

The Power of Nature and the Nature of Power

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Abstract

This paper explores the process of going outdoors and using “nature” as a way to support teaching about power and privilege within society. It explores how being inside the classroom hinders the process of understanding and disrupting power dynamics between learners and instructors. The classroom decontextualizes the learning process by denying the existence of oppressions in society as well as the power dynamics between the teacher and student. The classroom itself is devoid of life supporting forces and is itself oppressive. Taking the learning situation outdoors to a small urban park, the power dynamics change to allow teacher and students to become collaborative learners and together explore systems of oppression. Being outdoors we are bombarded with new stimuli, the presence of other people—nannies, panhandlers, school children—as well as the sun and the wind which provide opportunities for challenging the notion that students need to accept the oppression of the classroom.

Résumé

Cet article étudie le procédé d’aller dehors et d’utiliser la « nature » comme une façon de soutenir l’enseignement concernant les notions de pouvoir et de privilège dans la société. Quand on reste à l’intérieur de la classe cela entrave le processus de la compréhension et déränge la dynamique du pouvoir entre les apprenants et les professeurs. La classe décontextualise le procédé d’apprentissage en niant l’existence de l’oppression dans la société tout comme la dynamique du pouvoir entre l’enseignant et les élèves. La classe elle-même est dépourvue de forces supportant la vie et est oppressive. En déplaçant la situation d’apprentissage à l’extérieur, dans un petit parc urbain, la dynamique du pouvoir change pour permettre à l’enseignant et aux élèves de devenir des apprenants qui collaborent et ensemble explorent le système de l’oppression. Étant à l’extérieur, nous sommes bombardés de nouveaux stimulus, de la présence d’autres personnes – bonnes d’enfants, mendiants, écoliers, écolières — ainsi que le soleil et le vent qui fournissent des occasions de défier la notion que les élèves ont besoin d’accepter l’oppression de la classe.

Keywords: power, privilege, sense of place, teaching practice, narrative inquiry, arts-based inquiry

Conflicting Types of Power

This narrative explores how the power of nature may be used to overcome the oppressive powers within which we live and teach. It examines a developing ecological practice of education as well as a re-examination of self in nature facilitated by disruptive interruptions. It explores “becoming reconnected to complex, multiple perceptions, and lived realities of the environment [and] reviving a state of being within one’s own body, being fully within relationships, ecosystems and systems of spirituality” (Neilson, 2008, p. 137). This inquiry is about ecological teaching about and within complex global systems of oppressions.

As an environmental educator, I have been trying to disrupt oppressive powers for nearly a decade. My attempts, however, are complicated by my own complicity in these oppressions: a situation in which collaboration is essential. I am not to do this work alone. Although I have yet to co-teach the course upon which this inquiry is focused, recently my work has become less of an individual struggle of self-righteousness and more of a collaborative dance powered by ecosystems, weather patterns, and watersheds. I began this inquiry alone but the wind and rain interrupted me from writing and I looked up to see a colleague inviting me to dance. I purposely accepted his interruptions to my words since the same powers, about which I write, flow through this text nevertheless and I cannot disrupt them on my own. In sharing this inquiry, I heed the words of Thomas King that “stories [are] medicine, that a story told one way could cure, that the same story told another way could injure” (2003, p. 92). The text boxes that interrupt this narrative are for telling a story in relation, with care, and with the ambiguity necessary for exploring power. They are used to mimic the soundscape that distracted me when in the park near the university as well as the interruptions to my writing of this inquiry. I was trying to teach and later to write, but the wind and a persistent dancer kept getting in my way. I invite the reader to let the textboxes disturb my assertions and their own assumptions while dancing through this narrative with me.

This study explores the way knowledge is created, how I story the world in relation to this knowledge, and how I live these stories (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). I began this inquiry after completing all duties for an initial teacher education course. I reviewed documents from teaching four sessions of this course. I analyzed my course outlines, assignment, emails, notes from meetings, as well as transcripts of interviews with former students. I compared modifications between each course session and with my other teaching experiences. I wrote prose, poetry, and made sketches of my developing reflections (Cole, Neilsen, Knowles, & Luciani, 2004). I engaged in free association of words and ideas and wrote about specific episodes and dilemmas in my teaching.

Getting to this Journey—The Power of Nature Path

Prior to undertaking graduate studies in education, my “expertise” as a wildlife biologist put me in front of hundreds of educators to teach them about the environment. For many years helping educators learn to use their skills outside of the classroom and teach about the environment while meeting curriculum goals was a fulfilling experience for me. We would discuss wildlife conservation and natural history as we experienced the wonders of nature. I would lead them through games that highlighted that food, water, shelter, and space creates habitat for all creatures; they would talk about ways to use these experiences in their teaching. Alongside the teachers I got great joy from the natural world. We would scoop up caddisfly larvae and marvel at their protective casings of tiny pebbles or twigs. This would lead to discussing ways to create identification keys with their students and how the presence of certain aquatic invertebrate would allow them to make judgments about water quality and teach about biodiversity.

Working in a city, home to people from rural and other urban parts of Canada as well as from all over the world, it was common in my workshops that educators would discuss issues of language and differing cultures. When I worked overseas, the local context was essential to the success of the environmental education workshops I led. Listening to diverse groups of people, however, I began to hear about racism, classism, and colonialism amongst other oppressions, but I found that I did not understand how these were linked to environmental issues or how I could discuss them within my teaching. Time and again, in many locations across the globe, I have met with similar situations of oppression of race and class, generally associated with colonialism, bringing local people to an impasse of environmental injustice. How does this impasse happen? How does this disenfranchise the people with whom I am working? How does this distance me as an educator from the realities of others in the class? These concerns disrupted me, disturbed my approach; perhaps I am the colonizer? I could not continue working solely with the power of nature. My questioning eventually led me to graduate studies in education, where I broadened my understanding of social power in relation to environmental issues.

Social oppressions are particularly relevant to the study of environmental education since racialized, poor, and working class people are disproportionately harmed by environmental hazards and disproportionately receive fewer benefits from the existence of parks and wilderness (Bullard, 1993, 1994; Thompson, 2002). Current as well as historical practices of colonialism affect the environmental health of Indigenous peoples (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996) as well as people within the global south (Shiva, 1994). Questions of gender equity have also been raised around environmental health (Kirk, 1997; Sen, 1994).

As a white, Canadian-born, English-speaking educator trained in western science and having been privileged to work in many countries including those

of the global south, I am challenged by Indigenous scholars such as Battiste (2005), Castellano (1998), Cole (2002), Lickers (1998), O’Riley (2003), Sheridan, Longboat, & Shirt (1998), and Smith (1999) to acknowledge my multiple avenues of privilege so that I am not merely reproducing these through my teaching to “be” in relationship with all life around me. How do I act the part of environmental educator now that I am embedded within this system of higher education? I cringe when my colleagues—other instructors, students, chairs of departments—apologize to me when they drink coffee from a disposable cup. I believed my personal and academic understandings to be more complex and compassionate. Do they see me only as a member of the recycling police?

Narratives Trapped by the Walls of Anger

This narrative focuses on my developing practice in “Teaching and Society,” a course that explores how power and diversity are constructed and the ways in which teachers can understand their roles in the construction and disruption of inequities. This type of course is common in Canadian faculties of education. Although a major focus of my work with educators for the last 15 years has been to get rid of the actual classroom, going outdoors was not a priority when I planned my first session of this course; there was simply too much to cover and no time to waste in getting students out the door of the university.

Teaching and Society Vignette ~ Part I

We giggle excitedly, students and teacher, spilling out of the windowless cell to embrace “truancy” from the classroom. Waiting for the elevator, in the middle of the day, we enjoy the quizzical looks from colleagues—field trip? The sun, the wind, and the sounds of a multitude of life in the city greet us as we exit the faculty of education. We bump shoulders with the laughing teenagers (also skipping school?) as we pass the rumbling doors of the subway. The sparrows scatter from the serviceberry tree as we walk underneath; a black squirrel darts across the sidewalk in front of us. A tense moment as we try to escape the gaze of the quiet old woman with her hand out. She lets herself be invisible to us, but I think we all saw.

We enter the small park through the iron gates and toss our books on the hard, dry ground beneath the oak tree, careful to avoid the places still moist from the pigeons. As the students gather close and look toward me for instructions, I take my time and let them stretch and mingle and perhaps wonder. They take the offered pieces of chalk and disperse to find smooth places to write about how the world has changed in their lifetimes. I talk to the man who has been watching from the nearby bench, he says that he didn’t know that people had to go to school to learn how to teach. He seems to accept our presence in the park as well as my attempts to appear unconcerned as I keep strict surveillance on the students’ discarded backpacks.

However, as I paid attention to the obvious discomfort of many of the students, I started organizing class activities in a nearby park. In revising my course curriculum, I considered students' embodied experiences: both of the power we were going to explore as well as the hoped for disruption of this power. Going outdoors was initially conceived for the good of the students; their schedule had them in a four-hour class in the same room before a later four hours with me. According to one of the students, "when you are in the building, you just keep looking at the time and wanting to go home." Additionally, since environmental education is not part of the provincial curriculum and is not offered in this program, I wanted to teach in an ecological way to help these aspiring teachers to become ecological teachers as well.

Prior to moving class meetings outdoors, I had tried moving furniture into a circle to get students to talk to one another as I had done in other courses (cf. Breunig, 2005). Moving furniture in this course was not always so easy. Asking students to move sometimes appeared to be challenging the instructor from their morning class. Often the size of the room made a circle difficult to create, and the usual large rectangular arrangement was particularly difficult to dislodge. I had not been reluctant in my other teaching experiences, yet I gave up trying to move furniture in the first class meeting of this course even though my entire body was aware of the barrier I had left intact.

Classroom walls are strong in keeping students comfortable with the idea that nature is outdoors and humans are separate from the environment (Neilson, 2008). I wonder about the strength of these classroom walls in preventing students from being open to the challenges I was offering them about their place within social systems. Do these walls keep students firmly entrenched in the idea that racism, classism, and sexism are only embodied as individual acts of discrimination?

Clover and Hill (2003) suggest that I "should use outdoor learning for the dual purposes of provoking outrage and encouraging awe, wonder, and a renewed faith in human capacity to create change" (p. 91). Not all of my attempts at incorporating the outdoors in the "Teaching and Society" course were welcomed by the students. Some complained about the sun, and carrying around their belongings, or having to wait for the security guard to unlock the classroom after we returned from being outside. Some were critical of the slower pace and the experiential approaches that "were enjoyable, but seemed pointless." I was not fully conscious of the differences for me when I started to take the class outdoors, but through this inquiry, I have realized that my feelings of being ensnared by constraining forces and caged in by the students themselves dissipated from this action. Students also felt let out of the cage: "a great concession, there is a power structure... because my internal voice said, wow she let us go outside so I thought it was really great"; "We could go elsewhere and not be captured in that one classroom."

When confronted with the anger of individuals unable/unwilling to see inequities in society (a common occurrence, see Breunig, 2005; Dlamini,

The Panther

*His vision, from the constantly passing bars,
has grown so weary that it cannot hold
anything else. It seems to him there are
a thousand bars, and behind the bars, no world.*

*As he paces in cramped circles, over and over,
the movement of his powerful soft strides
is like a ritual dance around a center
in which a mighty will stands paralyzed.*

*Only at times, the curtain of the pupils
lifts, quietly. An image enters in,
rushes down through the tense, arrested muscles,
plunges into the heart and is gone.*

~ Rainer Maria Rilke (Mitchell, 1989, p. 25)¹

2002; Huber & Cale, 2002; Solomon, Portelli, Daniel, & Campbell, 2005; Sonn, 2008), my body reacts on high alert to the emotions so that I can only react to this one student, at the expense of the others; *my gut churns as I feel the power overcome my ability to speak*. I know at the time that the words of this student are likely causing pain to other students. The very students who have felt the pain of inequities in Canadian society are now feeling the slap of the public denial of these same inequities by their peers and by me, who is allowing the denial to have air time. At this tense moment, I am focussed on the pain, anger, and the power that is swirling between and around each of us, *agony—pain—black hole—searing white light of his anger—strong emotions—strong racial connotations*. This interferes with my ability to clearly describe for the class what is happening and why I am stopping this oppressive discussion from having any more public space. By not decisively stopping the conversation and not pointing out to the speaker that his lack of knowledge of oppression in society and his ability to openly challenge the professor is a manifestation of his privilege, a learning opportunity for him as well as the other students is missed.

Caring to Tear Down the Walls

Goodwill is reciprocating, and the learning space is grown where both student and educator benefit from openness and honest surroundings. Previously I have observed that it is possible to successfully challenge someone to ask questions of their own strong beliefs if done with respect and care (Neilson, 2008). It was clear from interviews and student evaluations that going out-

Teaching and Society Vignette ~ Part II

The noise of the accelerating bus, the squeals of the children and the singing of the starlings insist that we arrange our bodies in a close proximity much more intimate than normal for a group of adults. We view the chalk drawings on the sidewalk. For some, the collapse of the Berlin Wall is only a story from school, for others, it is the pivotal event leading to their presence in this park today. Our circle parts to let pass the man with the ragged coat and the woman (Filipino nanny?) with the blond child in the stroller. The discussion returns to power: who controls what we teach? What we think? Some strong words are spoken; nods of agreement and furtive looks of dissent follow. Someone suggests that both might be right. The silence is broken by the buzz of a yellowjacket, which scatters us apart again. I look at my watch; it is time to go.

doors was relaxing and enjoyable for them: “there was a general ease in myself”; “we were on our feet and there was oxygen.” Knowing that I was being caring and respectful might have dampened or re-directed away from me any anger that students may have felt from the challenges posed by the class readings and activities:

It was like an intimacy that you didn’t have [in the classroom]...you are outside...you are closer to them... When you are standing up in a circle, in the grass, you are more exposed, open, and generous and I think that is how it affected me the most. I was closer; I probably said things that I wouldn’t have said in the classroom. (student interview)

In my earlier environmental education work I learned to respect the learner and their experience as central to my teaching. Scholars such as Marie Battiste, George Sefa Dei, bell hooks, Ruth Frankenberg and Paulo Freire provide me useful suggestions for educational practices which privilege the needs of those marginalized by injustices. Curry-Stevens (2007) suggests that the privileged need help as well, as they may build an insurmountable resistance to recognizing their own privilege if they feel attacked. Conversely, I have been provoked by critiques of liberal approaches to challenging privilege. Leonardo (2004) argues that “a critical look at white privilege, or the analysis of white racial hegemony, must be complemented by an equally rigorous examination of white supremacy, or the analysis of white racial domination” (p. 137). Brookfield (2005, 2007) and Huber and Cale (2002) argue that many cherished popular education practices actually lead to the marginalization and silencing of more inclusive oppositional voices. This tension around teaching about and within systems of privilege challenges me greatly and persuades me to continue seeking outside collaborations.

Solar and Wind Powered Teaching

While I can accept the idea that angry students may be evidence that I have disrupted the classroom power dynamics and encouraged them to question their own assumptions, overcoming my embodied resistance to angering students and my desire to flee from any such anger is not so easy. My ability to teach as the “the disruptive activist” who does not fear anger is hampered by the discursive practices and norms of “the good motherly teacher” image, a powerful tag of identity for a white woman (see Barrett, 2007) that haunts the classroom (Anderson, 2004).

Yet, I feel more at ease when teaching outdoors and I can be caring and challenging simultaneously. The classroom has few of the life-giving elements of the outdoors. However, after being nourished by the sun and the wind, we can return to the classroom with a re-conceptualization of teacher and student that allows for a disruption of the normally constraining discourse.

Lea (2008) reviews the history of using nature as a place to recuperate and explores how “retreating to nature” has therapeutic properties related specifically to place. Others have studied wilderness experiences as positive spiritual inspiration (Fredrickson & Anderson, 1999) and green school yards as contributing to “physical, mental, social, and spiritual well-being” (Bell & Dymont, 2008, p. 77), “more inclusive of people who may feel isolated on the basis of gender, class, race, and ability” (Dymont & Bell, 2008, p. 169), and even “to reduc[ing] ADHD symptoms” (Kuo & Taylor, 2004, p. 1580).

I felt my body relax when the sun shone on my face; my breathing slowed and deepened when the wind blew through my hair. The cool shade of the tree under which we initially gathered, the singing of the birds, and the laughter of the children playing in the fountain seemed to have a calming effect on me. In addition to this embodied experience, when I am outdoors, I am reminded of life as an ecosystem which functions because “individuals” work in relation. I believe that my role in teaching this course is to disrupt the oppressive power flow of the education system, rather than be a lone teacher trying to overcome individual acts of prejudice.

Although the surroundings made hearing more difficult, large group discussions can work in the outdoors, where I feel at relative ease, unlike in the classroom where much of my attention is focused on trying to prevent oppressive whole class discussions without ignoring comments of students when they were steeped in racist, sexist or other oppressive discourses. The power of going outdoors for my teaching practice is seen in how it changed my experience from the original (normal?) oppressive classroom.

My Sense of Place

Going to the park reminded me of my life in this city over the past twenty years. The sound of the buses carried me to other places, people, and other living beings with whom I’ve interacted. I am connected to another park where I

spent years with other educators on the restoration of the natural ecosystem. I'm connected to the large urban river in which my canoe capsized during a "celebrate the river" event. I'm connected to numerous wildlife and education events carried out when I worked for the provincial government. When I am in this little park, I am dancing with my sense of place. Thomashow (1995) discusses the importance of sense of place to my identity:

It is through the place where we live that we construct our personal identities, relate to the landscape and determine what is important in our lives.... It is about our habits of familiarity, the places we visit everyday, how our immediate environment influences how we think, breathe and eat; the way the spirit of the land permeates our lives. (pp. 193- 194)

The students also found it important to "stand on the land, in a specific area...to be on fertile ground, where there is grass and trees and open air." Some students who had recently immigrated told me that learning about the local area is vital for developing their teaching practice in Canada, it "quite literally 'places' them within the world, and they escape the cocoon of classrooms and textbooks to make connections with the wider world" (Evans, Cook, & Griffiths, 2008, p. 330).

In the first class meetings, I usually invite students to relax by going on a guided journey within their own "environment" (see ProjectWild, Western Regional Environmental Education Council, 1992). During this inquiry, I asked students to describe how they understand nature and the environment and how this relates to the park we used. Yet I am uncertain that I always allow myself to recognize fully my own experiences of the environment. I fit the description: middle class professional, environmentalist, hiker, "nature lover." However, my identity and sense of place is also marked by the asphalt hauled by my grandfather's truck to pave the roads and the university where I studied wildlife biology. The hard physical labour of my parents and other family members has built the podium from which I teach about social power and the power of nature. I am vested in authority as a wildlife biologist and a university lecturer. As such, connecting with my sense of place can help me to bring attention to these people often excluded from the social construction of environment and nature.

Collaborative Communing with Nature

Psychological research on restorative environments suggests that this park could renew an educator's "diminished functional resources and capacities" (Hartig & Staats, 2003). Upon reviewing this literature, however, it is surprising that it did not actually involve taking people to parks and other "natural" settings, but generally involved showing images and asking how people felt when considering being in these spaces (see Berto, 2005; Herzog, Maguire, & Nebel, 2003; Robin, Matheau-Police, & Couty, 2007; Staats & Hartig, 2004; Van den Berga, Kooleb, & van der Wulp, 2003). I wonder—does

the outdoors give me the strength I need to resist powerful constraints because I believe that it can give me this strength? Where does that leave educators who do not believe that the outdoors gives them strength, or are prevented from communing with their “nature” because of forced migration or environmental injustices? This also raises questions about whether and the extent to which the educator can grow in strength from simple communion with the forces of nature.

Humans interact with the other parts of the natural ecosystem nested within complex social systems. I can conceptualize myself as an individual, but this is a perversion, albeit a widely accepted one. My engagement in the more-than-human world is embedded within my engagement within human community and this narrative is meant to recognize that. It is not arguing that I can do ecological, anti-oppressive teaching without collaboration with other educators. I believe that teaching, whether focused on the power of nature, or the nature of power, is best done in collaboration with other educators. Until the current status quo at most universities changes, however, I am unlikely to have the opportunity to actually team teach.

However, I can engage with the power of nature to lessen the impact of these social constraints. Going outdoors, while respecting multiple perceptions of nature and the flow of social power, allows the teacher/student dichotomy to be broken. Students and instructors can then dance between the roles of learner and teacher and help one another with the difficult parts of dealing with personal complicity within systems of injustices. The wind, the children in the park sandbox, and the men asking for cigarettes at the front door of the university, are allowed an important role in directing the learning as well. In situations when team teaching is supported, in more informal workshops for instance, natural power is equally important. Regardless of the good will and motivation between two educators, the oppressive social powers that flow amongst us all can only be fully recognized and tempered with the help of the creative power of nature.

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- ¹ “The Panther,” copyright © 1982 by Stephen Mitchell, from *The Selected Poetry Of Rainer Maria Rilke* by Rainer Maria Rilke, translated by Stephen Mitchell. Used by permission of Random House Inc.

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