

Schooling Character in the Wilderness

Ronald Koetzsch, PhD
Fair Oaks, California

Outdoor Education and Waldorf Education

- Rappelling off a seventy-five-foot-high, sheer cliff.
- Balancing on a pair of shaky ropes thirty feet up in the trees.
- Eating oatmeal every morning for a week.
- Paddling a canoe against the wind across a remote, pristine lake.
- Spending twenty-four hours alone in the woods.
- Being brunch for mosquitoes, no-see-ums, and other annoying insects.
- Finding one's way in a trackless wilderness using map and compass.
- Getting lost in that trackless wilderness using map and compass.
- Sleeping on the ground in a more-than-slightly damp sleeping bag.

These experiences – not common ones in our protected, urbanized, denatured lives – are becoming a standard part of the educational experience for students in many Waldorf schools. Outdoor adventure education has been discovered and embraced by many Waldorf educators as an appropriate element, in aims and methods, in a Waldorf schooling.

Kurt Hahn and Outward Bound



The scouting movement that began about a hundred years ago had the aims of giving boys and girls outdoor skills and of helping them develop self-esteem and citizenship values. But the main source of the modern outdoor education movement is the work of Kurt Hahn (1886–1974), founder of Outward Bound.

Disillusioned with the intellectual, abstract nature of the German educational system, Hahn founded a school called Schule Schloss Salem in southern Germany in 1920. In addition to providing a strong academic program, the school taught wilderness rescue skills and emphasised social service, responsibility to the community, compassion and concern for others, and dedication to the pursuit of truth.

Born of Jewish parents but a convert to Christianity, Hahn was forced to leave Germany in 1933 after having publicly spoken out against Adolf Hitler. He went to Scotland and there founded Gordonstoun school. Several years later, in the early stages of World War II, Hahn was asked to develop a survival training course for merchant seamen. Thus was born the first Outward Bound school in Aberdovey, Wales. Its standard twenty-eight-day program included nautical survival skill training; confidence building exercises including a ropes obstacle course; group expeditions; and a three-day solo experience. The aim was to give the young seamen the practical skills, but more importantly the inner strength, confidence, and willpower to survive and help others survive in extreme circumstances.

After the war, Aberdovey was the model for Outward Bound schools established elsewhere in the United Kingdom and around the world. The first Outward Bound school in the United States was founded in Colorado in 1961, followed a few years later by schools in Minnesota and Maine. Since then, through the Outward Bound schools themselves and through various spinoff organisations and programs (among them Project Adventure and the National Outdoor Leadership School), outdoor adventure education has become an important educational resource in North America. These schools and centres serve boys

and girls, and men and women, of all ages through a wide variety of courses.

The various outdoor adventure programs share certain goals and methods. They provide a direct experience of nature and instruction in practical outdoor and survival skills, such as making a fire in various weather conditions, orienteering, foraging for wild foods, and building a shelter from available materials. These programs also help students develop self-confidence and a positive self-image, the ability to work with others in a group, a concern and compassion for others, and tenacity in the midst of adversity.

These programs typically take place in a challenging, unfamiliar natural environment, such as the high mountains, inland waterways, or the ocean. The students are put in small groups and are taught basic skills, both practical and social.



A group of sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds paddle back to the Northwaters Wilderness Programs base camp on Lake Temigami in Ontario, Canada. They have just completed a three-week, 350-mile canoe expedition north to James Bay, which included long days of paddling, whitewater challenges, and rugged portages.

Team-building exercises and cooperative games are an important element. Then there are a number of incremental challenges and problem-solving situations that allow the individuals and the groups to use the skills they have learned. Most programs last between one and three weeks, though some courses take place over a weekend and some last a couple of months.

Rudolf Steiner and Kurt Hahn

There are some interesting points of contact between Rudolf Steiner (1861–1925) and Kurt Hahn (1886–1974). Steiner lived in Berlin in the late 1890s, when Hahn was growing up there; and in the first years of the new century, when Hahn was at Berlin University, Steiner was becoming a well-known figure in the German capital's intellectual and cultural life. Steiner founded the first Waldorf school in Stuttgart in 1919, just one year before Hahn started Salem less than one hundred miles to the south. Both men considered practical, experiential, and moral education very important. Steiner and Hahn each had an optimistic view of human nature and of the moral potential of every human being. They both wanted students to develop into competent, well-informed, independent-minded, creative, and compassionate human beings, capable of acts of altruism.



Eighth graders from the Kimberton Waldorf School build a shelter while on a course at Hawk Circle Wilderness Education, in Cherry Valley, New York. Executive Director, Ricardo Sierra, is a Waldorf graduate, and the centre has worked with many Waldorf groups.

Outdoor Education and Waldorf Education

Given these correspondences between Rudolf Steiner and Kurt Hahn, it is not surprising that the educational movements they founded would in time discover each other. In recent decades, many people associated with Outward Bound and the broader outdoor education movement in North America have sent their children to Waldorf schools. And more than a few former Outward Bound instructors and outdoor educators have become Waldorf teachers.



Up, up, and away. A student leaps for a trapeze swing high in the trees on the ropes course at the Hulbert Outdoor Center. Located in Fairlee, Vermont, Hulbert offers various outdoor challenge experiences besides a ropes course.

A number of Waldorf schools have realised that outdoor adventure education is an excellent, even necessary, part of a Waldorf schooling. The twelve- or thirteen-year-old, emerging from childhood into adolescence, needs and wants to test him- or herself against external challenges. Children at this age need to experience their competence in the new, suddenly larger and more complicated world. “Impelling young people into experience” – a key aim of Outward Bound according to Hahn – through individual and group challenge activities is an effective way to help these budding adolescents gain self-confidence, to realise that they can meet the challenges of the world. Such experiences also help them develop important social skills, such as cooperation and compromise.

Many Waldorf schools in North America and other parts of the world incorporate outdoor adventure activities into their seventh- and eighth-grade and also high school curriculums. These include ropes obstacle courses, team-building initiative exercises, solo experiences, and extended outdoor adventure trips.

The Kimberton Waldorf School in Pennsylvania, for example, has for years incorporated outdoor education into its high school curriculum. The

outdoor program there is directly connected to main lesson topics. Each grade has at least one one week trip when students study in nature. Ninth graders study geology while doing backpacking or rock climbing. Tenth graders work with Homer’s *Odyssey* while on a canoe and backpacking trip. In the eleventh grade, students study *Parzival* and do social service. In the twelfth grade, there are two outdoor trips, one for marine biology and one for the study of the Transcendentalists.

Some schools organise and run their outdoor education activities in-house with their own staff. Many schools, though, turn to established outdoor adventure learning centres, particularly for longer experiences.

The eighth-grade trip, the culmination of a class’s eight-year Waldorf journey, readily lends itself to being an outdoor adventure experience. While some Waldorf eighth grades decide to experience London or New York City, others opt for a wilderness adventure. For example, a recent eighth-grade class of the Washington (DC) Waldorf school went on a wilderness trip in Costa Rica organised by the Costa Rica Rain Forest Outward Bound School. In the spring of 2007, the Charlottesville Waldorf School graduating class



Participants in a program at Deer Hill Expeditions help whitewash and plaster the plaza on the Hopi Pueblo's Second Mesa, near Saupalovi, Arizona, in preparation for a Kachina dance. Such service projects are an important aspect of most outdoor adventure experiences. Deer Hill is based in Mancos, Colorado.

Ronald Koetzsch is a graduate of Princeton University (AB 1965) and Harvard University (PhD 1981). He was a full-time seasonal instructor for the Dartmouth College Outward Bound Center for over twenty-five years. He currently teaches at Rudolf Steiner College in Fair Oaks, California, and is the founding and current editor of *Renewal: A Journal for Waldorf Education*.

spent a week on a trip organised and run by Kroka, an outdoor education centre based in New Hampshire.

There are at least a half-dozen outdoor education centres in the United States and Canada that have worked with Waldorf schools or are interested in working with them. Thus, standard and customised courses are available in various parts of the country and with different emphases. A list of these centres and their Web site addresses can be found opposite.

We are in an era when education is becoming increasingly intellectual, abstract, test-oriented, and competitive. Waldorf Education, with its concern for the practical, experiential, moral, social, and spiritual education of the child, often finds itself standing alone in this educational landscape. It is reassuring to have, in the outdoor adventure educational movement, colleagues and allies who can enrich our own work of educating young people to become whole human beings.

[Reprinted with permission from *Renewal* 17.1 (2008)]

Some Outdoor Education Centres in North America

Deer hill expeditions, Mancos, Colorado:
www.deerhillexpeditions.com

Hawk Circle Wilderness Education, Cherry Valley, New York: www.hawkcircle.com

Hulbert Outdoor Center, Fairlee, Vermont:
www.alohafoundation.org/hulbert

Kroka Expeditions, Marlow, New Hampshire:
www.kroka.org

Northwaters Wilderness Program, Westport, New York, and Ontario, Canada:
www.northwaters.com

Outward Bound Canada:
www.outwardbound.ca

Outward Bound USA:
www.outwardboundusa.org

Siskin Ecological Adventures, East Charleston, Vermont: www.siskinea.org