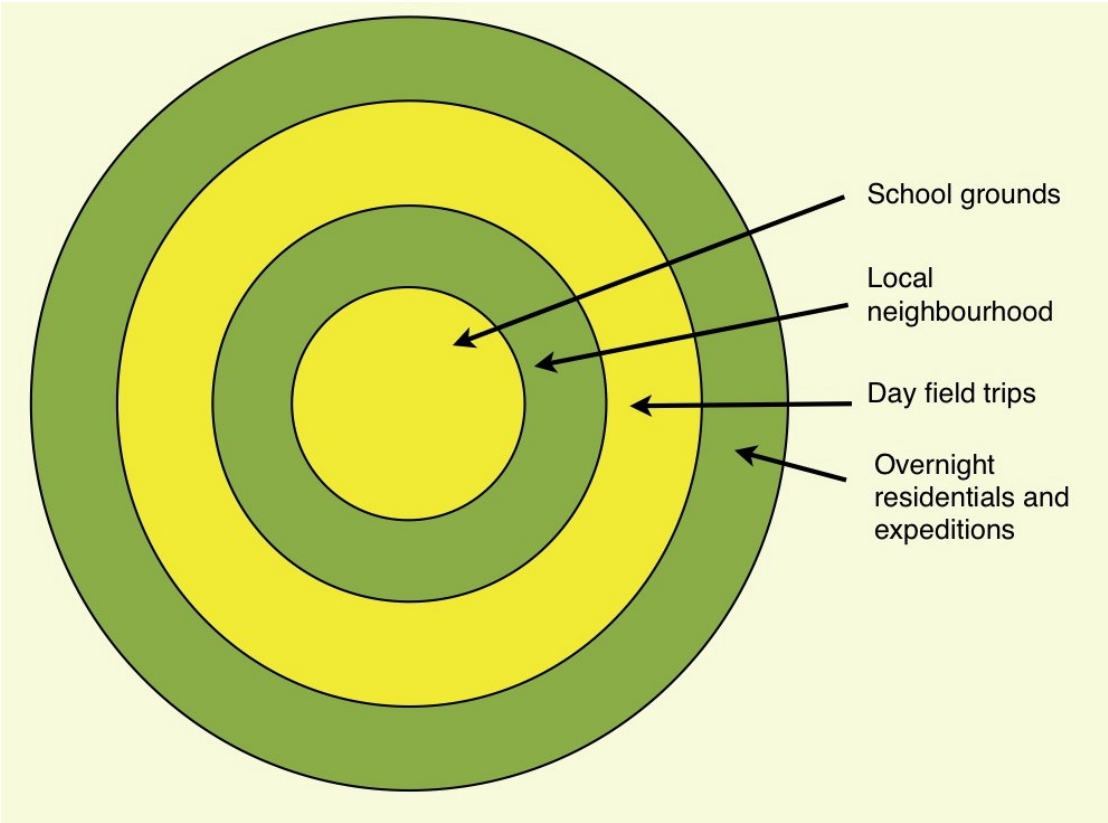

Diagram 1: Concentric Circles Model

This realignment has gained theoretical purchase through the concentric circles model conceived by Higgins and Nicol (2002) to inform an international collaboration project and then adopted by Beames et al. (2012). Diagram 1 is an unillustrated version which shows in terms of place that the inner circle refers to school grounds, moving out to areas in the local neighbourhood, to areas a little further away that require a day excursion, to areas that require overnight stays including residentials and expeditions and then outside of the circles where place is the planet itself. Whilst these authors argue that all zones offer important places for learning there is a growing trend in the literature that focusses on the educational potential of the inner circles. Stability and growth in school-based OL has been observed in some countries (Bentsen, Jensen, Mygind, and Randrup 2010; Fägerstam 2013) through longstanding Scandinavian traditions such as *friluftsliv* (Henderson and Vikander 2007) with Denmark's *udeskole* being most notable in terms of growth (Barfod 2018).

Despite these trends there remain significant barriers that prevent teachers taking their pupils outdoors on a daily basis. A summary of research papers conducted by Nicol, Higgins, Ross, and Mannion (2007, 6) found these to be:

1. *the financial cost to pupils and schools (e.g. paying for residentials),*
2. *the time involved in organising events,*
3. *the adult/pupil ratios required,*
4. *issues to do with safety, risk and liability,*
5. *the weather,*
6. *the dependence on transport to access sites (as well as issues linked to cost and ratios),*
7. *the disruption to classes.*

Having conducted three studies in England Waite (2010) noted a decline in OL opportunities in schools. If there is to be an increase in school-based OL opportunities there needs to be some consideration of how the barriers teachers experience might be overcome. Some reflection on the traditions that inform current practice is necessary to address these barriers.

Theoretical Background

The theory that informs OL is very often presented as rooted within the tradition of experiential education. This may be traced back to luminaries such as James (2000) Dewey (1963) and Pierce (e.g., Moore [1998]). Common to all three was the view that learners were not simply passive observers of the world. Whitehead (1968, 127) theorised about the world around us and the need to 'fix upon details within nature and discuss their essences and their types of inter-connection'. In order to understand the educational potential that might arise from these inter-connections it is important first to explain what is meant by nature. This has been described as something

‘physical and biological, human and nonhuman, natural, cultivated and constructed, social and political, cultural and aesthetic, and temporal with a past and future’ (Smyth 1998, 1). From this perspective nature is not just something green, distant and remote but everywhere. We are therefore in agreement with Duhn, Malone, and Tesar (2017) who contend that nature is a slippery and contested word and that this troublesome reality needs to be welcomed, not resisted, in order to be thought about and interacted with. Furthermore, nature might be better be understood, as Rautio et al. (2017) suggest, by ‘mapping *mutual emergence* of children and their surroundings in relation to each other’.

The philosophical pragmatism of Weston (1992, 1994) and Cheney (1989), and developed more recently by James (2009, 2015), provides some theoretical grounding not least because it is closely associated with experiential approaches to education (Miettinen 2000). Common to both is the preoccupation with the need for student-centred approaches to learning and, importantly, finding starting points that are determined not simply by institutional requirements but learners’ needs (Kolb and Kolb 2005).

Drawing on the traditions of philosophical pragmatism James (2015, 9) uses the term *practical* philosophy to argue that ‘appreciating nature’s aesthetic qualities involves not detachment and disinterested contemplation, but immersion, participation and engagement’. This is not a rejection of the importance of theory because as Weston (2009) reminds us, greater appreciation of nature arises from our scientific understanding of the parts and relations. In terms of processes and procedures, James (2015, 5) explains that ‘the practical philosopher, in contrast, begins not by reflecting on abstract philosophical questions, but by paying close attention to the scientific

economic and socio-political dimensions of real cases'.

Similarly, a constellation of ideas associated with phenomenology including place, proximity and presence adds to this theoretical background in revealing qualities associated with lived experience (Husserl 1973; van Manen 2007; Peters 2009). In terms of place Tuan's (1974) early contributions to this debate describe how human experience is affected by dwelling in places and spaces. Here he is making a distinction between space and place where space is something tending towards the global and abstract whereas place is more local within which attachment and belonging might be nurtured. In addition, Relph distinguishes between place and placelessness (1976, 1) by arguing that 'to be human is to live in a world that is filled with significant places: to be human is to have and to know *your* place'. While Gruenewald (2003) and Hung (2016) believe that places do indeed have something to say, they meant this to be conditional because humans must learn to listen. Indeed, James (2009) points out the need for reciprocity between 'place disclosure' on the one hand and 'active listening' on the other. In reviewing these proximal relations and the need for being present in places, Nicol (2014a; 2014b) argues that the moral significance of our relationship with places is based on the attention we pay to them.

Educators have also begun to explore the pedagogical opportunities of place through the development of 'Place-Based Education'(PBE). One of its leading exponents has defined PBE as

> the process of using the local community and environment as a starting point to teach concepts in language, arts, mathematics, social studies, science and other subjects across the curriculum. Emphasising hands-on, real world learning experiences, this approach to education increases academic achievement, helps students develop stronger ties to their

> community, enhances students' appreciation for the natural world and creates a heightened commitment to serving as active, contributing citizens' (Sobel 2004, 7).

This vision for PBE is incredibly ambitious and we use it here more simply to provide curricular justification for why teachers might want to cross the classroom threshold to learn outdoors. A helpful typology has been developed by Mannion, Fenwick, Nugent, and I'Anson's (2011) who named three different teaching strategies. One they term 'place-ambivalent' where the activities devised by teachers could have been conducted in any other place. 'Place-sensitive' strategies were those where 'teachers sought to *take some active account* of the location and its importance for the activity (28)'. Finally, 'place-essential' strategies, were those where 'the place itself, or the features or elements found there, provide the key basis for the task, activity or enquiry' (28). The authors acknowledge that this typology does not suggest three discrete strategies as they observed fluidity between them. In addition, Mannion et al.'s (2011) research was based on teaching strategies whereas this current research is investigating how teachers as individuals engage phenomenologically with place. However, it is a useful typology to begin to determine the differences and degrees of relational awareness for individuals while they are present in places. It is also a means of understanding Seamon's (2014, 11) term 'place attachment' which he defines as 'the emotional bonds between people and a particular place or environment'. This helps us respond to Wattchow and Brown's (2011, 181) challenge that teachers engaged in developing place-responsiveness 'need to be committed to come to know their places deeply' and this provides the empirical focus of this paper.

In OE literature the power and experience of 'the solo' have had an enduring appeal as an antidote to urban living with opportunities to 'reconnect' with nature (Bobilya,

McAvoy, Kenneth, and Kalisch, 2005; Knapp and Smith 2005; Campbell, 2010). In Outdoor Environmental Education (OEE) literature innovators such as Cornell (1989) and van Matre (1990) have for some time been using nature-based activities to promote learning in the outdoors through experiential engagement. Various rationales for doing so emerge from this literature where solitude and unstructured time provide opportunities for contemplation and reflection. These activities have tended to take place in the so-called 'wilderness' or in wild areas characterised by green spaces. One strong theme that emerges from this literature relates to the potential of these experiences to promote a greater sense of place-responsiveness.

The City as a Place of Learning

From the sections above two observations can be made. The first is there is an increasing tendency in the OL literature to argue for teaching and learning to be more localised. The second is that theory which has traditionally been used to support and inform learning in wild, remote and rural places is not necessarily place prescriptive. This raises a question concerning what might happen when the experiential learning theory used to inform practices in the wild are adopted and applied in a city-based context. Simultaneously the urban solo is an activity that teachers might easily conduct on their doorstep thus eliminating many, if not all, of the barriers noted above.

Before proceeding however we want to offer a caveat regarding our use of the term 'urban solo'. In OE literature the solo can come across as a highly-stylised, structured, teacher-led activity that is almost ritualistic in its performance. Whilst widely practised it is also something that is largely under-theorised. We do not see

the solo as an activity but more as an experiential opportunity for individuals to build theory based on their own responses to place. We are therefore not trying to transfer the theoretical notion of 'alone in the wilderness' to 'alone in the city' not least because the notion of being alone is problematic. It is problematic because it may well maintain the Cartesian perception that the person is separate from place which would be the antithesis of the sort of place-responsiveness promoted in this paper. This message is also conveyed rather explicitly in the title of the paper.

Framing the Course (Environmental Philosophy and City-Based Outdoor Learning)

The urban solo was one activity within a Masters-level credit-bearing course with a total of 20 contact teaching hours. The course was designed so that participants were engaged in teaching and learning in indoor and outdoor settings to explore if ontological disruption might be nurtured in city-based settings (Quay 2015). The recent debates on 'the ontological turn' in education and the social sciences have focused on how this turn can have important implications for methodological and political developments in education, particularly concerning agency, transformation, pedagogy and student learning (Zembylas 2017). Some authors have challenged an emphasis on what students acquire through education by foregrounding instead the question of who they *become*. Such changes, suggests Barnett (2004, 248) are 'characteristically internal. They are primarily to do with how individuals understand themselves, with their sense of identity (or lack of it)'. These authors do this through a theoretical/conceptual exploration of an approach to learning that undermines a narrow focus on the intellect by promoting the integration of knowing, acting and being (see, e.g., Dall'Alba and Barnacle [2007]). Such debates have drawn on the

work of researchers who have investigated ontological disruption and ontological disturbance. The concept of ontological disruption (see, e.g., Jickling [2015]; Straker, Potter, and Irwin [2017]), or ontological disturbance (see, e.g., Badley [2002]; Barnett [2004, 2005, 2007]; Pollard [2014]; Rogoff [2003]), suggests that for effective learning and real change to take place what must be created is 'epistemological and ontological disturbance in the minds and in the *being* of students' (2000, 154). Rogoff (2000) argues that such disruption, or disturbance, is associated with a hugely transformative power which brings about an ontological shift in the person experiencing the disruption, a shift which is inevitably associated with their identities. Taking this discussion ahead, Badley (2002, 449-450) concludes that 'these notions of disturbance, of accommodation to that disturbance … [have] very serious requirements of the teacher' who is responsible for ensuring that students are able to develop a sense of an ethical self in relation to competing discourses and perspectives (Pollard 2014). Several writers have called for the development of pedagogies, particularly in Higher Education (HE), which 'offer space to each student to forge their own becoming', a development which Barnett welcomes, and which he believes 'will be ontologically disturbing and enthralling all at once. It will be electric, as one spark moves another and in unpredictable ways' (Barnett 2007, 137-8). Barnett's view of HE for the contemporary world uses a vocabulary 'that includes terms such as excitement, passion, self-confidence, journey, travel, will, energy, being and becoming' (ibid, 7), terms which appear in the students' accounts reported in the Findings section of the current paper.

We wanted the students to consider how this notion of disturbance might affect not only their own learning as students in an HE setting but also their own teaching in

schools. Before undertaking the solo students were also informed of key literature from sources such as environmental philosophy, OE, OL, reform pedagogy, urban OL and transformative teacher education. The course reading list was compiled to avoid adopting an overly narrow OE/OL-centric approach to city-based learning. Accordingly, students were familiarised with sociocultural perspectives (Vygotsky 1978; Bakhtin 1981), which posit that learning occurs as a result of dialogic interactions (Mercer 1995, 2000; Wells 2000; Gonzalez et al. 2005). Dialogic interactions with staff and peers help learners to bridge the gap between what they could achieve on their own and what could be achieved with support from adults or more able peers in active and sustained collaboration (Wertsch 1985; Rogoff 1990); and inner dialogues, which are a form of internalized, self-directed dialogue, encourage learners to 'talk to themselves in silence' (DeSouza et al., 2008, 163). Thus both kinds of dialogue and interaction, which characterise sociocultural perspectives on learning, were required for successful completion of the course.

Course aims (of which the solo was a part)

The preceding paragraphs have delineated the key bodies of research and literature which informed the development of the course and have outlined how socio-cultural perspectives on learning shaped the conceptual framing. The following overarching aims informed the course:

1. to introduce students to the historical development of various theories under the umbrella terms 'environmental philosophy', 'environmental education' and 'Education for Sustainable Development (ESD)'; to the assumptions that underpin these terms; and to the implications for city-based outdoor learning;
2. to enable students to engage critically with theories of reform pedagogy and experiential education to help them to understand the role of education as an agent of change;

3. to enable students to engage critically with ontological assumptions and epistemological positions in order to devise a programme of city-based outdoor learning;
4. to consider a range of educational contexts in which to promote concept-based practice (a school class; a group from an outdoor centre; a field study centre, etc);
5. to enable students to adopt a personal stance regarding environmental sustainability as a guiding principle for professional practice; and,
6. to enable students to take part in a group task to devise and deliver a programme of city-based outdoor learning to operationalise epistemological diversity.

Because the students were all in full-time employment, the course took place over two weekends in September 2015.

The urban solo

Preparation

The solo reported in this paper was completed by each student. Beforehand and to encourage subsequent reflection we ensured that they were familiar with the well-known quotation from Gibbs (1988)

> It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively.
>
> (Gibbs 1988, 16).

However, the prominence of this form of reflection has been critiqued because it is grounded in the representation of self thereby maintaining the Cartesian dualism that creates an independent knower and furthering separation from the known (Bozalek and Michalinos 2017). While we wanted to encourage self-reflection we also wanted to encourage reflections that were place-responsive and encouraged the students to engage in creative activities such as sketching, painting, poetry and photography.

This is more akin to what Barad (2014) has called diffraction which reflects difference rather than mirroring and reproducing sameness. Diffraction aims to purposely trouble dichotomies and destabilise binaries by treating relationships as energetic processes of constant becoming. Through this methodological lens we hoped to see the co-creation of place and person as each acted upon the other. As Bozalek and Michalinos (2017) suggested we wanted to see one (place) in conversation with the other (person). Moving on from the fairly conservative idea of reflection simply bringing forth past events we hoped that as students settled into their place they might experience the much more ambitious idea of diffraction to promote ontological disturbance and disrupting what Haraway (1997, 35) came to disparagingly name the 'Sacred Image of Same'.

The task comprised three parts:

1. A pre-visit to the place
   The students were asked to identify an urban place local to them. They knew that when they did the solo 'for real' that they would be asked to spend more than an hour being stationary and solitary in their place, either sitting or standing. They were asked to go there in advance to identify the precise spot. The reason for this was to avoid any procrastination that might occur if they were asked to find a spot and undertake the solo at the same time. In preparation for the solo they were required to do a risk assessment, get a weather forecast and prepare to be comfortable for whatever weather conditions they encountered.
2. The visit
   Students were asked to consider this as both a *thinking* and an *experiencing* task and to write, draw or record their thoughts and experiences as field notes or some using other art form. They were asked to consider three areas that might provide a focus for their reflections (people, place and you).
   People
   Are there people around you? What are they doing? How are they interacting with this place?
   Place
   Describe the physical characteristics of this place. Is there concrete, soil, greenery, tarmac, lighting, noise, pollution, beauty, ugliness etc?

You

How does this place make you feel? Use as many senses as you can to record your descriptions.

3. Reflection

   Describe some of the important things that happened to you.

   - Have you benefitted from the experience? If so in what ways?
   - Did you feel uncomfortable at any time? If so what caused this and why?
   - Did you have any 'light bulb' or 'aha' moments? If so what were they?
   - Did you find yourself doing more thinking or feeling? Can you say why this might have been the case?
   - What was the most difficult or challenging aspect of the experience for you?
   - Has the experience changed you? If so, how?
   - How might this experience affect your personal life?
   - What would you do differently if you were undertaking an urban solo again at another time?
   - Do the phenomenological ideas associated with 'presence' and 'proximity' help to deepen your thinking on the relationship between culture and nature?
   - How could such places be used for educational purposes?
   - What one word best describes the experience of this activity for you?
   - To what extent do moral impulses come from concrete or greenery?
   - How could the experience inform your future work with pupils?

The students were asked not simply to use this as a checklist, nor were they required to reflect/diffract on all of the bullet points. Instead, they were issued as suggestions. After the solo the students were required to deliver a 15-minute presentation to their peers based on these questions and to illustrate the presentation with whatever writing or art-work they might have produced. Including the urban solo as part of this course was an experiment and there were no real precedents to follow. It was also a risk because although the solo was conducted in the students' own time it nevertheless

took up a considerable amount of core contact time and we had to ensure that the overall institutional aims of the course were met. It was with great relief therefore that, as we listened to the student presentations, one after another they reported experiences that were very special. Whilst we were pleased with the outcome it was also fairly unexpected. We had been confident enough that the solo would have some impact on the students, but what was unexpected was the power of what was reported by everyone, without exception. By the end of the presentations we concluded that we had to explore their experiences further hence this paper. What we are not able to report on are the presentations themselves as this opportunity had passed before this became a research project. This is something that we reflect on when discussing recommendations towards the end.

Method

The research reported here took place in the University of Edinburgh which has a long tradition in offering OE and OL Postgraduate Programmes. The research questions addressed were:

1. What sorts of experiences do students report after spending an hour alone in an urban place?
2. What role does ontological disruption play in this process?

Student participants

From a possible 14 (11 female and 3 male) 6 students agreed to be interviewed (5 female and 1 male). Five of these students were in full-time employment in schools and one worked for an environmental charity.

Student interviews

Interviews that lasted approximately one hour were conducted in places that were convenient for the interviewees. We carefully followed Holstein and Gubrium's (1995) advice on the active interview whereby it was viewed as a joint construction of meaning between the interviewer and the interviewee. An agreed set of questions was used, with additional prompts and probes developed through a piloting process with one interviewee. These questions were sent in advance of the interview so that participants could familiarise themselves with the questions and prepare if they wanted to. The topic set for the interviews followed the suggestions above given to students to guide their reflections, and the interview schedule for each student included questions which emerged from their earlier presentation to the whole group. There was thus a fairly substantial corpus of interview data to analyse.

All interviews were digitally recorded and fully transcribed for analysis. When transcribing the interviews we remained very alert to issues surrounding transcription highlighted in the methods literature (see, e.g., Atkinson [1992]; Riesmann [1993]; Silverman [2016]) and we returned regularly to the recordings themselves to ground our interpretations. Analysis involved the researchers as individuals, reading and re-reading the transcripts, before coming together to discuss emerging themes in order to enhance inter-coder agreement or 'interpretive convergence' (Saldana 2009, 27). Constant comparison was used to identify areas of similarity and difference (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Charmaz 2006). Our approach to analysis was informed by Charmaz's (2014) account of inductive, deductive and abductive reasoning (a type of reasoning that begins with the researcher examining inductive data and observing any surprising or puzzling finding that could not be explained with conventional theoretical accounts). Possible theoretical explanations were considered, and

hypotheses were given for each explanation, until the most plausible theoretical interpretation of the data was reached. Because we were investigating the extent to which, if at all, existing theories about 'solos' in the wilderness could be used in a new context, we remained alert to the possibilities and opportunities for what Charmaz (2014, 341) called 'an imaginative leap to achieve a plausible theoretical explanation'. Charmaz helpfully reminded us that 'at this point, the researcher may create a new theory or put extant theories together in a novel way. Thus, abduction brings creativity into inquiry and takes the iterative process of grounded theory further into theory construction'.

Ethical considerations

Close attention was given to issues of anonymity and confidentiality at the stage of analysis and reporting and to ensuring that participants could not be identified. Further, although the students had agreed to be involved in this research, we were aware of the unequal relations between students and academic staff given that these students' assignments would be assessed. Accordingly, we were careful to state and reinforce the voluntary nature of participation and that all assessment marking was in any case anonymous. We also heeded Macfarlane's (2004, 2008) advice on the importance of foregrounding the relationship between the researcher and the participants, and considered carefully the qualities that the ethical researcher should seek to exhibit in such relationships.

Data display and analysis

A variety of themes emerged from the interview transcripts around what the literature above has identified as 'place responsiveness' (Wattchow and Brown 2011). Our key contribution to this literature arises from the data we collected from students who

were asked to spend one hour by themselves in an urban place of their choosing. As noted earlier students were asked to focus on, and be able to comment on, Place, People and You and these are used here to frame the analysis.

Place

The locations in three different Scottish cities included:

1. A bench beside a reservoir with the skyline of the city visible in one direction and woodland areas in another. There is a lot of surrounding greenery with constructed and linked pathways (Louise).
2. A bench amongst several benches within the boundaries of a secondary school. Single trees are planted with mown grass in between (Kate).
3. A bench by a river that flows through the city. A single path runs down one side with grass verges, and houses line both banks (Linda).
4. A picnic table in a city park which has some grass, a rockery, swings, a roundabout and slides. The park is bounded by fences and walls (Sarah).
5. A bench in an open park bounded by a road on one side and buildings on the others. A series of treelined paths crisscross the grassy park and there are lots of benches (Rory).
6. A place on the grass planted with fruit trees. It is enclosed by a chestnut paling fence and hedge and a cycle path runs through it (Lara).

All of these are evidently built urban areas with the sights and sounds of the city visible and audible from each location, although the degree of construction and vegetative greenery varies from one location to another.

People

The students' reasons for selecting their places proved to be fascinating and unanticipated. Despite the fact that this was intended to be a solitary activity,

concerns were expressed about how they would be perceived by passers-by and this influenced both the selection of the site and how the students felt when they were in it. Louise reported being uncomfortable just sitting there with people walking by commenting that she might be thought of as an 'absolute weirdo'. Kate was conscious of being seen doing nothing and pretended she was gardening (something that we develop below). Lara stated that 'people could see that I was sitting there and really doing nothing' and then asked herself 'what's wrong with just sitting and doing nothing?' The greatest anxiety came from Rory who expressed a fear of being watched 'in the sense that it would be seen as an unnatural thing'. The other two appeared unaffected by this, perhaps because for Linda nobody passed close by and Sarah felt that those who passed close by were paying her no heed.

It is significant that all students reported such strong emotions about being alone in a public place. Perhaps this goes some way to explaining why all but one of the students chose not to stand or sit on the ground (part of the initial invitation) but selected a bench where they could sit and appear less conspicuous. Whilst all students had visited their place at least once beforehand, when asked to spend time alone they did so with a large degree of unfamiliarity with that place and being self-conscious in it. It is important therefore to distinguish between one-off use and habitual use. Lara expressed this eloquently when she said 'the more you habitually visit somewhere, that sense of place just deepens and means more to you'. It is also significant that the feeling of self-consciousness began to wear off the longer the time passed and each of the students reported feeling more relaxed and began opening up to what was going on around them, while thinking less about what they thought other people were thinking of them. References to habitual use and opening up relate to Ingold's (2000, 153) idea of dwelling which he defines as a:

> perspective that treats the immersion of the organism-person in an environment or lifeworld as an inescapable condition of existence. From this perspective, the world continually comes into being around the inhabitant, and its manifold constituents take on significance through their incorporation into a regular pattern of life activity.

You

As the students settled into their places, and with diminished self-consciousness, other thoughts and feelings began to emerge. These data are presented to reveal what it was that students were paying attention to in their places. Louise reported a feeling of calmness and being more relaxed and open to what was going on around that particular place. Kate described her place as being sacred (we return to this below). For her, this place brought about conflicting emotions as she thought about life and death and she reported 'zoning in' (thinking of the human death that this place reminded her of) and 'zoning out' (thinking through a planting schedule to enhance the place). Linda was reminded of a mindfulness course which encouraged her to spend less time being cognitive and more time 'simply being'. She felt herself trying to achieve this and, like Kate, found herself zoning in and out as thoughts and feelings emerged in a confusing blur, some of which were place specific and some apparently unrelated to that place. Sarah commented on people passing by talking on their phones, looking neither right nor left, and suggested that they were not really connecting with the place they were in. More specifically, she said 'they could've been anywhere'. Despite being in the middle of a large city, Rory felt that the park was different to the city. He made much of colour differences, associating greys, browns and 'the dark neutral tones' of the built environment and contrasting them with 'colours that represent growth and life'. These offered him, and he believed other people too, a different perspective and an escape from the city where we were not 'constrained by streets and the buildings'. Like Kate, Lara was continually zoning

in and out and seemingly feasting on the thoughts and feelings that were coursing through her. For her it was 'that sense that you're just yourself and you don't have a task to perform, there's no movement … and that allows you to … centre yourself … and become a bit more aware of thoughts and feelings'.

Like Linda, Lara struggled with *doing* and *being* and chastised herself for engaging more in the former than the latter. Pyyry (2017) has captured this unsettled state rather well in suggesting that 'this more-than-human understanding allows for alternative ways of conceptualizing learning. Clean-cut categorizations such as 'learner', 'urban', 'nature', and so on become problematic, and learning is re-conceptualized as an ongoing, non-linear and rhizomatic event in which knowing and being are always tied together'. It seems clear that these student testimonies include disruptive elements as they made sense of being in a familiar place that had suddenly become unfamiliar, with new senses of the familiar emerging the more they dwelled. Their thoughts and feelings oscillated back and forth through past and present, influenced by internal and external stimuli. Their reported experiences appeared to be reflective as they made sense of these experiences for themselves. There were also elements of diffraction evident as they troubled the dichotomies that Barad (2014) speaks of as previously-held perceptions of their places gave way to something more emergent and becoming.

Ontological disruption

While only two of the six participants introduced the term 'ontological disruption' themselves, all six described the impact that the experience had had on them, and the changes to their thoughts, feelings and actions that had come about as a result of their

experiences. While they did this in different ways, all couched their responses in terms of their identities as educators and as people who cared deeply for the planet. Their accounts clearly support the conclusion that 'experiential learning pedagogies can be effectively utilized across all curriculum areas and also across the continuum of urban and remote landscapes' (Straker, Potter, and Irwin 2017, 106).

When Lara was asked to explain what she understood the term 'ontological disruption' to mean she described it as 'a way of shaking up your ideas about things. So just something that makes you think differently about things that you've maybe not thought about before … it just makes us question what we already know'. She went on to say that 'it is a positive change … a whole new reframing of the way you think'. Lara's response was particularly powerful as she talked about the hour she had spent in the children's orchard and

> the profound nature of its impact on me. I'm learning so much more than just having an experience … it's an experience that really needs to have some action attached to it … the ontological disruption for me was about a bonding experience … I've been back since … and felt a little bit more ownership … the action is maybe not so important for me as that feeling of connection. I've thought about it so many times, and I feel myself drawn back to it … and if that's the impact on me purely on the strength of having sat there for an hour, then perhaps the young people I work with … maybe there's something that is having an impact on them.

Connection, and feeling part of something, were particularly important for her. Similarly, Sarah, who went to a park very near the school where she taught, talked about ontological disruption in terms of 'thinking about things in different ways… looking at things differently … challenging … and seeing how the park has (helped me rethink). It's about the connections that you make with places'. Like Lara, she believed that there were real benefits in visiting and revisiting the place because this was 'moving you on in terms of your relationship to the place'. Sarah reflected on the value of such an experience for the children she taught for their language

development ‘in a very meaningful and contextualised way’, since many of these children did not speak English as their first language, and she explained how she would tackle this differently as a result of her own experience.

When asked whether she felt there had been a shift in her thinking Louise responded ‘yes, I definitely think there has. My mindset changed a lot and I’m much more open to things’. Louise shared what she saw as a significant shift in her thinking and teaching approaches, and she is now much more aware of the value of letting her pupils ‘*experience* something themselves, rather than simply *telling* them, because it is much more meaningful for them’; as a result of her own experience she now believed that this ‘will have much more of an impact than …talk and chalk’. Louise described in some detail her thoughts and feelings as she spent an hour at a local reservoir, and clearly wanted her pupils to benefit from similar experiences, to ‘go out and learn about certain things’. Linda also focused on how her experience of spending time at a riverside in the centre of a large city had caused her to think about her teaching and her pedagogical approaches. Because she had managed to stop herself ‘thinking’ and ‘labelling things’, she was able to ‘switch off her preconceptions’ and therefore foreground her senses and experience things that she might otherwise have missed. She was able to ‘switch off the chatter and just experience something new’, which ‘piqued her curiosity and interest’ and allowed her to have a ‘wow, I never noticed that before sort of moment’. Linda wanted her pupils to be able to experience that kind of response, and she ‘would like to guide [her] pupils to do that’.

Kate chose to spend time in a ‘spot, to the right of our school entrance’ where ‘the grass isn’t really disturbed much’ and where she could ‘sit quietly and think’. This

space had been created as a memorial area for young people and former colleagues who had had an impact on the school, but sadly had died. Kate described in some detail the oak tree and the benches, and shared that because of the impact of her experience she had written a poem. The symbolism of the oak tree, which had been planted in memory of a teacher … 'a great guy', who had been her support and mentor when she started teaching, emerged clearly as she described her profound emotional response to being in that 'sacred' place thinking about him. However, she was uncomfortable displaying her emotions and found it very hard to sit still, preferring first to pretend she was gardening and then actually beginning to garden. This increasing awareness led her to decide that she needed to 'work on [her] mindfulness … get involved in meditative practices … and put an effort into just *being'*. Kate was acutely aware that she needed to separate her feelings from her thoughts, and that her tendency to over analyse stopped her 'feeling other things that come'.

Rory, who spent time in a large central park near a university, which was busy, noisy and full of life, initially responded that he had not experienced any kind of ontological disruption 'because it's such a familiar place to me … which may be diluting anything that [I] came across'. He felt a sense of comfort and ownership in what was '[his] space'. However, when prompted, he recalled that when he was sitting in the park he remembered several stories from other people about being in the park which he then recounted, stories which made him begin to see things quite differently and led him to interrogate the place and his feelings about it. Two of these stories challenged his view that this was a particularly safe place to be, and the third that people were caring for the place in the ways that he believed they should. Initially for

him the experience was ‘more about feelings than it was thoughts’, but having reminded himself of these stories he began to think and to question his previous strongly held beliefs.

Discussion

When we originally designed this task we pondered what might be an appropriate length of time. The decision making was somewhat arbitrary but deemed to be short enough for a teacher to easily organise for their own pupils but long enough to cause the sorts of ontological disruption we were looking for. While a one hour period suited our intentions we do not believe this to be prescriptive for other people running their own urban solos. For example the length might need to be shorter to accommodate the attention spans of younger or just different people. On the other hand it might need to be longer for older people and perhaps increasingly longer for all people/groups doing repeat visits. The length therefore needs to be experimented with in relation to a range of factors including educational intentions, individual readiness but also significant variables such as the weather.

In response to our first research question (what sorts of experiences do students report after spending an hour alone in an urban place?) it is clear from these data that solo experiences in urban places have had a profound and unexpected effect on the students. This was unexpected for them because all six selected places close to where they lived and worked, yet found that in dwelling within them for a very short time they experienced them as unfamiliar. It was profound because of the different ways of knowing they reported and learning opportunities that emerged through experiencing that place. They were able to find the unfamiliar within the familiar and

the extraordinary within the ordinary. In this sense the urban solo provided the basis from which to bridge Cartesian division by transforming 'place' from something one passes through on their way to work, to a place in which one might dwell and experience the sort of diffraction that Barad (2014) suggests leads to the destabilisation of boundaries ultimately offering different and newer ways of understanding the world.

From an educational perspective one very important conclusion can be drawn from these findings. This comes from the knowledge that these six students had weekly if not daily contact with the place they had chosen, yet it took the urban solo for this sense of becoming to emerge. Whilst this was a very small sample of people they were nevertheless experienced teachers and so this tends to suggest that place responsiveness will not necessarily happen by itself and that some form of educational and experiential intervention may well be necessary.

Furthermore, it is the utter simplicity and very ordinariness of this activity that is appealing. After all, this is something that humans often do; sitting on a park bench for a while, or lying on a blanket under a tree. Many people experience an 'urban' solo as leisure itself (our city parks are full of people having urban solos). The difference here is the educational and mindful emphasis that is placed on the experience and its potential for school teachers. In terms of the *potential* barriers noted above it costs nothing; takes very little time to set up; can be done in school grounds, if there are no other adult helpers; is of no greater risk than any other activity in the school grounds; can be timed during weather windows; requires no transport; and need not be a disruption to classes (but quite the opposite by becoming an integral

part of them). In this way the urban solo is an opportunity to bridge other Cartesian divisions where the indoors is perceived as diametrically opposed to the outdoors and one subject area from another. Doubters might say that this is all very well for pupils in primary schools where subject areas are not so sharply defined from one another. It is therefore important to point out that one of these teachers taught secondary chemistry and another secondary mathematics and both believed an urban solo could unite their indoor curricula with the outdoors. Of course it remains to be seen how this might work in practice and further research is required in order to understand the ways in which pupils might be affected by an urban solo and also how teachers might incorporate it into their teaching.

Our second research question asked 'what role does ontological disruption play in this process'? This seemed to occur as the result of students shifting from being passive receptors of stimuli to active engagement in and with their places which strengthened the longer they dwelled there. Straker, Potter, and Irwin (2017, 110) argue that to help people recognise the complexity of the world what is required is a break away from dichotomous thinking and the recognition that 'the world is not divided into urban or non-urban, ecologically fertile or barren, valuable or wasteland'. Students, they believe, can gain valuable learning *wherever* they are. They conclude that 'embracing these dualities opens up opportunities for students to discover how to respond to, and connect with, multiple places within the wider world. In addition, moving to places that are less familiar and less comfortable often helps students of any age to challenge the status quo and their preferred habits. These diverse sites can also help to disrupt our ontological position'. The findings from the current study support these conclusions.

Furthermore, Jickling (2015, 160) argues that, to achieve the kind of learning that more fully encompasses educating for a sustainable future what is required, in addition to personal development, is a focus on socio-ecological perspectives. For this to happen, he suggests, 'what may be required is a more profound disruption of one's ontological positioning'. In their published conversation Straker, Potter, and Irwin (2017, 106) have stated that

> it is the careful alignment of context and content, which is at the heart of experiential learning, that is most likely to meet Jickling's … challenge … relating to the profound disruption of learners' ontological positioning. This is because ontological positioning is related to identity, and identity formation processes are embedded, for the most part, in the communities and places we live.

One other significant finding emerged from the writing of this paper which was not a direct result of the research questions. From the outset we believed that the solo need not be limited to 'the wilderness' but might easily take place in urban settings. We have provided data to suggest that this is correct. In doing so we have essentially relied on theories that have emerged to inform solos in wilderness settings. By and large we have found that theories to do with phenomenology, and the associated concepts of proximity to and presence within places, apply equally well to urban and wilderness places. However future research would benefit from literature and theories that explicitly explore the urban. We refer again to Duhn et al., (2017) who stated that 'urban environments are key sites for reimagining and reconfiguring human-nature encounters in times and spaces of planetary crisis'. For this reimagining to occur might Lefebvre's (2003, 191) heterotopy bring 'together a plurality of discourses and vocabularies by situating them in one place'? Although the students in this study chose different places, a school teacher has the opportunity

to take their class to one place. There they might follow Lefebvre's lead by posing his questions: 'Who is talking? Who is acting? Who is moving in Space?' Such questions form precisely the sort of interrogative techniques that Place-Based Educators are calling for. They might readily lead to what Harvey (2013, xvii) has termed 'urban practices' that arise from what 'people do, feel, sense and come to articulate as they seek meaning in their daily lives'. Just as Snyder (1990) wrote about *The Practice of the Wild* for wilderness areas the data here, when supported by urban theorists, point towards how *The Practice of the Urban* might emerge. Clearly more experimentation and innovation are required for this to happen.

While these findings provide fascinating insights into the experiences of a small number of students there remain significant gaps in our understanding of the potential of solo experiences within urban OL. This is a call to move beyond the narrowness of personal development to include critical pedagogical practices that are informed by socio-ecological and socio-cultural perspectives. We have learned much from having set up the urban solo and from interviewing students about their experiences. We will build on this by using more interactive enquiry methods with different cohorts of students. We expect this will lead to richer and more complex data that will reveal other educational practices to develop place-responsiveness. However, we should be able to explore these more easily knowing of the possibilities that have been reported here when six students were asked to spend one hour by themselves and found out for themselves why 'you are never alone'.

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