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Outdoor Leadership Competencies and Training

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For the purposes of this chapter, outdoor leadership (OL) is both “a process of social influence in an outdoor setting where the [activity] pursuits are the media used to create adventure experiences” (Priest & Gass, 2018, p. 416) and a product of “legal, moral, and supervisory responsibility where the leader has met the tests for duty of care and standard of care” (Priest, Ritchie & St. Denis, 2022, p.3). The job of the outdoor leader is to look after clients and participants engaged in adventures and enable their enjoyment, learning, and transformation. The roles of a leader during outdoor activities are varied and apply to multi-disciplinary fields such as tourism, recreation, education, social work, psychology, health, and others.

The OL role often requires a diverse range of skills and competencies to manage program outcomes and safety during outdoor experiences. The importance of this role has been well-doc-

umented (Holland, Powell, Thomsen, & Monz, 2018), despite a lack of congruence across OL competency research, and OL training standards. In Canada, OL training is offered through both private and public training providers, including post-secondary programs offered at universities and colleges (Williams-Orser, 2021). The training required for OL is also complex, including, but not limited to, training in first aid, emergency response, risk management, navigation, leadership, facilitation, and activity-specific technical skills (Priest & Gass, 2018). Research related to outdoor learning has clearly underscored the importance of well-trained leaders (Goldenberg & Soule, 2015; Houge-Mackenzie & Kerr, 2017; Phipps & Claxton, 1997; Powell, Kellert, & Ham, 2009; Vagias & Powell, 2010). Further, authors of a recent systematic review concluded that a leader's effectiveness has a strong influence on the success of program outcomes (Holland et al., 2018).

Outdoor Leadership Competence

While the importance of training for OL is clear, research on OL competencies has lacked congruence. Globally, OL competencies were a particular focus of research in the late 1970s and early 1980s, where a plethora of empirical studies were completed (Buell, 1981; Cousineau, 1977; Green, 1981; Johnson, 1989; Priest, 1984; Priest, 1987; Raiola, 1986; Swiderski, 1981). The focus of these studies was primarily to identify and rank OL characteristics, traits, skills, knowledge, attributes, or competencies, and not to expand on training curriculum.

While OL competencies have been studied extensively during this early period, reviewing these studies revealed that only two listed a definition for the term “competence” or “competency” and only a few of these provided definitions for related terms, such as skills, knowledge, and attributes. During this early emergence of OL competency research, the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario commissioned a work by Rogers (1979), which proposed an alternative to mandatory OL certification and offered a more holistic model for OL preparation, suggesting that the development of OL is an ongoing process of life-long learning and not a single course to be completed.

After this boom of OL competency-related research, prominent efforts to synthesize the prior research into a list of competencies and a framework for training, resulted in the publication of two popular OL textbooks authored by academics. In 1997, Priest and Gass (2018) authored the first edition of *Effective Leadership in Adventure Programming*. In 2006, Martin and colleagues (2017) authored the first edition of *Outdoor Leadership: Theory and Practice*. A lack of alignment between early research and synthesis efforts have been noted, and competency-based approaches to OL training have been critiqued (Shooter, Sibthorp, & Paisley, 2009; Warren, 2007). Additionally, OL training has been criticized for lacking empirical methods to integrate competencies into curriculum (Berman & Davis-Berman, 2009; Pelchat & Karp, 2012). Despite considerable research and publications regarding OL, training, and competency-based approaches remain very complex and lack coherence within outdoor learning.

For instance, Priest and Gass (2018) suggested thirteen OL competencies, while Martin and colleagues (2017) suggested eight as summarized in Table 1. In addition to the empirical texts on OL training, a number of OL curriculum developments have been published by reputable organizations (Cockrell, 1991; Gookin & Leach, 2009;

Table 1: Comparison of two outdoor leadership textbooks

Priest & Gass, 2018 (3rd Edition)	Martin et al., 2017 (2nd Edition)
Foundational Info. HARD SKILLS: Technical Activity Safety and Risk Environmental SOFT SKILLS: Organization Instruction Facilitation META SKILLS: Communication Conditional Leadership Professional Ethics Problem Solving Decision Making Sound Judgment	1. Foundational knowledge 8. Technical ability 7. Safety and risk management 5. Environmental stewardship 6. Program management 4. Teaching and facilitation 2. Professional conduct and self-awareness 3. Decision making and judgment

Raynolds et al., 2007). Finally, an international framework for the progressive preparation of outdoor leaders was shared (Priest & Gass, 2018) and is appended in this textbook.

The International Standards Organization (ISO) has recently released four proprietary documents outlining standards for the adventure tourism industry, including Good Practices for Sustainability (ISO, 2018), Information for Participants (ISO, 2014a), Safety Management Systems Requirements (ISO, 2014b), and Leaders – Personal Competence (ISO, 2020). In the ISO standard for Leaders - Personal Competence, competence is defined as the “ability to apply knowledge and skills to achieve expected results” (ISO, 2020, p. 1). Further, the competencies detailed by this ISO standard are outlined in three sections: knowledge, skills, and attitudes or attributes. The methods used by ISO to create standards were very rigorous, and involved international collaboration. However, no reference to any of these ISO standards have been found in OL training research or manuals, thus the extent to which these standards are used or accepted within Canadian outdoor learning is unknown.

Led-Outdoor Activities in Canada

Canada has a long-standing tradition of outdoor learning, with a particular tradition of wilderness travel and use of routes with long-standing historical or Indigenous significance (Potter & Henderson, 2004). Canada’s vast geographical breadth and linguistic diversity has often meant that outdoor learning experiences occurred within regional networks, and training providers and operators were not always aware of what was happening in other fragmented networks across the country (Potter & Henderson, 2004). Ritchie and colleagues (2016) noted similar barriers when describing the fragmentation of Adventure Therapy training programs in Canada, a subfield within outdoor learning.

Recently, the “Canadian way” of outdoor education was investigated in a systematic review by Purc-Stephenson and her colleagues (2019). Their findings suggested that Canadian outdoor

education experiences aimed to recreate and retrace historic routes of the early explorers and settlers. Beyond this, Asfeldt and his colleagues (2020) investigated the common threads across outdoor education programs in Canada. Their findings suggested that, despite the many differences and distinctive programs, outdoor education programs in Canada had some common philosophical underpinnings (such as hands-on experiences and journeying through the land), common goals (such as personal growth and community building), and common activities (such as hiking, canoeing, kayaking, skiing, and snowshoeing).

A few notable tragic fatalities have significantly influenced the history and practice of outdoor learning in Canada, including the C.W. Jefferys Collegiate Institute drowning in Algonquin Park during 2017, the Strathcona-Tweedsmuir School avalanche disaster near Roger’s Pass in 2003, and the St. John’s School tragedy at Lake Timiskaming in 1978 (Jackson et al., 2023). Despite these high-profile tragedies, Canada has not adopted any formal standards for OL training or for employment in outdoor learning. Currently no training, competency, or occupancy standards apply broadly to outdoor learning in Canada, although recent and ongoing standardization related initiatives have begun.

The first Canadian Outdoor Summit (delayed due to COVID-19) had tasked a group to propose a framework for competency training for outdoor learning (2021). Additionally, Tourism HR Canada, a government funded organization, has recently started to develop a competency framework for the tourism industry, which includes competencies for adventure guides (Tourism HR Canada, 2020).

Two recent provincial legislative efforts within outdoor learning have added to this effort. In Québec, a provincial standard for safety in nature and adventure tourism was established in wake of a snowmobile tragedy in 2020, offered by Aventure Écotourisme Québec (AEQ), a government supported organization (AEQ, 2021). Though this accreditation is not mandatory, oper-

ators without accreditation are ineligible for Ministry of Tourism funding (AEQ, 2021). In Ontario, two recent labour disputes led to the Ontario Ministry of Labour becoming the first province/territory to set a minimum wage for wilderness guides (Government of Ontario, 2020). This legislation defined a wilderness guide as:

a [person] who is employed to guide, teach or assist a person or people while they are engaged [in] activities in a wilderness environment, including the following activities: back-country skiing and snowshoeing; canoeing, kayaking, and rafting; dogsled-ding; hiking; horseback riding; rock climbing; operating all-terrain vehicles or snow-mobiles; wildlife viewing; survival training.

Recently, several advocacy groups, who represent leaders across outdoor learning, have formed in support of fair wages, access to insurance, and safe working conditions, such as the Canadian Outdoor Professionals Association, the Association des guides professionnels en tourisme d'aventure, and the Sea Kayak Guides Alliance of British Columbia.

Professional Preparation

The many paths for OL training in Canada include activity specific training and certification programs, and other private or public training programs. Many provincially and nationally-based not-for-profit organizations have developed curriculum and assessments to offer individual certificates, predominantly in activity specific disciplines. Two examples of this are offered through the Association of Canadian Mountain Guides (climbing) and Paddle Canada (canoeing and kayaking).

Further, the Outdoor Council of Canada developed its Field Leader program aimed at non-professionals, and primarily focused on positions of custodial care, such as schools, summer camps, and outdoor clubs. Additionally, many reputable private and public organizations have also developed OL preparation programs. One example of this is the Canadian Outdoor Leadership Training

(COLT) program at Strathcona Park Lodge and Outdoor Education Centre on Vancouver Island (Tashiro, 2023). Others include various summer camps, which have a rich history in Canada of offering a plethora of outdoor learning experiences for youth. These summer camp programs typically hire seasonal staff and offer training before the programs commence. Post-secondary programs are also one of the main avenues for OL training in Canada, however, their focus appears to be toward technically proficient tourism guides.

In an attempt to identify the distribution of post-secondary OL training programs in Canada, Williams-Orser (2021) identified 54 programs across universities, colleges and CEGEPs (Quebec's Colleges of General and Professional Teaching attended for two years after grade 11). While several programs have closed since this study finished in 2019, a few new ones may have opened. A list of some post-secondary institutions from the Outdoor Council of Canada can be found in the final section at the end of this chapter.

Further research is needed to understand the current closure trends related to post-secondary OL training programs. Dymont and Potter (2021) suggested that this seems to be due to a combination of societal trends with neoliberal beliefs, administrators' desires for change given funding shortages, and a lack of understanding for the efficacy of outdoor learning coupled with a lack of strategic advocacy. Further, they recommend the need to:

understand the neoliberal agenda driving universities; maintain strategic relationships with senior academics; position oneself in high level academic positions; participate in reviews equipped with evidence; strategically advocate for OE programs; and, question the merit of being overly humble in a cut-throat evidence-based world (p. 1).

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Resources

Outdoor Training Organizations listed by the Outdoor Council of Canada. Retrieved from <https://outdoorcouncil.ca/resources/outdoor-training-organizations/>