# ‘Environmental awareness’ and rock climbing: changing pedagogies to enhance pro-environmental graduate attributes

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# Abstract

Geography has long been seen as having a central role in education for sustainable development, and yet the degree to which a geographical education translates to personal capacities for action has been questioned (Robinson, 2014). Having struggled for some years to engage Outdoor Adventure Education students with physical geography science-based knowledge of the environment, we trialled a pedagogical shift to emphasise a relational, self-in-environment consciousness developed through autoethnography. We recount this experience to suggest that a similar approach may have potential to connect geography students’ cognitive knowledge of societies and environments with personal identities and capacities for action.

## Keywords

Environmental identity; education for sustainable development; graduate attributes; outdoor learning; rock climbing; autoethnography

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## Introduction

1st May, Chudleigh Rocks. “*Walking through the forest to reach the crag. It was warm, the sun was shining through the trees and there was a distinctive smell of garlic. The sounds of bird song filtered through the trees and it sounded beautiful.*” (Lucy’s journal)

In the two decades since the adoption of Agenda 21, and with the United Nations Decade for Education for Sustainable Development (2005-14) recently ended, sustainability has become a central issue for higher education globally (Lee *et al* 2013; Ryan & Tilbury, 2013). Universities are seen as ‘key actors’ (Reickmann, 2012) in relation to sustainable development, given their roles in knowledge production and translation and (some would say most significantly) in the education of future leaders and decision-makers (Wyness & Stirling, 2014). In the UK, national guidance produced for universities (QAA/HEA, 2014, p. 5) defines Education for Sustainable Development as:

“the process of equipping students with the knowledge and understanding, skills and attributes needed to work and live in a way that safeguards environmental, social and economic wellbeing, both in the present and for future generations.”

Crucially, this guidance presents sustainability ‘graduate outcomes’ as entailing a combination of knowledge and understanding, skills, and attributes.

Geography and the Earth/Environmental disciplines have long been seen as the ‘torchbearers’ (Chalkley, 2002: 3) or ‘natural home’ (Robinson & Greenough, 2009: 20) for sustainability education. However, Robinson’s (2014) seven-year study of environmental citizenship among Geography students identified that although they have an interest in environmental issues, this does not necessarily lead to pro-environmental behaviours. Indeed, Robinson & Greenough (2009) found that geography students may be *less* inclined to engage in pro-environmental behaviours than students of other disciplines. It thus seems that while geography addresses sustainability related knowledge, understanding and skills, there remains a question about how geography educators might respond to the challenge of developing pro-environmental graduate attributes.

In this paper we take up this question through reflecting on our work on a *non*-Geography degree, a BA (Hons) Outdoor Adventure Education. While there are some apparent synergies between geography and outdoor learning, the two fields have developed in different directions such that the rapidly developing academic field of outdoor learning, with its own scholarly journals and degree programmes, is quite distinct from geography (see Couper & Ansell, 2012, for an overview). The challenges of working in interdisciplinary contexts have been well articulated, particularly in relation to research, with unbounded potential for miscommunication and misunderstanding (Jones and Macdonald, 2007; Oughton and Bracken, 2009; Baerwald, 2010; Simon & Graybill, 2010). Gallaher (2014, p.63) describes her experience of being a ‘lone’ geographer in a non-geography department as like being “a fish out of water”. The task of developing students’ ‘environmental awareness’ – leaving that term intentionally vague for the moment – on the Outdoor Adventure Education degree presented similar challenges, and confronting these led us to an exploratory shift (expansion) in the pedagogical approach taken. In considering what forms of geographical knowledge are relevant to developing graduate attributes in a non-geography degree, we aim to offer insight into the forms of knowledge that might be relevant to developing environmentally oriented graduate attributes within Geography.

## Scene setting: of rocks and hard places

The context for this paper is the BA (Hons) Outdoor Adventure Education (OAE) degree at the University of St Mark & St John in Plymouth, UK. This is an explicitly vocationally oriented programme, aiming to develop well rounded outdoor learning practitioners who are academically, socially, ethically and technically capable. More specifically (and perhaps in contrast with geography degrees), the graduate attributes and skills associated with the degree are directly shaped by external agencies and employer expectations. Waring’s (2006) research demonstrated that employers want employees who hold a range of activity qualifications, are active learners, capable of delivering programmes and outcomes, and are inspirational and motivational leaders. This is echoed by Williams (2011), who explained that as head of a leading outdoor centre he was looking for both technical competence and a less tangible ‘spark’, something that is “very difficult to measure by any form of professional accreditation”, but encompasses interpersonal awareness and an ability to relate to people.

Working in the UK context, degree programmes are shaped with reference to the relevant Subject Benchmark Statement of the Quality Assurance Agency. Outdoor Adventure Education does not have its own Benchmark Statement but refers to those of related subjects, and particularly that for Hospitality, Leisure, Sport and Tourism (QAA, 2008). Other external agencies include the National Governing Bodies (NGBs) associated with particular outdoor activities (such as the British Mountaineering Council and the British Canoe Union), Skills Active (the relevant Sector Skills Council) and the Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL). The latter is particularly important as the key professional membership body for outdoor learning practitioners in the UK. The Outdoor Adventure Education degree was one of the first to become an ‘IOL Approved Higher Education Course’. This is not *accreditation*, in that students do not achieve IOL accreditation through their degree, but it is indicative of the programme’s alignment with the major professional body.

As an organisational member of the IOL, the Outdoor Adventure Education programme signs up to the IOL *Code of Professional Conduct* (IOL, 2014) and its core values, which are described under the headings: Professional Integrity; Professional Responsibilities and Relationships; Professional Standards; and Sustainable Outdoor Practice & Care for the Environment. The background to this code of conduct is the Dartington Conference of 1975 (DES, 1975, p. 1-3), which provided a working definition of outdoor education as “those activities concerned with living, moving and learning in the outdoors.” It went on to outline the three most important aims of outdoor education as heightening awareness and respect for:

* Self – through the meeting of challenge;
* Others – through group experiences and the sharing of decisions;
* The natural environment – through direct experience.

This is taken as a seminal moment in the field, key in the development of outdoor learning as an entity in its own right, distinct from – yet overlapping with – the more purely science-focused field studies (Couper & Ansell, 2012). The common ground of outdoor learning, in which a number of shared values and practices are understood and reflected upon by an outdoor practitioner, lies in “outdoor experiences; activity skills; experiential learning; environmental issues; social and cultural justice; leadership and teaching; quality and research” (Martin, 2001, p. 82). The IOL does offer a practitioner accreditation scheme. Based first and foremost on reflective practice, this aims to develop the ability of the practitioner to become fully reflexive; committed to developing themselves and outdoor learning as a profession. The OAE degree programme aims to ensure that graduates are well placed to pursue professional accreditation should they choose to. Undoubtedly, the field of outdoor learning has a history of placing more emphasis on the personal and social dimensions than the environmental (Couper & Ansell, 2012). However, these external drivers clearly establish an expectation that graduates will have an in-depth and holistic understanding of Outdoor Adventure Education, including “an understanding of the environment and the behaviours that can adversely affect it” (IOL, 2014, p.2).

Alongside these external agendas, the staff who developed the OAE programme recognised at the outset that there is some synergy between outdoor education and geography (indeed, in the early years it was possible for students to combine the two, and many did). The early incorporation of Geographers into the staff team thus meant that the programme has long included some geographical content and pedagogy. Between 2002 and 2012 this primarily took the form of science-based physical geography and ‘recreation ecology’; the obvious way for geographers to contribute, reflecting a longstanding association between environmental education and science (Harvester and Blenkinsop, 2010), or physical geography and fieldwork. These contributions aimed at advancing the students’ scientific understanding of the environment, the nature and extent of environmental impacts of outdoor activities, and the practices through which such impacts could be minimised.

Over the years, annual exam boards revealed that each cohort’s collective effort on such work generally approximated a normal distribution of grades, with the spread of achievement presenting no cause for concern. In the days of combined honours degrees (when students could combine outdoor adventure with another subject, which is no longer possible), the geography students did not systematically achieve higher grades than the non-geography students. There was, then, no quantitative evidence that the scientific/physical geography approach was not successful; ‘performance’ did not appear to be a problem. Qualitatively, though, all staff had a sense that something was missing. This environmental content did not seem to *matter* to the students beyond an instrumental engagement with the coursework to achieve the required credit. While we recognise the limitations of such ‘intuitive’ assessments, the nature of the OAE programme is such that the core staff members have high levels of contact with students in non-formal settings (traveling to and from outdoor sites, for example), and this offers much scope for ‘incidental’ feedback on the course. The fact that this perception was felt by the whole staff team (who have a mixture of science and non-science backgrounds) lends some credence to the likelihood that something was not quite working as we would hope. The students just did not ‘connect’ with the material. As Blades and Bester (2013, p. 10) note in their discussion of Buber’s pedagogical philosophy, “the world treated as It” objectifies and alienates; a ‘hard place’ indeed.

The dominant pedagogical philosophy underpinning the OAE degree is one of experiential learning. Throughout the degree students participate in and lead a variety of outdoor activities and reflect on their own experiences and practices, drawing on academic literature as they do so. With this in mind, the corporeal turn in the social sciences seemed to offer potential for approaching ‘the environment’ in a way that would connect more readily with the students’ familiar modes of learning. Geographers were already interrogating embodied and affective experiences of the outdoors through rock climbing and walking (Edensor, 2000; Barratt, 2011, 2012; Brown and Dilley, 2012; Wylie, 2005). Inspired by such accounts, we would ask the students to do something similar. Introducing them to an autoethnographic approach to research, we would attempt to facilitate the development of the students’ ‘environmental awareness’ through their own embodied encounters with the non-human world. This required working with a different conception of ‘environmental awareness’, emphasising a relational, self-in-environment (or self-and-environment) consciousness rather than a detached, cognitive knowledge of environment-as-object. We stress here that this was not in place of the science-based, cognitive knowledge of the environment, which still featured in the degree programme, but an additional means of addressing ‘the environment’.

## Autoethnography: uncertainty, risk and trust

“*I initially found it hard to come to terms with the lack of structure but once I had read and created my own structure it was great.*” (Feedback from Izzy)

As anyone who has abseiled knows, the worst bit is (usually) that moment when you go over the edge, transferring your weight from feet to rope, with the full drop beneath you. That is the moment of maximum uncertainty, minimum confidence, but you have to go through it before you can enjoy the descent. Trying this rather different approach to ‘environment’ generated a similar initial uncertainty for staff and – as indicated by Izzy above – students. Underlying both, of course, is the risk of failure. In this section we outline our methods, in terms of both pedagogy and evaluation.

The focus for our attention is an optional second-year module, ‘Outdoor Practice 2’ (although since re-named), which had just 8 students for 2012/13. The module consisted of a series of 10 sessions of outdoor rock climbing led by one of us (Porter), and 8 indoor ‘theoretical’ sessions that were mostly led by the other (Couper). These included an introduction to (auto)ethnography, environmental ethics, and social constructions of nature, ‘wilderness’ and ‘the outdoors’. Preston (2014) argues that outdoor education is often guilty of separating ‘indoor’ and ‘outdoor’ places of learning, and that – despite rhetoric to the contrary – this tends to entail a separation of theory from practice. Perhaps because of the way the teaching was divided we were particularly conscious of the risk of such separation, and so made a concerted effort to avoid it. Outdoors, conversations during non-climbing time (walking to and from the minibus, selecting and preparing for a climb, resting at the top, or packing away the gear at the end of a session) were used to ask students questions about what was around them and their experiences, encouraging them to take notice and to think. While this leaves open potential for differentiation of student experiences, such ‘informal talk’ is normal practice within the discipline, and Leather (in press) suggests has an important (and under-unrecognised) role within students’ learning. The fact that this was occurring over ten sessions means that all students will have been involved in such conversations on more than one occasion. Indoors, some of the sessions used the students’ outdoor experiences as a starting point. Discussions then encouraged the students to make connections with life more generally (beyond outdoor activities) and social and cultural norms, emerging topics including ‘trust’, ‘nature’ and how/why we see ourselves as separate from nature, and the differences between being ‘indoors’ and ‘outdoors’. In some weeks staff gave up time to participate in each other’s sessions, to ensure coherence across the two.

The module is partially (40%) assessed by practical examination. For the written assessment, which at the time constituted 60% of the module (it is now 70%), the students were asked to “produce an auto-ethnographic account of rock climbing, encompassing your experiences and interactions with others *and* with the environment in which you climb” (unpublished coursework guidance). That initial instruction was intentionally broad, giving the students scope to focus and shape their work in their own way, but it was accompanied by a longer explanation that pointed to the possibilities, along with regular discussions throughout the module. It also connected with the dominant conception of outdoor education as encompassing ‘self, other and environment’ (DES, 1975), which the students encounter in their first year.

In preparation for their autoethnography the students were asked to keep a journal throughout the module. Here we gave them free reign to determine format and content, but stressed that: “This should not just be a bland description of ‘objective facts’. You need to put *you* into it” (unpublished coursework guidance). In the same way that autoethnography can be seen as an extension of the reflective practice with which the students were already familiar, keeping a journal was not entirely alien to them. Many of the NGB awards that students have opportunity to obtain alongside the degree programme require logs of practical experience to be maintained. We were simply extending this to more-than-practical accounts of experience. Each student’s journal then formed the basis for his or her autoethnography, enabling them to look back over their experiences and identify or select particular aspects to explore in depth. Submission of the journal was required as an appendix to the autoethnography, but – unlike Cook’s (2000) and Park’s (2003) use of learning journals – we did not assess the journals themselves. Where Park (2003, p. 186) suggests that students would “not have committed that amount of time and energy to the project” without their journals being assessed, we did not find this a problem. All students engaged (though some more than others, as always), presumably because this was a coherent extension of a practice with which they were already familiar. We explained that their journal would help us to understand how their autoethnography had developed, in effect providing the ‘evidence base’. It also meant that the students could refer directly to their journal within their essay if they wished.

This approach to the module, then, required staff to collaborate closely, with sufficient trust to be willing to try something that was open-ended, uncertain and unpredictable. We also needed to relinquish at least some control/authority to the students; the autoethnographies were theirs, and we were not looking for re-presentation of some ‘correct’ account. In some small way this approach was in the direction of Cook’s (2000) practice of border pedagogy, although with a rather different context and focus. The shift in power between staff and students was probably emphasised by our participation in each other’s sessions, where students knew we were not ‘experts’. On the rock face, before the module had finished both of us had trusted the students’ abilities enough to climb and abseil using the ropes they had set up, putting our safety in their hands.

At the end of the module the students completed the university’s standard module evaluation forms. We also asked them to participate in some additional evaluation, making it clear that we were hoping to then disseminate the experience through conference presentation and publication. All but one of the students agreed to do so. It is worth emphasising here that this evaluation session occurred before the students had submitted their coursework. Feedback thus reflects the students’ experiences of doing the work, without being shaped by their satisfaction or otherwise with the grades achieved.

The students also gave us permission to use extracts of their work. Here we were confronted by conflicting ethical considerations. The normal institutionalised ‘research ethics’ expectations are that research participants should remain anonymous, yet this conflicts with the academic norm of acknowledging authorship. As educators we also have conflicting ethical concerns; to protect our students, yet to allow/enable their voices to be heard in their entirety, rather than as anonymised, abstract and disembodied – literally nobodies. Using individually completed consent forms we asked them whether they wished to remain anonymous or preferred any extracts of their work to be attributed to them by first name. All opted for the latter. With two students by the name of Andy we have differentiated between them simply by adding a number. For the student who did not participate in the evaluation, we cannot eliminate that individual’s work from our overall impression of the module but the work has not been quoted in any context.

## The students’ accounts: freedom to explore

*“It was fun to have the freedom to choose what I wrote about and to develop this from age seven through to the present day”* (Andy2)

### Autoethnographic accounts of rock climbing

To recap, the coursework guidance provided to the students was quite loose, asking them to produce an account that drew on their experiences with others and the environment, but giving them scope to define and focus that for themselves. In this section we identify the themes or aspects of climbing that the students chose to draw out. We have tried to maximise the ‘student voice’ here, to give a strong sense of the module, their experiences of it, and their work. Where we give only a student name, this refers to the autoethnographic coursework. Journal entries and module feedback are identified as ‘journal’ and ‘feedback’.

The marks awarded for the students’ autoethnographic accounts ranged from third class (40-49%) to first class (70+%, two students), with no fails. Regardless of individual grades achieved, the essays across the cohort demonstrated a high level of self-awareness. A particularly good example of this comes from Andy2’s account:

*“I climb because I love it and because it is there (Mallory, 1924; Yates, 2001). My dyspraxia becomes a mere inconvenience and almost forgotten, as I improve my motor skills with every climb; my muscles remembering my climbing moves; and, most importantly, I take part on an equal basis with my peers. The challenge of rock climbing has been a spiritual epiphany for me with a strong connection with the environment and excellent partnerships being formed.”* (Andy2)

Most students did not *really* move beyond self-awareness; we could say they got the ‘auto’ more than the ‘ethno’ of autoethnography, choosing focal themes of fear, trust, confidence and development. There was, though, a clear awareness of their reliance on technology and how it enables a climb, in both the autoethnographic accounts and the journals. This reliance reflects Barratt’s (2011) study of climbing relations between culture, nature and technologies, which some of the students referred to.

“*It was quite a difficult climb but the grip you get from the boots was amazing. This has definitely increased my climbing ability and my confidence as I can trust in my equipment to keep myself safe and not fall/slip off the rock!”* (Martha’s journal, after she had bought some climbing boots)

Three students went further, thinking beyond themselves. Interestingly, two of these are the most competent climbers, the third being a particularly conscientious student.

“*I* *have seen and understood the value of learning about self, others and the environment, and that it is central to any outdoor activity. But in writing this auto-ethnography I have been able to think more deeply about each of these relationships and appreciate the power they provide to an experience, in particular rock climbing*.” (Izzy)

Only one student (with a high level of competence and confidence as a climber) really made the *ethno*graphic move to consider how his experiences were framed by society/culture more broadly.

“*…before I had a very archetypical approach to climbing outdoors. It was a case of wanting to conquer nature and its challenges. Although I had respect for nature, my motivations for climbing were extrinsic, it was a case of proving that I can beat nature’s challenges, or conquer it, that was my sign of achievement; this thought pattern is in line with a classicist way of thinking, which is still apparent today…”* (Hayden)

“‘*Outside of society, wilderness is something to be feared’ (Short, 1991: 6). This is a deeply worrying concept that human beings are forgetting where they are from, they are disconnecting themselves from their origins.”* (Hayden)

Hayden thus developed a critique of Western dualist notions of humans as separate from nature, and indicated that his own position had shifted through the module.

In terms of producing auto*ethno*graphic accounts, then, perhaps the success of the exercise was mixed. But overall the essays were clearly informed by engagement with appropriate literature, the students producing some good quality academic work even where the development of that broader social context was not so strong (the mean grade awarded was in the upper second class band).

### Module Feedback

The additional evaluation of the module involved three open questions specifically about the autoethnographic coursework. Our three questions are addressed in turn here, before considering the autoethnographic exercise as a whole.

*1) What impact did the autoethnography exercise have on the module for you?* The dominant theme among responses was that it prompted a greater level of reflection, as illustrated by Hayden and Andy1:

*“For me this rounded off the module and allowed me to delve deeper into my personal reflection and draw on my experiences in order to understand what they represented in terms of the bigger picture of my topic. It was a really good opportunity to evaluate personal experiences in a different way.”* (Feedback from Hayden)

*“…through looking at my own thoughts deeper, I have identified areas where I can improve further and this is apparent in my autoethnography.”* (Feedback from Andy1)

Alongside this there was some suggestion of a more holistic and creative engagement with the climbing experience:

“*Knowing I needed to write about my personal experiences for this activity I enjoyed researching about the climbs, location, legends and environment before I went on each climb and this made the actual climbs much more interesting and meaningful to me.”* (Feedback from Andy2)

“*Having the autoethnography to write really got me into a positive attitude whilst climbing. I wanted to get as much out of the experience not just because I enjoy it but it would make a more interesting story to write about. I found that I became more observant of the different types of environment where we were climbing...”* (Feedback from Lucy)

*2) What did you learn?* Two themes were dominant here: the style of coursework (on which comments appeared in responses to all three questions, so we deal with this at the end of this section); and the environment.

“*I learnt to take in every detail of the experience. To explore my senses; what I heard, what saw and what I smelt.”* (Feedback from Lucy)

*“I learnt mostly about how I interpret my experiences outside with the environment, how I feel when in outdoor environments and how these experiences have shaped my environmental awareness and respect for the natural world...”* (Feedback from Hayden)

*3) How might this affect you as an outdoor practitioner in the future?* There was no dominant theme among the responses to this question, but some consistency with answers to the previous questions was apparent.

*“I now have a greater understanding of climbing as the ‘whole’ experience including the sense of place, the environment, and the need for safety and technical skills.”* (Feedback from Andy2)

*“I am aware of the importance of acknowledging the environment and your positionality within…nature.”* (Feedback from Izzy)

*“This understanding through experiential learning is going to be invaluable to me in my summer placement.”* (Feedback from Andy2)

Overall, the autoethnographic approach found favour with the students. There was some uncertainty to start with, reflected in the quote from Izzy earlier in the paper about lack of structure. Hayden echoed this:

*“It was nice to write in a different style of 1st person. At first, I found it quite confusing and couldn’t quite grasp the style and construction of the work in terms of how I was going to approach the topic. After reading a few other autoethnography papers and journal* [articles] *I started to get a clearer picture of how I was going to write mine. I like how open it can be…”* (Feedback from Hayden)

Feedback on the standard (anonymous) module evaluation forms was also entirely positive, identifying that “autoethnography is an exciting way to write…much more interesting than the usual academic writing we do”, and that the “creative” assessment made the module “engaging and challenging”. There was also a comment that “All practicals and theory worked well together”, and two students identified that the module had inspired them to go and learn more.

## Environmental orientations: self and non-human others

In terms of attitudes towards the environment, the students’ autoethnographic essays and journals revealed a variety of positions. Some are highly egocentric or anthropocentric comments, focused on the students’ enjoyment and use of the environment, and associated technicalities. At times, of course, such an emphasis is absolutely necessary in outdoor activities in order to ensure safety. Many comments were about the effect of the environment on the students themselves, their ability to climb and/or their mood, as illustrated by Martha:

“*There was so much to contend with when seconding the climb, it had just started to rain, and the rock had become slippery. Instead of feeling like I could dance on the rock and really perfect my flexibility on the rock, I felt like an animal on ice, slipping all over the place. Everything I had finally become confident and comfortable with had gone out of the window. I was clinging to the rock with dear life and hating every minute, just wanting the climb to end. After feeling like I had come so far with rock climbing it is amazing how the change in the environment can affect me.”* (Martha)

Andy1 observed that the same climb on the same day could be experienced very differently by different individuals. Here he clearly recognises – though without putting it into the terminology familiar to academic geographers – that experience is embodied.

*“I noticed that both Izzy and Pauline found it more of a stretch to ascend compared to when I had a go and the easier parts of the climb were closer together…a taller person found it less challenging.”* (Andy1’s journal)

Some students made comments on ‘connections to’ the environment, and then Hayden’s concern to challenge the commonly held understanding of humans as separate from nature moved furthest from an egocentric/anthropocentric orientation. But the journals revealed that individual students would relate to the non-human world in different ways at different times. Andy2 provides a good example. His autoethnography features a mythical, magical, mystical nature, highly romanticised and fantasized:

*“I became enchanted by the spirits who surrounded me in a soft blanket of every shade of green with moss and lichen and creeping plants protecting the rock and having a life of their own.”* (Andy2).

His journal ranged from the egocentric to being ‘at one with’ or ‘part of’ nature, and at one point advocates a rule-based environmental ethic:

*“This was good to see that climbers were being respectful and evidence of everyone respecting and following the BMC’s Guidance on correct crag etiquette of leaving no trace.”* (Andy2’s journal)

He (and Hayden separately) also showed signs of care:

“*To avoid damaging a spider’s web across one of the cracks I was going to use as a handhold, it seemed only right that I located a different crack even though this made my climb much harder. Climbing may help to blow the cobwebs of my mind away but I did not wish to do this to such an intricate and labour intensive creation. After all I was relying on a web of climbing ropes tightly strung over rock and tree roots to hold me as I scaled the rock face wishing I also had six* [sic] *legs for extra grip.*” (Andy2’s journal)

Other students at times expressed disappointment at evidence of other people’s lack of environmental concern, with Martha writing “…it also extremely saddens me when I see other peoples [sic] litter and rubbish everywhere” (Martha’s journal).

As these quotes illustrate, the authoethnography promotes a relational understanding of self and non-human nature. Whether or not the students would specifically describe it in those terms themselves, this approach to studying ‘environment’ clearly has prompted them to consciously consider the non-human world in terms of their own embodied experiences, practices and, at least in some cases, attitudes and values.

## Returning to graduate attributes: developing environmental selves

To return to graduate attributes, it is generally accepted that the outdoor literature lacks clarity in terminology associated with environmentally orientated outcomes. Berns and Simpson’s (2009) review differentiates between environmental concern, environmental behaviour, environmental attitude and environmental sensitivity. However, this literature is predominantly focused on the outcomes of outdoor activities, rather than the education of outdoor learning practitioners. As a professional membership body, the Institute of Outdoor Learning guides practitioners to develop their own awareness, sensitivity and understanding of the environment, as well as to behave in ways that minimise negative impacts *and* to encourage others to enjoy the natural environment. There is no one way to approach this. What we loosely called ‘environmental awareness’ at the start of our paper is – and needs to be – a multi-dimensional and complex thing. However, when we consider the students as future (and often current) outdoor practitioners, as people who do and will lead a variety of others undertaking outdoor activities in a variety of environments, a key concern is their capacity to act. This connects with Knight and Page’s (2007: 11) description of graduate attributes as incorporating “a mixture of dispositions, understandings, attributes and practices.” It also suggests that ‘environmental awareness’ as a graduate attribute needs to be understood in terms of Barrie’s (2006; 2007) ‘enabling conception’, an attribute that allows graduates to acquire, develop, shape and reshape their own knowledge in a variety of contexts – ultimately facilitating development of the students’ own ‘environmental citizenship’ (Robinson, 2014).

The autoethnography exercise does encourage students to reflect on the ways they interact with human and non-human others, becoming (more) conscious of attitudes and values that they may unknowingly perform. In this respect there appears to be some correspondence with the notion of ‘self-authorship’ (Barber, King and Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2007) that has already been described in relation to geography (Moore et al., 2011). The combination of the journal and the essay promote the students’ ‘internal voice’, reflecting on their behaviour and evaluating their own perspectives. However, the idea of self-authorship arguably over-emphasises autonomy, that pinnacle of post-Enlightenment modernity in which a rational “subject ideally acts independently of interests, bodily desire, others, prejudice or tradition” (Colebrook, 1997, p. 21, and see Whatmore, 1997). This is at odds with a discipline that explicitly emphasises corporeal experience. A more relational sense of a situated, embodied self would also better align with the students’ accounts:

“*I was pleased to feel how the influence of the group around me and the instruction I was given gave me confidence in my ability not only as a climber, but as the person who had someone else’s life on the other end of the rope I was holding.*” (Paul)

Philosopher David Utsler’s (2014) notion of environmental identity takes the hermeneutic principle that interpretation always entails self-interpretation; environmental identity predicated on “a dialectic between the self and the other than self” (p. 127). He argues that environmental identity is thus not a matter of choice, a question of whether to have one or not; but of how aware we are of the complex set(s) of relations through which we understand ourselves. Drawing on Ricoeur’s *idem* (‘sameness’, continuity of identity) and *ipse* (selfhood, accounting for the dynamic and changing aspects of personality), Utsler emphasises the openness to change inherent in *ipseity*, in the dialectic between self and other.

Two points follow from this. First, mention of environment as other-than-self connects with the issue of students’ cognitive knowledge *of* the environment. By chance, half way through our module a highly apposite paper appeared in the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, in which Robbie Nicol (a well-regarded outdoor education scholar) presented his own autoethnographic account of a solo expedition by canoe and sea kayak (Nicol, 2013). Nicol recounts how a prolonged encounter with a fly during his journey piqued his curiosity, leading him to then want to know *about* the fly. In other words, he is suggesting that autoethnography could act as a precursor to engagement with scientific knowledge of the environment. Perhaps acknowledging the otherness, the agency, of non-human nature is a prior step to learning more about that otherness. This raises questions for us about how we progressively address ‘the environment’ in different ways within the OAE degree programme, and how we can build on the autoethnography in such a way that it might lead the students into *also* developing cognitive/scientific knowledge of the non-human world.

Second, we take up Utsler’s emphasis on the capacity for (environmental) identities to change. Within the module some students wrote themselves in relation to the environment more explicitly, more consciously, than others. We noted earlier that this seemed to be those students who were more technically competent, and this accords with suggestions from Wattchow (2007, 2008) and Preston (2014) that novice participants in outdoor activities can be overwhelmed by technical demands, rendering anything beyond that immediate focus (such as ethical relations with place) unimportant. We highlight this because it is important not to over-claim the impact of the module. We see it as a starting point rather than a closed entity, a prompt that encourages students to take up particular questions about themselves in relation to the environment. Two of the eight students chose to pursue the issues arising further with their final-year dissertations, again using an auto/ethnographic approach, undertaking expeditions in order to interrogate their own and others’ notions of ‘wilderness’ and ‘nature’. This illustrates the ever-present tension between formative and summative assessment experiences (and between our roles as educators and assessors). The autoethnography is assessed and provides the majority proportion of the students’ module grades, which in turn contribute to their final degree classifications. Such assessment implies an end point, yet the module is more likely to be the beginning of a much longer process of the students thinking themselves in relation to nature. As Hughes and Barrie (2010) note, progress in the development of graduate attributes may not necessarily be assessable within the short timeframes of degree courses or their component parts.

## Conclusions

To close, the use of an autoethnographic approach to exploring the natural environment was trialled because it seemed to accord with the dominant pedagogies of the OAE degree. While we recognise that we cannot draw firm conclusions from a single iteration of a module, and particularly one which involved such a small cohort of students, the experience offers some food for thought. Within the context of outdoor learning, it has led us to realise that developing environmentally oriented graduate attributes should not just be left to an environment-as-object epistemology. Necessary as it is to know *about* the environment, other ways of knowing than the cognitive are also important. In this regard the increasing attention being paid by social scientists to the more-than-human is helpful. As Castree (2005, p. xii) put it, “…because knowledges of nature are not reducible to the ‘real’ nature they depict, it is essential to ask what authorises these knowledges and what sorts of realities they aim to engender.”

It would seem, though, that this is just as important for geography, not least given that Robinson’s work (Robinson & Greenough, 2009; Robinson, 2014) suggests that although geography students know *about* environmental issues, such knowledge does not necessarily translate into a sense of personal responsibility and agency. Geographers have long adopted pedagogical approaches that encourage students to understand themselves in relation to ‘others’ (see Cook, 2000, and Ian Cook et al’s more recent Follow the Things work online). Our experience suggests that it is possible to undertake similar work in relation to ‘nature’ and non-human others. Angelo (2013) argues that social science, including critical geography, tends to establish “the problematic of society/nature relationships” (p. 352) as one of *distance from* nature, and yet relationships are founded on experience. Adopting an autoethnographic pedagogy explicitly asks the students to begin with their own experiences of nature, with the affective domain and with their own actions and ways of being. If Geography really is to claim a case for being the ‘natural home’ of sustainability education, such approaches may provide a means of connecting cognitive knowledge of societies and environments with personal identities and capacities for action.

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1. Pauline Couper was in the employment of the University of St Mark & St John when the module described in this paper was taught. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)