

ED296811 1988-03-00 Outdoor Centers and Camps: A 'Natural' Location for Youth Leadership Development. ERIC Digest.

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Author: Kielsmeier, James C.

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TEXT: WHY LEADERSHIP AND THE OUTDOORS?

Instead of moving steadily to full adult responsibilities, many young adults are caught in an isolated, relatively unproductive period of life where little is expected of them except to prepare for the next, more useful stage. Such youngsters often perceive adults not as

allies but as judgmental barriers to progress. Recent studies conducted in Minnesota and Chicago revealed that most high school students in these two places felt adults had a negative view of them.

Although not the prevailing approach, there is a model which supports "positive youth development" as a means of engaging alienated youth. Key to this model is the need to treat young people as resources and leaders in the community rather than as afflictions requiring treatment. Young people, in this approach, are asked to serve on community boards, to design service projects, and to play a more active role in the governance of their schools.

With interest growing in this style of youth development, a demand has been created for leadership training to prepare youth for expanded community roles. Camps and outdoor programs are well positioned to play an increasingly important part in offering youth leadership programs appropriate to this newfound interest area. This digest offers a framework for designing programs which utilize an outdoor setting as a "leadership classroom."

ADULT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Creating a youth leadership program in an outdoor setting requires some understanding of leadership theory. Unfortunately, most of the literature has been developed around business or military applications.

Leadership theorists typically categorize leaders on the basis of how they accomplish tasks and/or how they arrive at positions where they can perform the tasks. A typical leadership education course involves review of existing leadership theories, personal assessment using instruments like the Myers-Briggs personality inventory, simulations or case studies, time for personal reflection, and opportunity for personal feedback.

Most adults who participate in leadership education are either already viewed as leaders or are slated to assume positions of responsibility. However, for young people entering a leadership course, there often is not the same sense of destiny or personal expectation. Although some young people view themselves as being able to make a contribution later in life, few see themselves as valued current contributors to society. Leadership remains a distant, vague concept applicable perhaps to sports teams and school clubs, but not to larger contexts where it would make a difference.

A new way of viewing the world is necessary if young people are to break away from their stagnant assumptions and accept vital responsible roles where they can assume and exercise leadership. Camps and outdoor programs can become communities where this transformation can begin.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP: A TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

Helping youth break out of self-imposed and socially reinforced restraints and move into active leadership roles requires a carefully designed educational process. Particular attention must be given to underrepresented groups such as people of color and women who, at an early age, are often "traced" away from leadership roles. These youth stand to gain particular benefits from leadership education as they confront barriers of race and gender and learn to influence others in addressing these barriers.

Community. At the heart of creating a youth leadership program in an outdoor setting is the shaping of a supportive community. Key elements are:

Staff. Staff should mirror the ethnic and gender diversity of the students. There is no clearer message to underrepresented groups than the example of staff with whom they can identify. Staff should also represent, through their life experience, a commitment to leadership in some area. Active, confident leaders whose character and skills exemplify the ideals of the program should conduct the program. This is the key ingredient in building community.

Setting. An isolated camp or wilderness setting where distractions from the outside are minimal is ideal. The physical setting should represent a dramatic contrast from the everyday world in which young people live.

Scheduling. Intensity is more important than length of experience. Many effective residential program models are between 7 and 10 days in length. However, the degree to which participants are fully engaged in the program is a better predictor of program success than length. The model of the 24-hour extended wilderness experience can be applied to the leadership camp setting through careful program design. Effective programs often go from dawn to dusk, with every element (morning conditioning to evening speakers) integrated to relate to the goals of the program. Learning theorists reinforce this emphasis, suggesting that degree of intrinsic motivation and involvement on the part of the student are the key variables in learning.

Program design. The National Youth Leadership Council (NYLC), a national non-profit organization dedicated to developing service-oriented youth leaders, has identified four key elements essential to a youth leadership development program in an outdoor setting. These elements form the core framework for curriculum development. Later, specific activity modules will be added to the frame to complete a program design.

Revisioning. Young people must see themselves and be seen by adults as important contributors to community development--in contrast to how youth are seen today.

Empowerment. Young people must further begin to perceive themselves as powerful. This is accomplished through guided participation in acts of leadership, citizenship, and community service. When young people realize that they can have constructive impact upon the environment and other people, it becomes possible for them to feel

empowered. It is, after all, powerlessness, not power, which corrupts.

Action. Young people have not learned leadership until they have carried significant responsibility on their own. Once they are viewed as being able to lead and know that they are capable, they must enter the arena of leadership by initiating a project or by providing direction to a group.

Reflection. An act of leadership, once taken, should be judiciously processed or reflected upon. As John Dewey, one of America's foremost educational philosophers, emphasized; "Learning is thinking about experience." Consolidation of learning through intentional reflective activity is essential if understandings and competencies are to be transferred to other settings.

Program components. The evolution of the NYLC Youth Leadership model began with analysis of contexts where young people have historically been called to lead: war, athletics, and the arts. All are settings demanding an element of stressful performance preceded by intense, directed training. Challenge--physical and/or intellectual--is central to each. Training is experiential or "hands on." Outcomes are clear and consequential.

Isolated, residential outdoor centers or camps are ideal for youth leadership training. Using the sequence suggested earlier, specific outdoor activities can be creatively blended into an effective youth leadership training program. Outlined are learning modules which have proved particularly successful in NYLC leadership training. Also indicated are the design elements the modules reflect.

Moral and ethical simulations (Revisioning, Empowerment, Action, Reflection). Moral dilemmas have a tendency to draw out leaders or challenge them to emerge. NYLC has created day-long simulations using canoes and lengthy overland travel. Themes can be built in to add interest. An all-night adventure has been created, for example, to simulate Black people escaping the South and traveling the Underground Railroad during the 1850s. Everyone has a role, and discussion gets hot after spending all night in the woods as slaves and slave catchers.

Adventure challenge (Empowerment, Action). High-level physical challenge activities, such as ropes courses, rock-climbing, and backpacking, have long been associated with personal development. They are particularly useful in a leadership course to help young people "see" themselves as capable and powerful. Special emphasis should be on encouraging youth to play a role in leading/ facilitating others in the process as well as in experiencing the adventure activity.

Community building (Revisioning, Empowerment, Action). Residential camps are ideal for creating intentional communities where democratic leadership processes can be used to develop a sense of community. Leadership courses should do more than talk "about" leadership; they should demonstrate it by sharing community responsibilities

with young people.

Service learning (Revisioning, Empowerment, Action, Reflection). Leadership and service should be thought of as cointentional goals in youth leadership development. Service sites are settings where leadership skills can be practiced. Service also becomes an ethical outcome, answering the question, "Leadership for what?" Camps have plenty of program possibilities for guided service projects. Physical projects can include trail construction, tree planting, and facility renovation. Often neglected, but very successful, are human service projects that use the leadership community as a base for ranging out into the communities surrounding the camp. Performing arts groups for example, have been sent out to conduct vaudeville shows for senior citizen centers or teams of youth have gone to homes of elderly people to do maintenance work. Reflection on these acts helps young leaders begin to see themselves as valuable contributors to their own communities back home.

Performing arts (Revisioning, Empowerment, Action). In a leadership course, performances should be taken seriously as important forms of expression that have strong potential impact upon the presenters and the audience. Role-plays on racism, cultural performances of dance and music, and street theatre with political themes have been very effective in leadership courses. Revisioning is encouraged through performance as young people become not only actors on the camp stage, but presentors of important ideas and themes. Art also brings many young people into an empowered new world of personal development--getting on stage can be analogous to standing on the edge of a 150-foot rappel.

Action planning (Revisioning, Empowerment, Reflection). Secluded outdoor settings are ideal for making plans for the application of leadership skills. NYLC and other leadership organizations culminate their courses with planning sessions which ask participants to envision projects they wish to take back home.

Action planning is a particularly effective reflection tool to help leadership students consolidate skills learned during the course. As an outgrowth of action planning, empowered teams of leadership students have implemented projects to address problems such as homeless teens, refugee youth, the drug culture in their schools, and many others.

YOUTH LEADERSHIP: A NEW CHALLENGE FOR OUTDOOR EDUCATION

In addition to providing an ideal environment for developing leaders for the outdoors, the residential outdoor context is also appropriate as a classroom for developing leadership capacities that can be applied beyond the outdoor setting. Outdoor educators, in partnership with schools and community-based organizations, can play an important role in shaping this timely educational field.

The most effective youth leadership projects combine an action-based, intensive, outdoor experience with a continuum of community-based follow-through activities. Caring adults working with youth at every stage are essential. Programs which accentuate this goal include the National Youth Leadership Council (St. Paul), Northeast Leadership Project (New York), International Youth Leadership Conference (Martinsville, IN), Southwest Youth Leadership Project (Santa Fe), Indian Youth Leadership Project (Pine Hill, NM), Youth Leadership Council of Canada (Halifax), Khmer Youth Leadership Project (St. Paul), East Bay Conservation Corps (Oakland, CA), American Youth Foundation (St. Louis), and Leadership America (Dallas).

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