

Tashiro, J. (2023). Centre-based outdoor education programs. In S. Priest, S. Ritchie & H. Ghadery (Eds). *Outdoor Learning in Canada*. Open Resource Textbook. Retrieved from <http://olic.ca>

Centre-based Outdoor Education Programs

Julia Tashiro

Julia Tashiro is Co-director of the Canadian Outdoor Leadership Training program at Strathcona Park Lodge and Outdoor Education Centre on Vancouver Island, BC. Her Master's degree in Adventure and Experiential Education is from Philipps-University of Marburg. She has been working in adventure, experiential and outdoor education since 2008. Her passion lies with how time spent in the outdoors can fuel one's connection with nature, refocus personal goals, and build community.

Strathcona Park Lodge (SPL) and Outdoor Education Centre has been refining on-site outdoor education programs for school groups since 1959 (SPL, n.d.) and has taken an integral mentor role in developing outdoor education programs with their teachers since 1972 (Zanovello, 1999). Located on the edge of Strathcona Provincial Park, British Columbia's first (Baikie & Phillips, 1986), SPL originally began as a fishing lodge, but soon grew into one of the largest year-round outdoor education centres in Canada, today with 80 staff and two dozen buildings on 57 hectares (140 acres) of land by the shores of Upper Campbell Lake (J. Boulding, personal communication, April 22, 2023).

This chapter presents the outstanding elements of effective outdoor programming and reflects on the unique contributions that centre-based outdoor education makes to the diverse field of outdoor learning. The following exploration

of this outdoor experience draws on SPL examples and names some of the key elements within what, for ease, is simply called the "magic" of the outdoors.

A variety of synchronicities and stepping stones can lead to a human passion for the outdoors. Many people have been exposed to outdoor-oriented family traditions. Some have grown up living off the land. A few have been inspired through the outdoor passion of their peers. Others may have taken part in a tradition of summer camps. One of the more common avenues to find one's passion in the outdoors has been through centre-based outdoor education programs visited as part of school field trips. For example, instructors who apply to SPL frequently mention their pivotal experiences as past participants in SPL school programs. With the goal of passing it forward, they sign up to become an outdoor education instructor themselves.

Effective Programming

Programming at SPL is a melting pot of outdoor learning influences. SPL provides outdoor education programs for school groups, grade 5 and up, in the spring and fall, with other programming offered in the summer and winter. During the spring or fall, schools bring a cohort of students that encompass a single grade, while others bring multiple grades, so as to foster a curriculum progression from year to year. For week-long outdoor education programs, SPL can host up to 220 students in dedicated facilities separate from other additional accommodations. For program time, students are split up into groups of ten and each group is assigned an instructor for the week. This ensures that each instructor can build on a relationship with the students over time and carefully facilitate the progression of SPL programs.

SPL's signature program is called the "Adventure One Program" and is ideal for students' first time experience with outdoor activities. Their day is broken up into morning, afternoon, and evening blocks. During their 5-day long visit, students have an opportunity to challenge themselves at the rock climbing crags, learn more about local ecosystems, paddle the water environment in one of many crafts, gain essential camp skills, support one another on the high ropes course, and spend a good portion of their time participating in an overnight trip, the highlight of most students' week at SPL.

For those schools returning to SPL, devoted over several decades with multiple grades attending, trips are typically planned for older students in grades 8 through 12. Each time these older students visit, their outdoor skills grow, so simply repeating the same program as last year would not be as challenging. Therefore, after Adventure One, students may choose from a wide variety of activities with more specialised trips based on personal interests. Over the years, these choices have expanded to an array of specialties including, but not limited to: rock climbing, mountain backpacking trips, canoe camping trips, sea kayaking trips, caving, mountain biking, primitive

skills, service projects, sailing, white water kayaking, and other paddling programs. These specialty activities offer students the opportunity to engage with unique environments that they might otherwise not have access to.

Most programs begin with an entire afternoon dedicated toward getting to know each other, playing fun games, testing group dynamics in teamwork initiatives, talking about expectations in discussion periods, group conduct, and hesitations or fears. This afternoon lays the foundation for a week of adventurous experiences together, setting the tone for relating with one another, oneself, and the natural environment in a positive group experience.

Many philosophies of outdoor learning have influenced SPL's model of practice. With over 60 years of experience in the field and a strong mentoring culture within different staff backgrounds, SPL's program has evolved, from a focus on outdoor survival skills and back to the land teachings, to become a melting pot of many influences integrated into the "magic." Actively teaching more with less and teaching stewardship of the land and water are still priorities in all programs. This is made possible by enthusiastic outdoor educators who care about making a difference and who know about the importance of wilderness. The biggest driver of teaching others to care about the environment is their own connection, love and passion for nature.

Environment

Beyond this enthusiastic philosophy, many models of practice have influenced SPL's form of environmental outdoor learning. SPL is grateful for an ongoing relationship with the local First Nations' cultures of sustainably living on this land for thousands of years before settler arrival. The founders of SPL, Jim and Myrna Boulding, developed close friendships with Nuu-chah-nulth artists and authors, such as George Clutesi of the Tseshaht First Nation and Ray Williams of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation, and the many connections that came as a result of those friendships. SPL acknowledges the influ-

ences of Wedlidi Speck, Hereditary Chief of the G'ixsam Clan of the Kwakiutl, Frank Brown, Hereditary Chief of the Heiltsuk Nation, and the late Jerry Jack, Hereditary Chief of the Mowachaht/Muchalaht First Nation.

To name a few others, ethnobotanist and author, Hillary Stewart, taught survival skills and plant use at SPL for many years and has left her imprint on environmental outdoor learning. Other broader approaches that supported SPL on this path have been the Re-discovery program and its practice activities that started on Haida Gwaii in the 1970s (Henley, 1996) and the work of Steve van Matre and the Institute of Earth Education (van Matre, 1990). Lately, the practices of Coyote Mentoring and the Wilderness Awareness School (Young at al., 2010) and their west coast affiliates of the Wisdom of the Earth School on Salt Spring Island (Wisdom of the Earth School, n.d.) have made a lasting difference.

This combination of curriculum, skill teaching, and role modelling on an organisational and individual level makes SPL environmental outdoor learning effective and inspiring. Most importantly, the instructors bring a burning passion for environmental issues and the intrinsic knowledge of the tremendous benefits of living a life outside. SPL staff thoughtfully plan activities that evoke critical thinking about how to wisely use natural resources. They teach survival skills on every trip, which opens the students' eyes to how they can obtain the basics of shelter, fire, and food with only a few survival tools at hand. They include playful activities that enhance the students' knowledge of their ecosystems and bioregion, as well as their nature awareness and observation skills. The SPL community authentically role models living simply with an off-the-grid lifestyle.

We operate on a minimal footprint, using only what we need. Our operations are powered by hydro-electric generated with our own Pelton Wheel. Meanwhile, the water we use is sourced from Upper Campbell Lake, heated with passive solar technology, and treated using UV filters to ensure

drinkable standards. In our everyday practices, we religiously follow the three "Rs" of sustainability (reduce, reuse, recycle) – SPL website, Off the Grid: Power.

Our kitchen staff prepare healthy and delicious meals using locally sourced [some grown on site], organic where possible, and in-season ingredients. You can always be assured that your meal has been made with the environment and your well-being in mind – SPL website, Food Philosophy: Dining.

Adventure

Beyond this environmental approach, SPL's form of adventurous outdoor learning has been heavily influenced by the early experiential education methods of Outward Bound (Outward Bound, n.d.) and Project Adventure (Project Adventure, n.d.). SPL's outdoor educators are taught the importance of the experiential learning cycle and the group process (Priest & Gass, 2018). For example, the act of balancing leadership influence is extremely important, but difficult, between the two extremes of giving clear instructions or directly organizing students during the early stages of their development, weighed against letting them try things for themselves later on, thus giving them agency over their learning processes, with subsequent successes and setbacks.

Models, like the Conditional Outdoor Leadership Theory (Priest & Gass, 2018) and Simpson's (2003) teachings from *The Leader who is hardly known*, are some of the references used as templates for this delicate equilibrium. In addition, the comfort zone model (White, 2009), that encourages people to step outside their secure positions by encountering distress, danger, and dissonance in order to learn, is a common teaching tool among staff. This model, adapted by many practitioners in their own way, brings language to the process of challenge by choice and creates awareness for students' internal thinking, when they engage in new situations. Sharing this model with students, enables them to gain agency over their own learning process and interpret

the level of challenge that is the right amount for their growth. “Challenge by Choice” (Rohnke, 1989), the personal decision of what risks to take without coercion, is discussed near the start of every course.

Outward Bound had an initial influence over SPL programming, because early staff were drawn from the Mountain School in BC during the 1980s. Outward Bound was the originator of adventurous outdoor learning of the 1940s in Britain and of the 1970s in Canada. Its roots go furthest back in realising the potential of the adventure experience for the education and socialisation of youth.

Tripping

Trips are another predominant aspect of SPL programming. The importance and effectiveness of leaving all known sanctuary behind, heading into the unknown and facing unexpected challenges that the expedition might bring, has so clearly been demonstrated by a hero’s journey (Campbell, 2008). Week by week, the out-trip journey is the most talked about reflection of students’ experiences at SPL. In the skit presentations to their schoolmates during closing ceremonies, they invent entire plays to represent the challenges they faced and the fun they had together. This always feels special and festive, but also resembles more primitive times, when hunters wandered the land and came back to share their stories and adventures with the village members. Perhaps this is why the overall experience feels so good.

Before their groups head out on a trip, instructors create the correct mindset and this can be of tremendous value to students’ learning. The mindset is about teamwork: with mutual support and a positive attitude the team can move and grow through the challenges ahead. Despite strong head winds that delay a journey, endless pouring rain that soaks everyone and everything, or difficulties encountered along the route, the underlying message of teamwork is the importance of pulling together with a positive attitude. At the end of every program, the instructor facilitates

a meaningful debrief that helps the students to draw analogies of their outdoor experiences that can support them in their everyday lives.

Well-being

One easily overlooked aspect of centre-based programs is the wellness and fun that comes from outdoor activities and nature connections. Free or unstructured program time can be spent simply enjoying natural spaces by oneself or together with others, around camp before dinner, on the beach for sunrise or sunset, and telling stories at a campfire. Time to explore, play games and engage in the inherent joy that outdoor activities bring is an important part of maintaining mental health and well-being. In a childhood that encompasses more and more screen time, connection within the natural world is of tremendous importance to the health of youth and the planet. Time spent in this way must neither be dominated by adult instruction nor captivated by a virtual reality. The importance of this has been so eloquently emphasised by Richard Louv’s (2009) *Last Child in the Woods* and the work of the Children and Nature Network (n.d.).

Over the course of recent years, society has become increasingly aware of and outspoken about the mental health strain placed on youth and adults by modern life. A fine tuned awareness of the correct exposure to nature and challenges for individuals may never have been as crucial as it is now. As a result of growing psychological well-being issues among children, SPL’s medical forms now contains entries for the most common mental health conditions and how these are medicated and triggered. In addition to wilderness first aid for physical injuries, SPL staff are trained in the basic techniques of mental health first aid. This is not only beneficial for students and other clients, but also for the support of SPL staff, who themselves may be struggling with the pressures that modern life puts on them. Sometimes, they just need to debrief a hard week of constantly and positively supporting or guiding others through a difficult week of outdoor learning.

Risk Management

Being able to evolve and refine SPL programs over several decades has allowed a honing of risk management strategies to keep students safe while experiencing the outdoors. Creating a comfortable learning opportunity facilitated by qualified educators is the foundation for the students to be willing to take risks in new situations. A big part of SPL risk management is a wonderful local area knowledge that has been passed down through generations of staff. From some, who were born and raised on the local land, to other long term staff, who have explored and worked in the vicinity for decades. These experts on regional risks make up a cadre of SPL mentors working behind the scenes to keep an eye on the weather, water or air temperatures, and the bigger picture of safety. They supply critical information and guide SPL outdoor educators before, during, and after their week of school groups.

Another strong risk management pillar is staff training or ongoing professional development and mentorship of the staff. Many of the SPL staff have been drawn from a pool of in-house public outdoor leadership preparation program graduates (COLT, n.d.). A practicum period or “on the job” internship follows this 100-day semester, originally called an apprentice program when founded to privately train qualified educators and guides for SPL. Today, graduates are well trained in both hard and soft skills. The resulting staff team can expertly and carefully tailor school programs to students’ abilities and needs as well as a school’s goals and objectives.

Novelty

SPL’s outdoor education programs purposefully rattle the cages of participants and their social groups. This means deliberately choosing to step away from the daily routines of a school and after school activities, plus a week of family routines at home, in order to try something completely different and new. An overnight field trip means leaving the expectations and roles of daily living in order to learn valuable lessons that will transfer back to daily life. However, an over-

night trip also means breaking up the usual classroom dynamics and isolated peer cliques that form in school. Groups at SPL are often arranged by activity choices and so can include students across several grade levels participating in an experience together. Furthermore, students are sometimes assigned to groups where everyone is initially a stranger. Unable to rely on their usual clique for support, students must make new friends. Thus, SPL activities and outdoor adventures provide many opportunities to create new bonds among students who would otherwise not form a connection at school.

In addition, SPL outdoor education programs foster peer teaching and support during the whole experience. Students learn to work together in very tangible ways. They paddle their own canoe to the campsite and need to encourage each other when the head wind gets strong or when the steering can be initially difficult. Having a dry place to sleep, getting a warm fire burning, and cooking a nourishing meal, can only be accomplished with the offering and accepting of help and knowledge among everyone in the group. This peer instructional sharing offers multiple opportunities for students to shine in a new light. Only one pivotal opportunity is necessary for each student to be convinced of their potential and find a place to thrive. This plants a seed for change that might otherwise never have the chance to grow. It creates a stepping stone to reach for future passions and professional involvement.

At least for now, the remote location of the SPL base has prevented cellular phone reception and students are deliberately not given access to wi-fi during their stay. Some schools decide to separate students from their devices all together, while other schools allow devices for photographing and otherwise documenting student experiences. Being disconnected from the Internet and social media becomes a big deal for many students, who exhibit initial anxiety and later withdrawal. However, their loss of screen time and the ensuing “digital detox” provides important life lessons for many.

Relationship, Community, Mentorship, and Culture

Outdoor education programs at SPL take place within a community of like minded people: all are passionate about learning together in and for the outdoors. Activities are facilitated by instructors whose heart and soul lies in teaching the wonder, spirit and worth of people and the natural world. The different programs follow a well developed curriculum that is ever evolving. SPL instructors go through meticulous staff training, get mentored by their supervisory teams, and evolve through a consistent flow of peer feedback. The importance of all of this cannot be understated. However, what has proven itself over and over again, as the overarching and most important component of successful programming, is that instructors are master relationship builders. They can quickly break the ice, instantly relate to their group of students, and rapidly build rapport. They can act as peer-like role models for youth, thus providing inspiration and encouragement. They hold the glow of those people who show up at times to inspire chosen paths. They are change-agents whose vibrant “stoke” of students’ fire is contagious.

Instructors are not only master relationship builders, but also master facilitators. They actively tailor the activity to the needs, interests, and abilities of the group, as well as the situational conditions with the goal of creating a positive learning experience at that moment in time. Core Values at SPL provide guiding handrails for the instructors to support their group’s conduct, to encourage individual learning that focuses on each individual’s strengths, and to foster appreciation for the natural world. Each program focuses on positive team environments, mutual respect and support, and encouragement to find strength in one another’s special differences.

Programs offered are very hands-on and student-centred by nature, away from societal expectations, school grades, and specific expected classroom lessons. Everyone is encouraged to try, yet no one is pushed beyond what feels to them like the right amount of challenge. Stu-

dents connect with one another and their teachers when they witness each other well outside of their comfort zones and vice versa. By creating the right amount of challenge for each individual, students expand their skill sets. For example, since students taking turns at leading is especially encouraged on out-trips, with skillful instructor support behind the scenes, students can learn skills beyond the technical and are often viewed appreciatively by their fellow group members.

Instructors go beyond “delivering” a program; instead they partner by “being on the journey together.” This does not mean they ignore crucial risk management or push the group beyond its collective abilities. However, it does suggest being open to life-long learning, vulnerability, and humble growth with the students, because this is where the power of learning happens. For example, once or twice during their stay at SPL, each group of students takes on cleaning the kitchen and dining area as one of many camp chores that contribute to the benefit of the whole community. The instructor could easily stand on the side lines with a clipboard and be the expert of the cleaning process, possibly even enjoying a hot drink or an adult conversation, while pointing out what has yet to be done. Alternatively, the instructor could pitch in with the group and contribute to the cleaning process. The former approach is what youth expect of adults; the latter is a small step toward breaking down the old power dynamic of supervisor and worker or that of teacher and learner.

If instructors encourage students to “live on the edge” or “step outside their comfort zone,” and suggest that learning comes from shared adversity in the experience, then it’s only fair, that the instructors share alongside the students. This includes admitting when instructors don’t know the answer to a question and sharing hardships or stories about when they were challenged outside their comfort zones.

This culture of lifelong learning is supported by a tradition of mentoring among staff and their managers. Outdoor education instructors arrive

with a variety of leadership and instructional styles, but these are generally fixed. Mentoring develops flexibility in style and accents the positive in each newcomer as their next steps to developing as outdoor educators are supported by their mentors. The holistic nature of this experience of learning and growing together is also well demonstrated by how an entire staff cohort remains connected for the rest of their lives.

The model of holistic outdoor education programming practiced at SPL has demonstrated over and over again that it has the power to bring out the best in everyone involved, from business owners, through long term staff or seasonal staff, to students and other guests. People in the SPL community simply call this magic, but hopefully some of the magic's recipe has been illuminated in this chapter and can make a small contribution to the larger profession of outdoor learning.

References

- Baikie, W. & Phillips, R. (Eds.) (1986). *Strathcona: A History of British Columbia 's First Provincial Park*. Ptarmigan Press.
- Campbell, J. (2008). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New World Library.
- Canadian Outdoor Leadership Training. (no date). <https://coltoutdoorleadership.com/>
- Children and Nature Network. (no date). <https://www.childrenandnature.org/>
- Henley, T. (1996). *Rediscovery. Ancient pathways, new directions – A guide to outdoor education*. Western Canada Wilderness Committee.
- Louv, R. (2005). Last child in the woods. Saving our children from nature deficit disorder. Algonquin.
- Outward Bound. (n.d.). <https://www.outward-bound.ca/>
- Priest, S. & Gass, M. A. (2018). *Effective leadership in adventure programming, 3rd ed*. Human Kinetics.
- Project Adventure. (no date). <https://www.pa.org/>
- Rohnke, K. (1989). *Cowstails and cobras II: A guide to games, initiatives, ropes courses, and adventure curriculum*. Kendall Hunt.
- Simpson, S. (2003). *The leader who is hardly known: Self-less teaching from the Chinese tradition*. Wood 'N' Barnes.
- Strathcona Park Lodge. (no date). Our story: History. <https://strathconaparklodge.com/our-story/history/>
- Van Matre, S. (1990). Earth education. A new beginning. Institute for Earth Education
- White, A. (2009). *From Comfort Zone to Performance Management: Understanding Development and Performance*. White & MacLean.
- Wisdom of the Earth School. (no date). <https://www.wisdomoftheearth.ca/>
- Young, J., Haas, E., & McGown E. (2010). *Coyote's guide to connecting with nature*. Owl Link Media.
- Zanovello, I. (1999). *Outdoor and Environmental Education Centres: A case study of Strathcona Park Lodge and Outdoor Education Centre* [Unpublished master's thesis, University of Calgary].