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Empathy and Agency in the Isle Royale Field Philosophy Experience

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Abstract: For five years we taught a field philosophy course in Isle Royale National Park to study if and how wilderness experience, coupled with a care-based and community-focused curriculum in place-based ecology and environmental ethics, could help students develop empathy for nonhuman nature. Empathy for the natural world can positively impact environmental attitudes and behaviors; empathy also plays an important role in citizenship skills and actions. Using a constructivist grounded theory qualitative analysis of student pre-, on-, and post-course writing, we found that students consistently demonstrated shifts in empathetic awareness and individual agency all years but one, when the course size was larger. Several factors impacted the development of an empowered sense of self and moral agency, including: the use of narrative and storytelling in the curriculum, the inclusion of student-driven choice-based assignments, and group size. Experiential environmental learning focused on the development of empathy can provide a meaningful path for students to bridge moral agency, environmental attitudes and knowledge, and citizenship skills and behavior so they can connect their values with action These results have consequential impacts for sustainability learning and action.

Keywords: Field philosophy, Environmental ethics, Ethic of care, Community, Moral development, Affective learning

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Introduction

From 2008-2012 we taught an interdisciplinary experiential environmental philosophy—field philosophy—course in Isle Royale National Park to explore if and how wilderness experience coupled with care-based (Goralnik et al. 2012, Goralnik & Nelson 2014, Noddings 2002), community-focused (Leopold 1949, Goralnik & Nelson 2011) environmental ethics curriculum could help students develop empathy for other beings and the natural world, or widen their moral community. Students consistently demonstrated a metaphysical shift from a dualistic to a complex worldview, which included shifts in empathetic awareness, as well as shifts in individual agency. This pre-ethical growth—a worldview change that creates the conditions under which ethical change might be possible—can provide the groundwork for a more inclusive environmental ethics (Goralnik & Nelson 2014, Goralnik & Nelson 2015), which attributes intrinsic value to a wider collection of beings and systems. Coupled with the development of individual voice and an empowered awareness (i.e. agency), inclusive environmental ethics, e.g. non-anthropocentrism, likely play an important role in pro-environmental behavior (Chawla 2009) and a more sustainable future (Goralnik, Vucetich & Nelson 2014). Our results show consequential impacts for sustainability learning and action.

Pre-course reading responses to coursepack articles consistently demonstrated that many students held a dualistic—or what appeared to be romanticized—conception about natural resource issues, environmental responsibility, and problem-solving. This pre-course writing also displayed a lack of initiative to act in the world. Students suggested that decisions happened around them instead of feeling like they were participants in decision-making processes. They blamed institutions for environmental problems and refused to take responsibility for their own learning. Though students recognized what they considered to be right behavior in others' actions, they did not claim responsibility for environmental change, even as they expressed strong environmental values.

By the end of the course, though, most students inhabited a significantly more complex grey zone, which they demonstrated by empathizing with multiple points of view, appreciating the challenging process of problem-solving, and claiming responsibility for effecting change. Our analysis revealed a series of steps that facilitated this process of moving from dualism to complexity and from non-agency to agency, including: 1) self-awareness and personal development, 2) social learning and sense of community, and 3) emotional and cognitive curriculum engagement (Goralnik & Nelson 2014). Several factors impacted the development of student agency beyond vague expressions of hope or indignant reactions to bad action. We explore these factors and the teaching strategies that facilitated them here.

Field Philosophy

Field philosophy is fieldwork in the environmental humanities. It is a somewhat new phenomenon practiced by a few philosophers (Brady et al. 2004, Moore 2004) and on several humanistic field courses (Alagona & Simon 2010, Johnson & Frederickson 2000, "Outdoor Philosophy"). The terms experiential environmental philosophy and field philosophy are not used in this literature, though the University of North Texas's (UNT) Sub-Antarctic Biocultural Conservation Program does use the same language (Rozzi et al. 2012), as do several UNT philosophers (Briggle 2015, Frodeman 2010). Our use of the terms is specific to the model described in our research, which combines the intellectual content of environmental ethics with

physical experiences in the natural world to develop personal, emotional, critical, and concrete relationships with a specific place to help learners cultivate the skills necessary to create appropriate relationships with places more generally. Responding to ideas about community-development and emotion in environmental ethics (Brady et al. 2004, Leopold 1949, Moore 2004, Plumwood 1991) and driven by research both on values and attitudes in environmental education (Russell and Bell 1996, Smith-Sebasto 1995) and on affective learning and sense of place in experiential education (Elder 1998, Mortari 2004, Proudman 1992, Sobel 2004), field philosophy aims not just to educate about theoretical environmental ethics, but also to cultivate a sense of care for and responsibility to the natural world.

Because of our focus on the wilderness learning experience, our research is grounded in environmental, experiential, and place-based education scholarship. But our pedagogical and theoretical foundation in care and the moral commitment to act on behalf of one's values ties our course goals directly to sustainability education and action (Micheletti & Stolle 2012, Orr 2004). A consistent dialogue during the Isle Royale field philosophy courses pertained to how we might bring our wilderness values down from the mountain (Moore 2004), or how students might express their environmental values and ethical commitments to special places like wilderness in their everyday relationships with place, lifestyle choices, and engagement with their communities. We often framed this transference as sustainability wisdom and action.

Isle Royale Field Philosophy

Isle Royale Field Philosophy, a 4-credit upper-level course, included:

- a 3-hour pre-course orientation meeting
- a 30-article coursepack read pre-course
- a collection of nonfiction essays (Moore 2004) read pre-course
- short summary/response essays to each of the pre-course readings
- one-week base camping in a wilderness group campsite
- trail and dialogue experiences with Isle Royale Wolf-Moose Project ecologists
- interpreted hikes, management activities, and policy discussion with NPS rangers
- hiking, canoeing, cooking, exploring, and discussion
- individual, partner, and group exercises

Students wrote unguided daily reflections, taught one 10-25 minute class on an island-related subject, and presented a 5-minute literary and natural history mini-lesson along a group-interpreted trail. Two weeks after returning, students submitted a final project, a researched and often creative expression of what they learned from reading and through experience. Students also submitted a final reflection about their learning, which allowed us to compare pre- and post-course thinking. In 2011 and 2012, we added a blog assignment during the pre-course reading period to model thoughtful participation and provide feedback on student thinking. The blog allowed us to discern student growth pre-reading, post-reading/pre-course, and post-course.

Students ranged in age from 17 (with parental research consent) to 27; most were between 19- and 22-years-old. They were primarily fisheries and wildlife, zoology, and human biology majors. Other majors varied, from psychology to microbiology to English. No philosophy majors participated. Students applied for the course with short essays and interviews; the process was competitive. We prioritized upper-level students and students who had group experience or were curious about humanities learning. The course size shifted across the years.

Year	# Students	# Instructors	# Student TAs
2008	8	2	0
2009	11	2	0
2010	6	1	1 (undergraduate student)
2011	6	1	1 (undergraduate student)
2012	6	1	1 (graduate student)

Table 1. Course size shifts between 2008-20012

Most students did not have a strong environmental learning background or formal ethics training; all students had outdoor experience from camp, scouts, family, or school activities. The course filled requirements in both the fisheries and wildlife department and in the humanities core of Lyman Briggs College, a science-focused living/learning college within our university. While students shared an interest in field learning, their value systems, understanding of humanities scholarship, capacity for and engagement with personal growth, and learning styles were diverse. Backcountry travel in Isle Royale National Park is restricted to groups of eight; group camping is restricted to 10 people. We received special accommodation to camp as a large group in 2009.

Methodology

This project was approved by the Michigan State University Institutional Review Board (IRB # 08-185). Our data included pre-course reading responses (30 responses, ½-1 page single-spaced, per student), handwritten course journals (notes, assignments, and daily reflections), and 3-page (double-spaced) post-course learning reflections. In 2011 and 2012 students were also required to post (≥ paragraph) on a course blog: nine times pre-course (six reading-related and three instructor prompts pre-, mid-, and post-reading) and one time post-course (instructor prompt).

We used a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz 2006) framework for this research, which describes the primarily inductive analysis of a large quantity of data to generate "an abstract theoretical understanding" (Charmaz 2005, p. 4) about a phenomena about which no explanatory theory already exists. The process includes simultaneous data collection and analysis. The researcher continuously checks what is observed in the field against the analytical codes arising from the data until the empirical data leads to a data-grounded theory of the process described; in our case learning and moral development in the field philosophy experience. Our constructivist approach assumes that as field philosophy educators, participants, and researchers we influence and are influenced by our data collection and the phenomenon we are studying. Though our student numbers are small, our overall sample size of 25 participants is consistent with grounded theory methodology (Creswell 1998, Mason 2010). We recognize the limited generalizability of the research as characteristic of this kind of interpretive qualitative research (Martin & Leberman 2004).

Methods

Employing the constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss 1967, Lincoln and Guba 1985), we inductively coded eight students' work (2008 data, 32% of the entire data set) using NVivo software. We read the data numerous times and made notes about learning, ethics, relationships, nature, wilderness, and other inquiry-related themes, as well as observations about student language, process, and reflection. After iteratively condensing our notes we created analytical codes, then refined these codes into categories until they were saturated and distinct. This constant comparison within and across the data, then between data and emerging theory,

facilitates the movement from empirical observation to theoretical understanding and ensures that abstractions arising from the data stay true to the experience.

Our inductive analysis (Thomas 2006) enabled us to create a codebook, which we used to deductively analyze the entire data set. When new codes emerged, we adjusted the codebook, then used the refined codebook to identify emergent themes, relationships across categories, and trends within individual students, across students, and across years. We then diagrammed the relationships between the categories, which illuminated connections between our themes and provided insight into the process of student learning and moral development in the field philosophy experience (see Appendix A for the thematic code relationship diagram). This understanding led to our conclusions (Goralnik & Nelson 2014, Goralnik & Nelson 2015).

Consistent memo writing about confusing data, emergent themes, and anomalies in the analysis, plus field notes from the courses, helped document our process. During the analysis we co-coded data samples with each other and another colleague for intra-coder reliability. We also peer debriefed our emergent codes with a colleague, several graduate students, and a faculty mentor not involved in the project. We include samples of primary data in our analysis to represent the voices and tone of the participants (Wolcott 1994).

Empathy, Citizenship, and Sustainability

Empathy is an imaginative affective awareness of another's experience, which can provide entrance to moral judgments and agency (Hoffman 2000, de Waal 2009, Slote 2007). When we inhabit another's point of view we are better able to understand the *other's* needs and act wisely on their behalf. Scholars argue that good ecological research, and likely engaged environmental learning, depend on empathetic qualities, such as a sensitivity to natural patterns and processes, an ability to listen to the natural world, careful description, and highly developed skills of observation, all of which can be cultivated through natural history learning about place (Cooper 2000, Dayton & Sala 2011, Fleischner 2011). Empathy for the natural world can positively impact environmental attitudes and behaviors (Berenguer 2007, Chawla 2009, Schultz 2000 Walker 2003), which is critical for sustainability learning and scholarship (Orr 2004).

Also related to sustainability education is the important role empathy can play in the development of citizenship (Dewey 1938, Sobel 2004, Settoon & Mossholder 2002) and participatory virtues (Ferkany & Whyte 2012). Morrell (2007) writes:" Evidence indicates that higher predispositions to empathy will likely increase the healthy functioning of democratic society by encouraging citizens to show more concern for their fellow citizens, increasing citizens' tolerance of outgroups, and decreasing biases in judgments that increase misunderstandings among citizens" (p. 42). One critical element of an engaged citizenry is agency, or the capacity to move from beliefs into action, as "The 'good' citizen is often spoken of as the 'active' citizen whose activity takes place in the public realm" (Jenkins 2013, p.106). For sustainable and environmental citizenship, action is often driven by moral commitments to justice and nonhuman nature. This kind of moral agency requires wisdom about issues, the natural world, and community membership, as well as the skills and commitment to act. Experiential environmental learning focused on the development of empathy can provide a meaningful path for students to bridge moral agency, environmental attitudes and knowledge, and citizenship skills and behavior so they can connect their values with action (Micheletti & Stolle 2012).

Lack of Agency

Student pre-course writing demonstrated a lack of agency to affect environmental problem-solving, impact policy, or engage in meaningful conversations with texts or authority. This lack of agency then affected students' sense of responsibility to act purposefully toward these ends. Two forms of this lack of agency or disempowerment emerged in the data: 1) a general unwillingness to act when things were challenging, so that students would continue to allow circumstances they found disappointing, and 2) a feeling that one's actions would not result in intended consequences, which suggested an inclination toward consequentialist ethics, where the worthwhileness of an act depends on the consequences alone. This approach (versus intentions-focused ethics, like virtue ethics) can be disempowering, because it allows one to think that acting good might not be worth the effort if one's actions do not initiate grand change (e.g., the belief that one should not become vegetarian if one's behavior does not directly impact the meat industry). Though students did not feel the need to enact their values with action, they did expect others—institutions, authorities—to act in ways they considered good and right. Thus the students understood there was right action in the world and that it mattered. But they felt their voices were not heard, their actions not counted, and their choices not important in the larger context of environmental decision-making. This disempowered stance precluded agency.

The most consistent expression of this lack of agency in student pre-course writing occurred in response to course readings. Jason wrote: "Honestly that story really didn't give much to me…[I]t is hard to see the relevance of stories such as this in today's developed world….Perhaps I'm being totally ignorant, it wouldn't surprise me considering the society that I am a part of." Rather than take responsibility to develop meaning from the text, Jason expected meaning to be handed to him. He also blamed his lack of critical analysis skills on society, rather than understand them as a personal limitation, an example of a lack of agency to take responsibility for one's actions.

Students reacted to institutions and authority in a similarly disempowered way. Julie wrote, "It is the unfortunate part of the great American Contradiction that we can get this glimpse of that wilderness in very few places for ourselves. It has been taken away from us; those experiences have been revoked from citizens by our own government in an attempt to make them more available." She suggested that power holders—e.g. government—were taking things away from powerless citizens, who were not part of the policy process. Julie seemed to understand the paradox of wilderness, in that rooting a landscape's value in its pristine-ness makes physically appreciating the landscape without damaging this value impossible. But she blamed the government for this paradox and for denying her experiences she felt she deserved.

At the same time, students revered power-holders, or at least dared not question their authority. In his pre-course journal, Colin wrote: "Many problems are said to be caused by the over-population of earth. There is no punishment for over breeding. In fact, the UN has declared that family size is human right. What rational person is going to argue against the UN's definition of human rights?" Power-holders have answers, he suggested, and one would be crazy to interrogate their thinking. Samantha responded similarly to a pre-course reading: "The parts of his argument I disagree with…I can consider to be simply different interpretations—and who am I to judge whether [the author] is right or wrong?" The student refused to offer an evidence-based opinion of the text. Rather than defer to institutional power, this student instead deferred to relativism, the idea that all ideas are equally valid, which is another expression of disempowerment. This perceived lack of agency disallowed students from creating their own educated opinions about texts and ideas, which is problematic when they are expected to critique

sound argumentation or participate in a democracy as an informed citizen. Of course, students may instead fail to engage arguments because they are intellectually lazy. But this, too, is another form of disempowerment. If students do not care enough to act as responsible learners, they fail to be agents in their own development.

These expressions of powerlessness are occasionally coupled with platitudes of unspecific agency that ultimately have the same impact as inaction. For example, Jake writes: "I can only hope we wise up and stop abusing the wilderness….Nonetheless we should hold dear the few pristine areas left for us to enjoy." The actions of "wising up" and "holding dear" lack momentum; they are near empty hopes for a vague set of actors, identified only as "we." While the sentiment is fine, generally agreeing with the author and identifying the student as sympathetic to wilderness issues, such statements lack substantive agency.

One exception to this general trend of a lack of agency in the pre-course writing was an advanced Ph.D. candidate who took the course in 2008. His responses to texts and authority were driven by a strong personal voice and firm opinions on issues. Still, his post-course work revealed an openness to grey areas that was not apparent in his pre-course writing. In his final reflection he wrote: "My response to a question has always been to find the answer as quick as possible. Now I will take a moment, or a lifetime, to explore the question before responding." This thoughtful shift demonstrates a wiser, more empathetic approach to agency, willing to inhabit the vulnerable space of not knowing, though not paralyzed by complexity. Action driven by such an approach, as opposed to his previous habit of speed and decisiveness, is indicative of a more mature form of agency.

Field Philosophy and Agency

Field philosophy, in its focus on emotional engagement (Skinner et al. 2009, Wentzel 1997) and affective learning variables (Algona & Simon 2010, Johnson & Frederickson 2000, Proudman 1992), which through environmental education research (Hungerford 1996, Smith-Sebasto 1995) are connected to the locus of control (the feeling that one's actions can be effective) and empowerment (the motivation to act on behalf of things one cares about), can help students overcome this lack of agency. But students do not overcome a displayed lack of agency just because they have contact with the wilderness, learn about the environment, or study environmental philosophy in the woods (Marcinkowski 1998, Russell 1999). The process of learning, ethical awareness, and agency occurs differently for each student (and sometimes not at all). But our analysis revealed several strategies that facilitated this development of agency on our field philosophy courses, including storytelling, emotional engagement, and group size.

Stories and Voice

On our courses we invite multiple voices into our understanding of place, including diverse disciplines (ecology, philosophy, Traditional Ecological Knowledge, literature, natural history) and knowledge holders (rangers, scientists, instructors, island visitors, and the students), to create a textured story. Warren (1990) explains that, "narrative gives voice to a felt sensitivity….to conceiving of oneself as fundamentally 'in relationship with' others, including the nonhuman environment" (p. 135). On the island we make observations and create sound maps; we use imagination and science. We tell personal stories in dialogue to stimulate meaning-making and an awareness of one's relationship with place; in journals to explore self-identity and curiosities; and as rhetorical responses to the reading to make connections between one's own experiences in the natural world and literature about the natural world. Robert Summerby-Murray (2010), who

writes about the first time he used a nonfiction writing assignment with undergraduate geography students, found that many students "had an aversion to using the first person in any of their formal writing" (p. 237) and that their writing exercise "provide[d] the first academic opportunity for many of these…students to reflect on their own lived situations and to make the connections to an appropriate scholarly literature" (p. 239). The inclusion of storytelling in curriculum encourages students to both develop and reclaim voice (Warren 1990), which can address the lack of agency we saw in pre-course writing. To cultivate and trust their voices is to gain the ability to critically converse with texts and knowledge-holders. The use of narrative in the curriculum can also spark an empathetic awareness of both human and nonhuman others (Anthony 2009, Oliver et al. 2012), an element of inclusive environmental ethics. This, too, is tied to agency, as Bertling (2012) writes: "Imagination has the capability to move ecological awareness into action" (p. 14). These are all steps toward transference and an empowered sense of responsibility.

Emotional Engagement and Affective Learning

An emotional relationship with the curriculum, in addition to a cognitive engagement, can help students cultivate agency by igniting care for self, community, place, and ideas (Alagona & Simon 2010, Bertling 2012, Goralnik et al. 2014). This kind of relationship might take the form of inspiration, awe, or wonder, especially on field courses (Agate, 2010, Dayton & Sala 2011). It can also arise through relationships in the learning community (Bertling 2012, Sibthorp & Jostad 2014), because affective learning objectives are often tied to community development.

Affective learning is integral to the field learning experience (Elder 1998, Mortari 2004, NRC 2009, Proudman 1992) because it: "[enlists] experience and emotion as allies in the process of understanding . . . that extends to the students' lives and actions" (Johnson & Frederickson 2000, p. 45). Place-based approaches to experiential environmental learning (Gruenwald 2003, Orr 1992, Sobel 2004) emphasize the nested environmental, political, and social dimensions of place, which re-connects students to place as a personal and specific entity central to the learning process, identity, and relationship formation. This attention can provide an emotional connection to a specific place that students can then extend to other, more distant places (Plumwood 1991). If students are personally engaged with and emotionally invested in their learning experience, they are more likely to transfer course learning to their home environments (Chawla 2009, Holman & McAvoy 2004), because it is an expression of their values and identity. This extension of feelings—and learning—to other places is an expression of agency.

In environmental education scholarship, affective learning and agency are often linked to the ownership and empowerment variables from the widely-used Responsible Environmental Behavior (REB) approach to environmental learning (Hungerford 1996, Smith-Sebasto 1995). This scholarship emphasizes the knowledge gained, attitudes shifted, and behaviors changed as a result of environmental learning (Hsu 2004, Marcinkowski 1998). Hungerford (1996) explains: "[I]f we want to get students to accept responsibility for the environment and be willing to work on issues at the community level on their own, they must: (1) psychologically own the issues that they are working on in class and (2) feel empowered to do something about those issues in a citizenship capacity" (p. 29).

Ownership variables, according to Hungerford (1996), rely on students feeling that what they are learning is personally important, which requires they possess a deep understanding of the ecological and human implications of environmental issues. Empowerment variables allow students to feel they can contribute to problem-solving, which requires them to feel like they

have the right skills, will experience success or be reinforced for their actions (internal locus of control), have opportunities to apply their skills, and possess an intention to act (pp. 29-31).

To foster these kinds of emotional relationships with content and place on field philosophy courses we created opportunities for students to connect to the landscape at multiple scales. We viewed the land from up close, with our noses to the ground, and from afar, through binoculars, with historical photos, and while moving through the landscape. We delayed class to watch a moose on the edge of the lake, then imagined the winter lives of island moose during a researcher's presentation on moose preferences and lifecycles. All course reading was assigned and completed (hopefully) before the field experience, so students spent on-island time in place, not in a book. Every day we required 20 minutes of alone time for reflection and stillness.

We also created opportunities for students to explore whatever sparked their curiosity, thereby enabling personal investment in the learning process and products (Falk 2005, Hungerford 1996, Sibthorp et al. 2008). All students taught a class worth 10% of their grade:

> While on the island you will be expected to teach a 10-minute class on a subject that relates to our course and is interesting to you. …[It] must be sparked by a question you have about wilderness, Isle Royale, or something specific you and/or the group has (or could) experience(d) while on the island. The key to this assignment is its root in curiosity, grounding in your academic interests, and appeal to your audience—the class.

Students often began their research by reading course resources, though soon they would head into the field to collect data, make observations, interview rangers or researchers, or take photos. These activities were driven by curiosity and an eagerness to engage their peers. Many classes took 20-30 minutes, rather than the required 10, because students were deeply involved with their topics. In addition, the student-driven final project was worth 20% of the course grade:

> We encourage you to find the voice that best expresses your experience and learning and that tells a meaningful story about the concepts as you experienced them. We will provide a general rubric, but this final project should reflect your learning from the literature and group discussions as understood through your own experience.

Students used course time to collect data if they anticipated they would need interviews, photos, or particular observations. But most of the work was completed at home, where students had access to computers and art supplies. The subject matter was one form of personal investment students made. The choice of medium—we have received paintings, drawings, original music, collages, board games, poetry, interpretive pamphlets, stories and essays, posters, children's books, and research papers—was another. We encouraged students submitting creative projects to include a letter explaining the course concepts referenced in their work, in case the medium did not effectively capture their intentions. Though some students struggled at home with time management, most of these projects were personally meaningful representations of course learning. Some students even revised their work after grades were finalized because they cared about its quality or wanted to share it with family. Adding choice elements (Falk 2005, Sibthorp et al. 2008) to the learning experience facilitated student emotional engagement in the activity and required students to cultivate curiosity. This investment and self-awareness can impact agency, because when students care about something, they are more willing to act on its behalf.

Group Size

Group size contributed to student agency on our field philosophy courses, which the literature supports (Sibthorp & Jostad 2014, Walsh & Golin 1976). If understanding the concept of community in certain authentic ways relies on the ability to experience meaningful community,

where challenge, growth, interdependence, and the conflict between individual and group desires can emerge, then learning experiences that interrogate and seek to create community need to provide an environment where community can arise. There is likely a carrying capacity under which these conditions apply, and over which they cannot exist. Walsh & Golin (1976) explain that an effective group " is large enough to have diversified behavior types, yet…small enough that cliques … are not likely to form…, is large enough to have conflict, yet…small enough to manageably resolve it…[In an effective group, T]here exists a collective consciousness or bond along with the individual consciousness of the participating peers" (p. 5). Central to the formation of an effective group is fostering a sense of community, which Bishop et al. (1997, p. 195) describe as, "an experience, generated within the interplay of individual and group, which engenders the perception of belonging, and ameliorates feelings of isolation." This feeling is integral to affective learning objectives in experiential education (Sibthorp & Jostad 2014, Sibthorp 2003). Group size, among other factors (i.e. activities, instructor support, individual growth, setting), can impact the quality of group interactions and therefore each member's individual and collective learning. Individual agency relies on self-awareness and growth. If individual development is stymied by an ineffective community environment, agency is not likely possible.

While student learning and relational growth on our courses were fairly consistent across all five years, several students from 2009—when the course size was 11 students, rather than 8 (2008) or 6 (2010, 2011, 2012)—never progressed to a more complex understanding of community, ecology, or responsibility. These students held onto on romantic ideas about the natural world and relationships, even in their final reflections:

> From the mosquitoes who gave me the motivation to hike … to the sound of wolves howling wildly in the distance and moose caring for their young right before my eyes. Nature and wilderness are an intracle [sic] part of being human because we were created by nature and we now must move on to educate everyone we possibly can so they will be as passionate about the wild as we are. So we can live in harmony with the other organisms that inhabit this beautiful planet.

These students created false narratives about positive group relationships while remaining unreflective about the course's interpersonal dynamic, which could be petty and exclusive. They glorified wild nature, but they camped terribly, ignoring food scraps and keeping other campers up late with their noise. They recommended toothless solutions to environmental challenges, e.g. "live in harmony with the other organisms," rather than envision worthwhile action.

While a few students on that same course did experience dramatic shifts toward empathy and agency, the limited growth of several students in 2009 might be related to the challenge of creating community with a large group in the field (Paisley et al. 2008, Sibthorp & Jostad 2014, Walsh & Golin 1976). Our 13-person group (including instructors) could not hike together due to park regulations for group travel, so we hiked in two small groups, then regrouped for class in the impacted areas near the ranger station, the dock, or the lawn outside the store. These settings perhaps prevented students from forming particular kinds of relationships with the natural world. We operated two separate kitchens at opposite ends of a picnic table, where 2-person cook teams had separate chores and prepared separate group meals for two independent cook groups. We split tents across two group sites. While this was the same physical set-up we had with the 8-student group in 2008, the smaller numbers that year enabled us to sit together at a single table and required greater responsibility for group chores. As well, because we could spread out more

in the same space, individuals could take responsibility for their own things and impact, while our collective impact on the landscape was less dramatic.

The constant exposure to other people in the large 2009 group made it harder for students to find time for self-reflection. Accommodating the student classes in our schedule required three (of seven) very full evenings with 11 students, compared to two comfortably-full evenings with six students in 2010-2012. This difference afforded the smaller groups more unstructured time. Camp chores in the large group were divided up across more bodies, so fewer students were engaged with getting water, cooking meals, and tending to camp at any given time. This freed students from some responsibility, which they needed to re-charge. But a large group also meant there were more free students with whom to spend this unscheduled time. It was hard for students to turn down hammock-swinging with friends when they were required to take personal reflection time instead. This created a divide between those involved with cooking and those who were 'free,' which was heightened by the social nature of those not on-duty, thereby excluding those responsible for chores. Alternatively, in the smaller groups the center of camp activity was often the kitchen. Those not assigned to cook would offer to cut vegetables, coach new chefs, or go exploring alone. This made cooking a creative opportunity, rather than a chore, and enabled more productive free time for those not on-duty.

The large group created opportunities for cliques to form and for students to shirk serious engagement with all group members, including in discussion, which is an important arena for the development of personal growth, empathy, and democratic skills (Jenkins 2012). This dynamic precluded the development of a cohesive learning community, which in turn prevented the inclusion of the natural world in this community, an important step toward inclusive moral awareness. Since agency and moral development were nested outcomes, and since individual growth is often woven with group development (Sibthorp & Jostad 2014, Walsh & Golin 1976), the group dynamic also likely impacted the development of student agency.

Agency

So what did agency in the field philosophy experience look like? While every student's process is unique, our analysis indicated that agency often shifted in steps, which a series of reflections can demonstrate. Jess's transformation was particularly dramatic and observable, and thus serves as a good example of the kinds of shifts the majority of our students demonstrated during their field philosophy experience. On the first day of the field course, Jess wrote:

> What is my effect on the land? On East Lansing? Is there anything substantial I can do in my current situation? It's easy to think about the way we live on this remote island, but it isn't very comparable to how I live in East Lansing. I can't allow myself to take a defeatist attitude. People have to realize that sustainability is possible in the wilderness, farm-rural areas and even in urban areas.

Jess was reflecting about the challenges of transference and was open to interrogating her own impact, but her statements at the start of the course were quite general. Two days later her thinking was already growing more specific and reflective:

> I have often felt overwhelmed about my life and my connection to the environment. It's so easy to become apathetic about action… I have often thought "What can I do on my own?" Why do my actions matter? The burden seems too great. But today it was encouraging to hear [the instructor] say that once you have defined and solidified your personal ethics, no one can shake you. ….I need to build the confidence…to help usher in a new and… better relationship with the environment. The first step will be to define

> myself and my ethical identity….I also recognize that there are things in my life that I need to change. I can act now and practice what I preach in order to reduce my impact.

This reflection demonstrates how overwhelming the process of developing agency can feel. It also captures Jess's burgeoning resolve to look inward and make some personal changes, an important step in moving toward empowerment and an empathetic moral awareness (Hungerford 1996, Walsh & Golin 1976). The following day Jess wrote:

> It's…frustrating when I see dominating personalities directing the group. I have a hard time discussing when I feel like [sic] what I say might be contradictory or I [sic] feel I'm going to be ignored. However, I have been forcing myself to speak up and…have been surprised by my own confidence. These group talks have helped me to recognize my ability to formulate a solid conceptual understanding. I in no way want to criticize anyone…. I'm merely recognizing the interaction of my personality with others. I am beginning to realize my own strengths by playing off the strengths of others. Being here has taught me more about group interactions and has bettered my communication skills.

Jess was not only gaining voice, she was claiming ownership of her growth. She did not assert her empowered self in competition with others; rather her personal growth enabled better community awareness. On the last day, Jess wrote:

> When we strip the land, bulldoze the forests, and poison the water, we are doing these things to ourselves..…I can no longer consider my actions trivial.…[H]owever slow and difficult, I have found the desire to think and act in ways that benefit my biotic community….Staring down at our imminent fate, I am strangely alive, …. Am I insane? It isn't normal to be thrilled by impending difficulties and hardships, but… [o]ur situation demands action….I have crawled through the dangerous…attitude of apathy and dragged my guilty conscience behind the whole way. As of yet I have not found that divine clarity, but at least now I have a purpose and strong sense of what I know to be right. I feel the power of knowledge. So, the question I must now ask: What next?

The action orientation Jess displayed here highlights the shift she experienced between her first and final reflections. This was not the unsure observer trying to figure out how course discussions applied to her, or the thoughtful group member developing voice without stirring the pot. Rather Jess was committed to action, despite imminent challenges. Her journey was not finished by any means, but her intention was clear. She demonstrated both a locus of control and an empowered sense of self, as well as the moral commitment to act in accordance with her values. While we did not observe pre-course patterns that predicted particular paths of student growth toward agency, this kind of shift that Jess experienced, in which students exhibited personal voice, clarity of purpose, empathetic awareness, a recognition of complexity, and a commitment to value-driven action, was fairly consistent across the students, aside from the students in 2009 who did not exhibit this growth. Differences in student development of both empathy and agency were differences of scale, not differences of kind.

Conclusion

To participate meaningfully in environmental and sustainability problem-solving, students need more than just knowledge about environmental ideas and issues. They need to develop relationships with place, claim their own voices in dialogue with other thinkers, and be empowered to care about and invest in issues. They need, as Leopold (1949) argues, a change in values. In the *A Sand County Almanac* Leopold explains that fostering a land ethic requires not just more conservation education, but a *different* education, a moral education in conjunction

with experiences in the natural world. According to Leopold, "We can only be ethical in relation to something we can see, feel, understand, love, or otherwise have faith in" (p. 214). Therefore students need to see, feel, and love the natural world, the context for their learning about sustainability and place. This personal relationship with course content can lead students to interrogate responsibility and values, develop empathy for nonhuman nature, and, hopefully, gain new skills and make new commitments.

As Moore and Nelson (2010) explain, "No amount of factual information will tell us what we ought to do. For that we need moral convictions—ideas about what it is to act rightly in the world, what it is to be good or just, and the determination to do what is right. Facts and moral convictions together can help us understand what we ought to do" (xvii). And with these facts and moral conviction—with social and ecological knowledge, a rich understanding of place, and empathy for nonhuman nature—students need citizenship skills and agency, an intention and the ability to act. Field philosophy, with its shared emphasis on affective and cognitive learning variables, can do this work.

Through the use of narrative and first-person storytelling, field philosophy encourages students to take ownership of their experiences and develop an empowered sense of self. Creating opportunities for awe and wonder, reflection and stillness, field philosophy provides the space for feeling, as well as doing, and honors emotional reactions to place as important indicators of value. With student-driven activities designed around choice, field philosophy guides students to become curious and responsible for their own learning. These small steps in empowerment, coupled with opportunities for skill development, deep interdisciplinary content, and a focus on community development, can lead students to become moral agents, capable of taking a stand on issues they care about, making wise lifestyle choices, and participating in environmental and sustainability problem-solving.

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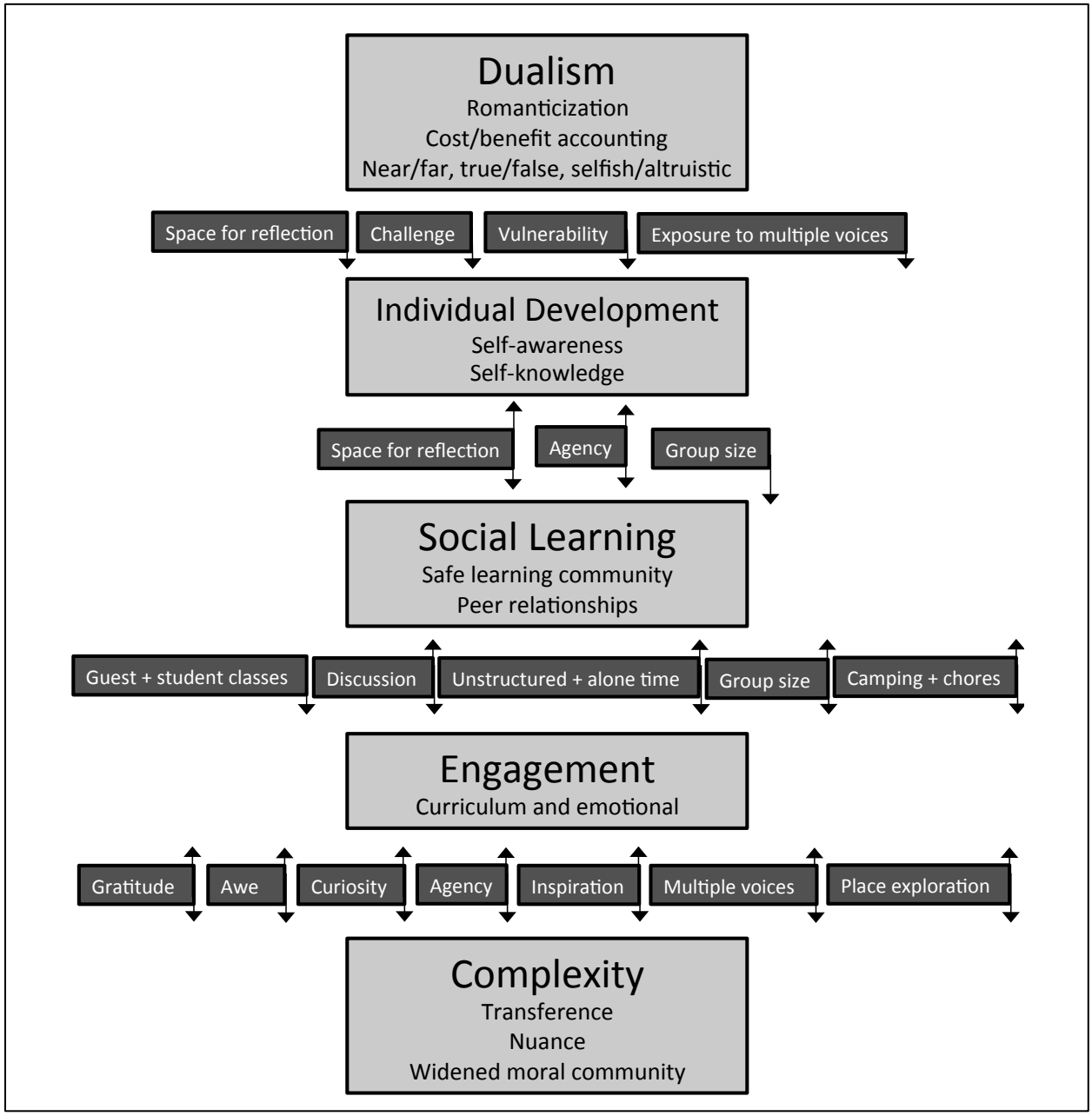
Appendix A: Thematic Codes and Code Relationship Diagram



*Large light grey boxes = Stages of student development as they emerged during the field philosophy experience (i.e. Dualism, Individual Development, Social Learning, Engagement, Complexity). Included below each developmental stage are the major analytical codes that emerged from the data, grouped to describe their collective influence on each stage of student growth.

**Small dark grey boxes = Sub-categories of the analytical codes that describe course elements that impacted the development of each stage of student growth

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Icon image for the article: Group shot at the Isle Royale Windigo sign 2010