



Outward Bound and Classroom Teaching: A 21st Century Perspective

I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion.

- Kurt Hahn

Kurt Hahn was one of the most creative educators of the 20th Century. Along with John Dewey and others, Hahn was instrumental in laying the foundation for the field of experiential education. In addition to establishing and overseeing innovative educational programs at the Salem School in Germany (1920-1933) and Gordonstoun in Scotland (1934-1953), Hahn founded Outward Bound in 1941. The first Outward Bound School was created at Aberdovey in Wales, with the intent of building resilience and perseverance in young sailors who were preparing for war. After the war, other Outward Bound schools followed in Great Britain, Europe, and Africa and, in 1962, the first US school opened in Colorado. The North Carolina Outward Bound School was established at Table Rock, on the edge of the Linville Gorge Wilderness Area, in 1967.

Although Outward Bound is typically described as a wilderness-based leadership program, Kurt Hahn's educational vision was to train students through the wilderness, not for it. The distinction is an important one, and it underscores Hahn's educational vision to challenge students in a way that promotes the qualities of "...enterprising curiosity, undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion." Tom James, Provost of Columbia University Teachers College and a noted scholar of Kurt Hahn's educational thought, writes that Hahn "...employed challenge and outdoor adventure not for their own sake, but as a way of teaching perseverance, skill, teamwork, leadership, and compassionate service." James goes on to describe Outward Bound as "...more than a set of methods and activities. It represents a core of values, a philosophy of education. In this broader sense, as well as in its applications as a specific method of learning, Outward Bound has a deep historical affinity with conventional schooling."

These core values of Outward Bound are exemplified by its "4 Pillars":

Physical Fitness - building the physical and emotional stamina to meet challenges

Craftsmanship - modeling quality and intention in one's actions

Self-Reliance - being resourceful, recognizing and applying personal strengths

Compassion - selflessly engaging in the welfare and dignity of others

Since its origins at Aberdovey 70 years ago, Outward Bound has used experiential pedagogy to help participants develop compassion and empathy for others, while also gaining self-confidence and resilience, honing leadership skills, and practicing problem-solving both as a group and individually. Through multi-faceted partnerships with schools, Outward Bound seeks to promote these same principles in a classroom context, where they can help to cultivate effective and inspiring teachers as well as motivated and successful students.

In his book, The Global Achievement Gap, Tony Wagner of Harvard University describes the new “survival skills” students need to thrive in what he calls the “global knowledge economy.” According to Wagner, in order to get good jobs and be active and informed citizens in our democracy, today’s students—and tomorrow’s workers—need to learn how to:



- think critically and solve problems
- work in teams and lead by influence
- communicate effectively
- be agile and adaptable
- take initiative
- access and analyze information
- be curious and imaginative

Anyone who has participated in an Outward Bound course will immediately recognize these “survival skills” as exactly those that are taught *experientially* in Outward Bound’s wilderness classroom. And anyone who has worked with students will know that if you want to effectively promote these skills in a traditional classroom setting, you need teachers who not only understand the skills, but also have the experience and training to integrate them into their classroom culture and curriculum.

Paul Tough describes another example of 21st Century skills in his September 2011 article in the New York Times Sunday magazine. In this article, “What if the Secret to Success is Failure?” Tough suggests that today’s students need to be encouraged to risk failure and cultivate resilience, rather than be sheltered by overprotective parents and teachers. Tough goes on to describe character education initiatives at Riverdale Country School and the KIPP charter schools in New York City. Drawing on the work of educational psychologists like Angela Duckworth and Martin Seligman of the University of Pennsylvania, Riverdale and KIPP have focused on seven character traits that they consider to be critical to a student’s long-term success: zest, grit, self-control, social intelligence, gratitude, optimism, and curiosity. In the article, Duckworth is quoted as saying “...*learning is hard. True, learning is fun, exhilarating, and gratifying—but it is also daunting, exhausting, and sometimes discouraging...To help chronically low-performing but intelligent students, educators and parents must first recognize that character is at least as important as intellect.*”

This “new” view of character education—especially the importance of teaching “grit”—has its roots in the educational philosophy that Kurt Hahn implemented more than 70 years ago at Salem and Gordonstoun. Hahn emphasized “tenacity in pursuit” and the importance of an “undefeatable spirit.” One of his Seven Laws of Salem was “*Make the children meet with triumph and defeat.*” Hahn expected his teachers to, “...*discover the child’s weakness as well as his strength. Allow the child to engage in enterprises in which he is likely to fail, and do not hush up his failure. Teach him to overcome defeat.*”

Angela Duckworth’s statement that learning is fun, exhilarating, and gratifying—but also daunting, exhausting, and sometimes discouraging—could also apply to every Outward Bound wilderness course. And these same values of challenge, perseverance, and overcoming adversity lie at the very heart of Outward Bound’s educational philosophy and mission.

North Carolina Outward Bound Programs for Educators

Through innovative programs such as the Educators Initiative and our new partnership with the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Education, North Carolina Outward Bound (NCOB) is working with classroom teachers to translate our vision of experiential education into a classroom context, focusing on specific best practices for teachers at all levels across all content areas. The Educators Initiative is a yearlong professional development program for K-12 teachers. It incorporates a 7-day Outward Bound course with follow-up activities including monthly coaching calls and two weekend retreats. Graduate students in UNC-Chapel Hill's MEdX program (Masters in Education for Experienced Teachers) are able to participate in a 7-day Outward Bound course in the mountains of western North Carolina as part of their first-year "Reinventing Teaching" course. Both of these opportunities combine the transformational experience of an Outward Bound course with ongoing instruction to increase teachers' understanding and integration of experiential methods into their own classrooms. The programs emphasize classroom community and curriculum development, while building a collaborative network of educators committed to innovative teaching and learning.

Participants report that, after their NCOB experience, they better understand the value of challenging themselves and their students in a supportive and safe environment. Students are given leadership roles in the classroom—just as the teachers were in their Outward Bound crews—and they are empowered to be better leaders and more effective communicators.

According to a formal evaluation of the NCOB Educators Initiative by the Evaluation, Assessment, and Policy Connections (EvAP) team from the School of Education at UNC-Chapel Hill, the program has demonstrated a consistently positive impact both on teachers and on their students.

Teachers

- change instructional styles to better assist individual students
- teach experientially, including more project-based learning
- incorporate more formative assessments, fewer tests and quizzes
- experience and exhibit more tolerance and compassion
- conceptualize and promote intentional community development in their classrooms
- exhibit greater classroom skills, confidence, and job satisfaction
- take initiative and assume leadership roles in their larger school community

Students

- are more active participants in the learning process
- take responsibility for classroom leadership and peer support
- are more willing to accept challenge and take initiative
- experience and express greater trust with teachers and classmates
- better understand and follow behavioral parameters

During the last two years, teachers from the following independent and charter schools have participated in the North Carolina Outward Bound Educators Initiative:

Agnes Irwin School (PA)

Boys' Latin Charter School of Philadelphia (PA)

Community Academy of Philadelphia (PA)

Episcopal Academy (PA)

Georgetown Day School (DC)

Gilman School (MD)

Haverford School (PA)

Lawrenceville School (NJ)

Riverdale Country School (NY)

SEED School of Washington (DC)

Springside School (PA)

St. Mary's School (NC)

Thurgood Marshall Academy (DC)

Quotes from School Administrators and Teachers on Their NCOB Experience:

"I have been to many conferences, professional development programs, etc. Your program was by far the most powerful and effective I have ever attended. I can honestly say I am a better teacher because of the Educators Initiative. Kudos!"

"I learned that admitting my fear is okay, and that I can challenge my students out of their comfort zone without causing panic."

"My Educators Initiative experience has become a huge part of my teaching...thanks!"

"Ownership and empowerment are just two of the ways our instructors created a genuine community within our crew. Experiencing first hand the power of such a community has forced me to consider how I will provide my students with the same sense of ownership and empowerment in my classroom. Following our instructors lead, I want to step back and allow for natural leadership to emerge among my students, allow them to affirm and assist one another, and give them time to work through problems rather than provide a correct answer right away. I believe these things will help build my classroom into a true community of learners."

"I learned the value of failure and that I have the ability to do more than I ever imagined."

"Routinely, the teachers who are most charged up, the ones who bring the most back to their classrooms, the ones who are most eager to try something new, are the teachers who attend (the) Educators Initiative. I cannot wait to send you more of our teachers and continually shift the culture of our school. Many thanks for the great work that NCOB does."

For more information about North Carolina Outward Bound programs for educators, please contact:

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