

Postparadigmatic materialisms: A “new movement of thought” for outdoor environmental education research?

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Abstract

Since at least the beginning of this century, the literatures of research methodology in the social sciences have increasingly focused on what are now being called “new empiricisms” and “new materialisms.” My purpose in this essay is to appraise the potential of these approaches for outdoor environmental education research. I begin by reviewing some of the ways in which outdoor and environmental education research has been conceptualised in the recent past, with particular reference to the practice of representing research in terms of paradigmatic distinctions. I argue that poststructuralist theorising, with which the new empiricisms and new materialisms have strong continuities, has never been accommodated by Kuhnian paradigmatic categories, and that these new movements are more usefully understood as arising from “postparadigmatic” thinking. I then provide a brief (and far from comprehensive) overview of some key characteristics of new materialist research approaches with particular reference to the utility of deploying Barad’s concept of “intra-action” and Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of “assemblage” in conceptualising research methodology and methods, and offer a selection of examples of how such approaches might inform outdoor and environmental education research, with particular reference to challenging anthropocentrism in these fields.

Keywords: new empiricism, new materialism, ontology, empiricism, materialism, Karen Barad,, machinic assemblage, Deleuze and Guattari

Introduction

My motivation for writing this essay arises, in large part, from my interest in pursuing a very similar question to one that Phillip Payne (2016) poses in the title of his capstone article for a recent special issue of the *Journal of Environmental Education*, namely, “What next? Post-critical materialisms in environmental education.”¹ I was both pleased and intrigued to note that Payne’s response to the “what next?” question converges in many respects with recent advocacy for modes of thinking described in terms of “new empiricisms” and “new materialisms” (see, for example, St. Pierre, Jackson, & Mazzei, 2016) that have also captured my interest. Payne writes:

This new *movement of thought* concerns itself with ontology, and the status of the real and, subsequently, the epistemologies flowing from a “new” material vitalism about the way the world *is*, and how we are *in* it. In its various guises, this movement may well reveal the historical complicity of “old” Western Cartesian inert “thought” about what it thought truly and rationally *mattered*, its presumptions, logics, and methods of reason (for example, Barad, 2007; Coole & Frost, 2010; Connolly, 2013; Latour, 2013; Shaviro, 2014). (Payne, 2016, p. 169; italics and quotation marks in original)

I share Payne’s interest in “what next?” for environmental education, and more specifically for *outdoor* environmental education research, but I do not

want to constrain my speculations by representing them in terms of familiar paradigmatic categories (such as critical or post-critical). To appraise possibilities for “what next?” requires consideration of past and present movements of thought, so in this essay I will briefly review some of the ways that outdoor environmental education researchers have thought about their practice, and the cultural materials on which they have drawn in so doing, before considering the possibilities for deploying new empiricist and materialist perspectives in this field.

I regret that Payne does not disaggregate the five sources he cites as examples of the “various guises” taken by the “new movement of thought” to which he refers. This “sandbag” approach to citing sources (in which multiple sources are packed into parentheses at the end of a sentence) is commonplace in academic writing, but is not particularly informative because it invites readers to interpret what might be disparate sources as having a degree of homogeneity. Of the five sources cited, only William Connolly’s (2013) work is further elaborated in Payne’s (2016, p. 170) assertion that the collective thought of the contributors to the special issue “about ‘what next?’ converges loosely on the need for new intellectual resources, vocabularies and grammars”:

William Connolly (2013) captures the broader mood well in his “ecology of late capitalism,” where the processes of “planetary politics” and, in particular “role experimentations” in “democratic