Disentangle or Disconnect? The Role of Geospatial Technology in Outdoor Experiential Learning

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Yi Fu Tuan describes Topophilia as a love and attachment to places, and the human desire to find place (Tuan 1974). He goes on to note that “what begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value” (Tuan 1977, p.6). Through experience, we engage in place-making. The concept of topophilia and the process of place-making has been particularly important for educators of experiential outdoor learning (Cumming 2015; Juliasz 2018). However, during the COVID-19 Pandemic, place-based learning in the outdoors has dramatically changed, and in cases stopped all together (Leonard 2021). Many forms of experiential learning shifted online and relied on the development and use of geospatial digital tools to foster connections to the outdoors (Haeften 2020, Valliere 2022, Quay 2020). During this time of pandemic-induced social isolation, technology hyper-permeated every aspect of our lives, reinforcing what Adams and Jansson describe as digital entanglements, or the constant relationship between humans and the digital milieu (Adams 2022). However, this contemporary reality works in opposition to increasing calls that society needs to disentangle from the pervasive presence of technology in all aspects of our lives and relationships, including mediating our relationship with the places that we live and interact with others (Adams 2022). These entanglements are particularly prominent with youth. We propose a research project that critically examines the role that digital geospatial tools play in youth geographies and place-making in the outdoors, using participatory mapping techniques. We ask the question, to what extent should we disentangle, rather than disconnect from these tools to create a sense of place? How do we employ greater intentionality in the use of digital geospatial tools within place-based youth education? This research will provide new insight on our relationship with geospatial technology and its role in outdoor education.

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