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# Universal Design as a Framework to Increase Diversity, Inclusion, Equity and Belonging in Canadian Outdoor Learning

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Outdoor learning (OL) in Canada needs to continue to evolve to become truly diverse and inclusive. It is only through individual and organizational change that true equity and belonging can be realized across the landscape of Canadian OL settings and contexts. This process of change requires well-informed and innovative leadership as well as new models of outdoor pedagogy and practice. In this chapter, I suggest that the principles of Universal Design (UD) may be a useful framework for promoting this movement towards greater diversity, inclusion, equity and belonging (DIEB) in Canadian OL.

UD is a planning process that is used to enable and empower diverse populations through the facilitation of access and participation (both physical and social) by all people regardless of their ability, age, or size (Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012). While UD is often situated as a process for the design of accessible infrastructure, it has been adopted for use in educational and OL settings as Universal Design for Learning (UDL) (Harte, 2013; Kelly et al., 2022; Wilson, 2017). Educators from the Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST) sought

to reduce barriers faced by learners by applying the principles of UD to the design of learning environments. Through their goal of designing educational environments in which all learners could engage in learning that is accessible and meaningful to them, CAST educators recognized that it was learning environments that must change rather than the learners (Wilson, 2017).

Darder et al. (2009) described a need for critical pedagogy that is "fundamentally committed to the development and enactment of a culture of schooling that supports the empowerment of culturally marginalized and economically disenfranchised students" (p. 10). More than a decade later, Scully (2020) noted that there is still "a distinct absence of attention to crucial elements of Place such as gender, race, class, and ability that have been called for by eminent theorists for decades" (p. 230). Many in the Canadian OL academic community have made similar calls for change. Kennedy and Russell (2020) consider it critical that the field of OL examine the role that hegemonic masculinity plays in addressing gender inequity while others call for centring the

voices of all marginalized populations (Gray et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2008). Laurendeau et al. (2020) have called for critical thought by those in the outdoors to “ask ourselves which histories, people, and ideas are brought to light, and which are kept in the shadows and to what effect?” (p. 127).

Returning to UD, Steinfeld and Maisel (2012) believe that conventional (i.e., non-universal) design excludes and stigmatizes many people by not recognizing that the diverse and broad range of human ability and experience is ordinary and not special. They created the “Goals of UD” to assist practitioners and educators to apply the principles of UD and UDL across settings. This chapter uses the goals of UD (awareness, understanding, cultural appropriateness, body fit, comfort, personalization, wellness, and social integration) to frame a discussion of how they can be used by OL organizations in Canada as they seek to deliver programming that is more responsive to all learners’ needs (Steinfeld & Maisel, 2012).

Having set the scaffold of this chapter, I begin by positioning myself under the umbrella of OL. I research and teach OL and gender studies at Memorial University in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada located on the ancestral homelands of the Beothuk. As well, I acknowledge the diverse histories and cultures of the Beothuk, Mi’kmaq, Innu, and Inuit of this province. Along with being an outdoor academic and educator, I see myself as an outdoor adventurer who has had the privilege of participating in remote expeditions across Canada. I identify as White, middle-class, agender, lesbian, and settler-Canadian living in a physically literate, middle-aged, straight-sized, and aging body that currently allows me to do almost anything I would like to do or instruct outdoors.

With my background in gender studies, I (and many others) have advocated for the elimination of sexism, racism, and classism in OL throughout my career. Pivotal experiences working with persons with disabilities outdoors and travelling on Indigenous lands propelled me to examine the fundamental tenets of my OL pedagogies and

practices, seek additional training, and deepen my understanding of how oppressions and biases intersect to prevent equitable access and learning for some students and privilege the participation of others. Parallel to Kelly et al., (2022), this chapter is built on an unwavering belief that all Canadians should have equitable access to the outdoors and outdoor learning, and the acknowledgement that there is still much work to do on the path to this goal.

### **Using the Goals of UD as a Framework for Designing OL**

Throughout the introduction above, my goal was to set the need to query the design of OL learning programs in Canada, so that going forward, we can purposely adopt UD as a framework that will guide the field to become more socially just. In the next section, I propose the adoption of Steinfeld and Maisel (2012) “Goals of UD” as a design framework to use in this collective reflection on OL practices in Canada.

### **Awareness and Understanding**

Building awareness and understanding of the need for universal design in OL is often an early step in the design process. Practitioners of OL in Canada need to ask themselves this question, “What will it take before OL programs become genuinely accessible to all who want to participate?” (Warren et al., 2014, p. 98). As we embark on conversations about national OL curricula, certifications, and program accreditation, we need to advocate for professional development training and standards that center on accessibility, adaptive outdoor learning, cultural competence, and social justice.

Progressing from there, OL programs are directed to examine their participant recruitment, staffing, programming and communications practices through the lens of the Accessible Canada Act which came into force in 2019 with an overarching goal of a barrier-free Canada by 2040 (Government of Canada, 2019). Using UD elements such as large text options, described and captioned videos, sign language interpreta-

tion, and visual and textural wayfinding, we need to ensure that participants and staff can navigate our facilities and program documentation such as forms, policies, and websites. Along with ensuring our text-based communications are accessible, the imagery we use in marketing and promotions needs to be accessible, authentic, and representative of the students we serve or wish to serve.

Warren et al. (2014) suggest that the OL field also needs to query the language we use to identify and shift away from using terms or nomenclature that can be hurtful, exclusionary, and oppressive. Feminist outdoor leaders have called for the terms “hard” and “soft” skills to be changed to technical and interpersonal skills for decades, yet the use of hard and soft persists (Warren & Loeffler, 2006). Similarly, others have identified the need to examine first ascent naming conventions in climbing and other outdoor pursuits since there is a long history of overt objectification and sexualization of women, racism, settler colonialism, and other discriminatory practices in these practices. (Laurendeau et al., 2020; Loeffler, 1996; Wigglesworth, 2021). Additionally, it is vital to language check with OL participants and staff about language preferences related to their identities such as their race, ethnicity, gender, and ability. For example, in Canada, many people with disabilities favour person-first language (e.g., a person with a disability or person experiencing a disability) while others prefer being identified as a disabled person. Beginning with building awareness of and the understanding that past programmatic designs and practices may have excluded others, sets the foundation for a deeper exploration of culture in OL in Canada.

### **Cultural Appropriateness**

Given the Calls in Action made in response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2012), it is critical that Canadian OL practitioners engage in a process of reflection, evaluation, reconciliation, and decolonization of our educational design, settings, and practices. Without this re-

design, OL programs will likely continue to fail their Indigenous participants (Friedel, 2011). OL programs must recognize the indivisible relatedness of land, culture, and language for Indigenous peoples (Cajete, 1994) and accept that the decolonization of OL requires the involvement of Elders, centers Indigenous voices, knowledges, and pedagogies, and deeply considers the places and land where programs occur (Battiste, 1998; Lowan, 2009; Madden, 2015; Tuck et al., 2014). Wallin and Peden (2020, p. 248) sum it so well:

*Place/land provides a common, integral connection between settler society and Indigenous peoples, even if that connection is framed from two very different worldviews and experiences. Place/land has been the site of struggle in the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and it will, therefore, be place/land that can help us heal and work towards reconciliation.*

In keeping with UD, reconciliation processes will not only benefit Indigenous students but others as well in that outdoor pedagogies that facilitate deep connections to place can assist students in examining their white privilege (Flynn et al., 2010). Rose and Paisley (2012) have challenged White practitioners to recognize that White privilege is woven into the fabric of OL and as such, is always there even in the absence of racialized participants or staff.

In their qualitative investigation of Canadian outdoor learning, despite vast geography and diverse programmatic foci, Asfeldt et al., (2021), concluded that there were some shared values across programs. These values included hands-on experiential learning, holistic and integrated learning, travel through the land, and religion and spirituality. Similarly, these researchers grouped OL programmatic goals into five themes: building community, personal growth, people and place consciousness, environmental stewardship, and employability and skill development. Pertinent to this chapter and perhaps indicative of the need for reflection in Canadian OL, there were few findings reported that addressed DIEB or

social justice. That said, Asfeldt et al., (2021), in describing the theme of people and place consciousness, related that 14 participants (out of 22) did identify that their programs addressed topics of history, culture, Indigenous traditions, and the specific uses/users of the land on which their programs existed. One research participant described her program's goal as follows: "to incorporate the two ways of knowing to be able to say understand the [Indigenous] culture and how important it is and how it fits with western science" (p. 304).

Lowan (2009) suggests that OL programs question and critique the unexamined use of OL models "such as the 'Outward Bound Model' that evolved within a European perspective" (p. 43). Ideally, we transition away from prioritizing narratives and experiences that focus solely on self-reliance, conquest, and individualism, instead turning towards reconciliation and decolonization (Laurendeau et al., 2020; Tuck et al., 2014). In the Canadian OL context, we must admit that lands and waterways on which we host our programs were most likely stolen from Indigenous peoples (Laurendeau et al., 2020). We can do this by forming humble and truth-seeking relationships with Indigenous leaders, Knowledge Keepers, and Elders—this is especially critical if we are designing OL programming for Indigenous peoples (Scully, 2020) and by adopting and using authentic land acknowledgments throughout our communications and programming.

Historically, much OL programming has appropriated Indigenous ways of being and knowing without acknowledgment or consent and this must practice must stop (Root, 2010). Many authors have called on OL practitioners to become intimately familiar with the origins of many of our programmatic philosophies and practices including gathering in circles, challenge by choice, and leave no trace, to name a few (Mitten, 1994; Rose & Paisley, 2012; Warren, 1998). Furthering this thought, Asfeldt et al. (2021) found that OL program founders continue to heavily influence program philosophy and delivery in Canada. The researchers described a topography of the OL field that grew organically from passionate ed-

ucators/founders passing on program philosophies and knowledge to students or participants who later became leaders themselves.

Given the potential dynamics of homologous reproduction, (Kanter, 1977), whereby a dominant group systematically reproduces itself through hiring and other practices, we need to question from whom and through whom has Canadian OL developed and who has been and continues to be excluded through this origin and design. Finally, Tuck and Yang (2012, p. 5) remind us that:

*Social justice education--whether or not we continue to use those words to define it--is the crux of the future of our field. Social justice is not the other of the field of education, it IS the field. There is no future of the field of education if it cannot meaningfully attend to social contexts, historical and contemporary structures of settler colonialism, white supremacy, and antiblackness. Social justice is not the catchall; it is the all.*

Staring up at this "crux move," I argue that Canadian OL needs to reflect on its program design and ask learners if they can access our programs and the necessary outdoor clothing and equipment to participate, including those who live with disability, those who live in/with bodies whose size or ability do not conform to current design requirements, those who are racialized, those who practice particular religions, those who are under-resourced, and those who are marginalized in a multitude of other ways (Russell et al., 2013; Warren et al., 2014).

### **Body Fit, Comfort, and Personalization**

Wilson (2017) suggests that UDL advises that we design for inclusion, ideally from the beginning, so that we transform the learning environment rather than expecting the learner to do so. Rather than a "rote" and "one size fits all" OL pedagogical approach that perpetuates a certainty that "generic methods work for everyone," Warren (1998), like the tenets of UDL, implores that, we as a field stop treating our "learning communities as homogenous groups of students

with similar needs”(p. 22). Instead, we need to personalize our approaches to ensure that all can avail of the benefits of outdoor learning.

As a field, we must ask ourselves, “What sort of bodies and identities are being produced in this pedagogical space?” (Newbery, 2003, p. 205). Furthering the call for re-examining our core design assumptions, Warren (1998) noted the influence of the field’s early focus on individualism and rugged physicality in OL programs. Traditional OL program design, based on a “rugged outdoorsy nationalism” (Laurendeau et al., 2020, p. 127) that focuses solely on human-powered travel through remote landscapes, privileges the participation of those who inhabit “able” bodies and often requires a high degree of strength, fitness, technical skills, and other abilities. These types of programs have tended to be longer, more expensive, and require greater up-front financial investment before participating, and have been a staple offering and program design mode for Canadian outdoor education programs (Asfeldt et al., 2021). Learners whose bodies, genders, or abilities haven’t fit this design requirement, have largely felt unwelcomed, been absent, or are expected to participate in a specialized program (Gray et al., 2020; Laurendeau et al., 2020). As one way forward, Dahl et al., (2019) ask that we consider utilizing simpler forms of natural contexts and local places and include a variety of skills, equipment, and experiences.

OL programs must redesign their learning environments and curricula to ensure that we eliminate ableism, heteronormativity, binary gender normativity, and other potential harms that frequently arise where bodies, race, gender, and sexual orientation intersect (Allen-Craig et al., 2020; Russell et al., 2008; Warren et al., 2014). Additionally, the field of OL, and the outdoor industry in general, have only recently begun to pay attention to body size diversity—indeed, at times, both entities have perpetuated the dominant fatphobic discourse through both unexamined practices, program design, and erasing people’s participation much like has happened with race, gender, and class (Laurendeau et al., 2020; Newbery, 2003; Rose & Paisley, 2012;

Russell et al., 2013; Warren et al., 2014). As a result, OL programs haven’t always had a wide spectrum of sizes in the clothing and equipment that they had to offer participants to use, rent, or buy. Larger learners may not have easy access to a PFD, climbing harness, or rain shell layer that fits them well.

As we turn our focus on individual learners’ needs, abilities, bodies, and identities, we can see that they exist at the nexus of these, and as such, are unique. We must continually remember that these intersecting identities, and the socioeconomic realities that accompany them, impact everything about learners’ ability to access, participate, and feel belongings in OL programs (Maina-Okori et al., 2018). Furthering the UD goal of personalization, it is critical to meet “students where they are and prioritize their goals, rather than focusing solely on the leader’s [or programs] goals” (Rogers & Rose, 2019, p. 44). This will likely require a greater breadth of learner choice that goes well beyond the field’s traditional implementation of “challenge by choice” (Mitten, 1994). With a focus on furthering access and inclusion through personalization, we explore the UD goals of social integration and wellness next.

### **Wellness and Social Integration**

Marginalized learners in OL likely do not reap the benefits of widespread representation of role models and heroes across social and print media platforms as the long history of Indigenous and other equity-deserving groups has been largely erased through eons of colonization and White dominance of conservation and environmental movements (Finney, 2014; Grue, 2016; Laurendeau et al., 2020; Tuck et al., 2014). OL in Canada cannot simply “add diversity” and stir, instead, we must begin again and redesign our programs to ensure true social integration and wellness for our learners.

In critiquing Labistour’s (2018) MEC social media statement, “Do White people dominate the outdoors?” Laurendeau et al., (2020) problematized MEC’s diversity campaign by stating,

*By bringing attention to the representation of marginalized bodies, larger structural barriers to the outdoors (set aside, for a moment, structural problems beyond outdoor sporting) go unquestioned: classed and ableist barriers to accessing parks, the not-so-micro-aggressions, racial profiling, the policing of gendered bathrooms and their use for only the temporarily, deliberately, and affluently unhoused, for example.*

We must fearlessly examine the multiple pasts which brought us to our present programming moment and address design thinking to move the OL field forward toward greater DEIB and away from the harms caused by marginalization and exclusion (Finney, 2014; Gray et al., 2020; Mitten, 1994; Tuck et al., 2014). Imagine the benefits for learners having the choice of participating in OL in a fully inclusive setting or with shared identity group members with teachers or leaders who share the same identity based on their needs, goals, and skills (Finney, 2014; Warren et al., 2014).

### Conclusion

To reach the eight goals of UD and to run OL programs that truly support DEIB, we must continue to examine our most overt and hidden OL practices such as the information we collect during health screening, how we communicate with participants, and how we assign participants' sleeping arrangements (Warren et al., 2019). From the moment we first have contact with learners, we can create welcoming OL educative spaces, or we can instantly prevent many learners from benefiting from OL. Whichever result occurs is ours to make happen, by how we design everything about our programs. Just like individual participants, each OL program is unique and will be at a different part of the DEIB spectrum, with some well past what I have suggested throughout the chapter and others just beginning. What's most important is to recognize the impetus to start or to continue to work for necessary changes in our programs. It's not good enough anymore for Canadian OL to answer the question of "Why do we do things this way?" with "That's how we've

always done things" (Asfeldt et al., 2021). We must instead, support innovative inclusive OL programming that progresses DEIB in every part of what we do. There will be much learning and unlearning we need to do along this path, but I hope you will join me along the way.

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