

# COME OUTSIDE

Study visit at Adventure  
Spirit LATVIA



Erasmus+

# OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND OUTDOOR COACHING AS A TOOL TO BOOST EMPLOYABILITY.

Study visit at Adventure Spirit, Latvia

Author: Santa Klodāne - [santa.klodane@gmail.com](mailto:santa.klodane@gmail.com)

Coordinator: Lena Nasiakou

Graphic Design: Elena Zanchetta

Photos: Erikaiti Maria Fintzou

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# ABSTRACT

The study visit in Latvia took place in September 2019. The aim of this Study visit was to introduce colleagues from six other countries to outdoor education and experiential learning. During the Study visit visitors had a chance to take part in activities and practically experience tools that are used by the organization Adventure Spirit in everyday work with youngsters and young adults. The aim of this chapter is to give an insight into the key principles of outdoor education and outdoor coaching as well as give practical guidelines and hands-on examples on how to incorporate elements of the outdoors in creating and delivering programs to their target group.

**Key concepts:** outdoor education, experiential learning, challenge by choice, Kolb's learning cycle, outdoor coaching

# INTRODUCTION

When hearing 'outdoors' some people think of something related to camping and bushcraft, for some, it's related to extreme sports and survival activities, for some it's being out in the forest. Going outdoors opens new horizons. It can be a journey into an unfamiliar world - a world of differences where norms and routines are left behind and where people dress, feel, think and behave differently. Going outdoors can also be a voyage of discoveries where people find out things about themselves, about each other and about the natural world. (Greenaway, 2004)

In our organization, Adventure Spirit, we see the outdoors as a tool in personal development and team development. Adventure spirit's main work setting is the group setting. Whether it's to enhance better cooperation in teams or to support individuals in their personal growth, we mainly work in a group setting, as we believe that individuals gain their own learnings through interaction with others and the surroundings.

The purpose of this chapter is to offer a theoretical framework of outdoor education and outdoor coaching, principles, and guidelines of using the outdoors as a tool when coaching and training people mainly in a group setting. With this chapter we aim to give:

- ∴ insight into theoretical aspects of outdoor education and outdoor coaching
- ∴ guidelines of how to use the outdoors as a tool
- ∴ practical examples of activities
- ∴ insight into how to use nature and the outdoors as tools for reflection

# OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND OUTDOOR COACHING: THEORETICAL ASPECTS

Outdoor education can be described as “an academic discipline and teaching method characterized by experiential learning, immersion in nature, and challenging activities.” (Purc-Stephenson et.al., 2019, p.365) Outdoor education can be simply defined as experiential learning in, for, or about the outdoors. In the organization Adventure Spirit we refer to outdoor education as a method and combination of tools that consists of non-formal education activities, low and high-rope activities, challenges, activities in nature (i.e., hiking, camping, kayaking). Activities are created mainly to support individuals and groups in their development.

The general goals for the application of an outdoor program include (Dixon, 2014, p.5):

- Help individuals achieve more of their potential by overcoming personal barriers and limitations
- Improve individual and group planning, decision-making and problem solving processes, especially in unclear and uncertain circumstances
- Learn to manage stress and to function effectively in difficult situations
- Develop team cohesion and team effectiveness
- Improve interpersonal communication, cooperation, and trust
- Analyze and manage challenging activities and to take risks safely
- Enhance participants' ability to innovatively deal with the new and unexpected
- Contribute to organization development and change

An essential part of outdoor education and experiential learning is the transfer of learning. Transfer means that the participant takes the learning that occurred over the program and can apply it to other aspects of their life. (Lisin & Kida, 2018, p.19)

Transfer is used as a metaphor for change - change in behavior, self-image, beliefs, skills acquired etc. Transfer of learned skills such as team building and critical thinking is definitely possible and noticeable in outdoor education.

The main way to foster transfer is a reflection or debriefing after and/or during activities. The trainer/instructor/educator is there to facilitate the reflection process.

# KEY PRINCIPLE SO Outdoor Education

*An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory simply because it is only in experience that any theory has vital and verifiable significance.*

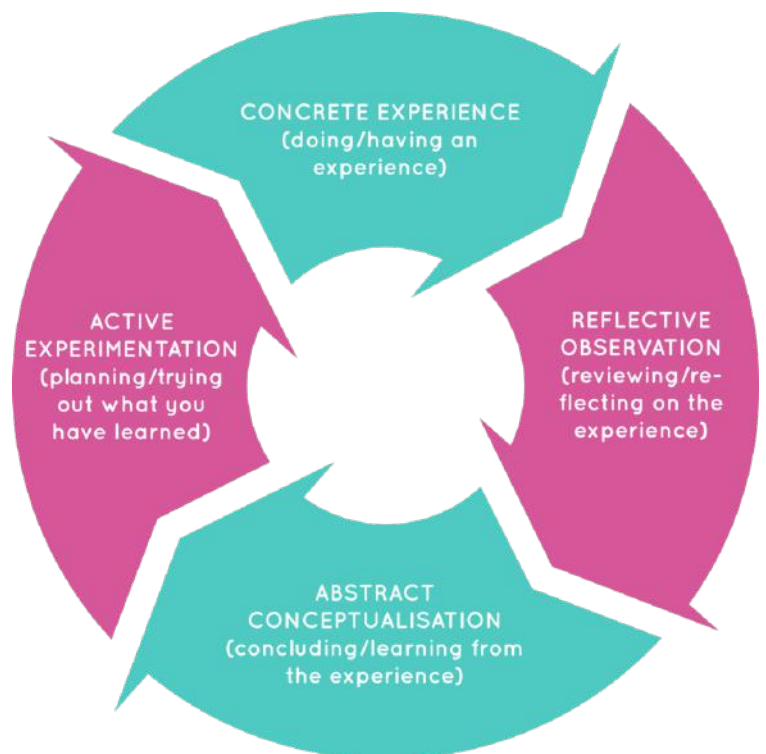
John Dewey (1859 - 1952), philosopher and educational reformer

# LEARNING BY DOING

Learning by doing is the key principle in outdoor education and non-formal education. Compared to formal education where the main focus is on abstract theories, in non-formal education the main focus is on practical experience. Much of what we learn is learned by experiencing something. Especially where behavior is concerned, this is an essential way of learning. (Vullings & Muller, 2018, p.61) Through activities, there is an opportunity for participants to experience some kind of 'simulated reality' and depending on activity, setting and context there is possibility that participants experience all range of emotions starting from bitterness of fear and stress (time pressure, being stretched physically and emotionally etc.) to sweetness of victory (accomplishing something that at first seemed impossible, gaining support from others, shared success etc.). The role of trainer/educator is to ensure that activity or set of activities leads to the learning process and is relevant and transferable to real life.

The learning curve in which experience plays a crucial role is described in Kolb's learning cycle, which identifies four different steps, allowing a person to enter the cycle at any point. Going all the way through the cycle provides a lasting learning experience and trainers/educators' role is to facilitate the process when necessary. (Vullings & Muller, 2018, p.62)

This cycle often takes place at various levels during activity or program. Following the principle of Kolb's learning cycle, applying debriefing techniques are an integral component of learning by doing. This enables participants to reflect on the practical experience, self-evaluate, and ensures the sustainability of the learning experience through facilitating the transfer. (Lisin & Kida, 2018, p.19)



Kolb's learning cycle. Source <https://www.cleanpng.com/>



# CHALLENGE BY CHOICE

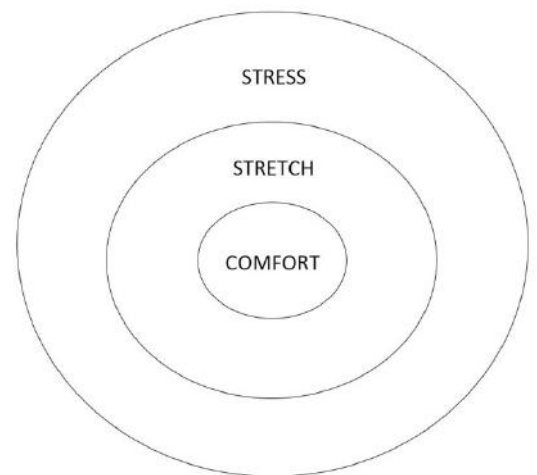
Challenge by Choice is a concept in which people are empowered to decide firstly whether to participate in an activity and second, how and to which extent to challenge themselves. Challenge by choice is important mechanisms in non-formal education as it recognizes that participants will have different strengths and weaknesses, and different priorities for learning. Using challenge by choice is asking participants to participate fully and actively during experiences and activities and it is up to them to each individual to find challenges for themselves and recognize that it is their own responsibility to work on their personal growth. (Lisin & Kida, 2018, p.17)

Challenge by choice concept goes hand-in-hand with Comfort-stretch-panic model - a model that describes how we respond/ behave in different situations.

Karl Rohnke introduced this model in the early 20th century.

Comfort-stretch-panic model. Source

<https://www.cleanpng.com/>



## Comfort zone

When a person is in their comfort zone, activities are familiar or recognizable and are easy to do. There are calmness and ease. There might be boredom in this zone as by continuously doing the same things, there is no learning or development.

## Stretch zone (Learning zone)

When in stretch zone person are pushing themselves by taking on something new, in order to grow and have different experiences. Activities are challenging and exciting but not overwhelming.

## Panic zone

Words that describe the panic zone are overwhelmed, scared, distressed. In this case activity is totally uncomfortable for a person and most likely no progress or learning will occur in this zone.

Referring to Comfort-stretch-panic model in outdoor education it is based on the belief that when placed in a stressful or challenging situation people will respond, rise to the occasion and overcome their hesitancy or fear and grow as individuals. (Brown, 2008, p.3) Trainers/educators' role is to carefully facilitate participants through this experience.

# OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND OUTDOOR COACHING: PRACTICAL APPROACH

Adventure spirit's main work setting is the group setting. Whether it is to enhance better cooperation in teams or to support individuals in their personal growth, we mainly work in a group setting, as we believe that individuals gain their own learnings through interaction with others and surroundings. Usually we deliver programs that are a combination with a set of different activities, including energizers, outdoor/indoor activities, reflection circles, closing/sharing circles etc. Duration of the program is from a couple of hours to 1,5 days when working with teams (classes, organizations) and 5 till 10 days when working with individuals in personal development training.

## STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM

### Introduction

Consists of energizer and get to know activities where participants are asked to share their names and expectations/intentions that they have for a program; introduction to framework-short information about our organization and values thus what to expect from program; common agreement where participants are introduced and asked to agree upon basic principles of program like safety, speaking one-by-one and main principle that participants are creators of their own experience (challenge by choice).

## Set of activities

Created by keeping in mind the main goal of program (team building vs. personal development), focus of program (communication, leadership, support, trust etc.), group (size of group, age, preferences, needs, background etc.) and environment and equipment available (indoors, outdoors, training site with high and low rope course, weather etc.).

Usually programs are designed in a way that participants have one activity after another and debriefing during and after activities. That's how Kolb's cycle of learning is introduced in two different layers. First layer is learning from experience within one activity and the second layer is transferring learnings from one activity to another.

## Closing

The first part of closing is reviewing the whole experience. It might be done by a trainer that makes a short summary or participants share what they remember from the program. And second, the most important part of closing is reflection. Depending on program reflection could be lead in different ways, but usually it is happening in a circle, where participants one by one shares answers to questions asked by the trainer. Questions can be:

What was the highlight of the experience?

What did you learn about yourself and others?

What is your takeaway from experience?

We found sharing gratefulness as a powerful tool to end any experience. Trainer asks participants to think about one thing that participants are grateful for and believe others should hear and then asks participants one by one to speak starting their sharing with words "I am grateful for....".

The main purpose of closing is to ensure long term transfer of learning happening. In other words, participants connect their experience, acquired skills, aha! moments, new realizations, new beliefs, awareness and learning points to real life. That is the place where magic happens, where we hear things like - "If I could climb that wall, what else am I capable of!?" or "I am grateful to my team for not dropping me and helping me to get up on that wall. I trust you. Thank you!"

# GUIDELINES FOR DELIVERING ACTIVITY

Outdoors is a tool that can be used to achieve different goals. Every activity is a tool that can be used as needed. By changing context, the sequence of activities, the storyline of activity, the focus of debriefing trainer can use the same activity to achieve different goals. For example activities in height, on one hand, can be used to develop trust and support within a team when working with teams, and on other hand to help individuals overcome fears, doubts and internal barriers when working with individuals on their development. The only difference is how the activity is presented and where is the focus of debriefing.

The basic points in introducing activity are to tell the goal of the activity, explain rules and introduce the group with safety instructions. Although as explained earlier the “how” it is done makes a difference in the outcome. The facilitator can create a context by using different materials and attributes. Also place choice can serve well in creating context. Another powerful tool to create a context is the legend or storyline of activity.

## DEBRIEFING AND OUTDOOR COACHING

Debriefing is any process in which the purpose or effect is to enhance the value of a recent experience. Other terms for 'debriefing' are 'reviewing', 'processing' and 'reflection'. (Greenaway, 2002, p.47) The commonly used concept is to provide space for the participants to reflect on experience occurred, look back at the situation, feelings, process. This process is strongly connected to the concept of transfer learnings and skills. (Lisin & Kida, 2018, p.37) It is common to have debriefing during activities, after each activity and at the end of the whole program.

Debriefing methods used in our organization vary from simple yes/no questions, open-ended questions till using surroundings and objects that are found in nature as metaphor to describe experienced situations, insights, feelings etc. By making reviewing active, mobile and outdoors, the reviews themselves can be at least as memorable as the outdoor experiences being reviewed. (Greenaway, 2004)



# ROPE MISSION

## Objective and rules

Your task is to complete your mission.

1. In a moment I will approach each group and give you paper with description of your mission.
2. You can look at paper only when I say "Start".
3. You are not allowed to show your paper to other groups.
4. During activity you have to keep silent.
5. You are not allowed to step out of a triangle.
6. You will have one try to complete the task.

Facilitator secretly hands out papers with 3 different missions:

Your mission is to tie a knot in the middle of ALL ropes;

Your mission is to tie ALL ropes together;

Your mission is to put ALL the ropes above your heads.



## Role of facilitator and debriefing

Although each group has its own mission, those missions do not exclude each other. Task is completed when ALL ropes have a knot in the middle, are tight together, and are held above heads of participants. There is a tendency that groups start to compete with each other until they understand that they can collaborate and find the way how to do that.

Facilitators role during activity is to observe participants and afterward facilitate debriefing by asking questions about the process, about how they found a solution, how they communicated and used non-verbal communication.

## What this activity develops

Cooperation; problem solving; non-verbal communication

## Materials

Rope 15 - 25m

Ropes 1m x number of participants

## Setting

Make a triangle from ropes, one side of triangle approx. 5 m long. Put as many ropes (~1 m long) as participants in the middle of a triangle. Divide participants in three equal groups and ask each group to stand in their corner of a triangle.

## Variations

For indoor version print out "X" on A4 paper in 4 different colors put these papers in corners of the room. In the middle of the room put as many lego pieces as participants. You can divide participants into four groups and hand out each group 1 paper of mission. Missions would be "Your mission is to put all lego pieces on red "X"; Your mission is to put all lego pieces on blue "X" etc. Another version is that you handout each individual one of four missions. This can be played with balls and different color hula hoops.

During the Study visit this activity was used to introduce participants to the Scale of Cooperation model - model for understanding how groups of people work together. Thus first participants did the activity, then we explained the theory of Scale of cooperation (more info about the model can be found <https://scaleofcooperation.com/>), then we showed video footage of them doing activities and debriefing to spot various roles and various types of cooperation.

# EXAMPLES of reflection activities

In this part you can find examples of how to use nature and objects you can find outdoors as a reflection tool. Nature definitely is a teacher when it comes to teaching flexibility with sometimes unpredictable weather conditions and creativity with all its variety. The fascinating thing about using nature as a reflection tool is that you don't need much in terms of materials. You can utilize everything that is around in the process of coaching. A simple walk can start a conversation and rock on the road can help the person to tell a story of their own



# 1. WALKY TALKY

Participants are asked to gather outside in a circle.

**In a moment I will ask you to find a pair. It will happen in a way that you will keep silent and only with your eyes you will make a connection. Once you lock your eyes with another person, come and stand in a pair.**

Once pairs are formed, the facilitator introduces the task and topic. The topic of reflection should be related to experience participants had previously but still pretty vague so they can make this reflection their own.

**Your task is for the next 20 min walk around with your partner and share your thoughts on the topic “Connection with nature”. Make sure that both of you have a moment to share.**

After time is up participants gather in a circle and have an open sharing on the experience they just had. It can be done either in popcorn principle (whoever has something to say, says it) or one by one passing some object from nature around.

# 2. SILENT TIME IN NATURE

Participants are asked to dress comfortably and weather appropriate and gather outside in a circle.

**Next hour is a silent hour. We kindly ask to avoid any communication during this hour. Take this time to yourself and have a moment with yourself and with your thoughts. You can think and reflect on the experience you had, what you did, how it made you feel. We invite you to explore nature around. You can take your notebooks with you.**

Silent time duration varies from 30 min to several hours, depending on goals facilitator wants to achieve with it. The facilitator can give specific topic to reflect on or no topic at all.



### 3. SYMBOLS OF NATURE

The basic principle of this reflection is that objects from nature can be used as symbols. The facilitator can ask participants to find an object that symbolizes previous experience they had and then share in pairs. Other person can ask questions that support their reflection process for example about physical features of an object and what does it represent, or about the process of choosing object etc.

Another way is that the facilitator asks each participant to find an object, and to personify this object by giving it a name and background story, and then take it with for the next experience. After experience is done facilitator can ask participants if their object could talk, what would they share about the experience they had. This is especially handy if participants are encountering a bit challenging task like a longer hike where different kinds of situations and emotions are evolving. This helps participants indirectly share about challenging situations they encounter and express their feelings and emotions.

### 4. SENSE THE NATURE

**Materials** - Blindfolds

In a moment you will divide in pairs. One person in each pair will be blindfolded and another one will be there to support. You will have 10 min in each role. Support person is there to support exploration by guiding a blindfolded person to touch objects in nature and asking questions about their senses, thoughts, feelings.

After experience participants are asked to share about their learning points of experience, how it felt to lead/to be lead etc.

This can be organized as coaching session. In that case, participants are asked to think about their intention/topic for coaching session and then a support person can utilize objects in nature to help them reflect on topic and ask questions related to the topic.

## CONCLUSION

Twelve participants from six different countries were introduced to the approach the organization Adventure Spirit uses. Participants not only learned about theoretical aspects of the approach but most importantly had a chance to experience it themselves. That is the foundation of experiential learning - learning through and from experience. The majority of participants recognized that this experience was not only useful in their professional life but that it also has an impact on their personal development.

# SUMMARY

Outdoor education has its specific theoretical body, and some activities require specific tools and equipment, as well as skills and knowledge of a trainer, but not all of them. In fact, the majority of activities and tools that are used by the organization Adventure Spirit come from the non-formal education and experiential learning world and can be easily used indoors/outdoors to achieve great results. Basic principles to remember are that the trainers' role is not only to introduce tasks with their aim, rules and safety rules, but also to ensure that transfer of learning happens. Transfer means that the participant takes the learning that occurred over the program and can apply it to other aspects of their life. Debriefing during/after the program is the way to ensure it.

Outdoors is a tool that can be used to achieve different goals. Every activity is a tool that can be used as needed. By changing context, the sequence of activities, the storyline of activity, the focus of debriefing trainer can use the same activity to achieve different goals.

Debriefing/reflection is an art itself. By using outdoors and objects in nature it is a way to add more colors in it. The fascinating thing about using nature as a reflection tool is that not much is needed in terms of materials. Trainer can utilize everything that is around in the process of coaching.



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