

# The potential of orienteering for arts-based research as a means to rethink transformative learning for sustainability

*Henrika Ylirisku*, doctoral candidate  
Aalto University, Finland

## Abstract

In my ongoing dissertation research, I study art pedagogies for change in the context of education and learning for socio-ecological sustainability with a combination of methodological strategies. Gaps and paradoxes in the theoretical and practice-based qualitative explorations have guided my interest on the embodied, complex and contradictory aspects of epistemic, transformative learning. I am using myself as an instrument to form an experiential research perspective in studying personal paradigm change and have developed an arts-based and orienteering-related research method for this purpose. I aim towards a more sensible and detailed understanding of the resisting, even paradoxical tensions in the human experience and transformative learning processes. The method is related with artistic mapping strategies and shares similar features with the walking and conceptual art approaches seeking to break the habitual ways of being and moving. Furthermore, practicing the method has directed my orientation to investigating the relationships between the human and non-human world.

**Keywords:** transformative learning, arts-based research, orienteering, experience

## Bio

**Henrika Ylirisku** is a doctoral student in the Department of Art at Aalto University, in Helsinki, Finland. In her ongoing doctoral research, she is exploring art pedagogies for change in the context of learning for socio-ecological sustainability. Her background is a combination of visual art education (MA), geography and martial arts. Her research interests include eco-critical and posthumanistic philosophies, transformative art pedagogies, embodiment in learning and arts-based research methods.



Orienteering as a sport offers a protocol<sup>1</sup> that gives me a certain mode and motivation to go running to forests. Practicing orienteering as a protocol makes visible the established and habitual ways of perceiving and moving in the environment. It is also an artistic technique to explore and engage in new experiences; to make them real through practice (Järvensivu, 2012). I have chosen to repeat the practice persistently over several years and to examine it with a phenomenological orientation, keeping my focus on the embodied experience (Varto, 2008). Looking back, it seems that I started developing this arts-based research method through my orienteering practice, first intuitively and improved it later intentionally while my research process advanced.

The orienteering method consists of practicing orienteering<sup>2</sup> systematically, writing reflective journals and taking photographs. Through critical analysis, reflection and narration, I strive for understanding and making visible the singular, artistically oriented orienteering experiences. Additionally, I juxtapose the emerging meanings and concepts gained through the research method with various eco-critical and posthumanistic philosophies by Vadén

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1 "In contemporary art, a protocol is a set of rules that an artist establishes to realize an artwork.... Some prefer the terms scenario, script, or score, borrowed from the performing arts" (O'Rourke, 2013, p. 47).

2 Orienteering as a competitive sport is a rules-based game in which you try to navigate from control point to control point as fast as possible, usually in unfamiliar forest terrain, with the help of a compass and a topographical map.

(2004, 2010), Morton (2010), and Bryant (2011). Thoughts of a future based on co-existence, interdependencies, and relationality are connecting threads in these philosophies. The concepts and perspectives gained through the orienteering method offer a frame for discussing further what kind of implications the paradoxes and tensions in the epistemic, transformative learning for sustainability open in the context of art pedagogy.



30.9.2016 Occasionally, I feel myself like an agile deer, planing through fluctuating masses, surfaces and shapes. Like I would be observing myself from a distance: how my body committed to presence is steadily guided forward on the path through a jungle of roots and stones. How do my feet know how to run on this variable terrain?



## Making paradoxicality of an experience visible

The orienteering practice raises the paradoxicality of human experience to my awareness. The practice unfolds moments where my subjective experience, the unisonous, organized comprehension of self, dissolves. As Vadén (2004) describes, in asubjective experiences the borders of the subjective experience break down: some other, something else, something you cannot control or



choose, takes part in the experience. You feel connected, continuity and joy of being alive, even though the subjective area of the experience is reluctant to loosen the control.

The impossibility of maintaining an image of myself as a capable athlete in control of the situation creates a fruitful tension between my will and wishes and the honest and brute feedback I get from my actions while orienteering. The sense of location might crack suddenly and the expected and perceived lose their coherence. I might find myself completely lost and my sense of time and direction might fail. I might easily twist my leg or hurt myself on a sharp branch.

The urge to navigate to the control points of the map using straight routes brings me to locations and makes me pass places that I would never in other circumstances drift

to. I would on other occasions probably circumvent thickets, steep descents, swamps or logging areas—the uninviting, forbidding, dull and ugly sites. Now the contrasts of varying places meet me as volumes, masses, surfaces and rhythms. I need to adopt and navigate the challenges they offer me if I wish to pass. I need to act and to bend, to balance between activity and responsibility. I will hurt myself if I try to push through too fast with a careless and contemptuous attitude.

The ostensibly safe context is easily shaken. The chance of observing the sublime power of nature from a safe distance is not possible, for example, when

a thunder shower hits the forest while orienteering or dusk falls faster than expected. I am exposed to the forest and the weather without cover or filters. In this practice, the joy of embodied vitality and the chance of vulnerability and incompleteness are close to each other.

## Complexity of transformative learning

The process of epistemic (transformative) learning that questions both the understanding of ourselves and our relationships with others arouses discomfort and confusion (Sterling, 2010). The orienteering method offers me a frame to encounter this friction and an opportunity to learn to recognize nuances in my ambivalence.

Orienteering practice challenges the epistemological dimensions of my worldview by repeatedly opening incoherencies between my assumptions and experience. While orienteering, I am in relation to the flow of events in a way that ignores my attempts at being in control. It seems that my habitual subject-object-based relation with the environment as well as the unity of my subjective experience would not be challenged if I would not be overwhelmed and pushed out of the ordinary. By repeating the practice, I end up exploring the things that my subjective “self” doesn’t want, understand or appreciate.

23.11.2016 So stupid of me to think that the thinned and cut young forest could not be so impossible that I should choose the long detour towards the next control point via paths. I really should have taken that detour. I have seldom met that kind of lush impossibility. When you don't even find a foothold in the middle of the topsy-turvy of wrist-thick tree trunks felled all over. Climbing, balancing, swearing out loud.

## Non-human agency as a teacher

The orienteering practice exposes me to the materiality of the forest. The forest rubs my body: licking, scratching, restricting, hitting. My intention to go through creates a bodily, non-propositional experience of resistance or accompaniment. Sometimes I can just follow the directional shapes of the terrain to get to the intended direction, sometimes the shapes of the nature deceive and misguide me away from my course. Wet forest grass stroking my



legs after a warm summer rain feels like a gentle touch of a non-human being. Bloody cuts and bruises remind me afterwards of the less tender encounters.

9.9.2016 After the track I feel like I would have been bathing in the forest. My legs are filled with marks of the terrain: dirt, chips of branches, smell of marsh tea. I have needles all over my body. They stick to the skin with sweat.



Like artistic walking methods, orienteering can be considered as a kind of artistic mapping practice. By using Edensor's (2010) concept, orienteering is a kind of 'place ballet' in which different agencies, their rhythms and intensions, are intertwined. Passing different forest terrains and places incorporates me into many varying rhythms. The rhythms of mossy spruce forests are different from the broad rock planes. The rhythms of 'natural' forest terrains offer a sharp contrast to the rhythms of places that are recently interfered with by man. Meeting the traces of industrial forestry, especially the imprints of forest harvesters, feels monotonous and brutally systematic. Weirdly comforting,



the continuous, seasonal growth of plants slowly covering the machine-made wounds on the ground remind me of my limited and temporal scale as a human being against the non-human materiality.

I play with the idea that the non-human forest would be my teacher. In this play I can't settle myself as a student in a direct, straightforward sense. I need to keep the subjective, controlling, willing side of my experience busy with the demanding challenge of multileveled presence needed in orienteering<sup>3</sup>. Often the challenge is too much for me to handle, and the forest gets a chance to leak in. The practice of orienteering is for me a bodily technique to expose myself to the possibility of drifting to the side of the asubjective experience. The non-cognitive, bodily dimensions of me are probably able to attend the teaching of the forest directly.



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3 Overlapping urge to move as fast as possible in varied terrain, to read a topographical map, to compare the experienced and the symbolic environment to create a sense of location, and to make constant choices on different levels and scales (short time scale: next safe footholds, longer time scale: route choices to the check points).

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