

Re-visioning School Camps

Case Study: Matamata College

Like many secondary schools in Aotearoa New Zealand, Matamata College students embark on annual camps at the junior level.

In year 10, students can express their interest in six different EOTC opportunities which take place during camp week. There are a range of opportunities available that cater for student interests. One of the camps is themed around the outdoors and traditionally took place at a residential centre which cost students around \$600.00 for the week.

What we planned

The high cost of this camp was a deterrent for many students, and we became concerned about how equitable this opportunity was for our students. At Matamata College, we want all students to have the opportunity to learn in, and experience the outdoors, and we didn't want cost to be a barrier to this. In re-thinking what was offered, we came to the realisation that we could facilitate our own outdoors-based camp if we lowered the technical level of outdoor activities that the original camp offered. We decided to use one external provider for sea kayaking as we didn't have the qualifications or resources to facilitate it ourselves.

Wattchow & Brown (2011) propose four signposts for place responsive pedagogy, which we used as a guide for our planning considerations. The signposts are:

1. *Being present in and with place*
2. *The power of place-based stories and narratives*
3. *Apprenticing ourselves to outdoor places*
4. *The representation of place experiences*

We planned a camp that was based in the Coromandel area as it was closer to school than our previous residential based camp. As we had to travel less distance, and didn't need highly specialised equipment (as we could facilitate most of the outdoor experiences ourselves), the cost of our camp went from \$600.00 to \$220.00 for the week, which made it much more affordable for our students.

Prior to the camp, students met during two assembly blocks where they participated in some team building activities and got to know one another. Students were put into three groups; each group was assigned to a place that we would visit while on camp; Cathedral Cove, Hot Water Beach and Hahei.

On the Monday of camp week, students spent the day in school planning for the week ahead. Each group was tasked complete a set of research questions about their assigned place and then come up with an activity that we could do when we visited.

The questions and tasks in the group workbook were;

Activity 1: Become the experts

- What is the meaning behind the place name?
- What is the Māori name for that place and what does it mean?
- What is here in this place?
- What will this place permit us to do?
- How is this place connected with our home places?
- What is an interesting story/myth/legend of this place?
- What can we learn here?

You could research;

- What Important events in history have happened around here?
- What are interesting geographical features about this place?
- Who used to be here? Who visits this place now?
- What is unique about this place?
- How have people shaped or impacted upon this place?
- What can we do in the future to help this place?

Activity 2: Sharing your knowledge

When we visit the place your group is assigned to, how will you teach everyone about what your group has learnt? (Everyone in your group needs to play a part)

Activity 3: Activity in your place

Your group challenge is to plan an activity that everyone can participate in when we visit that place. Things to consider;

- How will you make the activity fun?
- How will everyone be involved?
- How will your activity be unique in that place?
- Who will run your activity?
- How long will it go for?



The Result

Students engaged in the camp planning process and every group delivered a presentation about their respective 'place'. The groups also did well in taking the lead to facilitate activities. For example, the Hot Water Beach group shared some of the geography of the area and explained why hot water seeps out of the sand. Students then dug pools together to bathe in and then finished off with a sandcastle building competition.

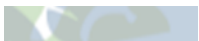
The first year we ran this camp we were keen to seek feedback from students about their experience and how they felt being a part of the planning process as well as being co-facilitators of the camp itself. We were pleased with the overall feedback, with almost all 30 students reporting that they enjoyed their experience.

By shifting the focus away from personal and social development to a focus on place, we hoped that students developed a personal connection with the places they spent time in. The quotes below are three student responses to the question 'What were your highlights of camp?'

- *I really enjoyed all the beaches, especially my first swim of the summer at Hahei on the first day and Cathedral Cove despite the walk. I enjoyed all the downtime and made friends with people I didn't think I would from school.*
- *Kayak, and I loved going to the beaches and spending time with friends. I also loved playing games and doing activities*
- *The thing I enjoyed the most was getting to know the other people on camp and creating a real bond between each other. I love going to all the beaches I have never been to before.*

Safety considerations

Given that students were active participants in the learning processes on camp and were responsible for facilitating outdoor experiences, our role as teachers changed considerably. Our role was to guide students through the planning and facilitation process and to always be there to support students who were leading learning. This point is important, because we didn't want to set students up to fail. We were constantly coaching students, which gave them assurance that we were the experienced adults that were ultimately responsible for their safety. Because students were actively involved in the safety management process, they would often discuss safety considerations without teacher prompting.



Reflections

After our first time running this camp, we were pleased to have offered an experience at around one third of the cost that was also perceived by students as a challenging outdoor based camp. For many students, the concept of being place responsive was new to them so we felt that we possibly didn't cover as many of the signposts to place responsive pedagogy as we would have liked. However, this challenge effectively formed an ongoing inquiry into the future shape and form of this camp.

The four teachers involved in this camp have also reflected on the experience are excited about making new changes to the camp in the future. Given that we know our students the best, we can be responsive to the group and make changes based upon their prior experiences and interests.

References: Wattchow, B., & Brown, M. (2011). *A pedagogy of place: Outdoor education for a changing world*. Monash University Publishing.

