

## Overcoming Fear: Helping Decision Makers Understand Risk in Outdoor Education

By Kathy Haras

The long history of outdoor education does little to alleviate the fears of many parents, teachers, principals and superintendents who believe that outdoor education is too risky. These decision makers often lack both the knowledge to make informed decisions and the time and resources to investigate their assumptions. Pair these circumstances with a fear of making the wrong decision and the popular media's focus on tragic events, and it is no wonder that decision makers' first instinct might be to say "no" to outdoor education experiences.

Outdoor educators understand the benefits of taking students outside and view risk as a product of the probability and magnitude (risk = probability x magnitude) of an event (Gardner, 2008). Based on their experience, they know that outdoor education incidents aren't that frequent and most aren't that serious. As a result, outdoor educators are perplexed when decision makers say outdoor education is too risky.

Decision makers, on the other hand, are responding to a moral-emotional data set



rather than a technical one. For them, the amount of risk depends to a large extent on the amount of outrage (risk = [probability x magnitude] + outrage) an event generates (Sandman cited in Levitt & Dubner, 2005). They are concerned with whether people will feel angry, resentful, insulted or violated if something goes wrong during an outdoor education experience.

Public reaction to Strathcona-Tweedsmuir (seven students killed by an avalanche while backcountry skiing in Rogers Pass in 2003), Timiskaming (12 students and an adult leader from St. John's School drowned on a canoe trip in 1978), and Lyme Bay (four students drowned kayaking in Lyme Bay, UK in 1993) tells us that outdoor education incidents produce high levels of outrage. Slovic (cited in Gardner, 2008) identified factors that generate outrage: catastrophic potential where many people could be seriously injured in one event; unfamiliar or novel activities with unclear benefits; an acute, immediate threat rather than a long-term one; a previous bad event; circumstances that are outside personal control; the involvement of children; and media attention. Outdoor education has the ability to generate outrage so decision makers are understandably wary.

Helping decision makers overcome their fear of outdoor education consists of four steps: increasing their familiarity with outdoor education; sharing responsibility for risk management; developing credibility; and communicating effectively. This article will outline the steps and techniques that will enable individuals to reach informed decisions about outdoor education experiences.

### **Making Outdoor Education Familiar**

Increasing decision makers' familiarity with outdoor education requires describing its approach to learning, explaining the hazards, and differentiating the delivery mechanisms that outdoor educators take for granted. If outdoor educators lack clarity in this area, they are unlikely to convince others of the benefits of outdoor education.

### *What is outdoor education?*

Outdoor education is the deliberate use of the outdoors to develop character, enhance the curriculum, promote the environment and strengthen well-being (Foster & Linney, 2007). It is an organized method of teaching that emphasizes direct, multi-sensory experiences. Outdoor education uses an integrated approach to engage students in learning that is not possible in a classroom setting (Bunting, 2006).

Risk is central to outdoor education. Simply defined, risk is the uncertainty of outcome. While the insurance industry sees risk as something to be avoided, outdoor education views risk as a neutral state — risk is the simultaneous potential to lose or gain something of value. Without risk there is no potential for learning and growth.

### *What are the hazards of outdoor education?*

Outdoor education experiences have the potential for numerous positive outcomes. Responsible outdoor educators carefully consider the possible gains and losses associated with an experience and take action to ensure that the benefits will outweigh the harm. Limiting harm requires understanding the two different types of hazards: *Generic hazards* are common to all activities in a similar venue and include aspects such as the weather, plants, animals, and insects, remoteness and group dynamics. *Specific hazards* describe the particulars of the venue along with an activity's inherent risks. These risks are integral to the character of an activity and its environment and cannot be removed without changing the basic nature of that activity. Imagine, for example, whitewater kayaking without the whitewater. Clearly, inherent risks can be desirable and undesirable at the same time.

As the whitewater kayaking example points out, outdoor education engages participants in specialized activities that use distinct equipment and unusual venues. These activities depend on the practitioner's skill, knowledge and experience to manage the inherent risks. Unskilled participants, therefore, require instruction and direct supervision by competent personnel.

*How are outdoor activities delivered?*

Specialized outdoor activities occur across a continuum of delivery modes. As a result, an outdoor pursuit may look similar but differ significantly in terms of practice and purpose depending on whether it is a self-directed activity, an open to the public experience, or a custom program.

**Self-directed activities.** As the name implies, there is no formal leadership in self-directed activities. The group often consists of friends and family who participate as equals. There are no waivers and no registration fees. The activity occurs during leisure time and participants develop expertise through apprenticeship. When my father took my sister and I rock climbing, it was a self-directed activity.

**Open-to-the-public experiences.** When consumers pay a commercial provider to participate in an outdoor activity, they have engaged in an open to the public experience. The activity generally has mass appeal that encompasses a wide age range and limited qualifications to take part. While the activity occurs during leisure time, the exchange of money often brings with it waivers and formal supervision or leadership. The approach to managing risk is buyer beware (Jackson & Pineau, 2009).

Open to the public experiences exist in a number of flavours. Participants may pay to play at a drop-in facility with established operating hours such as a climbing gym. Although group rates may be available, it is essentially the same experience for all. Participants may choose to sign up for an advanced climbing course or workshop. While it takes place at a pre-arranged time and individuals may need to meet certain qualifications to participate, it too is open to the public because anyone can sign up. Similarly, hiring a climbing guide falls into this mode of delivery. Members of the public are able to hire an expert to ensure a positive experience and any client input is at the guide's discretion.

**Custom programs.** Participants in custom programs engage in direct experiences that

may look like self-directed activities or open to the public experiences. Appearances aside, the opportunity has been deliberately designed to achieve a specific outcome — such as character development, curriculum enrichment, or enhanced well-being — and hence the reason why it is occurring outside leisure time. Thus, a custom rock climbing program might create an opportunity for Mr. Smith's grade 10 physical education class to explore body movement. Whether or not money changes hands, risk tolerance and informed consent are used to manage risk (Jackson & Pineau, 2009).

Custom programs may be delivered by regular classroom teachers or specialized teachers in the school. Because they lack the in-house expertise required to deliver custom programs, many schools contract with third-party providers for these services. Along with trained staff, third-party providers often have an available venue, specialized equipment, and the expertise for delivering a specific experience to large numbers of participants. With third-party providers the school signs the contract for services, not individual students. Finally, custom programs may be delivered by a mix of school staff and third-party providers (Wiley, 2007).

Self-directed activities, open to the public experiences, and custom programs are not distinct categories but locations on a continuum of outdoor education delivery modes. The level of personal responsibility is high in self-directed activities but low in custom programs. Conversely, formal risk management is a minor concern in self-directed activities but a major concern in custom programs. As an example, rock climbing provides different experiences, achieves different outcomes, and employs different risk management strategies based on its mode of delivery. The goal is to pick the right mode of delivery for a specific situation.

*Ideas for making outdoor education familiar*

Outdoor educators can use tours, displays and curriculum materials to familiarize decision makers with outdoor education. The focus should be on the outcomes of the

experience rather than the activity itself. Finally, outdoor educators must describe the hazards and the inherent risks of an experience in relationship to the expected outcomes.

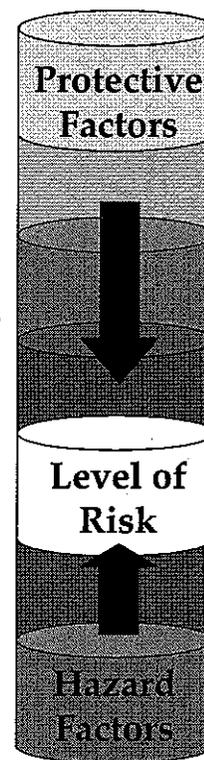
### Sharing Responsibility for Risk Management

Outdoor education is not “perfectly safe” — there are hazards. As a result, many decision makers feel that offering outdoor experiences is negligent and exposes them to legal liability. This legalistic perspective is a bit narrow. Negligence is the failure to act as a reasonable person would be expected to act in similar circumstances. Proving negligence requires the presence of four elements: injury or loss, a duty of care, a breach of that duty, and a proximate cause between the breach of the duty of care and the injury or loss. These same principles apply to all types of activities, indoor or outdoor. In short, liability is the result of *conduct*, not the activity itself.

Open-to-the-public experiences frequently use waivers to limit the provider’s legal liability. By signing a waiver a participant gives up (waives) his or her right to sue the provider in the event of negligence. This approach is inappropriate for custom outdoor education programs for several reasons. First, minors cannot enter into legal contracts and parents cannot waive a child’s right to sue (Leckie, 2008). Second, a waiver works on the premise that the participant understood the risks but willingly chose to participate anyway (Leckie, 2008). There would likely be some question about the enforceability of a waiver for a required class trip or mandatory corporate training program. Finally, the waiver protects the provider, not the participant.

In contrast to the legalistic approach, participant-centred risk management shares the responsibility for a successful experience. The intent is to further program outcomes in ways that also maintain and improve participant well-being. Organizational policies, procedures and guidelines are used to manage activities that involve inherent risks.

Participant-centred risk management pays attention to both hazard factors and protective factors. *Hazard factors* are negative causal agents. Thus, one way to ensure loss potential is kept to an acceptable level is to remove the hazard factors. *Protective factors*, on the other hand, are actions or items that counterbalance the hazard factors. Thus, another way to reduce loss potential is to add more protective factors. The Risk Assessment and Safety Management (RASM) model (Curtis, 2008) indicates that risk management involves both neutralizing hazard factors and increasing protective factors.



The RASM model nicely illustrates a program’s level of risk tolerance — the amount of risk stakeholders are willing to accept in pursuit of a desired goal — and includes individuals’ willingness and capability (including monetary) to be exposed to potential hazards. The availability of activities in self-directed and open-to-the-public delivery modes influences the risk tolerance in custom outdoor education programs (Cloutier, 2007).

*Ideas for sharing responsibility*

Outdoor educators need to involve all stakeholders (students, parents, teachers, principals, superintendents and members of school council) in determining the level of risk tolerance through meetings, advisory panels or third-party audits such as accreditation visits. When outdoor educators ask permission and notify stakeholders so they can give "informed consent," they send the message that risk management is a shared responsibility.

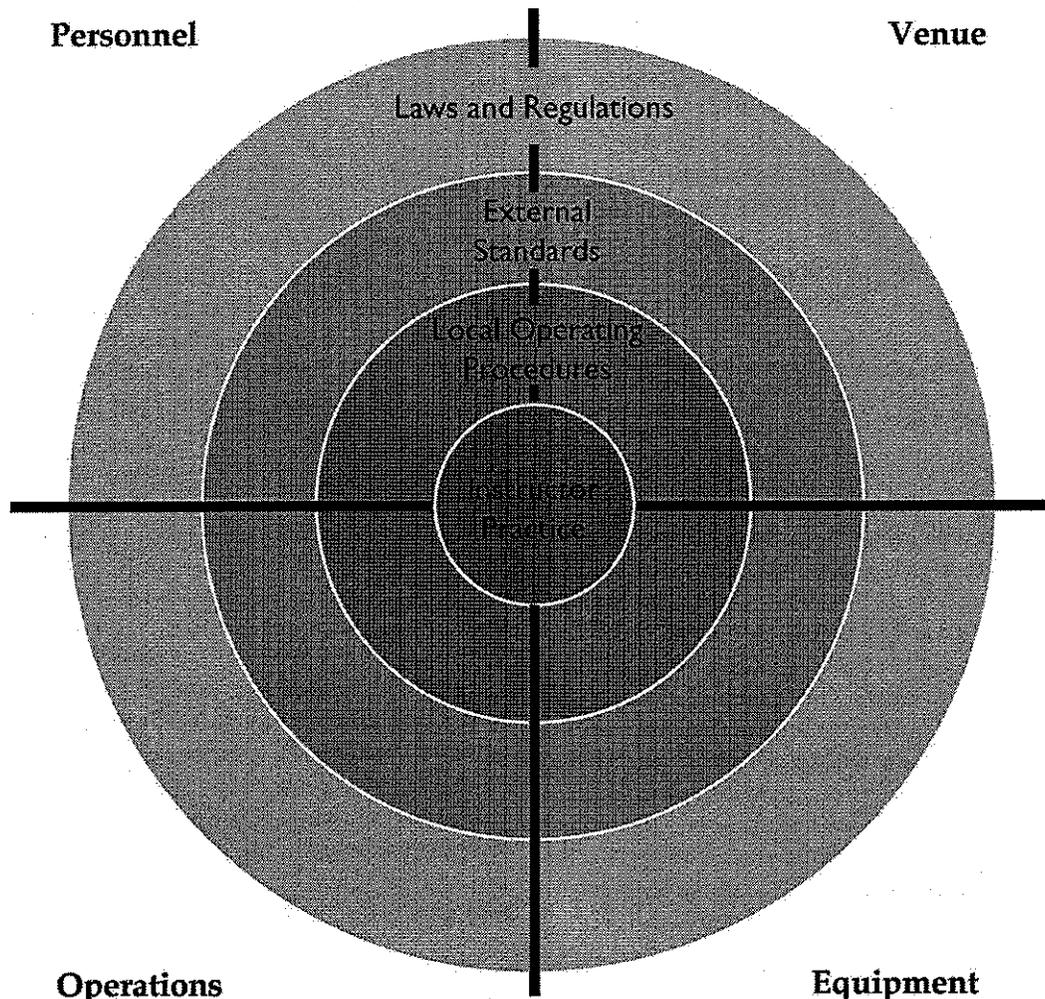
**Developing Credibility**

Matching the amount of risk with the level of risk tolerance requires an integrated approach. A custom outdoor education program is an opportunity deliberately

designed to provide a particular outdoor learning experience. It encompasses the venue, the equipment, the personnel and the operations associated with a specific program (Lisson & Haras, 2007). A change in one part of the system has an effect in other areas of the system. Developing credibility with decision makers requires the ability to both describe and implement an effective risk management system.

*Venue*

The location of the outdoor education program influences the level of risk. On-campus activities remain on school property while frontcountry areas are easily accessible by vehicles (even public transportation) and often provide amenities such as flush toilets, pay phones and a visitor centre within a 20-30



minute walk. Emergency services and cell phone reception are readily available at many frontcountry venues.

Backcountry venues are large undeveloped areas lacking human infrastructure. Support services and facilities are limited or absent. There may be no direct road access; travel is often human- or animal-powered. Backcountry areas are characterized by unreliable communication and require a large degree of self-sufficiency. A prolonged emergency response means these locations may meet criteria for wilderness medicine field protocols.

### *Equipment*

Whereas a venue is a natural or built facility used to deliver a custom program, equipment refers to reusable items needed to perform a specific task. A pool, a climbing wall and a walking trail would be considered venues while canoes, paddles, packs and sleeping bags would be considered equipment. Much attention is often paid to the venue — how it was built, when it was inspected, where it is located. Equipment generally receives less attention despite the fact that it may be specialized as with personal protective equipment (PPE) such as life jackets, climbing harnesses and helmets of various types. Regardless of the amount of use it receives, equipment does not have an infinite lifespan and must be integrated into the risk management system.

### *Personnel*

Custom outdoor education programs need to be delivered by personnel who are competent — they possess a combination of knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience that enable them to perform a role in a particular context. With regard to custom outdoor education programs, competence consists of four parts: skill in the activity; familiarity with the venue, ability to deliver the program and an understanding of participant needs. The competence required to facilitate a schoolyard-based experience differs from an overnight winter camping trip. A competent canoe trip leader may not be competent to teach a belay lesson.

In addition to delivering the custom program, competent leaders are able to manage themselves, the victim(s), and the group during a crisis. As such, there is a huge difference between a competent leader and a responsible adult. Experience, formal training and activity certifications all play a part. While formal training and certification does not guarantee student safety, it does provide a verification of skills and knowledge at a specific point in time.

### *Operations*

Program operations are the ongoing, re-occurring activities that achieve outcomes. Among the most important aspects of program operations are supervision and crisis response.

**Supervision.** A supervisor who systematically oversees an area and is immediately accessible is providing *general supervision*. The supervisor's function is to manage behaviour, enforce rules, monitor situations and conditions, ensure security and implement emergency procedures. To a large extent, this describes the schoolyard supervision teachers perform at recess or lunch times. In contrast, a supervisor who is within such close physical proximity to the student that the supervisor could directly intervene if necessary is providing *specific supervision*. The supervisor's functions are to provide adequate instruction and coaching, oversee the use of specialized equipment, direct practices and procedures, and explain and interpret risks. Specific supervision most resembles the actions of a parent whose child is just learning to ride a bicycle without training wheels.

**Crisis response.** When something goes wrong, crisis response deals with the immediate aftermath of the incident and longer-term resources such as insurance. Individual teachers who have the competence to lead students on outdoor education experiences often lack the support of an adequate crisis response system. Response protocols may be poorly developed and support personnel may be unaware of or unprepared for their role. If a student is injured during a weekend outdoor education

experience, will the teacher be able to contact school leadership? Will members of the school leadership team know how to respond?

Cell phones can mask the adequacy of a crisis response system. A cell phone enables individuals to communicate from the field. It does not, however, replace satisfactory planning, risk assessment and reduction, decision making or crisis response. Furthermore, cell phones may not function due to terrain, atmospheric conditions and other variables. Thus, cell phones should be considered only as an additional layer of risk management.

*A risk management framework*

Layered upon the program venue, equipment, personnel and operations is a nested set of rules that guides risk management decisions. Effective risk management is a matter of integrating all of these layers of guidelines into all aspects of a custom outdoor education program.

**Laws and regulations.** A law is a rule enacted by the government that directs or prohibits certain actions. Laws address the big picture while regulations provide details related to compliance with the law. Failure to follow laws and regulations can lead to penalties such as fines, jail time or loss of a licence. Unlike in the United Kingdom, there are no specific laws or regulations that govern outdoor education program providers in Ontario. There are, however, the Education Act and activity-specific regulations — the boating and the recent zip line regulations come to mind.

**External standards and guidelines.** External professional organizations provide a myriad of suggested practices for outdoor education activities. Whether they are called standards, guidelines, or best practices, these recommendations do not hold the same force as a law or regulation. Because different professional organizations serve different interests, there are multiple standards for

the same activity. For example, the Ontario Camps Association (OCA), the Association for Challenge Course Technology (ACCT), and the Ontario Physical and Health Education Association (OPHEA) offer different judgments on the provision of ropes course programs.

**Local operating procedures.** The next layer in the risk management system is the local operating procedures (LOPs) — site specific expectations for performing tasks that reflect local conditions, programming and resources. These guidelines communicate an organization's level of risk tolerance and identify protective factors that reduce loss. One outdoor education centre may allow students to belay while another may reserve this role for staff.

**Scope of instructor practice.** The final layer is the scope of instructor practice that describes an individual's possible range of duties. The scope of an instructor's practice will depend on an individual's level of skill, knowledge, ability, training, certification, job description and other factors as determined by LOPs, external standards and laws and regulations.

*Ideas for developing credibility*

Outdoor educators need to tell decision makers about accreditation, the standards and LOPs that they follow, and staff qualifications including any certifications. They need to be prepared to discuss their track record and crisis response plan, and to provide references from other clients.

**Communicating Effectively**

Effective communication is at the core of overcoming decision makers' fear of outdoor education and requires sensitivity to both values and data. It requires that all parties both speak and truly listen to one another.

A responsive process will smooth communication. Outdoor educators will need to acknowledge and validate

decision makers' views and treat them with courtesy. Outdoor educators need to take all stakeholders' complaints seriously — even those of doubtful validity and those that may be fuelled by a hidden agenda. Outdoor educators will also need to be prepared to adjust to the cultural norms of stakeholders.

Outdoor educators need to ask themselves these questions: Do I help decision makers reach informed decisions or do I try to convince them to accept my proposal? Do I discuss both outrage and hazard? Do I bracket risk by presenting higher and lower risk examples? Do I argue against my position? How do I feel about my audience (and does it show)? Do I expect to learn anything from the discussion?

Finally, outdoor educators need to put themselves in the decision maker's shoes. Imagine an issue (unrelated to outdoor education) about which you are passionate. Imagine the message developed from the other side. What messages and actions would demonstrate respect to you? Does your communication do this?

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