

A feeling for water: the body and the paddle

By

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It was good to sit there in front of the fire whittling the new paddle. It was elemental work, like shaping a spear or a bow, and when I smoothed the blade and handle I felt nothing could be more vital or important. The very act of shaping it set up a deep-seated chain of subconscious reactions that were satisfying, basic, and primitive.

Sigurd Olson (1974, p. 200)

My head rolls back in the blazing summer sun. A whirlwind, we call them whirly-whirlies in Australia, has just swept through the leaves of the Yellow Gum which provides me with shade. It shifts my focus from the timber paddle that I am sanding and from thinking about the words of Sigurd Olson, to the leaves, dead grasses and sawdust swirling high into the blue sky.

The canoe paddle I am finishing has made me re-think the often taken-for granted approach to technologies that we use daily in the practice of outdoor guiding and education. This paddle has become a culmination of thought and action, a praxis philosophy if you like, an opportunity

to probe for meaning as might be possible in the process of making and using an artifact of our profession. I have built and used many paddles and boats (canoes, kayaks and sea kayaks) with students and have always sensed that the process is, in some way, inherently good. Max van Manen (1990, p. 6) describes this as a 'sense of the pedagogic good'. But with rapid changes in the nature of technologies in education, including outdoor education, it is timely that the nature of that 'goodness' is reflected upon.

The geographer D. W. Meinig (1979, p. 6) writes 'the meaning of the ordinary is rarely obvious'. Familiarity masks and technologies mediate our lives to such an extent that they often 'disappear'. Although we may be aware of their presence, we become unaware of how they control the nature of our experience. This is potentially very significant for outdoor educators because much of our practice is predicated on a rhetoric of providing experiences for students which contrast the daily routine of modern existence in schools, universities and more likely than not, suburban homes and communities. This is often how we justify 'going bush', or periodically simplifying our

needs through 'light-weight' camping experiences. We assume that important lessons will be learnt through the nature of personal, small community and environmental experiences, which will transfer to other aspects of students' lives. If technology does 'invisibly' mediate our outdoor education experiences – if we are as dependant on the 'high-tech', or globalized technologies in outdoor education as we are in our daily lives, then the contrast, and the potential for important lessons to be learnt, may be missed.

There has been a profound paradigm shift resulting from the loss of localized and personalized modes of production to the mass production of the artifacts and tools we use in outdoor education and camping experiences. Where once individuals and schools made their own boats, and accessories such as paddles, in backyard sheds and school workshops, now much of it is imported and sold through specialist retailers. Where once designs were based on trial and error, experience, and progressive modification, now they are pre-ordained by the R&D departments of large corporate entities. Where once boat building and paddle making knowledge and skills were passed on at the individual, club or school level, now a user's manual and 'guarantee' arrives with the purchased equipment outlining its technological advantages over the rival models of other companies.

In many ways this trend mirrors society in general, with its increasing levels of specialization, production via the industrial complex, consumption of technologies and consumption of experiences afforded by those technologies. I am not proposing a moralizing of this process per se (as

contradictions lurk in the shadows of every sentence), although a moral position relevant to educational practice is likely to emerge. Rather, my motivation for this discussion is pedagogical from the outset. The likely question to pose becomes: What educational potentials are lost or afforded to the teacher and learner in choices made about the technologies of canoeing and kayaking and other small boats?

Insight into these potentials can be gained through attempting to consider what is fundamental to the nature of something so 'ordinary' as a paddle as an example of technology, and the process of paddle making as a means to make 'visible' our experience of the world as it is shaped by technology. For me, a way to start this process is to reflect upon each of these fundamentals as layers of stories, or narratives. Some of these stories begin as theory (or an idea), some are borrowed or learned from others, and some are intensely personal and practical. But the intent of them all is to illuminate a practical philosophy in relation to an aspect of the outdoor education experience.

Two Trees: The narrative of organic material.

I cannot think of a paddle without thinking of timber. I cannot think of timber without thinking about trees and the lives of the people who turned those trees into timber. I cannot think about trees without thinking about forests and our indebtedness to them whenever wood is removed and worked into something else. I have used two timbers in this paddle quite deliberately - one old, one new. Each has its own story.

Red Cedar (Toona Australis)

A large hardwood of occasional occurrence in the coastal rainforests of eastern Australia ... Now scarce ... is one of the few deciduous trees of the Australian forests ... Heartwood pale to dark red ... Grain straight to slightly interlocked. Distinctive odor...ADD (Air Dry Density) about 420 kg/m³) ... Furniture, paneling, decorative veneer, boat building ...
(Bootle, 1983, pp. 264-265)

The shaft of this paddle is the last length of Australian cedar (Toona Australis) left to me by my grandfather, along with an assortment of hand tools and odd lengths of various timbers, in his will. They gathered dust for many years in his shed after his death before I collected them. I have shaped it with a plane and a spokeshave that once pressed into the palms of his hands. Rather than a simple cylindrical shaft it tapers between two ovals offset at 90 degrees for strength and a comfortable grip - no tool is better than a sharp spokeshave for this task. Each time you push it across the surface of the timber, and a long shaving spirals from behind the blade, you are communicating with the timber and its past. It will unlock its story to the attentive.

With each draw of the spokeshave part of the grain of the tree's heartwood is revealed from a length of timber milled sometime after the Second World War, from northern New South Wales. On each of these occasions I can imagine the tree rooted to the earth, and the environmental conditions which dictated the possibilities of its growth. I can imagine the slope and the

twisting column of the trunk as it reached for the sunlight, and imbedded colour and strength into my paddling shaft. Through the shaping of this shaft I am linked to the past of both family and forest.

*Alpine Ash (Eucalyptus delegatensis). A large hardwood of the cold climate areas of Tasmania, eastern Victoria and south-eastern New South Wales...Grain usually straight...fiddleback. Gum veins common. Growth rings made conspicuous by the darker latewood...Quarter cut the boards...The sapwood is seldom attacked by lyctid borers...Furniture, flooring, oars, skis, handles, cooperage...
(Bootle, 1983, p 238)*

The story of the pieces of Alpine Ash, which I have included in my paddle to make the sides of the blade and handle, is very different than that of the Red Cedar. If you go down to the local hardware and timber supplier, you will be very lucky to find someone who knows much about Australian hardwoods and their uses. Virtually all Australian hardwoods are sold under generic labels (such as Vic Ash or Tasmanian Oak), which cover many species. The practical knowledge of particular species has been lost in these settings. Instead, you will need to locate and communicate with people whose lives are centered around timber and forestry. To talk with someone about Alpine Ash, and its properties, you will need to go to a timber merchant or even a mill. Some of the Alpine Ash sold in Victoria comes from re-growth forest after the 1939 bush fires, but some of it is still cut from old growth forest. The

particular pieces in this paddle came via a merchant in Dandenong and were cut from forest in the mountains beyond Orbost.

In a consumer society where we have become easily distanced from the sources of the products we use and consume, it is deeply thought provoking to re-connect with our dependence on the raw materials of nature, and those who work them close to their source. Wendell Berry (1991, p. 64) believes that, "The modern urban-industrial society is based on a series of radical disconnections". We rarely think about intensive feed-lots when we eat a steak, or the impact on the Darling River (low water levels, high chemical concentrations in irrigation run-off resulting in blue green algae outbreaks) when we proudly wear our 'Made in Australia' cotton clothing.

Humility can result from walking into a mill and hearing the scream of saws reducing a tree trunk removed from a nearby forest to a stack of lumber. A commitment arises to use those small pieces of timber carefully, and to make something which is both functional and beautiful. Nicholas Dattner (1993, pp. 56-57) has called for a 'Timber Renaissance' in Australia, an elevation of timber to 'the status of other things we regard as precious'. Through the creation of something beautiful and functional which we handle and use everyday, we might expose the continued practice of wood chipping and cutting for firewood, some of the finest timbers in the world. Even then, we are cautioned by Berry (1991, p 138) that 'no product can be the equal of its source. The source is infinite, the product finite'. It is through re-connection to the source of things that materials become precious.

The narrative of the paddle as technology.

E. F. Schumacher (1973) produced a provocative philosophical critique of the economic and human consequences of *mass producing* technologies, which he claimed were 'inherently violent, ecologically damaging, self-defeating in terms of non-renewable resources, and stultifying for the human person' (1973, p. 145). For Schumacher, much of modern technology was 'in defiance of all laws of natural harmony' (1973, p. 149). Similarly, Wendell Berry rejects as hubris technological attempts to solve global ecological and human crises (if the two can be separated) as forms of 'industrial heroism' (Berry 1991, p. 97). For Berry, 'prefabricated industrial methods and technologies are abstractions, the bigger and more expensive, the more heroic, they are, the harder they are to apply considerably and conservingly (Berry 1991, p. 97).

Berry (1991), in the United States, and Masanobu Fukuoka (1978), in Japan have written compelling philosophies of human interaction with nature through the examples of traditional farming. They provided powerful critiques in the 1970s and early 80s of industrial specialization and the obsolescence of traditional local knowledge and practices. Two decades later it is educational practice which is being radically globalized and fundamentally shaped through technological change. There is potentially much to be learnt from the struggles and achievements of non-mainstream technologically driven agriculture, such as organic farming and permaculture, for

pedagogical inquiry in outdoor education. How often do we as outdoor educators consider how our practice may be dictated by the technologies we use, and the cultural messages and industrial practices delivered by those technologies?

Don Idhe (1983) argues that we 'rarely thematize technology as such an existential element' (Idhe 1983, pp. 2-3). He is less concerned with technology as it is most often understood as a collection of tools and machinery. Rather, it is his philosophical inquiry into the non-neutrality of technologies (Idhe 1990) and the mediation of human experience through them, or *technics* (Idhe 1983), which raises significant questions for outdoor educators.

Questions should be asked concerning the obsolescence, at least in terms of functional obsolescence, of older technologies and what else is lost in terms of knowledge, skill and relationships (both ecological and communal). Questions should be asked concerning the almost total surrender of ourselves as producers, or manufacturers, of the technologies of outdoor education. It was not so long ago that many of these technologies had to be made and maintained as an integral part of the outdoor education and camping experience.

Aldo Leopold (1949, p 181) lamented the loss of practical knowledge and the rise of an industry based on the production of 'gadgets' for the outdoor recreator half a century ago.

Bigger and better gadgets are good for industry, so why not outdoor recreation? It has not dawned...that outdoor recreations

are essentially primitive, atavistic; that their value is contrast-value; that excessive mechanization destroys contrasts by moving the factory to the woods or the marsh.'

Actually producing: The narrative of practical work.

If technology mediates our experience of the world, the best way to probe the meanings of this meditation is by bringing the technology into the sharpest possible focus – to make it the centre of our attention, for a time at least. Perhaps the best way to do this is to use the primary methodology of outdoor education, direct 'hands on' experience. We should become 'actual producers' (Schumacher p 141). But this is counter to the dominant trend of society. Schumacher (1973, p. 146) cautions that,

it is rather more difficult to recapture directness and simplicity than to advance in the direction of ever more sophistication and complexity' (p. 146) and that 'insight does not come easily to people who have allowed themselves to become alienated from real productive work.

Medway (1997, p. 5-6) laments the loss of possibility in the demise of manual arts or 'technical studies' in school systems.

It's easy to understand why the craft experience has disappeared from school, in Canada as well as in England. Such processes have become marginal to the modern economy. Large-scale fabrication is often done by machines following computer

instructions in sheds without workers or lights. The making of one-off artifacts by single individuals, out of bits of wood or steel or fabric, is not the activity through which society's creative juices are currently flowing. Craft processes may be highly satisfying, but in the making of many of our most useful and pleasing objects...there's next to no craft involved. Any human labour that goes directly into the fabrication of such things is likely to be uncreative, while the creative activity, the design, is done on computer and offers no experience of bodily engagement with materiality.

If technologies direct our experience of the world in the way that Berry (1991), Medway (1997), Schumacher (1973) and Idhe (1983,1990) suggest, and we fail to make a considerable effort to know those technologies, then we may live in the same kind of virtual world that Medway has described. That is, we become unwitting inhabitants of a 'technological world'. We may think that we are getting back to nature, or close to nature, but we are more likely to remain distanced by the very technologies that we feel we need in order to be there. According to Yinger (1987, p. 9), 'practice breaks down...when it becomes specialised and isolated'. Technology and specialization have increased hand-in-hand in professional life dramatically since the Enlightenment. The experiential and integrated nature of outdoor education is challenged when we exclude such fundamentals as productive work and direct

engagement with the technologies employed.

The type of work which modern technology is most successful in reducing or even eliminating is skilful, productive work of human hands, in touch with real materials of one kind or another. (Schumacher, 1973, p. 141)

We rarely think of outdoor education being an opportunity to do this kind of 'work'. We may ask students to build a make-shift raft from a set of supplied materials (we see potential possible benefits in the social experience of this process) – but rarely do we consider them working to produce something in the material sense that will endure. Perhaps we assume that this kind of work belongs somewhere else in the specialised curriculum.

Feeling the water: the narrative of the body and the paddle.

At some point after the production process the paddle will be employed for its intended purpose. The novelty of the first few strokes may soon disappear, for the skilled paddler especially, and the paddle and boat to can, at times, seem to become invisible. The paddler and their technology merge together. The technologies have become absorbed into the body of the paddler and the body is extended out and into the environment. Educational questions abound in this phenomenon.

These are essentially questions of *technics*. Educators often categorise the learner's body in terms of its physical parameters and performance. This is certainly evident in many of the writings concerning the use of small boats and their attendant

technologies in outdoor education. These writing are characterised by the language of coaching, instruction, skill and performance. Again, it is largely necessary to search out alternative avenues to illuminate the pedagogical good concerning the body and the potentials of outdoor education experiences.

Peter Medway (1997, p. 4) writes of the need for educators to view learners (and themselves) as 'embodied persons' and of the implications of educators viewing the body as a 'sort of knowledge' in its own right. For Medway, the body provides the direct experience of the world's materiality, and it is the starting point for beginning to untangle the cultural layers of interpretation of human experience and identity.

Phillip Payne (1997, p. 7) believes that 'all technological 'tools', 'instruments', or artifacts have some 'intention' designed into them, irrespective of the 'potential' way the user might elect to use them, or the level of proficiency at which the user might technically operate the tool'. Payne (1996. pg. 87) concluded in an earlier article that 'visible and invisible embodied-relations of paddler, tool and river should be more apparent, as should be how the activity/experience is intentionally arbitrated, overtly and covertly, by the technologies themselves'. This kind of awareness of how our bodies are extended into or contracted from, the world by paddling technologies would clearly differentiate the recreational experience (already defined by Leopold) from the outdoor education experience.

Searching questions are raised again especially if the opening trend outlined in this article is accepted, that

there has been a significant, if not universal, replacement of locally and sometimes even personally, produced technologies by mass production where the eventual participant is profoundly distanced from the boat or paddle's origins, and has little or no way of assessing them. A profound contrast can be seen with West Greenland sea kayaks for example, which are built individually to 'fit' each owner (often the owner must be the builder). No two craft can ever be alike. The dimensions of the craft are not written down, but rather are a function of the bodily dimensions of the owner/builder. Thus the boat's length is determined by three arm spans, the width is that of the hips plus to fists, the deck height is two handspans, and so on (Stark, 1993).

My paddle is a true extension of my body as it is now dimensioned off of my body. I could write these dimensions down here in this article if you wanted to use them as a guide to build a paddle for yourself - shaft length is the same as this part of the body - the shaft is ovalled to fit the hand based on the distance between this finger joint and - the blade length in so many handspans, and so on. But this process would be self defeating. It would rob paddle building of its potential to engage us in communal activity. We would not have to meet - body to body, body to material - and participate in producing something that we will use. We would consign the information to dis-embodied practice.

My paddle extends my body into the watery world. The small boat floats me on the skin of the water (like a log or a raft), but it is the paddle which lets me feel the river's under-currents and eddies. Like the traditional silk grader who would run a

stick down a piece of the material to gauge its fineness, a carefully crafted timber paddle can magnify the elemental nature of water and its movements. It is the paddle which provides mobility, and makes me amphibious.

The immense journey: the narrative of water travel.

The intentionality of the paddle is, in the first case, obvious. It is the tool which propels and steers the boat across the surface of the watery world. Travel across or along bodies of water is based on ancient practice. As the keel and rudder were the breakthroughs which enabled our ancestors to sail across the wind (not just be blown downwind), and thus enabled them to circumnavigate the globe, it was the technological breakthrough of the paddle, and ultimately refinements in paddling technique (and then the technology of the boat) which gave human's feelings of control on the world's waterways. It was no longer wind or current which dictated a journey and a destination, but technology and technique. Technology, the paddle, had driven an early wedge between the natural and human worlds. But water travelers have always known that feelings of control over the wind, waves and currents are, at best, dangerous illusions.

Jonathan Raban's (1992) introduction to *The Oxford Book of the Sea*, charts the way we have told stories to each other in western culture about travelling over the largest bodies of water, the oceans. From the earliest times to the present the sea has been represented as two faced – both as provider of physical and spiritual nourishment and also as potential destroyer. Old texts refer to

'the Deep', 'the abyss' and the 'the Tempest'. Our language was once inundated with boating metaphors from times when paddling, rowing and sailing was more a part of daily lives. Some still persist. Things are 'above board' or we fight to the 'bitter end' (the last link in the anchor chain). Aqueous and river metaphors are perhaps more contemporary. We are either 'out of our depth' or we 'go with the flow'. We are either 'mainstream' or 'fighting against the current'. We might even be just 'drifting' along.

Water bodies and boats are fundamental to our Australian lives. Few major settlements in the broad dry continent are far from a significant body of water. Frank Broeze (1998) believes that the narrative of the significance of the contribution of shipping and water travel in shaping contemporary Australian life has largely been left untold. The adaptation of whaleboats for coastal and inland waterway exploration is a story rarely told. The extensive range of bark, wood and reed canoes made and used by different Indigenous peoples, each produced from local materials and adapted to local water conditions, have virtually disappeared. All that remains in some areas are a few 'canoe trees' from which the bark canoes were cut, and even most of these have gone (Edwards, 1972). Probably none of us have seen a whaleboat or a bark canoe afloat. The potentially rich history of the development of canoe, small boat and paddling technologies is almost completely denied in Australia, both in culture at large and in outdoor education.

This is such a profound contrast to the cultures whose technologies we have 'taken onboard'. In countries such as Canada canoeing technologies

are celebrated in all their forms. People still construct and paddle birchbark canoes, or spend their winter building, repairing wooden strip or skin and frame canvas canoes, or sanding back their timber paddles. An even larger and more dazzling array of commercial products is available than is available here in Australia. But it is the presence of those older technologies, and the potential for them to engage people at the more personal and practical level that gives access to a range of educational questions that are lost to those who have given themselves over entirely to the products of mass production.

The poem: a concluding narrative of the paddle as creation.

The poem has always been, in part at least, an exercise in self-limitation. Both Berry and Fukuoka were poets and traditional farmers in the same breath. Both activities were expressions of the same thing. Through such disciplines it is possible to get close to the essence of things. The origin of the poem is the Greek *poesis* – meaning, ‘to create’. Each paddle can be a creation, a practical experience of discipline and self-limitation.

As I reached the point beyond which I could sand the paddle no further I had realized that this process had become synonymous with slowing down and taking the time to develop an intimate knowledge about something ‘ordinary’, to seek out its connections. All of the power tools which could have done the job faster – or the dollars which could have been traded for a commercial paddle – would have only replaced the skill and patience of the maker, the actual producer. I had found that Fukuoka (1978) was right when he wrote that

‘it takes time to pursue a subject in its wholeness’.

I can recall a description of poetry by Wendell Berry (1996, p. 108), ‘the poems seemed to have been made with a patience like that with which rivers freeze or lichens cover stones’. So it should be for both poem and paddle.

D. W. Mening (1979, p. 6) says that ‘every landscape is an accumulation...a code...It is an immense realm which needs many kinds of explorers... so dense with evidence and so complex and cryptic that we can never be assured that we have read it all or read it right.’ I’m sure that the same can be said for the technologies that we employ to access these very outdoor landscapes.

We will be remembered by future generations for the landscapes that survive us, the words we leave to be interpreted, and the artifacts that remain from our time. Someone, somewhere in the future will ask questions about the beliefs and practices of our culture, our technologies, and of outdoor education strove to play its part. These are big, far-reaching questions, but they are personal and local questions as well.

And so, I will have to content myself that one day I will hand this paddle on to one of my daughters and say, ‘This paddle is from your great grandfather, and from me. It has a story to tell. It is a story about people and tools, forests and water.’

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